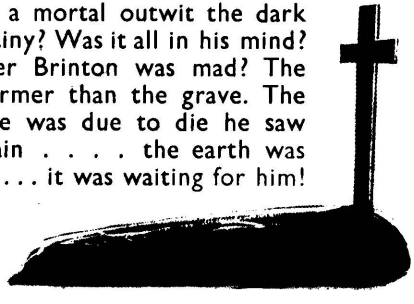
# Softly by Moonlight

**BRON FANE**

Brinton couldn't believe the inscription when he read it in the cold white moonlight. He was looking at his own grave. He tried to read the date but the light wasn't strong enough to be certain. He returned to the graveyard by daylight . . . but the grave had gone.

He left the town in horror, but the grave followed him. He was drawn to burial grounds like iron to a magnet. It was always the same. By moonlight he saw the grave, but never the date. By day he saw nothing. One night he saw the month. Then the day; at last he saw the year. He knew he was due to die in one week. What could he do? Can a man forestall his fate? Can a mortal outwit the dark designs of destiny? Was it all in his mind? Perhaps Roger Brinton was mad? The asylum is warmer than the grave. The day before he was due to die he saw the grave again . . . . the earth was newly turned . . . it was waiting for him!



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The shadows beckoned him into eternity

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Supernatural Special

# Softly by Moonlight

by

BRON FANE

*"The dark shadow beckoned him into eternity."*

*All characters in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental*

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## INTRODUCTION

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## CHAPTER ONE

### *One Alone*

ROGER BRINTON was singing. He was singing because he was on holiday. He was singing because enjoyment consisted, for him, of two things from which he derived the greatest pleasure. The first was his hand-built canvas canoe, the second, a river . . .

There was plenty of river. Roger Brinton was paddling up the Thames. He was the kind of man who did things seriously and well if he did them at all. Not for him the quiet beauty and the peace of the upper reaches of London's mighty river. Brinton was the kind of man who believed in exploring a river through all its twists and turns, the good as well as the bad, from an aesthetic point of view. Accordingly, he had taken his serviceable little single seater as far as Shoeburyness, where the wide mouth of the Thames, north of the Island of Sheppey, opened itself into the southern narrows of the North Sea—a stretch of water known as either the English or the French Channel, depending upon whether you were an Englishman or a Frenchman!

From Shoeburyness Roger Brinton had begun paddling. He had a small tent with him, and although it was very difficult to find a few square feet where a man might pitch a tent, without being asked to move on by the august majesty of the law, in those eastern stretches of the industrial Thames, nevertheless, to Rober Brinton this had been part of the challenge, part of the excitement.

He had passed Tilbury, Gravesend and Dartford. He had paddled through Purfleet and eased his way past Erith. He had weaved through West Ham, and wound through Woolwich. He had penetrated Poplar, and departed from Deptford. He had battled his way through Bermondsey, sailed through Southwark, and churned through Chelsea, fiddled along in his little craft through Fulham, broken the journey at Barnes, canoed through Kew, reached Richmond, and tied up at Teddington—the modern spelling was a derivation of Tide-end-town.

From Teddington he had made his way in a leisurely fashion into Kingston-on-Thames. Having dealt to his mental and his emotional satisfaction with those reaches of the river which were not often the precincts of the holiday maker, the pleasure-boater, or the explorer he felt that he could, with complete justification, settle down to enjoy the peaceful beauty of the aesthetic Thames of Oxford and the peaceful waters of the contributaries which flowed to it from the Gloucestershire hills and vales. There were reeds rustling in the wind as he paddled past Pangbourne and it set him singing.

Thought, so the psychologists said, reflected Roger Brinton, is very largely a matter of association. We think of A which reminds us of B which reminds us of





C, and so on and so on, *ad infinitum*. Or, in extreme cases, *ad nauseum*. To the man who sings alone as he paddles a canoe, the problem is not so much one of acoustics or voice production, but of finding something to sing. When all the factors are set fair for bursting into song, the mind sometimes refuses to come up with the title of a song, or a melody, which a man can sing, thought Brinton. However, the rushes triggered off the song he sought. He had reached the twelfth and final verse as he paddled out of Pangbourne:

*"I'll sing you twelve songs*
*Green grow the rushes O'*
*What are your twelve songs?*
*Twelve are the twelve apostles,*
*Eleven for the eleven who went up to heaven*
*And Ten for the Ten Commandments,*
*Nine for the nine Bright Shiners,*
*Eight for the April rainers,*
*Seven for the seven stars in the sky*
*And six for the Six Proud Walkers,*
*Five for the symbols at your door,*
*Four for the Gospel makers,*
*Three, three, the rivals,*
*Two, two, the lily white boys,*
*Clothèd all in green-O,*
*One is one and all alone,*
*And ever more shall be so!"*

The rushes and reeds seemed to nod approvingly as Roger Brinton clove the waters with his paddle. It was beginning to grow dark as he reached a stretch of

quiet water just to the south, and a little to the east, of Streatley, on the left bank, and Goring on the right.

He saw a stretch of inviting green river bank that looked as though it might have been made for tent pitching. With a few deft strokes of the broad, wooden blade, he nosed the canoe under the sheltering lee of bank. The bank top, with its fresh green grass, like the crew-cut hair of a craggy-faced Nature-giant, was about two feet above the canoe. The inexperienced canoeist would have been tempted to make the kind of sideway movement in scrambling out that would have capsized canoe and camp gear, but Brinton was no such character. He knew his canoe inside out and back to front. For him it was the work of a moment to scramble up onto the bank. The canoe rocked a little, but that was all.

Beyond the canoe, four or five feet from the river's edge, grew a graceful willow, and it was again only the work of a moment for Brinton to tie the two painters swiftly to the gnarled old roots, strong as steel hawsers, which projected above the ground. The gentle rains of nearly a century had worn away the soil, leaving the roots like some statuesque octopus, proud, weather-beaten, but undefeated by time or erosion.

As soon as the canoe was secured Roger set about collecting his tent. He had had considerable practice in far less congenial environments than this. The river-side turf was of an ideal texture for tent erection. It did not stubbornly refuse to take the pegs, but seemed to absorb them into itself and hold them like a friendly green hand steadying the guy ropes.

Inside his bivouac Roger Brinton lay resting in the





twilight. He was hungry as well as tired, yet for the moment he wanted to lie and rest the arms that had paddled and the back that had supported the arms. The weariness that he felt was a healthy, wholesome weariness. He was pleased with the progress that he had made during the day. He lay, enjoying his well-earned rest. Gradually the tiredness ceded its place to hunger. The hunger made itself increasingly acute. Roger Brinton got up. He took a tin of soup from his pack. He heated the soup on a small methylated spirit burner, scarcely larger than a bar of chocolate. He poured the soup into a plastic mug, and drank with relish and enjoyment. His clasp knife punched holes in the top of a tin of beans, the tin replaced the soup can on top of the miniature meths burner. From time to time he gave the beans a solicitous stir. Steam, and an appetising smell rose from the tinned beans. Experience, and the tactile sensation in his fingertips told him that they were hot enough; holding the side of the tin in the insulating thickness of a fold of his pullover, he closed the knife blade and flipped open the tin opener side. A few swift, practised movements and the tin was opened. He produced a spoon from his pack. It was a well-worn stainless steel implement, that had stood him in good stead on many an expedition of this kind. He ate the beans with relish and enjoyment.

Three oranges and a slab of bread and cheese concluded his repast. He made himself a cup of coffee as the last of the methylated spirit gave up its heat and the flame died away into that strange limbo of forgotten things which seems to be the ultimate destiny of transient matter.

Brinton normally felt sleepy after a meal, particularly after a meal and a hard day's paddling, but the air was fresh, sweet and clean and he felt a strangely wide awake feeling creeping over him. He felt replete and he felt tired but he also wanted to wander and look. It was rather a whimsical feeling, for there was something of the amateur philosopher in Roger Brinton.

He rose slowly, packed up his gear, and saw that the moon was rising. It was a summer's evening, warm and fine, the kind of evening when no man really likes to sleep; the kind of evening when soft and exciting adventure seems to linger in the warmth of the air, adventure of the mind, adventure of the soul. Brinton got up and began to wander slowly along the river bank. He looked at the moonlit river, and in the distance he heard a church clock. He counted the strokes . . . nine . . . ten . . . eleven. He waited to see if there would be another. There wasn't. Eleven o'clock. Brinton put a hand to his beard. Eleven o'clock on as perfect a summer evening as a man could imagine. Eleven o'clock and no feeling of sleepiness, only a desire to explore, a desire to look at this magic world of moonlight and silver. This magic world of soft, gentle shadows, a world of peace, a world that was beautiful as it slept.

Brinton felt rather like the sandman walking wakefully among a world of sleepers. His steps were taking him in the direction of the church clock. He was not walking very fast. Little creatures of the night rustled by the river bank. The faint splash of a water rat drew his attention to a line of ripples in the silver surface of the Thames. The rat swam sturdily, purposefully to the opposite bank. Brinton walked on, wondering





what the rat's purpose was . . .

He thought of himself in his canoe pushing purposefully up the Thames. The rat had a purpose; he had a purpose, but his purpose reflected back upon itself. He paddled for the safe of the satisfaction that it gave him. His objective was to reach the uppermost limits of the great river. He tried to go a stage further in his thinking. Why did he want to reach the uppermost stages of the river? It was only a goal he had set for himself, an objective that was self-inflicted. Was the rat's objective self-inflicted? Was it responding to some inner motivation? Or to some external stimulus, or to a combination of the two? Had the rat any choice, or was it merely obeying urges and instincts? Was it responding to the field of its environment, or was it exercising its ability to choose? The rat was conscious as far as an external observer could tell, but was it self-conscious? Was it able to say or to think "I am"?

It was an interesting train of thought that was running through Roger Brinton's mind as he reflected on the rat. The moonlight reflected on the water. The rat disappeared on its errand on the further bank. Brinton continued his leisurely stroll. The wind, scarcely more than a gentle breeze, warm and soft and pleasant, murmured among the rushes, and Roger found the words of a familiar tune going through his mind again. He began humming 'Green Grow the Rushes-O' to himself.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *The Lilywhite Boys*

ROGER BRINTON heard the clock towards which he was walking chime without any real sense of purpose, chime the quarters, sprinkling them on the sleeping village underneath. The church, in which the clock performed its task with faithful regularity, was situated a little outside the village, a little to the south. As Roger Brinton moved idly along the river bank he rounded a bend and under the trees, he saw the unmistakable angular outline of the church silhouetted in the moonlight. He left the river and made his way along a lane connecting the bank with a small by-road. A drive led from the by-road up to the church itself. In his present rather whimsical mood Roger Brinton walked towards the church. He felt drawn towards it with a kind of mildly gentle melancholy; he wanted to have a look at the tombstones. Cold white moonlight fell on cold, white marble . . .

Some of the limestone monoliths were covered in moss and lichen, others were crumbling after centuries of erosion, while some of the oldest memorials dated back, as far as he could tell, to the 17th century. He continued to wander among the graves, his steps were quiet and reverent. He moved from this older section of the churchyard to the more modern, and recent part. Here he found that after a few rather





ornate 18th century stones, there were large numbers of pretentious Victorian tombs, their inscriptions still bold and strong.

A white marble angel seemed to look at him disapprovingly. He returned its cold stare. Further along in the most recently excavated section of the graveyard were 20th century tombs. A large well-executed war-memorial paid silent tribute to the men of the village who gone out to defend it, but who would return to it no more.

Brinton looked at a stone immediately on his left. Cold white moonlight played on it, except for one section which was in shadow. The section which was illuminated caught Brinton's eyes and held them. He could not turn his face away. His gaze was riveted to the stone. He could feel his fists clenching until the nails bit into the palms of his hand. It was a shock!

"Sacred to the memory of *Roger Thomas Brinton,*
born April 7th, 1930, died . . ."

and then the shadow obliterated the date. He read that inscription over and over again. He felt in his pockets for matches. He had to read that other date. He had to! It was only an incredible coincidence, he told himself . . . But how many men called Roger Thomas Brinton could have been born on April 7th, 1930?

*How many men?*

The question thundered round and round his head.

*How many men?* HOW MANY MEN?

He fell to his knees at the side of the grave. He tried to trace out the other date with his finger, like a blind man reading braille. He could make nothing of it. He looked up at the tree whose shadow cut out the vital

moonlight. There was anger in his eyes as he looked at the tree. There was anger as he looked at the moon.

Then he got up and laughed . . .

Laughed at himself for being an angry fool. Could there be two Roger Thomas Brintons? That was the only explanation. But it was a nasty shock. As he got to his feet the church clock struck midnight. The shock of that strange grave had spoiled his walk. The mood of gentle melancholy had gone. He wanted to get back to his tent. He wanted to close the flap against the world. He wanted to get his mind on a different subject. He walked quickly back the way he had come. The moon sank lower and lower. By the time he reached the tent the moon had practically gone down behind a low night track of clouds.

It was only a coincidence. He drew a deep breath.

In the morning, he told himself, he would go back and have another look. In the cold, clear light of day it would be quite obvious that the thing was only a strange coincidence.

Before turning in he looked at the dark river; without the moonlight shining on it the waters were no longer a shining silver ribbon, they looked dark, forbidding and mysterious. He shuddered as he looked at the strength of the Thames. There was something frightening about all that power. Normally he thought of a river current as something challenging, now it seemed to be deadly and chill.

He shuddered again as he looked at it. Something was floating, floating past him, horribly. He looked at the floating something. It was not one something but two somethings . . . *dead fish* Belly upwards they





floated . . . white and horrible. Two white fish floating down a dark river. It seemed to have strange, meaningful symbolism. The wind whistled through the rushes, murmuring strange secrets beyond his comprehension.

He went quickly into the tent, and closed the flap against the night. The bivouac seemed small enough protection against the forces of nature that were somehow gathering against him in a hostile phalanx, a power that he was unable to comprehend. He crouched inside his sleeping bag. All the warmth seemed to have gone out of that summer night. At last he fell into a kind of uneasy sleep. As he slept he dreamed. He dreamed strange dreams . . .

* * *

Roger Brinton was walking through an enormous colonnade of gargantuan smooth green stems. He was wading through waist deep water in which the green stems grew. An enormous wind made the stems sway and rustle together. They were frightening. He felt like an insect in a reed bed. He thought of the water rats. He tossed and turned in his sleeping bag. He put out his hand to touch one of the thick stems. It seemed thinner; there was something incredible and peculiar about it. He wasn't sure whether he dreamed or woke. The feel of the stem was so real. It felt about the same thickness as a canoe paddle. He must snap one of these great reeds. He had to. He pulled and pulled again. The reeds were collapsing on top of him. He couldn't breathe. Thousands and thousands of reeds . . . Then

the reeds seemed to break to pieces in his hands. He was wide awake now. He realised what he had done. His hand, stretching out in the dream to reach the reed had caught the tent pole. The bivouac had half collapsed on top of his head. As he re-erected his tent the church clock struck two.

Roger Brinton settled down again. Once more he dreamed of the enormous sea of reeds, and then he was paddling through them in his canoe. The reeds were everywhere. He was making no progress. The water channel grew narrower and narrower. He could do nothing more. The boat stopped. Brinton got out. He hoisted the canoe up above his shoulder. In the dream it was so vivid, so real! He became acutely aware of strange pains. His body was covered in thick, black leeches that lived among the reeds. He got back into the canoe and pulled the loathsome things from his body. Gradually the waters came up again. The reeds seemed to sink beneath an upsurging tide. He got the canoe moving once more.

Two dead fish floated by, one on either side. They opened dead mouths and spoke to him. He tried to catch the words the dead fish spoke. They were drowned in the sound of the whispering reeds and the perennial wind. The canoe glided on. The reeds gave way to floating gravestones, they bobbed past him like icebergs, old stones from the 17th century, the 18th century and the 19th century. All bobbed past. The moon was shining on them as he paddled through them. He could read the inscriptions. One was always bobbing just out of his reach. He tried to paddle towards it, but it was still out of reach. He tried to paddle away





from it, and it bobbed horribly towards him. He stopped paddling and sat bolt upright in the canoe like a frozen corpse. Softly across the rippling water the stone floated towards the canoe . . .

His eyes were motionless in their sockets. Slowly and stiffly he turned his head.

"Roger Thomas Brinton," said the stone,

"born April 7th, 1930, died . . ."

and before he could read the date the stone sank suddenly into the dark water. He leaned over, galvanised suddenly into action. He tried to seize it in his hands and capsized the canoe. He woke up to find that he had sprawled out of the collapsible tent bed. He heaved a great, weary sigh and the distant church clock struck four.

Once more he settled, but his sleep was troubled and uneasy. Four strange figures walked purposefully out of the rushes. They carried scrolls and quills. They wore long flowing robes and patriarchal grey beards. Roger Brinton looked at them. There was a certain statuesque quality about them. Before his eyes they seemed to change into a ship's nameplate. They changed back. Where had he seen them before? Their faces were as grey as the beards they wore. Their eyes were as cold as the eyes of effigies. They were not men so much as walking statues . . .

Roger Brinton watched in his dream, in a kind of horrified fascination as they made their way back into the reeds from which they had come. The reeds parted again and a door floated towards him. There were five strange symbols carved on the door. They seemed to have some terrible, powerful, awesome, magic signifi-

cance. He felt frightened as he looked at them. He had no idea what they were, or what their significance was for him. The door floated back into the reeds and was lost. Once more the green curtain parted and this time he saw men of flesh and blood, their heads held high and erect, and their jaws iron hard. Their eyes flashed a cold strength, as the northern skies gleam in December. They forced the rushes apart as they walked and even the brackish water seemed powerless to impede their progress. They looked neither to the right nor to the left. There was something Roman or Spartan about them; their strength was a cold, hard strength, and looking at them, Roger Brinton was afraid of those men. They put hoods over their heads.

In his dream it began to grow lighter. He looked up as though drawn by some new light, above the whispering rushes that were all around him in his dream world. A point of light suddenly appeared in the darkness of the sky, then another and another. He counted three, four, five, they were still appearing. Seven stars gleamed down at him. They twinkled in the darkness. He counted them again, and as he counted them, they began to fade. Then there was nothing but the darkness. He was still looking up when he felt a drop of rain on his face and another and another. The rain was soft and gentle. It was warm, sweet rain, like the rain of April. He listened to drops of water splashing into the aqueous bed of the rushes . . . five . . . six . . . seven . . . eight distinct splashes he heard, and then the rain seemed to cease. He lay tossing and turning, half asleep and half awake. The weird dream held him in its strange grasp. Something was moving in the reeds . . .



## CHAPTER THREE

### *The Rivals*

SOMETHING was shining brightly. Were they jaws? Were they lights? Were they burnished gold or polished silver? Were they men in strange, shining robes? The reeds acted like a curtain, and prevented him from obtaining an accurate picture of the shining, bright things. He tried to count the moving lights. It was difficult because of their movement, and because of the camouflaging curtain of reeds through which he could not penetrate. He thought there were nine.

The church clock struck five, and he leapt from his bed, not sure of whether he was in a tent, or where he was. The first light of dawn brightened the eastern sky. He got out of his sleeping bag, and left the tent quickly.

He wanted to go to the churchyard again, he had to see that grave again in the cold, clear light of day. He had to see the date on which his namesake had died. Roger Brinton began walking through the grey light of dawn. He felt as though gripped by invisible hands of terrible, evil power. He began walking towards the village churchyard . . .

There was reluctance in his mind, and recalcitrance in his heart. A greater part of his will had no desire at all to go anywhere near the burial ground where he had seen that strange, terrifying phenomena in the moonlight. The gravestone with his own name on, that

gravestone which refused, capriciously, to reveal the date of his namesake's decease. It had to be namesake! It had to be a *rival!* It had to be another Roger Thomas Brinton. It had to be! But why was this other Roger Thomas Brinton born on the same day as he was? Why? *Why??* WHY???

As his footsteps took him slowly and irresolutely nearer, he clenched and unclenched his fists. He became aware of a pressure and a tension in his jaw. His nails were biting into the palms of his hands as he walked. He was aware of a strange coldness, despite the time of year. Brinton was afraid, afraid to see the date, afraid of what that enigmatic stone might reveal to him. He reached the lychgate and walked through. A dawn chorus of birds in the tall trees around the church rang forth like the topmost pipes of a mighty natural organ. Brinton felt some of the oppression and tension lifting from his mind and his body and his soul. Perhaps it had all been a strange dream? Perhaps he hadn't really walked to the church last night?. Perhaps he hadn't seen the gravestone? Perhaps it didn't exist . . . He retraced his steps carefully. He passed the old section, the 17th, the 18th, the 19th century graves; the names were there just as he remembered them. It hadn't been a dream then. He had actually walked up there the night before.

But there was no sign of the stone that he had seen with his name on it . . . *Just a patch of blank grass* . . . Sacred soil, but virgin soil, untouched, undug. The sight of that blank plot filled him with unaccountable terror. The grave wasn't there. Had he in some incredible, uncanny way, been projected forward into the





future? Had he seen that churchyard as it was going to be a month hence? A year hence? A week hence? Had he?

Perspiration broke out on his forehead. There was strange tension in his chest. It seemed difficult to breathe. Had he seen—like Scrooge in 'Christmas Carol'—the ghost of, not Christmas yet to come, as Scrooge had seen, but some distant summer when his body would lie there in that riverside burial ground. Had it been a phantasy, a trick of the light? He remembered strange cases he had read of peculiar premonitions. Was this such a premonition? Surely so horrible a dream could bode no good? Surely, he argued with himself, it could scarcely be a beneficent omen which he had seen, or imagined that he had seen? It all seemed so clear and so real.

Damn it, he told himself, he'd actually touched the stone. He had *touched* it! It was no vision; it was no hallucination; it was no illusion. That stone had been there. He was convinced that it had been there. Where the devil was it now? Why wasn't it there?

It began to grow lighter. The song of the birds grew stronger. Daylight and everyday reality began to reassert themselves. Roger Brinton turned and walked slowly out of the churchyard. He walked back towards the river, back towards his tent and his canoe. His main object now was to put as much distance as possible between himself and the burial ground where the strange phenomena had forced itself upon his senses.

Brinton packd his utensils away quickly, folded his tent like the proverbial Arabs, and stowing his gear carefully to ensure the satisfactory balance of the little

canvas canoe, he made his way upstream again. The sound of the paddle on the water had a comforting reassuring sound. The morning was still very young, and water-fowl began to make their presence known among the reeds. Here and there the coot and the moorhen would appear, dabbling in the water. A hen, a cob and a family of tawny signets sailed past, moving with the current. Steering rather than paddling they moved with an easy grace which contrasted strangely in Roger Brinton's mind with the urgency of his own paddling. He was anxious to put distance between himself and that stretch of river between Streatley and Goring.

A mile passed, and then another. He continued to paddle. The great ribbon of water on which he paddled seemed to be quickening its pace as though to impede him. The Thames at this point formed the county boundary, as far as he knew, between Berkshire on his left, and Oxfordshire on his right. Berkshire lay to the south-west, Oxfordshire to the north-east. He went on paddling against the current. A breeze sprang up; the sun, rising higher, vied with the breeze. He felt like a small morsel of food being conveyed alternately between an oven and a refrigerator by two quarrelling cooks.

The Chilterns rose away to his right, and the Berkshire downs rolled by to his left. There was no sign of a cloud in the sky. The only clouds were the symbolic, allegorical clouds that were trying to shroud his mind with worry and fear. He told himself he was being ridiculous. He had been overworking, that was why he had taken this holiday. Now the overwork was catch-





ing up with him. It only went to prove how badly he needed the rest . . . How much he was in need of the vacation!

He reached Wallingford, tied up his canoe and went out for lunch. He liked Wallingford, a very pleasant spot. A little Berkshire town of some 5,000 souls, forty-seven miles from the Metropolis and thirteen from Oxford. Today was a Wednesday, and he knew that unless he re-furnished his provisions before lunch the shops would be closed. Accordingly he wandered around the friendly little town, re-stocking his rucksack.

As he went back towards the river bank where his canoe was moored he passed down the High Street. A friendly hostelry had its doors invitingly open in the warm summer sun. Roger Brinton looked down at his attire. He was not particularly smartly dressed. Canoeing normally called for aged denims or corduroys, but he certainly felt that he could do with a pint. He walked in a little hesitantly, but the atmosphere was friendly. The landlord was a genial upholder of the ancient profession, who smiled as he took the order. Roger Brinton, slowly and with the air of a connoisseur, wrapped himself round a pint of black-and-tan. That done he felt decidedly better.

Half an hour passed, during which time he had sunk two more pints. He began to regard the whole episode of the mysterious gravestone as some peculiar fancy of his own. It didn't seem credible; it must have been a figment of his own overworked imagination . . . There was a good view from the window of the "George" and the architecture of Wallingford had in it a number

of aspects of all that was best in 18th century architecture. Roger Brinton was something of a student of architecture and the 18th century was a favourite period of his. Its buildings were characterised by their great refinement, and their civilised flavour. They were predominated by the type which he designated the 'town house'.

Georgian terrace houses proliferated in Wallingford. There was a certain similarity among them, because the 18th century had been the century when there was an accepted standard of good taste. This ensued, reflected Brinton, from the acceptance of a philosophy of materialism and of reason. The thought of 18th century materialism and reason took his mind from the horror of the coincidental grave. The men and women of the 18th century had had little time for such nonsense. Perhaps critics would have described their philosophy as a little on the brittle side. But it was a philosophy in which there was no room for semitones. A thing was either black or white. It was right or it was wrong. It was good or it was bad. This philosophy they had applied to all their activities, to every branch of their culture, and, of course, architecturally speaking, thought Brinton, as he looked down the street through the "George" window, there was only one right way to build. The right way was the standard way. Anybody who deviated from the standard was guilty of bad taste. He liked that solid Georgian work. He thought of other aspects of Georgian architecture. He thought of their avenues, their mausoleums. Mausoleums made him think again of graves and he shuddered. He took his mind off it





The Baroque flashed through his mind. It was a thing which appealed to the senses rather than to the intellect. The designer had allowed his imagination to run riot. A baroque designer composes in stone and brick. Sometimes the result is a dream. Sometimes, like Roger's experience of the grave, it could be something of a nightmare. He thought of the superb work of Blenheim Palace, he thought of Georgian, palladian doorways and the beautiful proportions of their windows which produced feelings of dignity and rest. He thought of the dignity of Georgian crescents, of the beauty of their bow shop windows . . .

He tried hard to bring his mind back to the present moment, to the reality of his present situation. He was, he reflected very comfortable, almost too comfortable to go back and start paddling his canoe. Unless he made some effort to get back to his canoe the charm of the town would hold him longer than he intended.

A fragrant aroma was coming through from the culinary department of the hotel. He made some enquiries and was shown to the dining room. Feeling a little out of place in his riverside attire, and yet sensing the very real welcome which was offered, he made his way through. The room was pleasantly cool, full but not overcrowded. It had the air of quiet dignity which goes with those establishments of long standing and high quality. The surroundings were very pleasant, the cuisine excellent, the wine first class. It was one of the best lunches he had had anywhere during the course of his holiday.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *The Gospel Makers*

He paid his account and left the hotel. The cost, he thought, was very reasonable, considering the meal that he had eaten and the high standard of the service. He walked back to the river feeling very much at peace with the world and reasonably satisfied with himself.

He reached the river bank. The canoe seemed a stark and violent contrast to the comfort of the hotel he had just left, but the canoe had to be faced, and the river had to be faced. It was one of those things. He prided himself on his ability to do a thing well. He thought of those long, industrial reaches of the Thames. He thought of the beginning of his adventure, right back at Shoeburyness. He was not going to let the earlier effort that he had made be wasted by failure to complete, in the grand style. He had set his hand to the plough, metaphorically, and he was not prepared to look back. Literally, he had set his hand to the paddle and he was not going to stop until he had explored all that there was to explore of the navigable Thames. The canoe rocked a little as he got in. He smiled to himself. It must have been the lunch, he thought, I'm a bit heavier than I was when I set out. He arranged the ruck-sack and the newly purchased provisions carefully to ensure the balance of his vessel. A good balance is particularly important to the canoeist, especially





when he is paddling up stream. The current seemed to be more powerful than it had been in the slower, lower reaches.

It was with a feeling of considerable regret that he left Wallingford behind him. The tortuous bends of the river above Wallingford wound and twisted through an afternoon of paddling until he found himself approaching Culham. He had seen the top of Dorchester church already in the distance, and he knew that away in the distance to the south-west, Steventon lay in the late afternoon sun.

Ahead of him, once he had paddled through Culham, he knew, lay Abingdon and the beautiful Vale of the White Horse, with a little tributary running through Wantage, which itself lay just to the north-east of White Horse hill, reaching nearly a thousand feet above the Berkshire downs. He paddled on past Culham, and now evening was beginning to make itself felt in the chilling of the air.

He didn't know whether he would get as far as Abingdon or not. He kept on paddling. The evening air was fresh and gave him a renewed enthusiasm; it took him all his time to get to Abingdon before sundown. Mooring a little south of the place he paused and rested in the canoe before setting about the business of pitching his tent. As he rested, a boat passed him; it was a yacht, a well built yacht, and roundabout the prow he read the name "The Gospel Makers". Odd name he thought. Boats are very often named as a result of whimsical fancies of their owners —or their builder—but 'The Gospel Makers' seemed such an unusual title. Things tried to put themselves

together in his mind. The strange dream he had had, the wind whispering in the rushes, the weird experience of the grave. There was a gestalt, a pattern, an overriding nexus between one thing and another. Somehow the name on that boat fitted in. At the back of her a flag fluttered, and on the flag there were depicted four rather statuesque representations of human figures. They carried scrolls and pens. 'The Gospel Makers' he thought; Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Was that in a song? Perhaps it was. He racked his brains trying to think. Anyhow what had it got to do with him? How had he become involved in all this? Perhaps his memory was failing?

He looked at the helmsman as the boat passed; the helmsman was a big, broad-shouldered, grey-haired clergyman. Fancy wearing a dog collar on holiday, thought Roger Brinton. The helmsman of 'The Gospel Makers' turned in his direction, beamed and waved as he went past. He looked a friendly, dependable sort of man. Brinton grinned and waved back.

The big vessel was so beautifully designed that she scarcely produced any wash, and although the canoe moved gently, it was not a disturbing movement. Brinton sat tight and watched as 'The Gospel Makers' moved upstream, then he alighted and began pitching his tent.

Having pitched his tent, he set off for a stroll into the village of Abingdon. Abingdon was a pleasant little spot and he found it peaceful and restful after his experience of the previous night. The church, in particular, seemed pleasantly inviting. He walked around it in the dusk. There was nothing odd about





this graveyard he thought. And yet, some power, he knew not what, drew him through the lychgate in the gathering gloom of the evening. Surely, he thought, it can't happen *again* . . . ?

He laughed softly as he walked among the tombs. I can't have another namesake buried here, surely? The older graves had but scant interest as far as he was concerned, he moved on towards the newer tombs. There was one a little apart from the others, by itself. It looked horribly familiar to him in the dusk of the twilight. He wanted to go and read it. Some strange, obsessional urge forced him towards it, and then, deliiberately fighting the urge, making a very pronounced effort to overcome it, he turned his back, and strode swiftly out of the churchyard. He went back until he reached the river once more. He sat in his tent, preparing his supper; the meal over, he took a book from his rucksack and began to read. He was very interested in the principles of Philosophy, and it was one of the immortal Joad's books that he was now involved in.

Normally the content held him fascinated, but now his mind danced from epi-phenomenal viewpoints to 19th century physics. He read the section on the materialistic conception of the universe and found it less convincing than he had expected. He moved through the section on modern materialism and he reconsidered the implication of Pavlov and behaviourism. He thought about the physicist's treatment of sense qualities, and the world of physics as being symbolic rather than real. He read the section on idealist implications, then he considered the chapter on the indirectness of the knowledge of matter. He went on to the

machinery of perception, and the conception of reality as mental or spiritual. He made his way through the arguments concerning intuitional knowledge and its contrast to scientific knowledge, and he read through the erudite conclusions of that section. He tried to get interested in vitalism and creative evolution, and then he came to the seventh section of the book, the suggested explanations concerning abnormal, psychical phenomena. He had just begun the first page, dealing with the relevance of psychic phenomena to the cosmos as a whole, when the thought of the grave that he had seen on the previous night, thrust itself violently before his consciousness and waved there, like a red flag in front of a bull. He drew a deep breath. It wasn't true, he told himself. It was only something in the mind. It was overwork, it was overstrain. He was a man who was very fond of living. Perhaps his love of life as such had made him repress his fears of death; maybe that was the whole answer to the entire problem. Perhaps it was as simple as that. Maybe the whole experience was illusory, was imaginative . . .

Yet he knew from his second visit to that churchyard that all the other graves were real, it was only that one that was missing. So if it was an illusion, it was only a partial illusion. The rest was real.

He wondered if it was possible when he got back to London, to check Somerset House to see whether another Roger Thomas Brinton had been born . . . *on the same day* . . . as he himself. Wasn't that stretching coincidence too far? Thoughts buzzed and stormed around in his head, like a swarm of angry hornets. His mental confusion became worse. The tension in his





mind increased. He flung his book down in disgust. He crawled out of the tent and stood up. He felt like a butterfly emerging from a cocoon. The tent seemed to be symbolic of restriction. He didn't want to be restricted. He wanted to be free. He wanted to get out and do something about life. He realised that there were two possible courses of action. No, maybe there were three, he told himself. The first was to run away from the thing, the second was to fight against it, the third was to stand still and do absolutely nothing. Sometimes he reckoned that doing absolutely nothing could, in a sense, be a very positive form of response to an unwelcome stimulus. But right now it wasn't the kind of positive response which he was going to make. Running, he reflected, any kind of flight or pretending that the grave didn't exist, or pretending that the experience hadn't happened, was not going to solve the problem. If he relegated it to the limbo of forgotten things at the back of his mind he would go on suffering from it for the rest of his life. He had to know whether it was possible for him to walk through a moonlit churchyard without seeing a grave that bore his name. He took a box of matches and set out.

The moon was very high now and it was strangely bright. The summer evening was cooler than the day that had passed, but there was still a vestigial warmth and a gentleness, a romantic softness in the breeze. Summer nights always made him think of girls. Summer nights always made him think of gentle moments spent with various women whom he had known in the past.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### *The Gospel Makers Again*

SOMEHOW he had never been able to settle down, somehow there had always been something lacking, either in them, or in him. If he was in love with anything he was in love with his canoe, and the river, and the paddle. He wondered rather cynically whether Freud would see any peculiar symbolism in that . . .

He reached the lychgate and strode purposefully through the moonlit tombs. An owl hooted in the distance. A bat fluttered from a latticed window in the tower and circled above him like a great dead leaf reluctant to fall to earth. Another followed it and another. The three of them formed a macabre, aerial dance, rather like the witches in 'Macbeth'. He looked deliberately away from the bats and proceeded along the narrow, trodden path between the tombs.

He saw the stone that he had turned away from at dusk. It was shining challengingly in the moonlight. He realised that his hands were trembling as he walked towards it. He had to move towards it, like a moth drawn towards a flame; he had to see that stone. What if he could read the date this time? Would it mean anything? He clapped a hand to his forehead. He could feel a little pulse vibrating against his temple. His breathing was becoming increasingly difficult. The sky overhead was clear, and beyond the moon there were





stars, but around the edges of the horizon, reaching up like the hands of some nebulous giant, he could see the rack of clouds, haggard and brown and dangerous. As though behind that camouflage of airborne vapour he imagined that there lurked strange spirits, beings of dark power. He felt as though the messengers of destiny and the harbingers of Fate were concealed behind that cloud, watching and waiting. Watching him to see whether he would dare approach the stone, waiting to fulfil some sinister purpose of their own if he did. The fear dissolved inside him.

All human emotions stand very close to one another. Fear can change to anger, anger to fear, love can turn to hate but now, with him, it was the first metamorphosis that was effective. Fear was changing to anger. They were only clouds and moonlight, and bats and an owl hooting in the distance. There were no spirits of darkness; there were no spirits at all; it was all damn silly nonsense. That grave certainly did not bear his name. It couldn't.

"Go on!" challenged a voice deep down inside him. "Prove it."

"Don't be a fool," said another voice. "Perhaps your mind is so overwrought that you will see your name even though it isn't there. Perception isn't a matter of the senses, it isn't objective, it's very largely subjective. You are overwrought at the moment. If you do see it, it will give you a terrible shock. It will be dangerous to you. Don't do it, walk back to your canoe. You're safe at the moment, go back while you're safe."

"Coward, coward, coward," whispered the wind in the trees.

He squared his shoulders. Anger had welled up inside him like a living thing. To hell with them all! The owl, the bats, the whispering wind in the churchyard trees. He was going to see what was written on that stone. He had to see what was written on that stone. It had become a matter of life and death, both literally and metaphorically. It was not only top priority, it was the be-all and end-all of his existence.

He knew that if he walked out of the graveyard without stopping to have a look at that stone, to see whether it bore his name, he would never be able to face himself again, *never*. He took three purposeful paces; his hand reached out; he touched the top of the stone. His jaw clamped shut like a steel trap, like the jaws of a pair of blacksmith's pliers. He moved around so that he could see the moonlit inscription. The blood seemed to freeze in his veins.

"Sacred to the memory of Roger Thomas Brinton, born April 7th, 1930, died . . ."

He strained his eyes to see the rest of the inscription. Was it going to tantalise him again as it had done before? Wasn't he going to be allowed to see it this time? He had to see it. He *had* to . . . Then he saw it.

"*January* . . ."

He could make that much out. He struck a match, but even the light of the match couldn't reveal any more. There was something there, but it wasn't a figure that he could recognise. Maybe his own shocked perception was unable to take in the terrible fact that was throwing itself at him now. He staggered back, like a man who had just received a thousand horse-power kick in the stomach. January. So it was going to be





January. That gave him a few months if no more.

"Roger Thomas Brinton, born April 7th, 1930, died January . . ."

but what day in January? What year? He had to know the year. Maybe it wasn't next year. Maybe it was fifty years from now. Maybe he'd be an old man of 80 when he died? Then again, maybe he wouldn't. Maybe it was this January that was coming . . . Maybe it was the January that was just around the corner that men call tomorrow. The words went pounding through and through his head. He felt as though the top of his skull had been removed and little demons armed with hammers were smashing into his bruised brain.

"Roger Thomas Brinton . . ."

Crash! Crash! Crash! went the hammers. Over and over again! An infernal anvil chorus. He could no longer bear it. He reached the riverside. For a moment there was something tempting about the cool deeps. This was midsummer. This wasn't January. He could thwart them. He could plunge into that cool, inviting water and that would be the end of it. That would be the end of the tantalising threat of the illusory grave. He'd show them they were wrong. He felt light-headed, intoxicated and dizzy. He patted the canoe affectionately, as a cowboy might have patted his horse a few moments before going into a gun fight from which he knew he had little chance of emerging alive.

"Thanks for the trip," he said quietly and then he flung himself deliberately into the water.

Roger Brinton was a fair swimmer, but he forced himself to make no effort. He forced himself to sink, yet he could not outwit the instinct of self-preservation.

It wouldn't let him suck in a great lungful of water. He was holding his breath and he couldn't force his body not to hold his breath.

Roger Brinton's brain was overtaxed, Roger Brinton's brain had had enough of existence, but Roger Brinton's body hadn't. Roger Brinton's body wasn't going to let him take in a great lungful of water which would bring oblivion and the end of the instinct of self-preservation. Somehow he splashed up to the surface. He hadn't meant to. He released his breath and sucked in another great lungful.

"Damn," he muttered. "I *will* drown, I *will!*" He tried to force air out of his lungs, but his lungs weren't having any. He shipped a little water and then broke surface again.

"I won't swim," he gasped. "I will sink, I *will!*" He sucked in another mouthful of air and took some more water on board. He was coughing and spluttering now. His consciousness was reeling and in that state of pseudo-control he began striking out in spite of himself. Some instinct that came from the very depths of his being made him shout "Help!"

He didn't expect that there would be anybody about at that time of night, but a dark shadow suddenly cut out the moonlight above him. He heard the soft ripple of a boat.

On board "The Gospel Makers" the Rev. Charles Ferguson was pulling at a boathook. Charlie Ferguson was a big, grey-haired man, inclined a little to the obesity of late middle age, but otherwise in excellent trim. He occasionally amazed visitors to the vicarage with such feats of strength as lifting the garden roller





above his head, for Charlie Ferguson had been a Rowing Blue in his earlier days, and the great muscles of his arms and back had lived up to the old truism that 'Muscle one formed lasts till death'. As Charlie Ferguson held the boathook the two other members of the crew of "The Gospel Makers" came on deck.

"What's the matter, Charlie?" asked a very deep, powerful voice.

"Somebody in difficulties in the water," said Ferguson. "I've got him on the boathook. Can you give me a hand, Val?"

"Surely!" Powerful hands gripped Roger Brinton and he found himself aboard the big yacht. He looked up into the face of the clergyman whom he had already seen, and despite his befuddled condition, he recognised him.

"Let me drown, padre," he said. "Just let me drown."

Charlie Ferguson raised an eyebrow quizzically.

"In some kind of trouble, old chap?" he asked.

"Let's drain him out," said Stearman.

With effortless ease the big journalist adventurer, who was spending a few days with La Noire aboard Charlie's Ferguson's yacht, picked up Roger Brinton as effortlessly as though he were a tiny child. Brinton didn't realise what was happening until the iron grey Colossus that was Val Stearman inverted him, while the Rev. Charles Ferguson administered a number of well-placed thumps to the back.

"I believe this is known technically as 'postural drainage', and is very beneficial for the treatment of asthma and certain cases of bronchitis," said Val Stearman.

"Oh, you sound quite professional," said Charlie Ferguson. "Now you come to mention it, I have seen them doing this to some poor little specimens at the church school. They hang them over a thing like a pair of padded steps, and the nurse prods their backs and make them cough, or something . . . I often wondered what it was for."

La Noire appeared carrying a glass of brandy. They turned Roger Brinton the right way up again and he found himself looking at the most staggeringly beautiful woman he had ever seen. She seemed to be the essence of everything feminine. Her hair was a thousand times blacker than the night; it was almost blue black. It was as black as jet. It was a glossy, glistening black. Her eyes were the same mysterious dark colour. Her skin was absolutely flawless. The cast of her face was not exactly European, it wasn't exactly anything that he had seen before, except that it was indescribably lovely. She had full warm, sensuous lips, moist and inviting. For a man who had just been dredged out of the Thames, half-drowned, Roger Brinton felt his blood stirring with unaccustomed enthusiasm.

## CHAPTER SIX

### *Aboard The Gospel Makers*

"I'M dead," he said. "I'm dead and I'm in heaven; the Mohammedans are right. You must be my houri."

La Noire smiled.





"This isn't nectar," she murmured, "it's brandy. Drink it."

He took the glass with a hand that shook a little. The warm spirit revived him.

"Ah, that's better," he agreed.

He finished off the brandy and returned the glass, to that dainty feminine, yet lithely strong hand of hers.

"Have another?" said Charlie Ferguson.

La Noire refilled the glass.

"Let's go inside," said Val, "it's a little less public."

"It's not very public out here at this time of night," said Charlie, "but I see your point."

"I said something foolish, can you forget I said it? It's big trouble if they think you're trying to make off with yourself, isn't it?" said Brinton.

"I never heard you say anything," said Val, with a wink at Ferguson.

"Neither did I," affirmed Ferguson. "As far as we're concerned you just fell in, old man, that's all there is to it."

"You're very kind," said Brinton. "Kinder than I deserve. Look, I'm making your cabin all wet. I'm all right now. I'll go back to the camp."

"You'll do nothing of the kind," said Charlie Ferguson firmly. He had a great rugged face, and it was creased into a smile, but behind the kindness of the smile was the firmness of a rock hard character. But the rock hardness of that character was not a cold hardness. He was a mixture of strength and tenderness, of jovial good humour and the kind of rock-like faith that characterised an early Christian martyr or one of the first century apostles.

"You're in trouble, aren't you?" said Stearman.

Brinton looked from this Colossus of a man with the curly iron grey hair, and the steely grey eyes to the clergyman, and back again. The big man looked like a veteran centurion or a Spartan General. His shoulders didn't permit him to go through the cabin door without turning sideways. He had an enormous depth and breadth of chest. His great muscles rippled against his well-cut yachting jacket. He was as much a man as La Noire was a woman. There was a strange common denominator about them. Roger Brinton had never met anyone of this calibre before. These people didn't just exist, they lived. They vibrated with life. They did not fill their time with some kind of negative dragging through. They didn't pass the time; they used it. There was something of this same quality of vibrant life in Charlie Ferguson. It was a kind of common denominator that joined the three together. They looked as if they belonged to the same kind of spiritual family.

"Yes, I am in trouble," admitted Brinton.

"What is it?" said Val. "Money, or a woman, perhaps, or a guilty conscience?"

"I almost wish it was!" exclaimed Brinton, "it's nothing like that at all."

"Well, those are the three prime favourites," said the padre. "Are you just wrestling with your own soul?" He had stopped grinning; he looked deadly serious now.

"No, I'm not," answered Brinton. "I'm trying to keep it in my body."

La Noire fetched him a third brandy and Brinton began to feel a little better.





"Suppose you start," suggested Ferguson, "by telling us a little bit about yourself, old chap. It's often a lot easier to give the climax of a story comprehensively when you've given the background."

"It does seem pretty logical, doesn't it?" agreed Roger.

He drained the brandy and felt the warmth of the spirit coursing round his veins.

"Well, it goes like this; my name is Roger Brinton," he grimaced, "Roger Thomas Brinton according to the stone."

"The stone?" said Stearman interrogatively.

"I'm committing the unforgivable error," said Brinton, "of trying to get to the climax before I have told the story. I've been overworking; I'm on holiday. I'm one of these outdoor enthusiasts, I suppose we could call ourselves. I also like messing about in boats. I like messing about in boats to such an extent that I built myself my own collapsible canvas canoe. It's moored by the side of the river there. Serviceable little craft; I'm very proud of it; I'm also very fond of it, and I'm a pretty reliable canoeist. Done a number of survival courses, the sort of thing we go in for. I set myself a project. I started off from Shoeburyness; I wanted to go right up the Thames. Everything was going beautifully, I'd been right through the industrial reaches, with no bother at all. At last I came to that little stretch of river that lies between Goring on the right bank and Streatley on the left. I spent the night there—last night. During the course of that night I went wandering into the village. I wandered round the churchyard."

"Odd thing to do in the middle of the night, wasn't

it?" asked Ferguson.

"It didn't seem odd at the time. It was one of those summer nights when you feel in a whimsical sort of mood. What the poets call a mood of 'gentle melancholy' I believe. I wandered around in the village and came to the churchyard, or rather—it came to me. That was how I felt afterwards."

"It came to you," repeated Stearman.

"Like Mohammed and the mountain?" whispered La Noire.

"In a sense you could say that," agreed Roger Brinton.

"Go on," prompted Val.

Brinton looked at the Colossus and realised the strength of character of the man. There was something shatterproof about Val Stearman. He looked as though no power on earth could ruffle him. He looked just about the most capable man whom Roger Brinton had ever met. And in that, at least, Roger Brinton was an adequate and capable judge of character.

Val Stearman was capable. He was one of the toughest and trickiest fighting machines the world had ever seen. And although metaphorically speaking, the first fall of snow had made itself evident on the roof, there was still plenty of fire in the cellar. The great muscles of the colossal frame had slowed a little, but they hadn't weakened. The oak was more gnarled than it had been in the Spring, but the wood was as strong as ever and many a winter gale would blow over it before Stearman was finally felled by the tempest of Time.

Because of that strength, that power, that force of





personality, Roger Brinton felt a new confidence.

"I don't know why I should want to tell you this. I don't even know why you should want to listen," he said. "But it's obvious that you do . . ."

"I'm glad we made it obvious," said the Rev. Charlie Ferguson. The jovial character of his voice did not in any way belie his actual sincerity.

There was silence for a few moments while Roger Brinton collected his thoughts. Then he said:

"There was moonlight in the churchyard."

"That's natural enough," commented Ferguson, "there's bright moonlight tonight."

"The moonlight shone on a grave."

"That's also natural," said Stearman, "if the moonlight is shining, and the grave happens to be there it can't do much else."

In cold black and white print it looks flippant, but it wasn't flippant the way Val Stearman said it. It was gently encouraging. There was another silence.

"I read the inscription on the grave . . . I was born April 7th, 1930, and, as I said a minute ago, when I jumped the gun a bit in my narrative, my name is Roger Thomas Brinton."

"And you mean to tell us," said Val, "that this is what you saw on this grave."

"Yes," said Brinton, softly. "It said 'Sacred to the Memory of Roger Thomas Brinton, born April 7th, 1930, died . . . and then I couldn't see any more."

"And was that why you were trying to jump into the Thames? To prove that the grave was right?" asked the Rev. Charlie Ferguson.

"No, I jumped into the Thames to try and prove that

the grave was wrong!" said Brinton.

"The grave says that you're dead," said Val. "You can't prove it's wrong by doing what it wants."

"You're both so practical, so matter-of-fact about it," said Brinton. "Neither of you jumped up in the air and said it was incredible, or impossible. Neither of you laughed at me!"

"You're in rather strange company," said La Noire.

"I realise that I am in unsual company," agreed Brinton. "In what way is it strange?"

"Do you read the 'Daily Globe'?" asked Charlie Ferguson.

"Occasionally. There's a copy delivered to the office. I see it."

"Do you ever read the psychic adventure coloumn?"

"It's one of the few things I'm interested in. Bit sensational, of course, but I think it's damn well written." What's the name of that chap?"

Charlie Ferguson was grinning.

"There you are Val; you've just had some perfectly honest criticism, a bit sensational, but damned well written!"

"You mean you're the Val Stearman of the 'Daily Globe'?" asked Brinton. He paused and laughed. "Here I am at 33 sounding like a moonstruck teenager!" he exclaimed. He mimicked his own voice, "Are you the Val Stearman of the 'Daily Globe'? I shall be asking for your autograph next!"

"I am the Val Stearman of the 'Daily Globe'," replied the big journalist adventurer, "and you can have my autograph if you like. I don't charge for it!"

Brinton grinned.





"No wonder you weren't surprised by my tale of a walking grave," he said.

"Where does this walking business come in?"

"I'd only told you half the story. I'd only got through half the punch line," said Brinton. "I saw the damn thing again tonight!"

"Tonight?" said the Rev. Ferguson. "Where, and when, and how?"

"Where—was right here."

"Here?" said Val.

"In the churchyard at Abingdon," explained Roger.

"Here, in Abingdon," echoed Val, "I thought you said you saw it at the other village, further down."

"So I did. It's following me. There's more than one!"

"Hmmm!" commented the Rev. Charlie Ferguson.

"But tonight I saw much more," said Roger Brinton. "I saw more than I did last night."

"And what was this 'much more' that you saw?"

"Well, of course, I did everything I could to read the death date. I was terrified. I wanted to know what it said, yet I was frightened. I overcame the fear and tried to read it."

"And how much did you see?" asked Stearman in that characteristically deep voice of his, that massive bassus profundus, which reverberated like the sound of a bittern across the river.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### *The Song Returns*

"I SAW the month," explained Roger Brinton, "just the month."

"And it wasn't this month," said Val.

Brinton shook his head.

"No, it wasn't," he said.

"When was it?" asked the Rev. Ferguson.

"It was January!"

"Winter," said La Noire.

"And so to forestall the grave that had you marked for the winter, you plunged in during the summer, eh?" said Val.

'Yes that's the long and short of it," agreed Brinton. "Now you've got the story, such as it is."

"It's an extremely interesting phenomena."

"You mean you believe me?" said Brinton.

"You haven't escaped from an asylum, or anything, have you?" said Stearman.

Brinton shook his head with a grin.

"But you make it all sound so normal!" he protested.

"I just said you were in very strange company," commented La Noire.

"Tell me, Mr. Brinton," said Charlie Ferguson. "Have you any respect for the veracity of the Cloth?"





"I wouldn't expect a parson to lie to me deliberately, if that's what you mean," said Brinton, "though I make no pretence about it. I'm not a religious man."

"That's a fair answer," agreed Ferguson. "The point is this, Mr. Brinton. The adventures that my friends Mr. and Mrs. Stearman have recently had make your story of a travelling grave, your story of an itinerant tomb, a pursuing sepulchre, sound I won't say 'tame' or 'modest', but certainly commonplace, and everyday."

Brinton looked at Stearman and La Noire.

"Those articles you write are *fiction,* aren't they? Or largely fiction, or legend or something?",

Val shook his head.

"I have to present them in a fictional style," he said, "But a lot of them are straight, unvarnished truth. In fact I actually have to play them down a bit to make them acceptable as fiction."

"You have to play them down?" echoed Brinton. "You mean some of those things have *happened?"* He looked at Stearman again. "I've read some of those books of your adventures that are written by Bron Fane. I always thought they were pure fiction."

Stearman shook his head.

"My good friend Bron Fane chronicles some of my adventures in that way," he said. "But it's only another method of presenting facts which it would be difficult to present straightforwardly."

"Well, I'm damned!" said Brinton.

"There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in our philosophies," quoted La Noire.

"I'll say there are!"

"There was the adventure of The Walker," broke in

the Rev. Charlie Ferguson. "That was chronicled quite recently. And then there was that fantastic adventure they had with Chronol, the Time Warden, and his disc ship."

Roger Brinton looked from Stearman to La Noire and back again to the padre. He opened his mouth as though to speak but apparently changed his mind. There was silence for a few moments. At last he did open his mouth and speak.

"I'm still not sure that you're not leg-pulling," he said.

Ferguson raised an eyebrow.

"If I told you the story which Val and La Noire recently told me of their adventure in a strange, unknown world, an adventure which is being presented to the public under the tile of 'The Intruders' you would be even more surprised than you are now, Mr. Brinton."

"I don't think I could be more surprised than I am now," commented Roger. "I don't think any human being anywhere could be more surprised than I am at this moment." He looked at them again acutely. "Why are you telling me all this, anyway? Where's its relevance?"

"Its relevance is your peace of mind," said Stearman.

Roger Brinton looked up at the iron grey Colossus.

"My peace of mind?" he asked rather vaguely.

Stearman nodded.

"Your peace of mind," he asserted. The depths of his voice rumbled around the cabin.

"What's my peace of mind got to do with it?" asked a puzzled Brinton. As far as he was concerned Stearman's remark was cryptic and enigmatic. "I can't see the connection," he persisted.





"Is it easy to tell a story to people who have not had a similar experience?" asked Charlie Ferguson. "Is it easy to tell a story to people who are likely to be incredulous?"

"No, I suppose it isn't."

"Don't you feel uncomfortable if you are called upon to state unusual facts, which you don't think have much chance of being accepted?"

"I see what you mean . . ."

There was a thoughtful pause, then Brinton continued.

"It does help my peace of mind, and I appreciate it. You've helped to get the thing into proportion, the whole word had just become a grave."

"An adage has been quoted here tonight," said Ferguson. "There are more things in heaven and earth . . ." He looked at Brinton. "That's very true, you know, my friend, that's very true. There *are* more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in our philosophies. If all the dreamers and the philosophers who ever lived, and all who are ever destined to live, could put their dreams and philosophies together there would still be more things in heaven and earth than they could compass with their finite minds."

"I suppose there would," agreed Brinton.

"One day," said Val, "the physicists may have all the answers to all the questions that are posed by the physical laws of matter. One day chemists may solve all their chemical problems; one day the astronomers may unravel some of the superficial secrets of cosmo-

gony and cosmology, but there will still be philosophical and metaphysical questions that remain unanswered. The physical universe alone is a mass of enormous problems. Beyond it there is a great unseen realm. Occasionally the seen and the unseen, the known and the unknown, the shadow and the substance, brush together. A little of one seems to rub off onto the fabric of another, or, if you imagine that you are an observer looking through two screens into the unseen world beyond, in each screen there is one tiny pin-prick. When those pin-pricks are aligned, then you catch a flashing, fleeting, transitory glimpse of the Great Beyond. The alignment is only momentary and then either one screen or the other shuts out the distant realm and we are hemmed in once more by the physical world, the world of sense, as the ancient philosophers would have called it."

Charlie Ferguson got up and moved out of the cabin.

"Give me a hand Val," he called over his shoulder.

Stearman followed him up onto the deck. La Noire sat in the cabin talking to the man they had salvaged from the Thames. Both Val and Ferguson were skilled yachtsmen and it was the work of a few moments only for them to turn the hull of the beautiful yacht "The Gospel Makers" until her proud bows pointed downstream.

They had not cruised very far from the spot where Roger Brinton's canoe was moored. As they reached the bank again the moonlit shape of the canoe showed up in the pale silver illumination. Stearman leapt easily to the bank. For a man who carried between fifteen and sixteen stone of avoirdupois Val Stearman was





surprisingly athletic. He was that rare combination of strength and agility which made him such a doughty opponent. He took the for'ard rope and made "The Gospel Makers" fast.

A few moments later they had the little canoe packed with Roger Brinton's gear and bobbing along happily in the wake of the yacht. As he worked Val Stearman was humming to himself. It was not a song that was particularly familiar to him and he wondered, as he hummed it, why he should have done so. Perhaps it was a combination of the rushes round about, and the name of the yacht on which he and La Noire were spending a few days' holiday with Charlie Ferguson.

It suddenly struck him that 'Gospel Makers' occurred in one of the verses of the old folk song that he was now wafting softly over the moonlit, evening river.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### *The Grave*

"GREEN grow the rushes-O," he whistled.

"That song!" exclaimed Brinton. He stood framed in the cabin doorway. "Mr. Stearman, *that song.*"

"What about it?" asked Val. "It's not that bad, is it?" He grinned.

"No. I think that's the theme, the link, the gestalt; it's got some incredible significance."

"Has it?" asked Charlie Ferguson. "It's very old of course, traditional . . ."

"That's my dream," said Brinton. He had already told La Noire about the strange dream he had had. He looked up at Charlie Ferguson. "The name of your boat—The 'Gospel Makers'; it's part of the dream."

"I thought that was the reason I was singing the song," said Stearman, "you know, association of ideas . . . I've just been mucking about among the reeds there, getting your canoe, and then seeing the name 'The Gospel Makers' in the moonlight on here. the combination of reeds and 'Gospel Makers' made me sing. I don't think there's more to it than that, is there?"

"Perhaps," suggested the Rev. Charles Ferguson, "there could be some kind of channel, some kind of connection between the two things. Perhaps there might be some kind of overall nexus, some kind of incorporating gestalt which involves that song. Perhaps the ancient combination of symbols is being used by some sinister power for a purpose of its own. Some dark force appears to be threatening our young friend here."

"Would you come and have a look at the graveyard with me?" asked Roger Brinton.

"Try and keep us away!" rejoined Stearman.

"If you saw it as well I'd know there was nothing the matter with my mind," said Roger.

"I don't think you need have any serious fears about that," said Stearman. "I have seen men who have lost their reason. I have seen men who have been the victims of their own visual fantasy. I do not believe that you are such a man, Mr. Brinton."

"Call me Roger, please," said the man they had





fished from the Thames.

"All right, Roger, you call me Val," answered the big journalist.

Brinton nodded.

A little further upstream they turned the big yacht again. They tied up the yacht and made their way through the silent, sleeping streets of Abingdon until they reached the churchyard.

"It's a lovely church," commented the Rev. Ferguson.

"Beautiful," agreed Val.

"There's a great air of peace and tranquillity, here," said La Noire. "It seems almost incredible to believe that any evil could be here, in this hallowed place. And yet——" her strange sense of intiuition gave her an unaccountable feeling.

"Well," said Val, "what is it, darling?"

"There's——" she broke off hesitantly. "There is something mysterious here. Something that doesn't belong."

Ferguson looked at her meditatively.

"I get a similar feeling," he agreed. "There is something intruding here, something that has come through from the Other Side."

Stearman nodded.

"I must see that date," said Brinton.

"One of the great mercies of life," said Charlie Ferguson gently, "is that we are not permitted to see the date. When we know, then the forcing of such knowledge upon another human being is one of the severest punishments which society can inflict."

"You mean capital punishment."

"That's right," agreed the padre. "Speaking personally," he went on, "I am a very strong opponent of the death penalty. When it is exacted it is not so much death itself which punishes the condemned man, it is the condemned hours, the condemned days, that he spends contemplating the end. This is the real punishment. If we all had experiences like yours, Roger, and if it was vouchsafed to us to see the date, then we would all be in the position of the condemned man."

"Aren't we like that anyway?" asked Brinton. "Man knows that he's mortal. We know we've all got to go—sometime."

"Ah, but that 'sometime' is a glorious word for the escapist," said Ferguson. "Behind the façade of 'sometime' we all cherish the illusion that it will never happen to us. We shall be the man or the woman who lives to be a hundred, or a hundred-and-fifty." He looked around. "I see a few wrinkles in that face of yours that weren't there last year, Val!"

"I know every time I look into a mirror that Father Time has carved one more notch," said Stearman.

"Inexorably we are growing older," said Charlie Ferguson. "It is one of the few realities of life." He looked at La Noire. "You appear to be the exception that proves the rule, you are the exception that tests the rule. I have known you for many years, my dear. I have known you almost as long as I have known Val, but although chivalry prevents a gentleman from applying common sense to a lady's age I must admit I find you very perplexing. There is something of the eternal Eve about you, La Noire!"

She smiled as alluringly as Helen of Troy.





"Don't let me spoil your train of thought," she said. "One exception won't spoil the general principle!"

"It's all the good treatment she gets," put in Stearman. "That's why she looks so well!"

She wondered if there was just a trace of a question in Val's voice, for La Noire was a woman of many secrets. There were strange things about her, mysteries that were more than mortal.

There was silence for a moment while the Rev. Charles Ferguson re-collected his thoughts.

"Oh, yes," he went on, "I was saying that we all believe it can never happen to us. This perhaps is the main reason for the decline in religious faith. So many people today prefer to bury their heads in a façade of empty nothingness. They like to be busy watching the telly, or using the newest washing machine. They go in for all kinds of entertaining and pleasant pursuits. He smiled. "I do, myself, I thoroughly enjoy boating. Pleasure is a very good thing. I am convinced that God has given us this world to enjoy, but that is not its only use. Christianity, when it is not misconstrued by the dismal, is a religion of happiness. A Christian is able to enjoy the pleasures of the world, to use them as they were meant to be used by a divine Creator, but at the same time he has to see that to use the joys of this world as a narcotic, as a means of dulling the mind, is not to *use* them, but to *abuse* them. The great thing, remember, is that real peace of mind comes from something deeper; real peace of mind can only come when we have faced the great issues of life and death, when we have made peace in our own souls, when we have made peace with our

own being, when we have made peace with ourselves and our God. When we are reconciled to the Eternal, then we can turn to the world around us and see in it new joy and new happiness, that has escaped from us before . . ."

"What's that?" said La Noire, pointing. Her finger was in a direct line with a stone that shone in the moonlight. It seemed somehow different from the others.

Roger Brinton gasped as though he had just received a violent physical blow.

Charlie Ferguson put a steadying hand on Brinton's shoulder.

"It's all right. We're with you Roger. Don't be afraid."

"It is the one," said Brinton.

"I'll have a look," said Val Stearman.

There was something of the quality of direct attack about Stearman's approach to life. There was nothing round about or tortuous in his approach. He went through difficulties or pleasures with a good old-fashioned gusto. He was not a man who was particularly enamoured of innuendo. Val Stearman had in him the age old spirit of the warrior. He reached the stone and looked at the inscription:

"Sacred to the memory of Roger Thomas Brinton,
born April 7th, 1930, died January . . ."

There was more, but it was unreadable. Val struck a match and looked at the peculiar lines. It was the embryo of an inscription. It was by no means a full or real inscription. It looked like an unborn carving. It might have been the projection of an idea. There was

a vague and amorphous quality to it. The stone wasn't blank, neither was it carved.

"Very weird," said the Rev. Charles Ferguson.

"Uncanny," agreed La Noire.

"Tantalising," agreed Val.

"You see, you see," panted Roger Brinton. "My name, my birthday, and just that one word."

"I know this will sound very empty counsel," said the priest, "but don't worry about it, Mr. Brinton. Don't let it get you down."

"Don't worry about it," gasped Brinton.

"Some evil force, for reason or reasons unknown, is aiming at you, is gunning at you," said the parson.

"But why, what can I have done?"

"I don't know," answered the Rev. Ferguson, "if we knew why they were after you, if we knew who they were, we'd be a great deal closer to finding a solution to the problem. We must diagnose before we can cure. It's no good giving medicine that cures mumps if you're suffering from measles! It's no good giving you lung pills if you've got a touch of the nadgers, to put it in more modern and colloquial phraseology."

Despite the grimness of the surroundings, Roger Brinton smiled. There was something about the cheerful optimistic courage of the Rev. Charles Ferguson which would have made a condemned man smile as he stood on a trap door.

"That's better," said Stearman, "stiff upper lip and all that sort of thing."

Brinton raised an eyebrow.

"I thought stiff upper lips had gone out of fashion," he said rather querulously.





"Overdone there's nothing worse," agreed Val, "but done in the right proportion, in the right way and in the right place, it's an excellent tradition, even in circumstances like these a man with backbone is a very preferable creature to a man without!

"I don't think I displayed much backbone when I went into the Thames," said Roger Brinton.

## CHAPTER NINE

### *Holy Water*

STEARMAN was silent for a moment as though trying to mentally compose a suitable answer. Finally it was Charles Ferguson who spoke.

"At least you did something. It was a defiant action, perhaps, don't misunderstand me; I'm not for one second condoning it! As I said when we fished you out, as far as Val and La Noire and myself are concerned you fell in and you were trying to swim out."

"Thanks," murmured Brinton.

"But," went on Ferguson, "as I said, I'm not condoning it in any way, although you need not reproach yourself entirely. It needs a certain kind of wild, desperate last-ditch courage perhaps . . ."

"A desire to defeat fate in this case, I would have thought," said La Noire, very sagely. "Either consciously or sub-consciously you had got this threat that hung over you——"

"Lying under him to be more exact," said Stearman.

"It was hardly hanging over him!"

"If you want to be exact as all that, yes," said Ferguson. "This threat seemed inevitable—whether it was over or under is of little significance!" He rounded on Stearman. "You know Val, you remind me of that Gilbertian situation in which Wilfred Shadbolt and the jester are singing the song which pretends to relate the death of Fairfax, and they are arguing very amusingly, very wittily, as to whether he sank like a stone or whether he sank like a lump of lead!"

"I see the parallel," agreed Val.

"We," said Charles Ferguson, "are sombrely and soberly discussing whether or not the danger metaphorically, or literally, is over, or above, our friend Mr. Brinton. He grinned. "Rather like the mediaeval school men, aren't we?"

"Mediaeval school men?" asked Stearman, who was not the same kind of classical scholar as the Rev. Ferguson, although he had no mean background of culture at his disposal.

"Yes, the mediaeval school men, who used to seriously debate the number of angels who could dance on a pin-head."

"That must have been an interesting topic!"

"If ever discussions generated more heat than light I sometimes think theirs did. Yet occasionally, there were brighter points in their philosophy. There were illuminating passages in their philosophy. However we digress, we digress. We have a problem, what are we going to do with it?"

"Let's do something practical," suggested Val. "Let's uproot that gravestone!"





"Ah, the empirical approach," said Charles Ferguson. "This thing, you know, is only a *sympton*. It won't do us any good if we do uproot it."

"Look," said Val, "it's an avenue of approach."

La Noire was shaking her head gently.

"You won't be able to move it, Val," she said. "It's not like that. That isn't the right answer."

"Well, psychologically speaking," said Stearman, "it may be what is known as an ineffectual response. Nevertheless I'm going to try it." He got hold of the tombstone. "Come on Fergy!" he called over his shoulder, "don't just stand there! It's set in here like a giant's biscupid! I feel like a decay germ trying to shove somebody's tooth out of the way!"

"I'll help," said Brinton. "There's nothing I'd like more than to uproot it and throw it in the Thames!" Together Ferguson, Brinton and the mighty Stearman heaved and pushed at the stone.

"It's like a plate of steel," said Val, "it's like trying to push over the Tower of London."

"I said it wouldn't work," said La Noire. "It is a manifestation of evil, theoretically, you are pushing against something that isn't physical."

"In that theoretical sense then," returned her husband, "we should be going right through it, instead of wasting our energy and getting nowhere."

"But you won't!" said La Noire. "If I can coin a phrase it's not 'get-throughable', it's not penetrable; it doesn't exist in our continuum in that way. It's from Beyond. You could no more push that over than you could put your hand above your head and push the moon out of the sky. There's no contact, you see. You

think you're making an effort against it, but you're not. It's so difficult to explain. I can see it all so clearly," she concluded.

"All right," said Val, "I'll take your word for it. I've tried the empirical approach, it hasn't got us very far, has it?"

"We can strike at it," said Ferguson.

"Thought of something?" queried Val.

"There are psychic weapons. I know this is only a manifestation of the evil, this is not one of the evil entities themselves, but, perhaps, through this we can strike back at them."

"Perhaps we could carve a symbol on it," suggested Val, "if we could cut a cross into it . . ."

"Ah! Now that would be real progress! It would make it impossible for them to handle it," said Ferguson.

"How are you going to cut it?" asked La Noire. "It isn't real in that sense."

Stearman looked around and found a thick, purposeful looking flint. He struck the flint hard against the top of the tombstone. It didn't break; he didn't feel an impact; he was just aware that something was barring his path. There was no resemblance at all to the kind of experience which a man expects when he strikes stone with stone.

"There is something very odd here," he said, as he put the flint down.

"Yes, we shan't be able to carve it," agreed Ferguson. "We must mark it in some other way." He was looking thoughtful.

"Holy water?" suggested La Noire.





"Yes," answered Ferguson, "definitely yes."

"Have we got any?" asked Val.

"I know where we can soon get some," replied the priest. "I believe the church door is open, one of those delightful places of unspoiled country charm where churches are infrequently locked. Vandalism doesn't seem to have spread to the peace of these places. There is no need for churches to be protected by locks, keys and bolts."

"O.K." said Val.

He followed Ferguson to the church. Brinton and La Noire stayed by the strange gravestone. Val and Ferguson went inside the church. Ferguson genuflected as he crossed the front of the altar, then he made his way to the font. He lifted the cover and dipped a hand into the holy water that the font contained.

"A handful will be enough," he said. "We haven't got anything to carry it in, anyway."

Cupping his hands together carefully so that he didn't lose the water he had just taken out, he blessed it solemnly and sincerely and then made his way out of the church door which Val pulled quietly to behind him.

They reached the spot where La Noire and Brinton waited by the enigmatic grave.

"If you will dip your finger into the water and trace the outline of a cross on the top of the stone," he said to Val, "we shall see what we shall see. I'll sprinkle the rest on the grass in front of it. That too, seems to have a peculiar quality of unreality."

Stearman made the sign of the cross with the holy

water on the stone. There was a strange vibrating sensation.

"We've got through to them this time!" exclaimed Ferguson. "Stand clear; there may be some kind of violent manifestation at any moment."

With the residue of the holy water he made the sign of the cross over the grave itself. The ground around them seemed to vibrate and shake like a minor earthquake.

"I wonder if that would have registered on a seismograph?" murmured Ferguson.

"Perhaps not," suggested La Noire.

Brinton opened his eyes very wide and watched. This was a very new experience for him. He had seen nothing like it before, ever . . .

Moonlight fell, silver and strange, on the grave, and the grave continued to vibrate.

Stearman looked at the stone.

"Look at the Cross!" he exclaimed.

Where he had traced the sacred symbol in holy water the stone was glowing. White light shone on it.

"We have enabled the powers of light to focus on this spearhead of evil," said Ferguson softly under his breath by way of explanation.

His remarks were actually addressed to Roger Brinton, who was trembling almost as much as the vibrating earth. The white glow, a cruciform white glow, radiated upwards out of the ground. The stone began to crumble. White vapour rose from it. The ground began to break and crack.

"It's like a mediaeval impression of the Day of Judgement," said Stearman.





"Do you think anything is going to *emerge?*" asked La Noire.

"I doubt it," answered Ferguson. "I don't think that's what's going to happen. In fact, I think what's going to happen will only be the disintegration of the symptom. It will let them know that we are aware of them. It will let them know that they are not up against amateurs, that they are not up against a helpless victim. It may even finish the whole business."

"From my experience, nothing will do that except the complete destruction of the agent the enemy is using," said Stearman. "We had an experience with Jules, and with von Haak."

"And that hideous hunchback!" said La Noire, with a shudder.

"They hounded us for years," admitted Stearman. "The only way we finished them was a silver bullet."

He patted the pocket of his sailing jacket. A big Browning .45 nestled in that pocket. It was a lovely gun, superbly designed. It was built to the highest design of the gunsmith's craft. There was something a little unusual and extraordinary about it, too. Stearman's Browning fired silver bullets. His hand slid around the butt. There was reassurance in the cold feel of the steel.

"If anything does emerge," he said, "I shall deal with it!"

The cracks continued to open and more white vapour poured out. The glowing white cross was beginning to shine up into the sky like a miniature cruciform searchlight. The stone crumbled and decimated before their eyes, and Stearman tightened his grip on the butt of

the big Browning. His eyes, like grey steel, matched the butt, the butt that he held, so straight and strong. Then they were aware of a feeling of anticlimax. The white vapour lessened. The stone collapsed into a powdery heap. The ground stopped vibrating, the vapour vanished. Nothing was to be seen of the stone at all. The marks on the ground had gone, rather like a scab the wind has blown away, leaving fresh clean skin underneath.

## CHAPTER TEN

### *Analysis*

STEARMAN looked at the place where the grave had been. There was nothing. There was nothing but empty grass, virgin soil, no one had been buried there. At least—no one had been buried there for centuries, if at all.

"Strange," commented Val.

"No more than I expected actually," said Ferguson. "I didn't think we would accomplish more than the destruction of that particular symptom. At least, we have had a crack at them. The exercise of evil power of this magnitude calls for a great deal of effort and energy on their part. This effort and energy have been wasted because we were successful, by the grace of those Higher Powers, in overthrowing this evil. We have been used as channels of those great Powers. Now, having blunted the enemy's dart, so to speak, let us





see what their next move will be."

"You anticipate a continuation of attack, then?" said Stearman.

"Oh yes," said Ferguson.

"Seems logical," agreed La Noire.

Val stood still, ruminating, for a moment. "I'll hazard a guess," he said. "I may be wrong and it's probably no more than playing a hunch. I'd suggest that they will continue the pattern that they have established so far."

"You mean their pattern in regard to me?" broke in Brinton.

"That's it," said Val. They were walking back towards 'The Gospel Makers'. "I think if we pushed on upstream, and reached another town, or village, put up there for the night, took another moonlight walk, towards the church, we should see the stone again," he went on.

"Do you think it would reveal more information this time?" said Brinton questioningly.

"It's likely," said Stearman, "very likely indeed!"

"But I'm not sure that I want to see the rest," said Roger.

"Ah, this is where they have you in a device rather similar to Morton's fork," said La Noire.

"What on earth was Morton's fork?" asked Brinton. "I'm afraid I'm not an historian—or is it something to do with cooking?"

La Noire laughed.

"No! It was an historical argument! When Morton was collecting revenue, if a man appeared poor, then Morton would argue that as he had not spent his sub-

stance he must have plenty of money put away. If a man appeared wealthy then he would say the appearances of wealth obviously signified wealth and that he must pay, too. So there was no escape."

"Oh, I see," said Brinton, "no *via media.*"

"Ah, you speak quite passable ecclesiastical Latin," smiled the big priest.

They got back to the boat. There was an altogether more cheerful air over everything.

"That old folk song," said Stearman, as he looked at the rushes again before casting off the mooring rope.

"What—'Green Grow the Rushes-O'?"

"Yes," said Val, "there's a sequence there which I feel is a secondary pattern somehow, as though its pervading us."

"Let's go further, let's try and analyse its significance," said La Noire.

"Well first of all, there's verse one: 'One is one and all alone'. There I was all alone in my canoe. That seems pretty reasonable," said Roger.

"Yes, I would think that's a fair interpretation there," said Stearman.

"Then I had that terrible dream about those two dead fish, floating belly upwards, white in the moonlight," went on Brinton.

"Two, two, the lily white boys," said Stearman. "Two dead fish—I don't know what the significance of that is."

"Well, of course, the fish has a deep psychological and a deep religious significance," said Ferguson. "For example, *Ichthus* the Greek word for 'fish' was used by the church of the first century because in Greek





*Ichthus* is an acrostic."

"I see," murmured Brinton. "So the symbolism of two dead fish would be the sybolism of the death of Christianity. The overthrow of good."

"But this, of course, is only wishful thinking on the part of our opponents. It's about as naive as the sympathetic magic of cavemen who paint pictures of aurochs on the walls of their caves with spears sticking in them."

"Sticking in the walls of the caves, or sticking in the aurochs?" demanded La Noire brightly.

"Oh, hilarious darling!" retorted Val. "That sounds just about as old as the aurochs and the cavemen."

"Seriously though, I see no reason why, if that dream was projected to you from outside, in other words if it was objective and not subjective, you may very well find that what the enemy were projecting there was no more nor less than a piece of very empty wishful thinking."

"I see, so that account for the 'lily-white boys'—the projection of the dead fish," said Brinton.

"Three, three the rivals," went on Stearman.

"Well that's been fulfilled now," said Brinton. "My real self and the two 'rivals', the 'bodies' in the 'graves' that didn't exist. Three Brintons altogether, myself and the two others."

"Ye-es, that would probably fit," agreed La Noire. "So we have satisfied the first three conditions of the gestalt, of the pattern, of the overall scheme. What about four for the 'Gospel Makers'?"

"That's us of course, and the boat," said Ferguson. "Four for the gospel makers—you and I, Val, and La

Noire and Brinton—*four for the Gospel Makers!*"

"Of course!" agreed Stearman. "It's so simple and straightforward I nearly missed the significance of it because of its simplicity. I wonder what the five symbols at your door can be?"

"I have a feeling that this will be the next object," said La Noire.

"I think we've already started it," said the priest. "We've used two of the symbols already. The Cross and the Holy Water; they're symboliic of the power of Light."

Stearman patted the pocket where the big Browning nestled.

"That's the third one," he said. "Silver bullets."

"We haven't used them yet," said La Noire.

"True," answered Stearman. "I wonder what the other two could be. There are other sacred symbols, of course."

"There's the Star of David, the Pentagram," said La Noire.

"Oh, yes, that's a fourth . . . silver, a cross, holy water, a pentagram. I would guess that the fifth sign was a circle, the symbol of eternity."

"We may be wrong about some of these," said Val, "but I myself feel sure that we're right as far as we've gone."

"I think these other figures are going to be in this duel before it's concluded," pronounced La Noire.

"Well, whom may we expect next?" said Val.

"One is one and all alone,
Two for the lilywhite boys,





Three for the rivals,
Four for the Gospel Makers,
Five for the symbols at your door,
And six for the six proud walkers,"

quoted Ferguson.

"The six proud walkers! They came in my dream. They make sense now," said Brinton. "I saw them, men like statues. They wore hoods or masks, later."

"Of course the dream symbolism may be doubled back on itself; I wouldn't take it too literally if I were you," warned Val.

"The Gospel Makers" made its way majestically through the upper reaches of the Thames. The beautiful old university city itself lay a few miles to the north of them, and at this point the Thames still carried out its function as watery guardian of the Berkshire-Oxfordshire borders. The main part of Oxford, with its academic peace and the magnificent stillness of its ivy-covered walls, lay to the north-east as the Thames wound its way northward and westward. They had a favourable, following wind and "The Gospel Makers" was moving at a comfortable eight knots. From time to time across the wide vale that ran like a huge natural sports ground south-west of Oxford almost as far as Bath and Trowbridge with the pavilion hills of Berkshire to the south-east and those of Gloucestershire to the north-west, they caught glimpses of the Gloucestershire uplands where the Windrush was born and where Bibury and Burford sat like patient old spectators at some comic cricket match. The voyage was pleasant and uneventful. The Rev. Charles Ferguson could handle the tiller as competently as he could handle a

Bible or a Prayer Book, and Val Stearman was the kind of man to whom almost every sporting pursuit came as easily and as naturally as breathing. It was difficult to think of any physical skill which Stearman could not practise with consummate ease.

They followed the Thames less to the north now, and more to the west. Its escalations gave it the semblance of an enormous aqueous step-ladder. The northern runs were the risers, and the western runs were the treads. They reached what may well have been described in this metaphor as a 'landing'. In the distance, four or five miles to the south they could see Cumnor, while immediately ahead of them, as the river itself now turned to the south-west and the previously following wind opposed them for the first time, they could see the little town of Eynsham. The afternoon sun had disappeared like some coy vestal behind an altar cloth of cloud.

"I think we're going to be in for a bit of a blow," remarked Charlie Ferguson, as he stood by the tiller.

"I wouldn't be surprised," agreed Val.

La Noire looked round at the greying sky.

"Be a good idea to stop, I think, Charlie," she said.

Ferguson nodded.

"I think so," he agreed.

Brinton's little canoe was bobbing along faithfully behind them like a loyal and well trained dog that walks at its master's heel. Brinton looked over the stern of "The Gospel Makers."

"Makes me feel rather disloyal," he said. "I'd promised myself that I was going to paddle all this way."





"You didn't count on circumstances," said Val. "It certainly wasn't your fault that some dark psychic power appears to be gunning for you. We've got to find out yet what it is that you've done to offend them."

"He hasn't necessarily offended them," said Ferguson. "Haven't you sometimes found, Val——" he left the sentence unfinished.

"I know what you were going to say," said Val. "Sometimes they victimise a man for no reason at all other than their own pernicious inverted logic."

"Well phrased," said Charlie Ferguson. "Well phrased indeed, Val."

There was a small public mooring by the side of the river and in spite of the season they were in luck, for no one apparently had moored there before them that day. The row of iron rings beyond the row of semi-submerged palings had a friendliness and welcome about them. Their corroded perimeters seemed to invite the traveller to throw his mooring rope and settle down for a night of peace, but although the mooring rings themselves had a welcoming look, and although Eynsham itself seemed a friendly little town there was no particular peace, there was no specific tranquillity aboard "The Gospel Makers."

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### *The Date*

STEARMAN was pacing the deck like some old time naval commander preparatory to going into battle.

Charlie Ferguson was busying himself with ropes and anchors. They made fast and then scrambled off the boat onto the little mooring stage which some unknown Victorian benefactor had placed there, for the convenience of those who wanted to view Eynsham from the river, and spend a little time among the rural pleasantries of this little Oxfordshire vale. They heard the rumble of a distance train as it sped through the early summer evening on its way south-westward to Whitney. Val Stearman guessed that it had just come down through Bicester and Islip, on that pleasant summer afternoon, that was now grey with the approach of evening. The wind had taken on an unusual chilliness, there was a kind of cold in it which neither Stearman nor his companions found particularly pleasant. Brinton shuddered and shivered. Val looked at him.

"Cold?" he asked.

"Partly," said Brinton. He shivered again. "Isn't there an old superstition about somebody walking over your grave when you shiver like that?" He swallowed hard.

Stearman put a hand on his arm.

"Relax," he said. "When the sun goes down we'll investigate."

"It's nearly down," answered Brinton.

"Whatever power we're up against it will probably operate by moonlight as it did before," said Charlie Ferguson.

La Noire nodded.

"You'll have to wait for the moonlight, Roger," she said.





"It's forcing itself back into my consciousness," said Brinton. He hesitated. "I don't know if I can face it again. Not *another* grave . . ."

"Now look," said Stearman, "it may not happen again. We've taught them a lesson."

"Yes, I think we can say that without any fear of contradiction," agreed the Rev. Ferguson. "They won't like what we did; they won't like it at all."

"You mean what we did in Abingdon," said Brinton.

"That's right," answered the priest.

"There is a sense," amplified Stearman, "when by striking at the symptom we also strike at them. Mind you it's not as good as striking at them *direct*, but at least they may have found the experience sufficiently unpleasant not to attempt it again."

"You don't really mean that do you?" said Brinton.

"There are different degrees of meaning. I don't say that I don't believe it, but I say it with a certain amount of reservation. There is a very deep chance, and I say this in all sincerity, that we may see no more of them at all, it may be the end of the matter. Whatever interest they had in you, they now know the risk that has to be entailed is probably not going to be worth it. On the other hand, as I have already remarked to you, during our discussions on this matter, these people have a singularly horrible tenacity. It took us years to shake off Jules and von Haak and the sinister hunchback, who were pursuing us, after I rescued La Noire from the clutches of the coven." Val paused. He looked grim and thoughtful. Then went on: "Once or twice they almost got us, even now I sometimes wonder whether some remnant of the coven still survives, and

whether that remnant would appreciate a chance of revenge."

"You don't think this is all some kind of plant, do you," queried Ferguson. "I mean we made no particular secret of our whereabouts. We're not travelling incognito."

"You mean they're trying to get at you through me?" asked Brinton. "But how could they have known that you would be passing at that exact minute? How could they have known that I was going to—er——" he hesitated, "'fall' into the Thames just then?"

"They have ways," said Stearman. He said it rather vaguely, but in spite of the vagueness it carried a wealth of conviction. "They have ways," he repeated.

"Such as?" persisted Brinton.

"Scrying, or crystal gazing," said Stearman. "Divination with sand trays . . ."

"Well, that sounds like 'magic' . . ." began Brinton.

"What do you think this grave is—an example of natural philosophy?" challenged Ferguson.

"I suppose having seen that I ought not to be shocked by anything," said Brinton quietly.

"We're all under a bit of a strain," said Val.

"You don't look as if you are," returned Brinton.

"There are two ways of taking a strain," said Stearman. "A piece of oak, for example, and a piece of steel of equivalent strength; long before it reaches breaking point, the oak—which is as strong as the steel—will creak and protest. The steel will make no sound at all until suddenly it reaches breaking point and then—*snap!*"

"Well, what's the meaning of this analogy as far as





I'm concerned?" enquired Brinton.

"There are some of us who make a fuss before we reach breaking point," said Stearman. "The kind of man who gets irritable when he's under a strain, the man who snaps and snarls, who is angry without apparent cause. The other man is like the steel, he just goes on taking the strain and taking the strain, until he snaps."

"Yes, I see the analogy now," said Brinton.

"So you mustn't blame yourself if your innate temperament has made you of oak instead of steel," said Stearman. "A sufficient thickness of oak is just as strong as a piece of steel of the right proportions. If you're one of the old oaken buckets of this world, you will creak and groan a bit, as the weight goes on, but that doesn't mean you can't take the weight. You may be inclined to fly off the handle, you may be inclined to say things in haste that you regret, you may make fatuous remarks, you may fall unusually silent. Over-talking and under-talking are both nervous symptoms." He grinned. "That's elementary psychology, text book one! by Professor Stearman."

Brinton laughed.

"You have a very reassuring manner, Mr. Stearman," he said.

"Val," said the big journalist, "don't forget, boy, Val. I don't like formality. The kind of approach which demands some kind of ceremonial or formality between one human being and another is, to my way of thinking, a wrong approach, an inexact approach. We are nothing more than fellow passengers to the grave, nothing more and nothing less. A man can have

blood as blue as the sky, or as red as a pillar box, but he's still a man."

"Is that part of your political philosophy?" asked Charlie Ferguson.

"If you like to make it so," answered Val. "It's part of my *general* philosophy, put it that way. My general philosophy includes within it aspects of the political, the theological and the practical."

"You'll have to write a book on it one day," said Charlie Ferguson with a grin. "You never know, they may use it as a text book in theological colleges. A kind of warning—'don't be like Stearman'!"

"Very funny," retorted Val.

"What I think we all need is a drink," said Charlie Ferguson.

"I think that's an absolutely splendid idea," applauded Val.

"It will serve two functions," went on the priest. "One, it'll buck us all up, and I think Roger needs a bit of bucking up, and two, it will fill in a little time until the moon rises . . ."

They found a charming old rural inn complete with an 18th century shove-ha'penny board. It was a splendid old piece of mechanism. Ferguson and Brinton played against Val and La Noire.

"You've played this game before," said Charlie Ferguson with mock disapproval as La Noire placed her coins with unparalleled accuracy between the slats of the board.

"It's good fun," she commented.

"You play like a professional, darling," rejoined Val.

Her beautiful black eyes looked up responsively.

"I like to play well when we're playing together," she said.

They each bought a round and played two more games before the moonlight took over from the last fading light of sunset.

"So," said Val, "'Once more into the breach, dear friends, once more'," he quoted rather lamely.

They reached the moonlit churchyard. Here at Eynsham it was the same story as at Abingdon. In the solitary, moonlit churchyard the grave stood waiting. It was alone, isolated, and it seemed non-physical compared to the others, some way past it. They crowded round it like stockbrokers waiting for the latest news on the exchange telegraph.

"There's more—there's more!" gasped Roger Brinton. "Look! There's the date."

"Jan. 9th," read out Val.

"There's only one thing missing now," said Ferguson.

"What's that?" asked Brinton as he looked in horror at the grave.

"The *year*," said Ferguson.

"The year," whispered Brinton.

"It needn't necessarily be next January," remarked Val. "It needn't be 1964. It could be almost any year. It might say 2015, or something like that, in which case you could relax. You could become a sort of indestructible man."

"I suppose so," said Brinton. He looked at Val searchingly, "but you don't think it's going to be as remote as that, do you?"

"No, I don't," said Val. "I think it's pretty close, I think it will be either Jan. '64 or Jan. '65."

Brinton was trembling.

"God!" he breathed. "What am I going to do?"

"Well, the first thing we're going to do," said Ferbuson, "is to do what we did last time."

He walked over to the church. It wasn't locked. He came back with his hands cupped and full of water which he had just blessed.

"We'll show them that we can be as persistent as they can," he announced.

Once more Stearman made the sign of the Cross on the stone the priest poured out the rest of the holy water in a cruciform shape on the grave itself.

There was a repetition of the phenomena which they had seen previously.

When the white mist had cleared away and the rumbling had subsided, the grave had ceased to be. They were standing on a patch of plain ground.

"Where do we go from here," said Ferguson.

"This is getting us nowhere," agreed Val.

"I think it will have some repercussions," opined La Noire.

"Repercussions?" echoed Brinton.

"I think you're right," agreed Ferguson. "I don't think they'll be prepared to let it rest at that."



## CHAPTER TWELVE

### *The Six Proud Walkers*

Let me concoct a parallel situation," said Stearman. Assume if you will that driving this evil symptom in our direction is rather like their having driven a chisel into a piece of wood. Now let's assume that they're still holding the handle of the chisel. What would happen if we hit this end?"

"If you hit it hard enough you'd damage the hands of the man who's holding it," said Brinton, brightly.

"Exactly," agreed Val, "we've given them a nasty jar if nothing else, not once, but twice."

"What shall we do next?" demanded Ferguson.

"I think the next move is up to them, let's get back to the boat," said Stearman.

They went back to "The Gospel Makers" and La Noire prepared supper. She was a magnificent cook. It has been said by Gibbon, perhaps one of the greatest historians of all time, that the Emperor Gallienus was a superb cook, although his talents as a statesman were not of the same quality. La Noire cooked as though she were the epitome of all that is held good by the worthy holders of the *Cordon Bleu*. With the limitations of the small galley the meal was superb. Roger

Brinton found that his interest in life was being rapidly restored. Good cuisine can do as much to alleviate depression as it can to alleviate hunger. After supper they sat in the comfortable saloon of "The Gospel Makers" and watched fleecy white clouds drifting across the face of the moon, while silvery-tipped wavelets lapped against the side of the moored yacht.

There was a noise. A noise of footsteps . . . footsteps on the jetty beyond. There was a sudden crash, crash, and a round, heavy object shattered the port-hole of the saloon and landed on the bunk, beside Stearman's head. The projectile rolled onto the floor.

Val stooped swiftly and picked it up. He held it only long enough to ascertain that it was not a bomb, and then he was moving out of the saloon and up the companion way onto the deck. He had expected that after the classic fashion of bomb throwers or missile throwers, the hurler would have made good his or her escape.

But he was wrong.

Six hooded figures stood impassively on the jetty.

"What the devil?" began Stearman. It looked like an inaugural meeting for an Oxfordshire branch of the Ku Klux Klan!

And then Val saw that the hoods were not plain, they were covered in strange black designs, weird hieroglyphics and strange cabalistic symbols.

"All right, who's the amateur pitcher?" demanded Stearman, with the straightforward action of the kind that he understood.

None of the six hooded figures spoke.

"Dumb show or mime?" jibed Stearman.





He felt angry; he had not had time to examine the object that had crashed through the port-hole, but he had no doubt whatever in his mind that it had been hard enough and heavy enough to have done considerable damage if it had struck one of them.

Ferguson and La Noire had moved up the steps behind him. Brinton was a little to the rear. The six strange hooded figures still stood grouped on the landing stage.

La Noire was studying the sinister inscriptions, the peculiar symbols and the weird hieroglyphics with which their costumes and hoods were emblazoned.

"They're not amatuers Val," she whispered, "it's the real thing, and they're dangerous."

Something like four or five feet separated the "Gospel Makers" from the wooden edgings of the little mooring. Val Stearman knew that these six sinister figures boded no good for himself, for La Noire, for Ferguson, and least of all for Roger Brinton.

He was nothing if he was not a man of action. He had action in his veins instead of blood. If there was one thing he liked, that he understood and appreciated it was a direct attack. Perhaps there was a downright, wholesome, earthiness in Val Stearman's make-up which many a purer mystic would have regarded as grounds for disapproval of the man himself, but the qualities of the earth, contrary to the views of platonic philosophers, are by no means entirely bad in some theological senses; this fair green planet of ours may be regarded as a 'vale of tears', as a proving and testing ground, as a time of trial and tribulation, yet there are other things about the earth — strength, fortitude,

action, courage, which make it a home of certain virtues which are inexorably tied up in its nature. There is a very real sense in which man, 'proud man' as the poet sings, is a child of earth; these qualities which the Romantic poet might have regarded as being both good and natural were certainly inherent in Val Stearman. He believed that attack was the best form of defence, and there was no possible doubt that the motives of these hooded figures were not beneficent.

Stearman leaped across the narrow gap separating "The Gospel Makers" from the landing stage. Charlie Ferguson was less athletic than Val. He took hold of the for'ard mooring rope and began to pull slowly, until the gap had ceased to be, and then, ponderously, but with considerable purpose he, too, stepped across.

La Noire covered the distance with a lithe and powerful feminine grace; only Brinton remained on board.

The six hooded figures stared at Brinton.

"Not for sale," said Stearman, coldly. He was finding the way that they insisted on ignoring his remarks increasingly aggravating.

"I said take your eyes off the boy! He's not for sale!" said Stearman.

"And on the subject of 'sales' I am reminded of the sordid topic of money! It'll cost us about £2 for a new port-hole," said Ferguson.

For the first time one of the hooded figures turned its shrouded head towards Stearman.

"Heed the warning," said the Hooded Terror.

Val's temper was not the most controllable of mental mechanisms. Perhaps 'mental mechanism' is something





of a misnomer, for anger is a psycho-physical mechanism. Val took a pace forward, seized the robe at the back of the hood and another fold lower down. The iron muscles of his arms contracted his fists around the cloth, until he held the robe more tightly than a steel mangle. A heave of his colossal shoulders, a swing of his powerful body, and the hooded giver-of-warnings was sailing slowly and gracefully through the air. He landed with a splash and a muffled curse a few feet from the bows of "The Gospel Makers." The throw might have been a signal for all hell to break loose as far as that peaceful little Oxfordshire landing stage was concerned.

The remaining five Hooded Horrors rushed at Val Stearman simultaneously. None of them were small although they did not equal the height and breadth of the massive journalist adventurer. Val Stearman laughed; it was a wild, ringing laugh, more like the war cry of a Norse god, or the battle shout of a Celt or Viking; not the kind of sound that you would usually associate with 20th century humanity. An inexperienced man would have gone down before the violence of that rush and the kind of experience that a man gets in the gentlemanly pursuits of boxing, wrestling and judo, would not necessarily have been the kind that was required here. Some champions box, others wrestle. Stearman was a fighter. There is an amazing difference between the two. The trained boxer or wrestler is normally skilled in dealing with one opponent at a time. Stearman as a fighter knew just what it was like to tackle a dozen men, with or without knives or bludgeons. He could fight in the cramped quarters of

a waterfront cafe, or in the wide open spaces with all the room in the world to manoeuvre.

Neither claustrophobia nor agrophobia bothered Stearman in the least. In spite of the iron grey of his hair he could still whip his weight in wild cats. The Golden Rule for fighting the pack—be it wolf or human—is to take one opponent at a time and finish him. To make ineffectual strokes at five or six elusive, dancing figures is worse than useless. Val Stearman seized the nearest man and ignored the smothering weight of the others as they tried to pull him down. He had an opponent's arm in his hand. It was quite a powerful arm, but it didn't match the strength of Val's biceps and forearm. He heaved himself around until the elbow was across his shoulders, in the position known in the old Cornish wrestling school as the 'flying mare' and then he gave one swift, vicious jerk. There was a crack and a scream of pain as his opponent flew over his head to land with a splash in the Thames.

He decided to deal with numbers three and four simultaneously, for out of the corner of his eye he had already seen Charlie Ferguson and La Noire moving in to lend a hand. It is not easy to count swiftly and purposefully in the middle of a flurried rough house, but Stearman knew that two men were in the river and that he held two more. That, according to his calculations, should leave one each for La Noire and Ferguson, even if Brinton didn't take a hand. The odds, he decided, were now very much in their favour. He had one opponent under each arm. With a sudden jerking effort he hooked his steel-strong fingers together and allowed the bodies of his victims to sag a little





until his strong arms were crushing their ribs against the massive bones of his hips. It was a kind of double bear hug of his own invention. He felt both the bodies go limp, but he did not ease up on that relentless pressure. There was plenty of life in them yet, he well knew. He continued the fearsome grip until he knew that the lifelessness in the bodies could no longer be simulated. Both men, he guessed had lost consciousness. He relaxed his incredible hold and they slumped, inert, to the landing stage. With a kind of rolling push rather than a kick, Stearman sent them into the Thames to join their companions.

Charlie Ferguson was a big, round man, but there are two kinds of roundness. There are the flabby fat men and the strong, leathery fat men, and the Rev. Charlie Ferguson belonged to the strong, leathery variety. His abdominal muscles were extended, but they were by no means atrophied. He fought as valiantly as Falstaff had claimed to fight, and had he lived in an earlier age, Charlie Ferguson was the kind of comic hero, who could, like Chaucer's miller, or Shakespeare's immortal buffoon, have warded off a score of men. In fact he was only concerned with one at this precise moment. The fifth of the hooded terrors had been doing its best to take Stearman from behind with a strangle-hold. This did not seem a particularly right or happy state of affairs as far as the priest was concerned. He grabbed the fifth hooded man's robes from the back, and tugged. There was the sound of ripping cloth, and then, with a muffled oath the hooded thing turned to face the priest, having lost interest in Val Stearman.

Through the eye slits two orbs of burning hate glared at Charlie Ferguson. Ferguson was a friendly man. He found it very difficult not to smile even when he was fighting, even when things were serious. The hooded thing clenched its fists and punched at the leathery paunch of the priest. There was apparently no result. Ferguson kept on smiling, but his eyes were serious.

"I'm sorry to have to do this," he said, sincerely. He was a big man, almost as big as Stearman, and if anything, a little heavier. He drew back one ham-like fist, and having made sure—for he was a psychologist as well as a theologian, that the eyes of the hooded terror were on the fist that he had so obviously clenched, he delivered a chopping, jabbing blow with the other hand. The eyes glazed over. Ferguson tried to grab his man before he collapsed, but the river was too close. Number five splashed into the water.

The last of the six shrouded marauders, who apparently had very little of those admirable qualities, courage and chivalry, made straight for La Noire, but the slim, lithe, feminine grace of the woman was deceptive. As the outstretched hand of the hooded thing tried to grapple with her, it felt itself seized adroitly and earth and sky changed places for a few brief seconds, before it landed with a splash just behind the bows of "The Gospel Makers." Six bedraggled, spluttering, cursing objects, moaning and gibbering, made their way rapidly downstream to be lost among the rushes.



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### *A Nasty Jar!*

BRINTON stood hesitantly at the side of the ship.

"I don't suppose you'll want me any more, will you?" he said.

"What the devil's the matter with you?" asked Val.

"I didn't do anything, did I? I let you three fight for me . . . I let a woman fight for me. I must be just about the most useless coward that crawled across the face of God's earth."

"Nonsense, my boy," said the priest. "We thoroughly enjoyed it. You didn't have time to do anything."

"You keep covering up for me," said Brinton.

"Don't wallow in guilt," said Stearman. "Damn it, man, if one had got at you, you'd have hit him back, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, I would," agreed Brinton.

"Then what the devil's wrong with you?"

"I should have been first up the companion-way. I should have jumped across like you did and had a go."

"Well, we couldn't both be first," said Stearman, "and I got up the ladder. Look at the size of me. How could you get past?"

"You're just being kind," murmured Brinton. "I'm no good. This whole thing has got me down; it's de-

flated me. My ego seems to have collapsed. My personality is disintegrating. I just don't know anything any more—I——" He drew a deep breath. "I'll go. I've caused plenty of trouble."

"You haven't caused any trouble at all," said Val.

"If you've brought us anything at all," put in the priest, "you've brought us a little adventure. And adventure is a vitally precious commodity let me assure you."

Brinton looked at La Noire.

"I should have been there, I shouldn't have let that hooded thing get at you. I'm sorry."

"Don't be," she assured him. "I enjoyed it."

"He might have injured you. They were vicious and I'm sure it was me they were after."

"Yes—I think it was you they were after," said Val. "There I will agree with you. In that case, you see, you're not a hindrance, you're an asset. As I said, adventure is a vitally precious commodity! If you go paddling off on your own you'll have all the adventures to yourself! You don't want to be selfish, do you?"

"You've got a very convincing way of putting things," replied Brinton. "You're all far kinder to me than I deserve."

"Nonsense!" said the priest. "Come on, let's see if we can patch up that port-hole and get the glass cleared up. There'll be a marine outfitters somewhere up the river, with all kinds of supplies; we can buy a new port-hole there."

"Please let me pay," said Brinton, "it was my fault they threw it."





"Yes, *it*," said Stearman thoughtfully. "Let's examine 'it'." He picked the object up from the cabin floor where he had thrown it after reassuring himself that it was not a bomb.

"It's like an earthenware vase of some kind, isn't it?" said La Noire.

"Hmm, with a seal on," murmured Val. "It's quite heavy. There must be something in it."

"It looks like a model of a canopic jar of the Egyptian variety," said the priest.

"The sort of thing they used to put heart and lungs and viscera in?" asked Stearman.

"Something like that," agreed the priest.

"How jolly," said La Noire.

Val grinned.

"Do you think it's a canopic jar?" he asked.

"I'm sure it is," she replied. "They're significant in Black Magic."

"Yes, I know," said Val.

"Well, let's get it open," said the priest who had a practical nature, as well as considerable theological ability. He fetched the ship's tool-chest, produced a hammer and chisel, and while Stearman held the peculiar earthenware vessel, Charlie Ferguson set to work on it with the tools. Three swift blows with the chisel cracked the clay seal of the porcelain stopper which was obviously not of the same age as the original jar. It fell with a ceramic clank to the floor.

"Damned unpleasant smell," said Val, wrinkling up his broad aquiline nose.

"Yes, there is," said La Noire, sniffing daintily.

"It's like the smell of death," said Brinton.

"It may have something to do with the grave they keep trying to bang you into," said Stearman. "First a grave and now a burial jar!"

"Well, they've got their ideas a bit mixed," said Brinton. "That's a modern grave and this canopic jar goes back to ancient Egypt."

"Yes, it does," agreed La Noire, "thought the symbolism would still be there. The chronology and teleology has just got its wires crossed a bit."

"Do you think it's another form of warning for you?" enquired Stearman, looking at Brinton.

"I would think so,"said Brinton, "but what the devil is it they're warning me about?"

"Well, I would suggest that they want you to stop splashing holy water on that grave they keep throwing at you," said the priest. "This is their way of telling you to accept what they're doing, not to fight against it."

"I may not have shown up in a very good light tonight," said Brinton, "but I'm certainly going to fight against it."

"That's the spirit!" said the priest.

"What do you suggest we do next?" asked Val.

"I'm all in favour of turning in early and getting a good night's sleep," said Charlie Ferguson.

"Perhaps," said Val, "it would be a good idea if somebody stayed on watch."

They took it in turns to sleep and watch, but the morning came uneventfully.

At the first light of dawn they set off up the river from Eynsham. The smooth waters of the Thames flowed softly past them. There was no sign of the six





'proud walkers', whom they had fought so recently and so savagely. The Rev. Charles Ferguson took the wheel while Val Stearman, La Noire and Brinton, began examining the canopic jar in closer detail. The peculiar smell was singularly sickly, vilely unpleasant. It made their senses reel a little and Stearman decided that it would be a great deal more sensible to examine it in the air. They took it to the upper deck where Charlie Ferguson was handling the wheel with dexterous skill. Stearman took the screwdriver from the tool kit situated by the steerage mechanism, and prodded about inside the jar. A strange muddy paste revealed itself on the end of the screwdriver.

"What is it?" asked Ferguson.

"The only thing I can suggest," answered La Noire, looking far paler than usual, as she turned her beautiful features as far as possible away from the foul stench, "is that it's some hideous concoction connected with Black Magic in some way. You know the vile spells that are still used by some of the covens, Val."

"I do indeed," agreed Val. "Toads, snakes, entrails, pieces of bat, mandrakes torn up in the moonlight, compounded together and stirred with a bone of a corpse, preferably a suicide."

"I think the best thing would be to jettison the wretched object," said Charlie Ferguson. "I don't see that it's going to bring us any closer to a solution of the mystery."

"I think it's a very good idea," said Stearman. "We should really have slung it overboard last night."

"Well, it might have provided some kind of clue," said La Noire.

"More likely to provide an epidemic of bubonic plague," said Val, "by the smell of it!"

"Do you think it would be advisable to throw it into the water after all?" said Ferguson. "It's not the kind of thing I should like thrown into my river."

"I see what you mean," agreed Val, "but if we don't throw it into the river what shall we do with it?"

"We could always bury it," said Roger Brinton practically.

"Yes, that's a good idea," said Stearman.

There was no sign of habitation on this stretch of the water and a steep overhanging bank offered reasonable mooring. "The Gospel Makers" was made fast, and Stearman, together with Ferguson, carrying a spade, went swiftly ashore and began to dig.

Ferguson got about two feet from the surface when he paused, the sweat pouring from his ample forehead.

"I don't know," he puffed, "I seem to be getting past this a bit, Val."

"We're none of us getting any younger," agreed Stearman. "Here, give me the spade, Charlie."

Charles Ferguson was by no means a weakling, but Stearman dug like a mechanicad shovel.

"I say, you're showing me up a bit!" said the parson.

"Not intentionally," said Val. He grinned. "We all have our special abilities, Charlie! You can preach a sermon far more advantageously than I can!"

"Some of your articles would make very good sermons. There's always room for the laity. I feel that they serve a very important purpose. They have a significant part to play . . ."

Smiling, Val put the spade down, and Roger Brin-





ton kicked the canopic jar with its indescribably hideous contents into the hole, which Stearman and the padre had dug. He filled it in and Charles Ferguson flattened the earth with a strong broad foot.

"That's the end of that," he said.

Roger Brinton shuddered as he looked at the earth they the had turned.

"It's too much like a grave," he muttered, "it frightens me!"

"Don't worry about things, Roger," said Ferguson, "it's going to be all right. We'll deal with these characters. We shall soon be in Lechlade, and as soon as we've tied up there another visit to the church by moonlight, and your mind can be set at rest. You'll know the best, or the worst. We'll fight these things, as we've fought them before."

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### *The Disintegrating Mind*

"It isn't the physical side I'm afraid of," said Brinton, "it's the things they do to my mind. I'm frightened of the graves. I want to go to Lechlade and see whether it'll happen again, at the same time I'm terrified of it. I feel like a man waiting for an examination result. An important examination, a degree, or something of that nature. Can't bear the suspense of waiting, but at the same time must know."

"I would have thought the strain of waiting for an

examination result was comparatively trivial to what you're going through," said Stearman."

"I wouldn't be so unkind as to say that," said Brinton, "after all, it's not unknown for undergraduates to blow their brains out, or take an overdose of something or other when the pace gets too hectic."

"I hope you're not thinking in terms of doing that," said La Noire.

"I'd already have done it if you hadn't fished me out of the Thames, and you know it," said Brinton. "I feel the world's biggest failure. I'm a complete stranger to you. You've befriended me, and I'm very grateful to you, but I don't want to involve you in my trouble. You've already done far more than you should have done. Look what happened when they attacked us . . ."

"Well, what happened?" demanded Stearman. "We beat 'em up!"

"You said that as though you enjoyed it!" accused Ferguson.

"To be brutally honest, Charlie, I did!" said Val. "There are two sides to my nature—like there are two sides to everybody else's nature, if only they're honest enough to admit it."

"And what do you see as my murky side?" demanded Charlie.

"I don't know," answered Val, "but—it's there. The thing to do is to recognise it."

"You're quite right, of course," said the priest. "This, I feel, has been the purpose of the confessional in the mediaeval church, and in the modern Catholic church, the recognition of the fact that we are other





than we would like to be, the good that we would we do not, and that which we would not, that we do. This is part of the Christian solution to the problem of evil. There are some philosophies, there are some religions, which try to overcome evil by pretending that it doesn't exist. But we are not ostriches, we're men, and you cannot overcome evil by pretending that it doesn't exist. You can only overcome it by recognising it and conquering it, by facing up to it. There have been many battles fought in the long history of the world, for the human race is a particularly militant race, but of all those battles there is no record in the whole panorama of history of any battle that was ever won by a man who turned his back on the enemy and ran away like a frightened rabbit."

"That's a long speech," commented Stearman, with a grin.

"I'm sorry," returned Ferguson, "I'm preaching sermons again!"

"Don't apologise," said La Noire, "your sermons are worth hearing, Charlie."

"Thank you for those few kind words," returned Ferguson.

La Noire smiled. Her eyes held a deep mystery, for she was comparing in her secret heart of hearts and in her innermost memories the kind of sermon that Ferguson preached with the memories of men whose souls now lived with the saints, and whose bones were as dry as the dust. *Men who, to Ferguson were only names, had been living, breathing people as far as La Noire Stearman was concerned. But this was her secret and the bewitching look faded from her mysterious*

*black eyes again.*

They reached Lechlade and tied up.

After supper, with Brinton trembling in every limb they walked towards the church, a fine church, a good example of its period. There was an air of peace and reverence over the building. The moonlight gave it only an ethereal beauty, an aesthetic, eternal quality, but apart from the moonlight, there was something else. *The grave was there.* Brinton closed his eyes, staggered forward a pace and collapsed beside Val Stearman.

Ferguson and Val helped him to his feet again. He stood swaying as though the world had ended, as though the ultimate cataclysm had fallen upon him.

"I'm no good; I'm no good; I'm afraid," he gasped. "I'm afraid. I don't deserve your help."

"Pull yourself together," said Ferguson, "listen to me Roger." The priest's voice took on a strong and serious note. He might have been a general calling his men to battle.

Stearman was reminded of a verse from "The Deserted Village":

"Beside the bed where parting life was laid,
The Reverend champion stood.
At his control dismay and anguish fled the
parting soul,
Comfort came down the trembling wretch to raise,
And his last murmured accents whispered praise."

Stearman was not exactly certain that he remembered those immortal lines with complete accuracy, for Val Stearman had the kind of memory which psychologists would distinguish from *rote* memory by defining





it as *content* memory. Stearman could remember the gist of a passage, he could remember the argument of a passage. The *exact* words might escape him, but the *import* of the words—which after all was the important thing about them as far as he was concerned—remained in his mind. He thought of the phrase 'the reverend champion'. Yes it was a phrase that summed up Charles Ferguson very well, thought Stearman, a man of God, a reverend man, in the finest meaning of that holy word, and yet a champion, a champion of champions. A man who fought evil quietly and persistently in his own way, in the country parish, or in the city Cathedral, whether by deed or whether by action. Whether by example, or whether by doctrine, Charlie Ferguson was a genuine pillar of the church. He was a man among men, and at the same time it was obvious that he was a man who was set apart for the service of God.

"It's all right Roger," said Ferguson, "you're going to be all right."

The worst of the tremors departed from Roger Brinton's quavering body.

"Thanks," he answered, "I shall be all right now. I've got to face it. I've got to see it. I know it's going to tell me the year, I know, I *know.*"

"Steady," said Val, "steady."

Like Horatius, Herminius, and Spurius Lartius, the three men advanced on the challenging enimga of the grave.

La Noire remained a little behind them.

Roger Brinton steadied himself with his hands on that accursed stone:

"Sacred to the Memory of
Roger Thomas Brinton,"

he read, in a shaking voice,

"born April 7th, 1930, died January 9th, 1964."

His eyes opened to their widest extent.

"1964," he said. "Next January, Val. It's the January that's coming. What am I going to do?"

"Relax," answered Stearman. "We've already disposed of this thing twice; we'll dispose of it again."

"I have the necessary components," said Ferguson. "Or at least," he corrected himself, "I shall have them in just a moment."

He walked into the church and consecrated some water from the font. They repeated the ritual that they had used before, and again the same thing happened. There was a minor earthquake, a cloud of strange white, powerful, burning vapour and then nothing but plain green sward. No stone, no grave—nothing out of the ordinary. They might have been four ordinary tourists walking through the peace of the moonlit churchyard like Grey composing his 'Elegy'.

"1964," whispered Brinton.

"It's going to be all right," said Ferguson.

Brinton's eyes opened very, very wide.

"No, it's not," he hissed.

He leapt away from them and then rounded on them suddenly like some over-dramatised amateur Hamlet. But this was not drama, it was a real human life, the real human life of Roger Thomas Brinton. This was a mind under an almost unendurable strain, and Brinton had proved that his mind had had enough.

"I can't take it," he screamed. "I can't take it! It's





lie! It's got to be a lie!"

"We've got rid of it," said Stearman.

"It came back though, it came back," said Brinton.

"We can destroy it again," said La Noire, "have courage, Roger."

"Courage! *Courage!* What do you think it takes just to go on drawing my breath with that thing hanging over me?" sobbed Brinton. "I can't face any more. I don't want to die; don't you understand?" He flung himself down at Ferguson's feet. "I don't want to die, Ferguson, save me!"

"I haven't got the power," answered Ferguson. "None of us have. We're mortal."

Again strange thoughts drifted across the innermost mind of La Noire.

"We're ordinary human beings," said Ferguson, "but there is a power that can save you. You've got to believe that no matter what evil does, the power of good is stronger. Love is stronger than hate, courage is stronger than fear, good is stronger than evil. It *is* so, I *know* it's so!"

"*How* do you know? Prove it to me; prove it to me!"

"I would if I could," replied Ferguson, "but I can't. That is one of the great problems of life. You can't prove it. You can't prove a victory before it's won. You can't prove a man to be a leader worth following until you follow him to the death," he paused. "And then you've got to go out beyond death, because death is nothing but Satan's lie upon eternal life."

"Platitudes," snarled Brinton. "What good are your blasted platitudes, Ferguson? It's my life that's threat-

ened, not yours."

"The greatest truth is sometimes platitudinous," said Stearman."

"It's all right for you," said Brinton, "you're not dying." He looked at the three of them. "I hate you!" he screamed. "I hate you. It's all right for you to be complacent; it's all right for you to be cheerful. It isn't you whose life is threatened. That damned grave isn't waiting for *you;* it's waiting for *me!* For me, Roger Brinton, Roger Thomas Brinton. Me. Myself. My own personality. I don't know how else to express it, but I don't want to die. I don't want to go out like a light."

"You won't go out like a light," said Ferguson. "If the worst happened, if the power of evil destroyed your mortal body, it can't destroy your soul. That's in God's keeping; that's beyond the power of evil."

"Soul! Soul!" sobbed Brinton. "What's a soul? I don't believe in a soul!" He stamped his foot on the ground. "A sole. The sole of my boot." He laughed, a wild, demoniac laugh. "That for your soul. It doesn't exist. A man is a clever animal, no more than that Ferguson, an animal. I've got more brain than a sheep, or a cow, or a dog. I've got more brain than a monkey; that's what makes it so damned hard. A cow, a sheep, or a dog, or a monkey couldn't read that blasted grave. Man isn't better off than the animals, Ferguson, he's worse off!"



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### *The Plan*

"I DON'T understand you," said Val. "Think what you're saying, Roger. Think." His voice was calm, gentle.

"The dog, the cat, the cow, they don't know that they've got to die. That's what makes it such hell to be a man. From the second you're born, at least from the moment that a child is old enough to understand that human life doesn't go on for ever."

"But it does go on for ever," said the priest, interrupting him.

"That's dope for the masses, it doesn't help me," snarled Roger. He glared at his friends angrily. "I can't believe in your eternal life . . . You say death isn't real, but for me it is real. You can cover yourself with escapist religious notions, because that grave isn't beckoning to you. You've got another twenty or thirty years. It's all right for you, but it isn't all right for me."

"Even if that date was true," said Stearman, "you might outlive us all."

"I don't want your sops of comfort," snarled Brinton, "that's no good."

"If you don't want comfort what do you want?" asked Stearman.

"I want to *live,* is that too much to ask? Damn it, I'm not an old man. I haven't even had half my allotted span yet. I want to live. I love life, it's probably a horrible sentiment, *but I love me!* I like this thing inside my head that ticks from side to side and says 'I am'."

"Do you love it more than anything else?" asked Ferguson. "Can you think of no tragedy which would be worse than the extinction of your own personality?"

"Right now I can't," answered Brinton, "because it's standing in front of me and I can't see round it."

"Is there no circumstance, Roger, in which you would give up this thing that says 'I am Roger Brinton' willingly? Is there no religious or political ideal that you would think is worth dying for?" He pointed to the Thames. "Over there is a river, imagine a child in that river, helpless, drowning; could you stand by and let that child drown?"

"I'd like to say that I couldn't," answered Brinton. "Of course I'd like to say that I couldn't, but on the other hand, you saw what happened when those six walkers, those monsters, whatever they were, came. Who did the fighting, did I? No, I hid behind a woman." He looked at Stearman. "I let your wife fight before I did. I'm hopelessly mixed up, I've got to unscramble my mind. I'll beat that grave. *I will.* I will beat it. It's not going to get me." He leapt up and down, stamping on the ground. "It's not going to get me. I'm not going to die! I'm not going to die."

Before any of them could stop him he suddenly





turned away, sprinting over the grass, vaulting the churchyard wall and disappearing among the shadows.

The other three began pounding after him.

Ferguson's corporation did not help him to run. It was he who gave up the chase first.

"Up to you, Val," he panted, sitting against a tree in the moonlight, drawing in great lungfuls of the soft summer air.

Val Stearman was a fighter rather than a runner. He may have been a runner in his youth, but he was never built to sprint. He was powerful and athletic; he had stamina; but running as such was not his cup of tea. He pounded to a halt.

La Noire ran with the ease and grace of a gazelle, but she was pursuing a man who was motivated by a terrible fear, a man who ran as though the Wild Hunt of the north itself was pursuing him. The fear, the incredible fear, in the mind of Roger Brinton had set in process a number of glandular secretions primarily adrenaline, which had worked him up to a state of frenzy. He was not running as a man would run in normal physical condition. He was a supercharged, fear-crazed, glandularly-activated runner. As such even La Noire's graceful, feminine, fleetness of foot was no match for him. She trotted back to where Val was regaining his breath. His great chest heaved as he breathed deeply in the soft, Western summer air.

"No good," he panted, "hadn't got a hope in hell of catching him. He was pumped full of adrenaline."

"I thought so, too," agreed La Noire.

"You're hardly out of breath at all," said Val. She smiled. "You run like a teenager," he said, "I don't

know how the devil you do it."

She smiled again, but there was a certain sadness, a wistfulness in her smile.

"You carry a lot of weight, Val," she said.

Stearman put a hand across his huge muscular diaphragm.

"I don't carry cargo," he said. "All my biological cells have to work their passage, the muscles particularly."

With their arms around each other Val and La Noire made their way back to where Charles Ferguson had regained his feet. He was puffing like a grampus, spluttering like a walrus, and waddling like a large, fat autumnal bear that is on the verge of hibernation.

"Did you catch him?" gasped Charlie.

"Not a hope," answered Val.

"He was running like a madman wasn't he?" said Ferguson.

"He certainly was," agreed Stearman.

"Where do you think he was heading for?"

"No idea. I think he was just trying to get away from what he considered to be the inescapable."

They went back to the boat. A sense of failure hung over them just like a cloud.

"Perhaps we did wrong to let him see it."

"Could anybody have stopped him?" demanded Val. "If we hadn't gone with him he'd have gone alone."

"Funny thing, isn't it?" said Ferguson. "Strange pattern and all that. It's as if there were two patterns, or as if it were a tapestry with a thread running through it. It's trying to keep up in some way with that weird old folk song, about the rushes."





"What will the next be, then?" asked Val.

"Well, we've certainly had the Six Proud Walkers," said La Noire, feelingly.

"Seven for the seven stars in the sky," announced Ferguson in that deep melliflous voice of his.

"I wonder what that means," pondered Val.

"It could mean almost anything," commented Ferguson.

They looked above them at the stellar orbs twinkling in the summer firmament.

"It could be any seven among the unaccountable millions to the *nth* degree," said Val with a weary sigh.

"Let's try and do a little bit of logical prognosticating, stars in their supernatural context are normally tied up with astrology," said La Noire.

"Then if we could get hold of an astrologer . . ." began Charlie.

". . . who could tell us about the Seven Stars in the sky, and what it's astrological significance may be," continued La Noire.

"Do you know any astrologers?" asked Stearman. "They're rather rare these days."

"No, I don't," answered Ferguson. "I hoped perhaps you would."

"I've got an Indian colleague who's an expert," said Val.

"Can we consult him?" asked Ferguson.

"It would mean leaving the boat here at Lechlade and getting a train back into the city."

"He's in the smoke, is he?" asked Ferguson.

"Yes, he's a London man," agreed Stearman.

"I think if we're going to do anything to help Brinton we shall have to forestall them. It's no good letting them keep one jump ahead. So far all we've been doing is defending against their attack. Now we've got to attack," said La Noire.

"It sounds a good philosophy. I'm always in favour of a bit of action, as you know, my darling," replied Val.

"Yes, I think that's a very wise thing," agreed the priest. "You think the most advantageous action at the moment would be in conjunction with your astrological friend. What's his name, Val?"

"Ambat Singh," replied Stearman.

"That sounds a good old English name!" smiled Ferguson.

"Good old *Indian* name," smiled Val.

"Indubitably," agreed La Noire.

"That's a good word for this time of the evening, considering the events that have just passed," said Val with a smile.

"We'd better call in at the station, if there's anybody there at this hour of the night," said Ferguson.

It transpired that there was a late train. There was, therefore, a gentleman on duty at the station, and he was pleased to inform them that the train for which he was coincidentally waiting, was the one that was going through to London.

It was not a fast train, but it was a train.

They purchased their tickets and boarded the train when it arrived.

"I shall certainly miss the railways when they all fall eventually under the sharp axe of economy," said





Ferguson. "I think there's a certain magical lore about these old trains."

"I couldn't agree with you more," said Val. "Besides, I think it's a darn pity."

"There is no alternative solution," said Ferguson.

"I know the problem is very vast and complex," said Stearman, "but I would feel that the ideal answer to the transport problem is really tied up with the problem of air pollution. We in England have got one of the worst rates of bronchial disease anywhere in the world. Ninety per cent. of this can be laid directly at the door of air pollution."

"I agree," said Ferguson. "It's a terrible tragedy but what can we do about it? What kind of action would you envisage?"

"Well, principally," said Val, "do away with combustion, because most of the pollution in the air is the direct or indirect result of combustion. Pollution itself is the product of combustion."

"Well, how do you run a factory or drive a train," or even a motor car without combustion?" asked Ferguson in a puzzled voice.

"Well, I know this isn't original, and I don't pretend it is," said Stearman, "but my plan would be this . . . wholesale electrification of the railway systems; not a contraction of the railway system but an *expansion.*"

"Expansion?" said Ferguson. "That's a revolutionary concept."

"Nevertheless," said Stearman, "that is my vieiw."

"Revolutionary," said Ferguson. "I mean, in this day and age who would think of expanding the railway system?"

"The road traffic problem is a very bad one," said Stearman.

"How would you make such a system pay?" asked Ferguson, as the train continued to jog through the moonlit summer night.

"Well, my electrified railway system would obtain its revenue from a special national railway tax."

"I don't think you'd find much popular support for that kind of plan."

"What I envisage," said Val, "would be the setting up of a railway board, like the British Broadcasting Corporation if you like. A separate entity of that kind of stature. As the BBC obtains revenue from licences, so the Railway Board that I envisage would obtain revenue from a Railway Users' Licence. Now, this railway users' licence would cost say ten pounds per head per year. If you wish to use the railways anywhere, any time, you pay ten pounds, you buy what amounts to a perennial season ticket, and that year you can travel when, where and how you like."

"Seems a bit steep," said Ferguson. "It's a lot of money for a chap who doesn't use the railway very much. I mean, I don't. I use a car."

"Well, think what it would cost you to use your car," said Stearman. "By the time you've licensed and insured it, its cost you nearly a pound a week just to have it standing in the garage."

"Well, that's fifty pounds a year," agreed the priest.

"My railway tax is only a tenth of that," said Val.

"Hmm, see what you mean," said Ferguson. "Sounds promising, Val."

"I think it's the only sensible system," said La Noire,





"but how would you get everybody to see it?"

"Ah, that's the point," answered Stearman. "You see, public opinion is the deciding factor. Public opinion in a democracy is all-important, and this is right and proper. But how can you inform public opinion?"

"You've got the mass communication media," said Ferguson.

"Yes, but how accessible are the mass communication media to an ordinary citizen like me?" said Stearman.

"You're not an ordinary citizen," said Ferguson, "you're a very successful journalist . . ."

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### *Journey's End*

"I'M a supernatural column writer. I'm not an economist or a political column writer. We live in tight pens in Fleet Street," said Val.

"Oh, that was an unconscious pun," groaned Ferguson.

"It was unconscious," agreed Stearman.

"You deserve to be unconscious if you crack any more like that," retorted Ferguson.

Stearman smiled.

"The point is," he said, "I can't very well change my style over night."

"Do you think your railway tax would really work?"

"Well, I quoted a figure of ten pounds per head. It might be possible to raise that figure. It could be five shilling per head, per week, say, or something like that."

"Do you think the scheme would pay then?" asked the parson.

"Only the people who wanted to use the scheme, need pay," said Stearman."

"Let's go back to your economic argument about the car. It costs a pound a week to keep a car on the road, even before you take it out of the garage. Now let's add the depreciation. Let's assume the average family car costs £600. It's going to depreciate at the rate of, at the very least, £50 a year. And that's a very generous allowance."

"In one sense it is and in one sense it isn't," said Ferguson. "I would say that the depreciation in the first year is considerably more than that."

"All right," agreed Stearman. "If you allow depreciation at the rate of a pound, and tax and insurance a pound, there's two pounds a week gone, or a hundred pounds a year. Well, suppose you do only a nominal mileage of ten thousand a year, that's not heavy, I do forty thousand. And I know a lot of chaps who do considerably more than that. When you put a car on the road you have a percentage of repair bills. At ten thousand miles a year you need ten services at ten bob a time, that's five pounds. If there's anything wrong, you're going to spend a lot more than that. On top of all this there's petrol. The average car is going to use an average of two pounds worth of petrol and oil per week, a little more if you use upper cylinder





lubricants and other additives of that kind, any of the molybdenum, disulphide preparations, so it's going to cost you £5 per week to put your car on the road. You've got to buy the car in the first place, and if it's on hire purchase, you'll be paying back about £10 per month so that's another hundred. To run an ordinary average car is going to cost you six pounds per week. For a railway tax of £6 per week, there is no doubt at all the railways could be reconstructed, electrified, and we should overcome another problem. There would be no air pollution. We'd have got the cars off the road."

"What about all the extra power stations?" asked Ferguson.

"Either we could use nuclear power, but there is always radio active waste, from these. We could have either hydro or wind power. I think enough hydro-electric power could be found.

"What about the chaps who are going to swear when you start building electric-hydro-power stations in their beauty spots, and damming up their trout rivers?" asked Charlie.

"I agree it's important not to dam up rivers and to spoil rural amenities, I'm a great believer in rural amenities, but a rural amenity is no good to a man who is dying of a bronchial complaint, because of air pollution caused by solid fuel, or oil, or something of that kind. You've got to build hydro-electric stations where the water is, and they needn't be made too barbaric. Beauty is very largely in the eye of the beholder, and a man who is breathing pure air which is indirectly due to the existence of that hydro-electric power

station, is not going to look upon it as an object of evil, an object of ugliness. It is intrinsic rather than extrinsic," said Val.

"All right," said Ferguson, "you've made your point. When I'm Prime Minister, Val, you shall be my Minister of Transport with complete power, and you can erect your fine railways, and take the cars off the roads, and build electric hydro-power stations to your heart's content. Why do you want to do these things, Val? Why?"

"Because I have particular views of my own about what you call the Kingdom of God," said Val, as the train went through the night.

"What are these ideas?" asked Ferguson.

"I believe that the Kingdom of God has an important role to play on earth . . . I accept that the Kingdom of God is a kingdom of peace within a man, I also accept, though with considerable reservations, the eschatological significance, but to me the important thing for my brand of muscular christianity, is the establishment of the Kingdom of God in a real and concrete sense on earth, to see the outworking of the Christian ethic in the ordinary lives of Christian men and women."

"You've missed your vocation," said Ferguson. "You make a better job of expressing that point of view than ever I could."

"Maybe it's because I sincerely and genuinely believe it," said Stearman. Charlie Ferguson looked suddenly hurt. "I didn't imply for a second that you didn't," said Val, "I just felt that you didn't emphasise it in the same way that I would. To me this is first,





last and always the Christian ethic. We can only express our love to God by the way we treat our fellow men. I'm one of these men who would be far less moved by an elaborate service in the finest cathedral in the world, than I would be by the opportunity to do something, however small, for somebody who might be in need of such a service. I feel, quite honestly, putting it in its simplest form, that if I stop and help an old lady across the road I have done more in the nature of worship than if I spend twelve hours on my knees."

"You really believe that," said Ferguson. "It's a great creed, but I'm not sure that it goes quite far enough . . . The danger of such a view would be that you were falling into the fallacy of the belief in a brotherhood without a Father."

"I don't deny the existence of God," said Stearman, "I don't say that for a minute. I agree that this is the fallacy of purely humanist ethics, but my own view is that God is best served by the kind of lives we live. Deeds are more effective than prayers."

"You are certainly unorthodox," said Ferguson. "How far do you think you live up to this?"

"Nowhere near it," answered Stearman; he laughed, "I mean it sounds like the most rank hypocrisy for me to sit here in the quietness of this compartment chatting with you about the interpretation of Christianity when I was busy beating the daylights out of those masked devils who attacked us."

"Well, I joined in that scrap," said Charlie Ferguson. "If that was sin then I'm as guilty as you are."

"But is it sin to fight evil?" asked La Noire coming

in on the conversation. "That is the crux of the whole matter!"

They sat in thoughtful silence as the train rolled through the night.

"Some of the Zoroastrian theologians," said La Noire, "believe that Ahriman, the spirit of evil would be reconciled finally to Ormuzd the great spirit of Good, and that only in this way will life, cosmic, universal life, be real and full and complete. Otherwise, if even spirits of evil are destroyed something is lost."

"That brings us into very difficult theological ground, it poses the whole problem of evil," said Charles Ferguson. "It brings us to the omniscience and omnipotence and love of God. These are very deep questions—they test and try the faith."

"I think I'll try and get some sleep," said Stearman.

"It will be a good idea," said Ferguson.

They made themselves as comfortable as they could in the compartment. The train jogged on through the night. They awakened as it pulled in to London.

"Ah, we're here," said Ferguson with a happy little cry.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### *The Seven Stars in the Sky*

"GOOD," said Stearman, as he stood up and stretched limbs that were cramped somewhat by the confines of the compartment. He looked around at La Noire and Ferguson.





"Now, let's go and see if we can find Ambat Singh."

"Will he be pleased to see us at this hour of the morning?" asked Ferguson.

"I think he will," said Stearman.

They went in search of Ambat Singh. They took a taxi from the station and reached the Kensington mansion where Ambat Singh occupied a modest third floor flat. He was a broad faced, high foreheaded Indian, of obviously high caste and his features revealed a combination of intelligence and the mystic, complicated nature of the East. He greeted them after the time honoured custom of his people.

"I bid you welcome, Stearman, my friend, and the so-charming Mrs. Stearman whom you have brought with you. And who is the new friend to whom I am so soon to have the pleasure of being introduced?" Ambat Singh's dark eyes turned swiftly and searchingly, and at the same time approvingly in the direction of Charlie Ferguson.

"This is my very good friend the Rev. Charles Ferguson," said Stearman. "Charles Ferguson—Ambat Singh. I am sure you gentlemen will like each other, after a short acquaintance."

"You sound as though you're running a marriage bureau," said La Noire with a grin.

"There are worse institutions," he said jovially. "Now, Ambat Singh, we have come to seek your help."

"You are welcome to any help I can give you by such powers as have been given to me," said the astrologer.

"I knew I could count on you, we have had a long

journey, we have just come up from Lechlade on the other side of Oxford."

"Lechlade? I do not know the charming place, city?"

"Oh, sort of medium size, nice little riverside place," answered Stearman.

"If so pleasant, why you come all the way to London? I would think from crumpled appearance of Stearman friend, and other friends, that you have slept in slow train all night."

"That is exactly so."

"Where is the splendid Stearman automobile?"

"No misadventure has befallen it," said Stearman. "We're on holiday on the river."

"Oh, this would be the great and mighty and so very British institution called the Thames," said Ambat Singh quaintly.

"It would. But we have found ourselves involved in some very unpleasant devilry," added Val.

"The work of the *devas* is ubiquitous," pronounced Ambat Singh. "If I can help to combat the evil power of dark spirits, then such knowledge as I have is yours right gladly and without charge, Stearman friend."

"As I have said before," said Val, "many thanks. We have an English folk song, called 'Green Grow the Rushes-O'. This begins by talking of one man alone, then going on to two lilywhite boys, three rivals, four gospel makers, five symbols at the door, six proud walkers, and the next verse——"

"I see it goes up by numbers," said Ambat Singh with swift perception.

"The next verse," said Stearman significantly, "is





about the 'seven stars in the sky'."

"And that is why you have come to consult me?"

"We would be very grateful for any help you can give us," said Val, "when I tell you that there is something deeper, more deadly and interwoven in some diabolical way with this folk song. The thing is only what I can describe as an itinerant grave."

"An itinerant grave?" queried Ambat Singh. "In a long experience of the occult I have never come across anything like an itinerant grave."

"Neither have I," said Val. "It is pursuing a man we came to help, a man named Roger Thomas Brinton."

"You don't know the date of birth of this man?" asked the astrologer.

"Oddly enough I do," said Val, "because the grave that is pursuing him——"

"I do not quite understand you," said the Indian.

Val explained more fully.

"I see, I see," said Ambat Singh, "it is all very perplexing and peculiar." He began consulting charts and diagrams, referring back to almanacs and reference books. His face clouded as he worked. "January 9th, 1964, will be a very dangerous day for your Mr. Brinton. He seems to come very close to death on that day."

"By thunder," said Ferguson, "that's clever."

"What is clever?" asked Ambat Singh.

"This is the second part of the story," said Val. "This is the death date that is forecast on the grave."

"Most dangerous day for him. Evil presence, seven stars in particular; very evil portents. They allow the

evil forces to concentrate their powers against a man born under the stars of Roger Thomas Brinton. It is very tricky, very tricky indeed," said the Indian.

"What do you recommend that we do?" asked Val.

"Guard him night and day, guard him particularly on January 9th, 1964."

"That's the trouble," said Stearman, "he's disappeared. He saw this grave; it had followed him as far as Lechlade. Seeing your death date is a pretty horrible thing for any man."

"This is true; it is terrible for any man. It is not fitting that even a criminal should suffer such mental punishment."

"He ran away from us," explained La Noire.

"I see in the stars that the strain is too much for his reason, that the strain is too much for his *memory*."

"You mean amnesia?" said Ferguson.

"I'm afraid so. He is also suffering from shock and terrible fear."

"Oh," said Stearman. "Now what do we do?"

"We stop and think," said La Noire.

Ambat Singh stopped to consult more charts. He took down heavy tomes of vellum and parchment from upper shelves of his bookcase. He blew dust with a rather apologetic little smile.

"There must be some strange power in these ancient tomes. They seem to gather dust to them as a modest man does a garment," he said.

Val Stearman grinned.

"Now," said Ambat Singh, as he finally seemed to run to earth the information he was seeking. His face took on a very serious expression. "There are seven





particular stars which are operating conversely, as far as the well-being of your friend is concerned," he said. "Seven particular heavenly bodies have moved into altogether wrong places."

"Stars in the sky," said Charles Ferguson.

"It's all fitting in with the pattern," said La Noire.

"That's what's so frightening," said Val.

"Are you able to give us any idea at all of Brinton's present whereabouts?" asked Ferguson.

"I'm not sure that I am, esteemed friend of the esteemed Stearman," said Ambat Singh. "But it is just possible."

They waited while he consulted more charts and more diagrams. He was covering sheets of rice-paper with neat black ink calculations.

"I have arrived at a solution," he said suddenly. "If the memory has gone, there is every possibility that your friend will no longer be in full and normal control of his senses. For this reason I would suggest, perhaps, that you try one of those places which are the refuge of such people, from the difficulties of the world."

"You think he may have been picked up raving mad somewhere and taken to an asylum, is that it?" asked Ferguson.

"In straightforward and direct language esteemed friend of esteemed Stearman, *yes*," said Ambat Singh.

"I wonder how many asylums there are in England?" said Stearman.

"He can't have got very far," said Ferguson. "He was on foot, and he was alone. I don't suppose he had more than a few pounds on him, if that, and if he

has lost his memory, he won't be able to draw any cheques."

"That's a point," said Stearman.

* * *

Roger Brinton was running as though all the devils in hell were after him. He had seen it. He had seen the date. His mind was one huge date. JANUARY 9TH, 1964. Gradually the date grew larger and larger, until Brinton felt that it had crowded everything else out of his mind. It was pushing his personality aside; it was forcing his identity beyond the fringe of consciousness. Just those enormous figures seemed to be carved on the living cells of his brain, instead of on the cold stone where he had seen them. They grew so large that they disappeared entirely from the screen of consciousness. It was like looking at a distant object through a telescope while drawing closer and closer to it, until finally so small a part of the object can be seen that it is no longer recognisable because its outlines have gone off the field of vision at the edges. Brinton felt sudden sense of relief. He looked around. He drew a deep breath. Soft gentle rain began to fall, he looked up at it and laughed a strange laugh.

"April showers," he said to himself. Something far away in the bottom of his mind tried to tell him that this was not April, but the rain seemed to inform him that it was. April felt very comforting, somehow. It gave him the feeling that something dangerous had now been passed and overcome. A little jingle went through his mind:





"Thirty days hath September, April, June and November,
All the rest have thirty-one, excepting February alone."

He repeated it over and over again, tried to get the months in order, but he could only think of February, March, April, May and those that followed. *Between December and February there was a gap.*

He counted on his fingers as he walked across a field. There were only eleven, there was one month missing, and he couldn't think what it was. Silly. He ought to know that. He knew there were twelve. How did he know? He knew there were twelve months as well as he knew his own name. His name was . . . ? *His name was* . . . ? A frown crossed his face.

"My name," he gasped. "I've forgotten my name! Who am I? Who am I?" He fell suddenly to his knees, clawing at the ploughed earth as though trying to dig for the information that he sought. He felt a small flint pebble in his hand. The rain continued to fall around him.

"Who am I?" he asked the pebble, pathetically. It made no answer. He put it in his pocket and got up, brushing wet soil from his knees as best he could. Through the scudding rain he could see what looked like the outline of a farmhouse. There was a light in the window.

"They'll know my name," he said out loud.

He knocked at the door; it was several minutes before anybody came. The man who answered was burly and rather suspicious looking. He carried a shotgun

under one arm. He took a step back when he saw Roger Brinton.

"What do ye want this time o' night, then?"

"Could you tell me who I am?" asked Roger Brinton.

"What?" said the farmer.

"I expect it sounds very strange, but I've forgotten who I am," said Brinton.

The farmer's eyes narrowed distrustfully. His grip on the double-barrelled twelve bore tightened a little.

"You'd better come in," he said.

He led Brinton into a stone-tiled kitchen.

"Martha, I think you'd better telephone the police."

A big raw-boned woman, with straggly grey hair, appeared in the doorway behind the farmer.

"What's the matter, John?"

"Fellow here says he doesn't know who he is."

"I don't," said Brinton.

"You been falling about? You're covered in mud," said the woman.

"Oh, I was asking a pebble if it knew who I was," explained Roger.

The farmer made a significant gesture.

"Perhaps he's escaped from somewhere," said Martha.

"Ah," said John darkly, "you'd better get on the phone then, my beauty."

Martha disappeared.

In the distance Brinton heard a telephone receiver being lifted, and he heard the purring of a dial that returns to its spring-loaded place after use. He heard, as though in a dream and far away, the woman Martha





speaking urgently and excitedly with a strong West-country accent.

"Perhaps you'd better sit down," said the farmer, not unkindly.

Brinton sat.

It was an old, strong wooden chair; it looked very much at home in the farm kitchen.

"They're coming," said Martha significantly, as she reappeared.

"Who's coming?"

"The police are coming. They'll be able to help you," said the farmer. He had apparently sized Brinton up to his own satisfaction by this time, and he put the gun back on two hooks on the wall.

"Perhaps you'd like a cup o' tea," said the woman.

Behind the red face and beneath the grey hair there was a brain that was not by any means devoid of simple country kindness.

"Yes, I think I would," said Brinton. "Thank you." He had the pebble in his hand. He turned it round slowly in his fingers. "I did think you could have told me my name."

"Well, let's try some guesses," said the farmer, "perhaps you'll remember it if you hear it. Adams, Brown, Carlton . . "

"Shall I get the telephone directory?" asked Martha suddenly, as she finished putting the kettle on the stove.

"That'd be a good idea. I'll read him some names out there."

Brinton, however, took the book and began reading slowly and dutifully through the list of names, which

the farmer had given him. He was still only halfway through the 'A's when Martha handed him a cup of tea. It was hot and strong, and it seemed to travel around his veins giving him new strength, a new feeling of warmth, and life. She poured him a second cup, and gave him a thick wad of home-made cake. The warmth of the farm kitchen seemed comforting and friendly. Outside something cold and threatening waited. Something to do with that forgotten date, perhaps the farmer would know the date. Brinton asked him.

"July," answered the farmer.

"It can't be; it's raining and it rains in April. Eight for the April Rainers, the song says."

"It rains in other months as well," said big John.

"I never thought of that," said Brinton. "I've been so sure it was April." He clenched his fists and bit his lip. His eyes opened wide. "It's got to be April. It mustn't be that other month!"

"What other month?" asked the farmer.

"The one I can't remember," said Brinton.

"Well, there's only twelve," said the farmer. "Go through the ones you know, and I'll tell you what you left out."

"February, March, April," the farmer stopped him.

"Why did you start with February, January's the first month."

"*January!*" Brinton repeated the word like a psychopath with echolabia.

All the strength seemed to depart from his body. He fell off the chair on which he sat. The cup, now





empty, fell from nerveless fingers and shattered on the floor.

The echoes of the crash seemed to reverberate round the tiled kitchen.

"O! God!" sobbed Brinton as he lay on the tiled floor. "January, January 9th. *Died* January 9th!"

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### *The April Rainers*

HE clutched the farmer's ankles. The big countryman helped him to his feet.

"You hurt yourself?" asked Martha.

"No, I'm all right. It's just that month. I've forgotten again . ."

"January," said the farmer.

Brinton's eyes were as wide as two port-holes in the side of a sinking ship.

"What's the matter with January 9th?" asked Martha.

"That's when I died," said Brinton.

John laughed.

"You're not dead," he said. "You're very much alive."

"That's when I'm going to die!" cried Brinton.

"You mean that you're frightened you're going to





die next January? January 9th? Is that it?" asked the farmer.

He was a good man, a reliable man, but even his closest friends wouldn't have said he was quick on the uptake.

"I've seen my grave," sobbed Brinton. "It's already waiting for me, back in Lechlade . . . I remember being in Lechlade, and seeing a grave." He clapped his hands to his head. "I don't want to remember," he sobbed again and again.

Consciousness left him, and when he came round again blue uniformed men were helping him to his feet and supporting him out to a waiting car.

"Where am I?" he asked.

All memory of January 9th and a waiting grave had gone from his mind . . .

The police car drove in through a pair of wrought-iron gates, set in a high brick wall, topped by inward sloping strands of barbed wire. The tyres crunched on a gravelled drive, and the car pulled up in the concrete forecourt of a huge old Georgian mansion, set amid trees and broad acres of pasture. Two friendly, helpful, blue-uniformed men helped Brinton out of the car. A white-coated man with glasses met them on the other side of the door.

"Ah, doctor, I'm very glad to find you up so late," said the police sergeant.

"I've just been called to one of my patients I was just going back to bed when I heard your car pull up," said the doctor. "I wondered what was the matter."

"We wondered if the gentleman was one of your patients. He turned up at John Redman's farm a little while ago. He doesn't know who he is, or anything, apparently. Just staggered in out of the night."

"How very strange," said the doctor. "Let's see. Unless he's one of the newest intake who came yesterday and whom I haven't seen for an interview, I don't know who he is." He smiled reassuringly. "Have you been here before? Do you know me? Can you remember seeing me?"

"I've never seen you before," announced Brinton. "Never seen you before."

"I see. I'll get my orderly to make you comfortable for the night, and we'll see if we can sort out the mystery for you tomorrow. I had just done a fourteen hour stint when this other business came along. I was hoping to get some sleep. I have some important analyses to make tomorrow."

"Yes, of course, doctor," said the sergeant.

The doctor pressed a button set in the wall, a smart white-coated orderly arrived and led Brinton to a room with bars at the window and a bed that had been bolted to the floor. He found him some night-wear, brought him a plastic container of milk and a round of sandwiches. Brinton ate gratefully.

"If you need anything, there's a button. Understand? Press the button if you want anything."

"If I want anything, press the button," said Brinton with a rather vague stare.

"Are you sure you've got that? Anyway I'll be along





in the morning. Have a good night's sleep, don't worry about anything. The doctor will help you tomorrow."

"Tomorrow," agreed Brinton, then his eyes suddenly opened wide in fear. "It is April, isn't it? It's got to be April! It's raining, isn't it?"

"Of course it's April," soothed the orderly. He smiled reassuringly. "It can be April as long as you want it to be."

"Can it really?" asked Brinton.

The orderly was very practised at humouring his patients.

"You can keep it at April for ever and ever, if you like," he comforted.

"Then it needn't ever be that other month, the month I've forgotten?"

"No, of course not."

Brinton heaved a great sigh of relief. He felt very tired. He tucked himself into bed slowly and carefully and pulled the blankets over his head protectively. His knees curled up and he hugged his arms around them. He felt suddenly very small and helpless. The orderly had said that it needn't ever be anything but April . . .

The soft sound of gentle rain lulled Roger Brinton to sleep.

He was awakened with tea and breakfast. When he had washed he found that the mud had been cleaned from his clothes and his trousers had been pressed.

The orderly took him along numerous corridors after

breakfast until he found himself in front of a large comfortable office whose furnishings he could glimpse through the half open door. He remembered seeing the tall, bespectacled, white-coated doctor the previous evening. He began to feel a little more secure, a little more sure of himself. He felt less frightened of the amorphous black something that was creeping after him like a huge open mouth. He tried hard to remember who he was and what he was doing there. No memory would come. The doctor looked round the edge of the door.

"Come in!" he called.

Brinton moved hesitantly into the consulting room.

"Well, I think we might begin by some introductions," said the doctor. "After all, it's a necessary social convention, isn't it? My name is Slade, Dr. Slade."

"I'm pleased to meet you, doctor. I'm afraid I can't introduce myself, as you know."

"As you say. We'll put a name to you for a moment, we'll call you 'John Brown'. Statistically speaking you have as good a chance of being called John Brown as you have of being called anything else. Well, now, Mr.-hypothetical-Brown, let's talk about your troubles. When people lose their memories, as a rule it's because there is something they can't face. Something they want to forget. Somewhere in your mind is something you are not able to face. There is something you've got to forget. By losing your memory you've chosen the lesser of two evils. The other way of escaping from an unbearable difficulty is suicide. Amnesia,





which is the technical word for loss-of-memory, is the safety valve which prevents the sensitive mind from self-destruction."

"When you said 'suicide'," said Brinton, "I got the feeling that I had already tried but I couldn't remember when or where. It's something to do with drowning, I think. I have a feeling of dark waters swallowing me down, down, and yet I wasn't committing suicide so much as making an escape, as a challenge, as an answer. Whatever it was that was threatening me was answered by suicide.

"That sounds very interesting," said Doctor Slade. "Some men regard death as the worst thing that can happen, now if whatever is threatening you can be defeated by self-destruction, then whatever-it-is cannot be any worse than death, if you follow my reversed logic."

"Yes, I do," agreed Brown/Brinton.

"I think we're going to get to the depth of your trouble by hypnosis. You haven't had a long acquaintance with me, so you'll have to take me on trust. Do you think you're the kind of man, Mr. 'Brown', who can sum up character very quickly?"

"I don't know. I don't know what manner of man I am; I don't know what manner of man I was."

"The great thing about hypnosis is that the patient must be absolutely willing. You haven't known me long enough yet, to put forward that trust, but maybe it will come."

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

### *Nine Bright Shiners*

It took more than one session, it took many sessions, and progress at first seemed to be inordinately slow, but at last some glimmerings of Brinton's former personality began to assert themselves. Months had passed, snow was falling, as, with a strange feeling of expectancy, like a parachutist about to make his first jump, Brinton came into the now-familiar consulting room where Doctor Slade, the asylum superintendent and psycho-analyst, was sitting.

"You're looking brighter today, Mr. 'Brown'," said Doctor Slade. "I think something has happened deep in your subconscious."

"I think it has," agreed Brinton. "I feel as though I am on the verge of something momentous. I feel as if I'm coming back, as if I'm coming back to myself."

"I think we're going to have a special session today," said Slade. "Go and make yourself comfortable on the couch. Lie back on the couch with the attitude of a spaceman who is on the verge of being blasted into the infinite, with some new kind of propulsion unit."





"I feel that this is a moment of truth," said Brinton. "I feel that it's going to be of use to me."

"Don't build too much; it may not be all that we hope for, but I too, feel a kind of electrical expectancy in the air. I'm going to try a new technique today. It's one that I haven't used in previous sessions. In fact I haven't had it very long. It was sent to me by a colleague who was experimenting with different types of concentration-inducer-objects."

"What exactly is it?" asked Brinton.

"It consists of nine revolving points of light, powered by a small silent electric motor."

"I see."

"I want you to keep watching it while I talk to you; keep watching it until your eyes are no longer able to keep open. Lie back and watch *the Nine Bright Shiners.*"

Brinton's whole body suddenly went as stiff as a board.

"Doctor, doctor—I think something's coming back. That was a trigger phrase. The nine bright shiners! It's part of a song."

"Yes, it's part of 'Green Grow the Rushes-O'," said the doctor. "I hadn't realised that when I said it; it's purely coincidental. One is one and all alone; two are the lilywhite boys; three the rivals; four the gospel makers; five the symbols at your door; six the proud walkers; seven the stars in the sky; eight the April rainers."

"I remember the April rain the night I came in here. And now nine, we've reached the nine bright shiners."

Relaxation flooded through Roger Brinton's body like the waves of a warm southern sea. He lay back, the nine bright shiners revolved in front of him, one by one, gyrating and oscillating as they revolved. His eyes closed. He could hear nothing but the voice of Dr. Slade, powerful, deep, hypnotic, compelling.

"You will remember," said the voice. "You will remember your name, the April rain, and the stars in the sky. You will remember the proud walkers."

Memory came back, breaking like waves against the basalt cliff. The cliff collapsed and the waves of memory broke through into his consciousness. Roger Brinton moaned a little and tossed fitfully as he lay on the couch. "I remember," he said in a strange far-away voice.

"Now you are slowly coming back to consciousness; when you awake you will be able to remember everything. You will be able to remember everything and talk to me about it without fear. *Everything.*" Slade's voice was firm and compelling.

Brinton awoke at Slade's command and his mind filled instantly with waves of memory on which fragments of fear floated like spars from a long sunken wreck.

"It has come back, Dr. Slade. My name is Roger Thomas Brinton. I was born on April 7th, 1930. I remember the fact that I was trying to hide now. I'd had an incredible supernatural experience; an in-





credible experience," he repeated. "I was on a canoeing holiday on the Thames. I stopped at a village. I saw my own grave; there was my name 'Roger Thomas Brinton and the date of my birth, and something else, *the date of my death.*"

"Ah," said Slade, "this accounts for your dread of January."

"It was January 9th, doctor."

The doctor looked pointedly at the calendar on his desk. It was the 8th.

Brinton's eyes opened wide.

"Tomorrow," he said, "I am due to die."

"I see," said the doctor.

"You probably think I still need your professional assistance, but I don't, I can assure you. If you have any doubts I want you to contact some friends of mine."

"Very gladly," said the doctor. "Can you give me some names, and I'll get straight on the telephone."

"The Rev. Charles Ferguson, I don't know his parish but I expect you'll find him in Crockfords, but Val Stearman will be the easiest man to contact."

"The journalist?" asked Slade in surprise. "You know Val Stearman the journalist?"

"Yes, very well. In fact, he and his wife, and Ferguson, saved my life on more than one occasion. It isn't just this grave that's after me, there are some strange masked characters. I just don't understand it. Obviously while I've been here with you I've been safe."

"As long as you had lost your memory they may have been unable to trace you, even by supernatural means. There may be some method which scientists would call a kind of telepathy perhaps, although not in the sense that it is generally understood, but which a black magician, or even a white magician, would call some kind of spiritual contact, something which is independent of, or short circuits the normal means of communication. Now that your memory has returned you will be in very serious danger indeed. I'm assuming —because apart from your amnesia you have given every appearance of a man who is sane and rational— that you are in some serious danger from midnight tonight to midnight tomorrow. If we can get you through the next twenty-four hours you will be safe, but for the next twenty-four hours you're going to need all the help you can get. Mr. Stearman works for the 'Daily Globe' to the best of my knowledge," said the doctor. "Therefore I shall at once communicate with that particular example of daily mass communication." He smiled and picked up the phone.

Brinton paced across the consulting room.

"Steady," said Slade, as he waited for the call to come through, "you're going to be all right."

Brinton's eyes narrowed.

"I feel scared. All the time my memory has been gone I enjoyed a kind of peace, and yet I felt that I was living in a fool's paradise, or on the brink of an open grave. Oh, how I hate that word! If you can imagine seeing your own name on a gravestone in the moonlight . . ."





"I'll see to it that you're not alone for the next thirty-six hours. We're going to stay with you all the time, two or three of us."

"We're going to need more than two or three if those six proud walkers come back," said Roger.

"Yes, tell me more about those," said the doctor.

"They attacked us, I know it was me they were after, I was on the Rev. Ferguson's boat, 'The Gospel Makers'."

"Ah, another link in that song-chain gestalt," said the doctor.

Brinton nodded.

"Four for the gospel makers," he repeated.

"Well, what happened when they attacked you?"

"Stearman was magnificent."

"I've heard tales of his prowess in the field of fisticuffs."

"He fights like a tank," said Brinton. "He's no longer a young man. One of those iron grey veterans, tough as old oak, possibly slowing up a little; it doesn't matter. He's got the strength to back it up."

"So these masked men attacked you," persisted Slade.

"And Stearman and Ferguson mixed it with them."

"What happened to you, did you mix it with the others?"

Brinton hung his head.

"No, I didn't," he said. "I felt I'd let them down and

I'd let them down badly. I even let Mrs. Stearman tackle one of them. Apparently she's a judo expert."

"I see," said Slade. "I can understand the guilt feelings that that would arouse."

"I was just paralysed with fear," said Brinton. "They were very nice about it, and that seemed to make it a thousand times worse."

"I know how you feel," said Slade.

"Do you? That isn't just a comforting phrase?"

"No, I've been in this profession too long to hand out palliative phrases."

"Then would you have done the same?"

"All of us have particular fears," said Slade. "Some are afraid of confined spaces, this is called claustrophobia, some of us are afraid of wide open spaces, this is called agrophobia. There are men who are terrified of death—necrophobia. Some of us are terrified of physical violence."

"I begin to see what you're driving at," said Roger Brinton.

"I myself do not like physical violence," said the doctor. "I would not run away, perhaps."

"I didn't run away," said Brinton.

"I experience a kind of empathy with you, a sharing of the feeling itself," said Slade. He glanced towards the telephone and as though his eyes had triggered off some device, the bell jangled. He picked up the phone.

"Your person to person call, sir. Mr. Val Stearman, London."





"Val Stearman here," boomed a voice.

"This is Dr. Slade." He gave the address of the asylum.

"You aren't going to tell me that this is the end of a six months search are you?" said Stearman.

"I'm going to tell you that I have a gentleman here who claims that he is a friend of yours, and who has been suffering from amnesia for six months."

"Brinton," breathed Stearman, "am I right? Roger Brinton."

"Yes, yes," shouted Brinton, who could hear Stearman's powerful voice echoing out of the telephone.

"I can assure you that Brinton is in deadly peril tomorrow," said Stearman to the doctor, "and I can assure you that every word of his story of an itinerant grave is true. I have seen it. So has my friend Charles Ferguson, so has my wife."

"Brinton mentioned Ferguson to me," said Dr. Slade.

"Well now," said Stearman, "I think the best thing for you to do is to hang on to Roger until we can get over there."

"Of course," agreed the doctor, and hung up.

"Is he coming?" asked Brinton. He was panting eagerly.

"Yes," said Slade.

"I knew he would! He's a sound man."

"From all I've heard of his exploits I would be very

inclined to agree with you," answered Slade.

Stearman picked up the Rev. Charles Ferguson on the way as he and La Noire drove rapidly westward.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

### *The Ten Commandments*

"INCREDIBLE that they should find him like that," said Ferguson, leaning forward from the back seat of the powerful sports saloon that Stearman drove with such skill.

"I'd given him up for lost," said Val.

"I feel that without help they'd have got him," said Ferguson.

"He might have been safe as long as his memory was blanked off," said La Noire. "They have strange ways of tracking a man with their devilish evil magic, but a man who is not aware of himself is not giving off what might be called personality radiations."

The big car sped on through the gathering gloom of an early afternoon.





"There is a danger they may try a two pronged attack," said La Noire.

"You mean physical and psychic?" asked Ferguson.

"I think so," said La Noire.

"If those other gentlemen were anything to go by," commented Val, "I don't think we need fear much from them."

"Oh, the six proud walkers who became the six humble swimmers!" said Ferguson.

"Funny how they hang onto this gestalt, this peculiar pattern of theirs. They're still following the pattern aren't they?"

"We've had nothing since the six proud walkers. What does come next?" asked La Noire.

"Seven stars in the sky, eight for the April rainers, nine for the nine bright shiners," said Val.

"Oh, of course! Ambat Singh told us about the stars," said La Noire.

"It is very odd," commented Ferguson.

They reached the asylum. It was about seven in the evening.

"Brinton's in his room with two orderlies at the moment," said Slade, as he introduced himself to them.

Stearman nodded.

"I don't think there'll be any danger till the moon rises," was his comment.

"They shouldn't strike till after midnight if they're true to form," said Ferguson.

"Don't let's be fooled by that. They may strike tonight and kill him tomorrow."

"You mean they might abduct him?" said Ferguson, sounding horrified at the thought.

"I think it's highly probable," said Stearman.

"Good gracious," said Ferguson.

"I think we shall be more than capable of dealing with the six proud walkers," said Val. He slapped the pocket where the big Browning nestled.

"The psychic attack may be more dangerous than the physical attack," said Ferguson.

"In my opinion it almost always is," replied Val.

The asylum, which stood in its own grounds and was surrounded by a high wall with an in-pointing barbed wire top, was in itself a useful fortification, but it had the disadvantage of being isolated. The nearest house was five miles away and the nearest village eight.

They made their way to Brinton's room.

"Thompson," Dr. Slade called, "tell Brinton Mr. Stearman's here."

*There was no answer.*

"Thompson," shouted the doctor, "Thompson."

He was running now. He flung the door wide open. The white-coated orderly lay on the floor, but his coat was only partially white, an ominous red stain was spreading from around the stiletto that had been plunged between his shoulder blades.





Stearman hesitated for a second, then knelt by the fallen man and turned him over.

The doctor was by the side of his orderly. "Dead, quite dead," he said softly.

"Penetrated the heart, didn't it?" said Stearman.

The doctor nodded. He looked angry. The other orderly was in no better condition, but he had been stabbed in the chest. Of Roger Thomas Brinton there was no sign.

"It looks as if they've got him," said Val.

"Not yet," said Ferguson.

"What do you mean, not yet?" asked Stearman.

"They won't kill him until midnight at the earliest."

"That gives us just under five hours. We've got to get after them quickly."

The priest nodded.

The open window was mute testimony to the way the attackers had come and gone.

"The best way to find out where they've gone is to follow them from the point of exit," said Stearman.

He lowered his massive bulk down the side of the asylum wall. Thick creeper grew all over the ancient stones.

"There's no doubt that's how they got him away," said Val, calling up to the window above, where Charles Ferguson's massive head and shoulders were outlined.

Having made his way down, Val followed tracks

which led away into the bushes and trees in the asylum grounds. The tracks grew more difficult to follow as the shade grew thicker. He waited until Ferguson, Slade and La Noire arrived.

"What lies in this direction?" asked Val.

"There's a ruined church a mile or two on, over the fields, said Slade. "It's been derelict for the best part of a century I should think."

There was a pause.

"In my experience," said Val, "there is nothing that the ungodly like better than a derelict church. You remember the Jenny Humberstone case recently?"

"Quite well," answered Ferguson.

"There is nothing these people like better than a derelict church, where they can come and hold their peculiar rites and ceremonies, which are a reversal, as nearly as they are able to perform, of the Chrstian sacraments."

"You suggest we head for the church then," said Slade. "I was telling Mr. Brinton, I am averse to physical violence. You won't be able to count on me if there is a fight," he added.

"I may not be unselfish enough to leave any of the six proud walkers for anyone else to have a go at," said Val.

"There may be more than six," warned Ferguson.

"I don't care if there's sixty-six, or six hundred and sixty-six!"

"That would have a singularly sinister significance!"





said Ferguson.

"It would indeed," said Val.

The ruined church was now visible on the skyline. It was almost nine o'clock by the time they had reached it over the ploughed fields. The moon was low and ghostly-silver over the horizon.

La Noire sniffed the air.

"What can you smell?" enquired Val, for he knew how hyper-keen her senses were.

"I think it's either incense or sulphur. They're burning pitch and sulphur by the smell of things."

"I can get a tang of it now," said Val.

Then Ferguson and Slade were about to smell it.

"Then it is a black mass," said Ferguson.

"I think it will be more than that," said Stearman, grimly. "I think stealth would be better than bursting in," he added.

"There are no lights and I can't hear any noise," said La Noire.

"Neither can I," said Stearman, "which is rather strange."

"Doesn't all this seem very, very obvious," said Ferguson. "I mean they know that we're not amateurs Val, particularly you."

"Well, do they know that we're on the track?" said Stearman.

"I know nothing about the supernatural," said Slade,

"but even my instinct would have been to come straight here."

"That's what I mean," said Ferguson. "I think that this is a red herring."

"But I can smell the sulphur and the pitch," protested Val.

"It wouldn't be difficult for them to light a few sulphur candles and burn a little pitch to get us over here. We have wasted nearly two hours, and it will take us nearly as long to get back" said Ferguson.

"I think we may as well have a look at the church now we're here," said Slade.

"All right," said Val.

As they suspected, it was empty. Two or three sulphur candles burned in odd places.

"Look at the screen," said Ferguson. "Do you see what's been written on it."

Val played a torch over the faded gilt letters.

"I can hardly made it out," he said. "What is it? You're the ecclesiastical expert."

"I can only pick up an odd word here and there," said Ferguson, "but there's no doubt what it *was.*"

"Well?" demanded Val.

"*It's the Ten Commandments,*" said Ferguson.

"The son," said Val, "it's fitting in."

"Exactly, one alone, two lilywhite boys, three rivals, four was our ship, 'The Gospel Makers', then there were the holy symbols at the door, then we encountered the six proud walkers. The seven stars in the sky, that was where we met Ambat Singh the astrologer."





"I think I can take over from there," said Doctor Slade. "When our patient came he spoke of the April rain."

"Nine for the nine bright shiners, I wonder what that means?" said Ferguson.

"I can help you there, I used a new hypnotic method on Brinton. It consists of an electric motor which turns nine shining points of light," said the doctor.

"So it all fits in."

"Only too well!" said La Noire.

"We've got as far as ten. Two more to go."

"What are they?" asked Slade.

"'Eleven, eleven went up to heaven'," said Ferguson.

"And twelve apostles . . ." added Val. "What could the eleven be that went up to heaven?"

"Could be almost anything," said the priest.

They got back to the asylum. It was drawing on for eleven by the time they reached the door.

"We've got one hour to find him," warned Val.

"And to rescue him!" said Ferguson.

"One short hour seems nothing," La Noire said quietly.

"We shall solve no problems standing here," reminded Slade; he paced up and down . . .

"Well," said Stearman, "where could they have taken him?"

"There are no ruined castles or anything of that nature?" asked La Noire.

Slade shook his head. "None that I can think of,"

he said. "Wait a minute," he went on, "there's one place on the opposite side from the church . . ."

"That's useful," said Stearman.

"There's a disused observer corps post, or ARP; one of the civil defence organizations had it during the war. It looks like a prehistoric burial ground. People may even suggest that's what it is when the war has been forgotten, so many years . . ."

"What if he's not there when we get there?"

"It will be midnight, and there will be nothing else we can do."

"I wouldn't say there's nothing else," said Val. "If we can't rescue Brinton, we can avenge him."

"I'm not sure that I commend your sentiments, but I understand them," said Ferguson.

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Roger Brinton was talking to Thompson and the other orderly when the window was prised silently open from outside. Before any of them could raise the alarm there was a strange hiss, as gas escaped from a cylinder. Exactly what that hideous ethereal compound was, neither Brinton nor the two orderlies knew. They staggered and gasped speechlessly as sinister hooded figures like macabre Ku Klux Klansmen piled in through the prised-open frame. Before the choking orderlies could make any effort to defend themselves, two deadly stilettos had done their evil work.

Brinton was alone and helpless in the presence of his attackers. He was seized, bound, and dragged through





the window. He was lowered none too gently by the masked terrors and dragged stumbling and terrified through the woods.

A group of them had gone off to the ruined church where they had lit the sulphur candles. A bigger group had taken Brinton around the perimeter of the asylum, to the wall. There a rope-ladder and sacks of straw had overcome the problem of the wall and the barbed wire. Brinton had been bound and gagged very securely. There was nothing that he could do to help himself, nothing at all.

How far they dragged him he didn't know; it was difficult to judge distance in the pale moonlight. Fear was clogging his brain. At last a mound loomed up in front of him, a sinister-looking mound like some ancient tumulus. He was thrust roughly into it. Inside there was the hideous smell of black sulphur candles, the odour of burning pitch and the sickly smell of incense. Other hooded figures moved in the darkness. Evil, terrible evil, seemed to throb and pulsate in the air. They were chanting hideous, blasphemous things in a kind of 'dog' Latin, and an altar was prepared. Behind the altar was a thick, dark, velvet curtain.

Brinton was terrified of that thick black velvet; it seemed to represent something. He felt an overpowering urge to look beyond. At the same time he was afraid of what it might reveal. There was demoniac laughter. Two of the hideous walkers, in their Klan-like robes, dragged him towards the black velvet hangings. He struggled desperately but there was no escape. It seemed to take them an eternity to get him to the

curtains, but at last he stood before the black velvet. They released him. He closed his eyes. He heard the sound of the curtains being drawn and there was a terrible silence behind him.

He didn't want to look. He tried to keep his eyes closed, but he was not successful. His eyes seemed to move of their own accord, as though curiosity was motivating them.

In the alcove *he saw*. There was the grave. The earth was newly turned, it was waiting for him. A dark shadow seemed to come up out of the grave. That dark shadow beckoned to Roger Thomas Brinton. The dark shadow beckoned him into eternity, and just as he felt as if some hideous, sinister, evil power of untold magnitude was dragging the soul out of his body, was sucking the soul from the living flesh that housed it, his tormentors allowed the curtain to fall back.

Roger Brinton collapsed insensible.

They carried him to the back of the strange, old dug-out, opened the door of a small sub-compartment, thrust him inside and kicked the door shut again. He opened his eyes in the darkness and heard a bar being dropped on the door. There was an awful silence for a few seconds, then a low chanting began. It was working up to a climax, and he knew what the climax was going to be. He was going to be sacrificed, that grave was waiting for *him*.

Obviously this was some sinister and terrible rite. They had waited a long time for this, perhaps from the moment he had set off on that solitary canoeing holiday.





He wondered whether his friends would be able to rescue him. It seemed a slim possibility, all the power here seemed to be evil.

As he lay on his back he became aware that he could see a star through a small aperture in the roof above him. He didn't know where he was, but he knew that he was within walking distance of the asylum. He knew, too, that Stearman would be looking for him.

He struggled desperately, and one by one managed to free his limbs of his bonds. He tore off the gag and breathed deeply after the exertion. His eyes were gradually becoming accustomed to the gloom; he realised that he was in an old army post of some kind. In one corner he saw some boxes. He found other things. A Very-pistol . . . and suddenly facts fell into place in his mind. He heaved the boxes over until he had built himself a barricade. He knew it would not last very long, but at least it ought to hold for long enough for him to accomplish his purpose. He counted out eleven flares and stood directly under the hole through which he could see the light of the star. With trembling hands he fitted the first flare.

The Very-light went up true and straight.

The chanting stopped at the crack of the exploding pistol. He fired again and again, and again, as he heard them at the door.

At the eighth rocket they began heaving his barricade aside, at the ninth they were three yards away from him, at the tenth they were one yard away, and they tore the gun from his hand a split second after the

eleventh Very-light had been fired, but he had done it; *the eleven had gone up to heaven.*

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Val Stearman, La Noire, Ferguson, Slade, six policemen and two burly orderlies were running across the fields in the direction from which the distress rockets had been fired.

"We have to be right," panted Val.

"I counted eleven," said La Noire, still running with the speed of a gazelle.

"I wish I had your wind," puffed the mighty Stearman. "I'm a fighter, not a runner. Even when I'm running towards a fight I get out of breath."

They reached the mound. Hooded figures emerged like ants from a disturbed colony. Stearman dropped the first masked figure with a punch like the kick of a mule. The police sergeant found himself grappling with a tall, wild-eyed, sinister-looking thing that seemed more animal than human. He was reluctant to use his truncheon, but felt that this was an occasion which was possibly justified. The truncheon came down with a satisfying sound and the light went out of the fanatical eyes.

Stearman had already dropped two more. Slade had moved to the edge of the melée, looking dubious and unsure of himself. Not until one of the hooded figures actually made a direct attack on the doctor did he make some move to defend himself. If Val Stearman had not had a split second to spare to give a back





hander to the man in the robe who was grappling with Slade, the doctor's plight would have been very serious indeed.

Ferguson had arrived, and Ferguson was carrying a big silver cross. He also had a flask of holy water and there were howls of terror from the hooded things as his 'dog collar' flashed in its celluloid whiteness in the moonlight.

It was Val who crashed his way through the stream of running black magicians into the very heart of the underground lair. The fanatical leader of the organization, more mad than sane, more beast than man, more devil than human, had the hapless, helpless Brinton flat on the sinister black altar; a wicked curved knife was flashing in the air as the big Browning spoke. It was not just a supremely powerful gun, it was a superbly accurate gun. The knife spun across the room as the hand that was holding it shattered; the knife clattered harmlessly against the earthed up wall. Brinton tried to struggle into a sitting position, but others of the coven were still holding him. The gun went on talking. The leader did not rise. The side of Stearman's hand came down on another hooded figure and it passed into the arms of Morpheus.

Police and orderlies rounded up those who did not make good their escape.

Brinton staggered out into the moonlight, supported by Ferguson and Stearman.

"Behind the black curtain behind the altar, there's my grave," said Brinton.

"I'll go and deal with it," said Ferguson.

He returned a few minutes later.

"I have destroyed it," he said. "You are safe now. We have broken them up. You will never be attacked again."

"In a sense it is completed," said Val, "there were *twelve* of us in the rescue."

"I hope we shan't be irreverent if we refer to ourselves as the *twelve apostles* just on this occasion," smiled the priest.

"I shouldn't think so," said Stearman.

They went out into the cleaner, sweeter air of the night.

THE END