

Danger: Religion!

Brian Aldiss

We made a strange group, the four of us plodding manfully through nowhere.

Royal Meacher, my brother, led the way. His long arms and bony hands fought the wind for possession of his cloak, a shabby mantle that stayed about him no more certainly than his authority.

Next, the breeze from the north plucked at the figure of Turton, our man Turton, poor old Turton, the mutant whose third arm and all but useless third leg combined with his black cloak to give him from behind something of the appearance of a beetle. Over his shoulder, Turton carried Candida in an attitude of maximum discomfort.

Candida still dripped. Her hair streamed in the wind like frayed ribbon. Her left ear jogged up and down the central seam of Turton's coat; her right eye peered sightlessly back at me. Candida is Royal's fourth wife.

I am Royal's younger brother, Sheridan. I felt de-feated by Candida's stare. I kept hoping that the jig-jog of Turton's walk would shake her eye shut; and so I suppose it might have done had her head not been hanging upside down.

We walked toward the north, into the molars of the wind.

The road on which we walked was narrow and absolutely straight. It appeared to lead nowhere, for despite the wind a miasmal mist rose from the damp about us, obscuring everything ahead. The road ran along a dyke, the sides of which, being newly con-structed, were of bare earth. This dyke divided a stretch of sea. We had the sea on both sides of us.

Almost as far as our vision extended, we could see another dyke extending parallel with ours. The sea was being chopped into polders. In time, as the work of reclamation proceeded, the squares would be drained; the sea would dwindle into puddles; the puddles would become mud; the mud would become soil; the soils would become vegetables; and the vege-tables—oh, yes!—the vegetables would be eaten and become flesh; ghosts of future people grew here.

Treading steadily on to the rear of Turton, I looked back over my shoulder.

The vast funeral pyre we had left was made insig-nificant by distance; the kiln was a tiny black pipe topped by flame. No more did we feel its heat or smell the burning bodies, but the effluvium lingered in our memories. Royal still spoke of it, rambling in and out of quotation as his habit was, addressing the

wind.

"You note how the parsimonious Dutch reclaim both their land and their dead in one operation. And those grisly corpses, maligned by sea and radiation, will make excellent fertilizer with their ashes. How convenient, how concise! Occam's razor cuts precious fine, friends: the obscene fag ends of one chemical reaction go to start another. 'Marvellous is the plan by which this best of worlds is wisely planned!' Forty thousand dead Dutchmen should guarantee us a good cabbage crop in four years, eh, Turton?"

The bent old man, with Candida's head nodding idiot agreement, said, "Back before the last two wars, they used to grow tulips and flowers here, according to the engineer at the kiln."

Dark was coming in now, the mist thickening, the sulky captive sea falling motionless as the wind died. Beyond the outline of my brother's back I could see lights; with gratitude I mouthed their ugly name; Noordoostburg-op-Langedijk.

"That moldy towerful of cadavers would seem to be less appropriately applied to tulips than to cab-bages, Turton," Royal said. "And what more suitable envoi to the indignity of their deaths? Recollect your Browne: To be gnawed out of our graves, to have our skulls made drinking bowls, and our bones turned into pipes, to delight and sport our enemies—"how does it go?"—are tragical abominations escaped in burning burials.' Since Browne's time, we've grown a lot more ingenious! Nuclear destruction and inciner-ation need not be the end of our troubles. We can still be spread as mulch for the genus brassica...."

"Cabbages it was, cabbages or tulips," old Turton insisted, but Royal was not to be deflected. He talked on as we trudged on. I was not listening. I wanted only to get off this eternal earthwork, safe into civili-zation and warmth.

When we reached Noordoostburg-op-Langedijk, a mere platform joined by dyke and mole to the distant land, we went into its only cafe. Turton laid Candida down on a bench. He unbent his beetle back and stretched his arms (but the third never stretched straight) with groans of relief. The cafe manager came forward hurriedly.

"I regret I cannot introduce you properly to my wife. She is religious and has passed into a coma," Royal said, staring the man down.

"Sir, this lady is not dead?" the manager asked.

"Merely religious."

"Sir, she is somewhat wet!" the manager said.

"A property she shares with the confounded ditch into which she plunged when the coma overtook her, my man. Will you kindly bring us three soups: my wife, as you see, will not partake."

Dubiously the manager backed away.

Turton followed him to the counter.

"You see, the lady's very susceptible to anything religious. We came over with the party from Edinburgh specially to see the cremation down the road, and Mrs. Meacher was overwhelmed by the sight. Or perhaps it was the smell, I don't know, or the sound of the bodies bubbling in the incinerator. Anyhow,

before anyone could stop her, backward she went— splash!—and—"

"Turton!" Royal called sharply.

"I was just trying to borrow a towel," Turton said.

We ate our soup in silence. A puddle collected under Candida's clothing.

"Say something, Sheridan," Roy demanded, rapping his spoon on the table at me.

"I wonder if there are fish in those fields," I said.

He made his usual gesture of disgust and turned away. Fortunately I did not have to say anything more, for at that moment the rest of our Edinburgh party came in for soup. The incineration ceremony had finished just after we left.

Soup and rationed chocolate were all that the café offered. When the party had finished up their bowls, we went outside. I draped Candida over Turton's shoulder, and we followed Royal.

The weather was showing its talents. The wind had dropped; rain began to fall. It fell on the concrete, into the polders, into the sour sea. It fell onto the buzz-jet. We all packed into it, jostling and pushing. Somehow, Royal managed to get in and away from the rain first. Turton and I were last aboard, but Turton had been wet already.

This buzz-jet was a missile left over from the last war and converted. It was uncomfortable, yet it could move; we headed northwest across the sea and over northern England, where not a light showed from the stricken lands; in a quarter of an hour the lights of Edinburgh showed through the slashing darkness.

Our craft was a government one. Private transport of any variety was a thing of the past. Mainly it was fuel shortage that had brought the situation about; but when the last war ended at the beginning of 2041, the government passed laws forbidding the private ownership of transport.

At Turnhouse Airport we climbed out and made our way with the crowd to a bus shelter. A bus arrived after a few minutes; it was too full to take us; we waited and caught the next one; it crawled with us into town, while we stood like cattle in a truck.

That sort of thing takes the edge off what otherwise had been a very enjoyable day's sightseeing. We had made several such excursions to celebrate my demobilization from the army.

Since the war, Edinburgh had become the capital of Europe, chiefly because the others had been obliterated or made uninhabitable by radiation or the after-effects of bacterial warfare.

Some of the old Scottish families were proud of this promotion of their city; others felt that this greatness had been thrust upon them; but most of them took advantage of the shining hour by thrusting up rents to astronomical heights. The thousands of refugees, evacuated and displaced people who poured into the city, found themselves held to ransom for living space.

When we climbed out of the bus at the city center, I became separated from the others by the crowd, that cursed anonymous crowd speaking all the tongues of Europe. I brushed off a hand that clutched at my sleeve; it came again, detaining me more forcibly. Irritably, I looked round, and my eyes met the eyes of a square, dark man; in that instance, I took in no more detail beyond saying to myself that his was

a great Gothic cathedral of a face.

"You are Sheridan Meacher, fellow of Edinburgh University, lecturer in history?" he asked

I dislike being recognized at a bus stop.

"European history," I said.

The expression on his face was not readable, weary triumph, perhaps? He motioned to me to follow him.

At that moment, the crowd surged forward, so that he and I were borne out of it and into a side street.

"I want you to come with me," he said.

"Who are you? I've got no money."

He wore a black and white uniform. That did not endear him to me. I had seen enough of uniforms in those weary war years underground.

"Mr. Meacher, you are in trouble. I have a room not five minutes away from here; will you please come with me to it and discuss the situation with me? I assure you I will offer you no personal harm, if that is why you hesitate."

"What sort of trouble? Are you a black marketeer? If so, shove off!"

"Let us go and discuss."

I shrugged my shoulders and followed him. We went down a couple of back streets, toward the Grass-market, and in at a grimy door. The man with the Gothic face preceded me up a winding stair. At one point a door opened, a dimly lit hag's face peeped out at us, and then the door slammed again, leaving us in gloom.

He paused on a landing and felt in his pocket. He said, "I shouldn't think a house like this has changed much since Dr. Johnson visited Edinburgh." Then in an altered tone, he added, "I mean—you did have a Dr. Johnson, Samuel Johnson—didn't you?"

Not understanding his phrasing—yet I had not taken him for other than an Englishman—I said, "Dr. Johnson visited this city to stay with his friend Boswell about 1773a.d."

In the dark he sighed with relief. Sliding a key into a lock he said, "Of course, of course, I was just forgetting that the road from London to Edinburgh was open by that date. Forgive me."

He opened a door, switched on a light, and ushered me into his room. What could the man mean? Edinburgh and London had been connected—though of-ten tenuously—a long while before Johnson's visit. I was beginning to form ideas about this Gothic stranger—all of them later proved wrong.

His room was bare and nondescript, a typical lodging room with a combo-toilet in one corner, in another a hand generator in case the main electricity supply failed, and a screen standing on the far side of the room with a bed behind it. He went across to the window to draw the curtains before turning to confront me.

"I should introduce myself, Mr. Meacher. My name is Apostolic Rastell, Captain Apostolic Rastell of the Matrix Investigation Corps."

I inclined my head and waited; the world was full of sinister-sounding establishments these days, and although I had never heard of the Matrix Investigation Corps, I did not say so. We stood looking at each other, summing one another up. Captain Rastell was a considerable man, untidy perhaps, but prepossessing, strongly built without being bulky, a man in his late twenties, and with that square, dogged, extraordinary face. I could not make him out—truth to tell, I have never been able to make him out.

He went behind his screen, to emerge carrying a light folding screen. This he opened and stood up.

The screen was locked with some sort of a combination lock. Rastell worked it, staring at me somewhat grimly as he listened to the tumblers click.

"You had better look at this before I offer any explanation," he said.

A seat unfolded from the screen, and behind it, the screen surface turned silver and mirrorlike. I took a good look, and faintness overcame me. I staggered and he caught me, but I quickly recovered.

I saw myself in the screen. The anonymous room was also reflected there, if reflected is the word, its dimensions cramped and twisted, so that it looked as if the figures of Rastell and myself stood on the outside rather than the inside of a cube. The effect was as if I peered into a distorting mirror; but this was no mirror—for I found myself staring distractedly at my own profile!

"What's this bit of gimmickry?"

"You are an intelligent man, Mr. Meacher, and since I am in a hurry I hope that already this sight has suggested to you that there are departments of life which are a mystery to you, and into which you have not peered or cared to peer. There are other earths, other Edinburghs, than this one of yours, Mr. Meacher; I come from such a one, and I invite you to follow me back to it now."

I sat on a chair and stared at him. There is no point in recounting the terrors, hopes, and suppositions that poured through my mind. After a moment, I listened to what he was saying. It went something like this:

"Although you are not a philosopher, Mr. Meacher, you perhaps understand how many men spend large parts of their lives waiting for a challenge; they prepare themselves for it, though they may not guess what it is until the moment comes. I hope you are such a man, for I have no time for lengthy explanation. In the matrix from which I came, we had a dramatist last century called Jean Paul Sartre; in one of his plays, a man says to another, "Do you mean to say that you would judge the whole of someone's life by one single action?" and the other asks simply, "Why not?" So I ask you, Mr. Meacher, will you come with me? Will you test all your life with one action?"

"Why should I?"

"You must ask *yourself* that." In the circumstances, what monstrous assumptions behind that remark!

"You will come? Excellent!" he said, moving forward and grasping my arm. Unthinkingly, I had risen, and he had taken my rising for assent. Perhaps it was.

I allowed myself to be led over to the seat in his—let me use his own term—his "portal." He saw me settled there and said, "This is nothing that you are unprepared for; you may be astonished, but you are not surprised. It will be news for you, but probably nothing upon which you have not privately speculated, when I tell you that the earth you know is merely a three-dimensional appearance—an outcrop, a geologist would call it—of a multidimensional uni-verse. To comprehend the total multidimensional uni-verse is beyond man's power and perhaps always will be, one impediment being that his senses register each of its dimensions as a three-dimensional reality."

"Rastell, for God's sake, I don't know what you are saying!"

"The violence of your denial persuades me other-wise. Let me put it this way, with an analogy with which you may be familiar.

"A two-dimensional creature lives on a sheet of paper. A bubble—that is, a three-dimensional object—passes through the paper. How does the two-dimensional creature perceive the bubble? First as a point, which expands to a circle that at its maximum is the circumference of the bubble; the bubble is then halfway through paper; the circle then begins to contract until it becomes a point and disappears in the next instant."

"Yes, yes, I understand all that, but are you trying to imply that this two-dimensional creature can climb onto the bubble, which is...."

"Listen, all that stops the creature climbing onto the bubble is its attitude of mind, its system of logic. Its mind needs a twist through ninety degrees—and, so does yours. Join the creature's strip of paper up at both ends and you get a lively representation of your mind; a closed circle! You can't perceive the other matrices of the multidimensional universe. But I can make you perceive them. I'm going to give you an injection now, Mr. Meacher, that will have that effect on your perceptions."

It was crazy! He must somehow have hypnotized me—fascinated me certainly!—to make me go as far as that with him. I jumped up from the chair.

"Leave me alone, Rastell I don't know what you are saying, and I don't want to. I don't want any part of it. I lost my sense of adventure in the army. I— Rastell!"

His name came from my lips as a shriek. He had put out a hand as if to steady me, and plunged the tip of a small hypodermic into the vein of my left wrist. A stinging sensation coursed up my arm.

As I swung toward him, I brought my right fist up, aiming a blow at his face. He ducked, and, carried off balance, I staggered forward.

"I'd sit down if I were you, Meacher. You have nicomiotine in your veins, and, if you are unused to it, exertion may make you sick. Sit down, man."

My gaze fixed on his face, with its tall lines, and the extraordinarily sensible relationship between its various features. I saw that face, graven onto my sight, as a central point, a cardinal fact, a reference from which the whole universe might be mapped; for the influence of time and event lay in that face, until it in its time influenced time and event, and in that linkage I saw symbolized the whole wheel of life that governs men. Yes, I knew—even at that time I knew—that already I was gliding under the influence of the drug Rastell had given me. It made no difference. Truth is truth, whether you find it or it finds you.

When I sat down in the seat, it was with a motion that held the same magic dualism. For the act might have looked like submission to another's will; yet I knew it was more vitally a demonstration of *my* will, as inside the universe of my body a part of me had brought into play a thousand minute responses, and blood and muscle cooperated in the act. At the same time that this dramatic and cosmic act was in process, I was hearing the voice of Rastell, booming at me from a distance.

"In this matrix of yours, I understand you passed through what is now referred to as the Tobacco Age, when many people—this applied particularly to the first half of the last century—were slaves to the tobacco habit. It was the age of the cigarette. Cigarettes were not the romantic objects portrayed by our his-torical novelists; they were killers, for the nicotine contained in them, though beneficial to the brain in small quantities, is death to the lungs when scattered over them in large quantities. However, before the cigarette finally went out of production toward the end of the seventies—how are you feeling, Meacher? It won't take long—before the downfall of the ciga-rette firms, they developed nicomiotine. Because the firms were in general bad repute, the new drug lay neglected for fifty years; in this matrix of yours, it is neglected still, as far as I can ascertain."

He felt my pulse, which labored beneath my skin like a man struggling to free himself from imprison-ment in a sack. Sunk in an ocean of feeling, I said nothing; I could see the benefit of remaining uncon-scious all one's life. Then one could be free to pursue the real things.

"You probably won't know this, Meacher, but nico-tine used to retard the passing of urine. It set in motion a chain of reactions which released a sub-stance called vasopressin from the pituitary gland into the bloodstream; when the vasopressin reached the kidney, the excretion of water taken by the mouth was suppressed.

"Nicomiotine releases noradrenaline from the hy-pothalamus and from the tegmentum of the limbic brain, that part of the brain which controls the func-tions of consciousness. At the same time, the drug builds up midrenaline in the peripheral blood ves-sels. This results in what we call an 'attention trans-fer.' The result—I'm simplifying here, Meacher—the result is the dislocation of consciousness necessary for switching over from one matrix to another. The flow of attention is, so to speak, given a Mobius twist and tagged onto the next matrix."

"Curiouser and curiouser," I murmured.

"The seat on which you sit is in a circuit which can be turned to various vibratory levels, each of which corresponds to one matrix of the multidimensional universe. I move this switch here, and you will slip easily through the portal into the matrix from which I have come. Don't think of it as going through a barrier; rather, you are avoiding a barrier.

"The effects of this technique can also be achieved by long mental discipline; it was this that the yogi were unwittingly reaching out for when they—ah, you are sliding through now, Meacher. Don't be alarmed."

I was not alarmed. I was standing outside my own shell and seeing that to all of us come moments of calm and detachment; that stillness might be the secret which only a handful of men in any generation stumbles on. In the same long-drawn moment of time, I was aware that my left foot had disintegrated. No dismay assailed me, for the right foot had disin-tegrated too. The wisdom and symmetry of this event pleased me.

Everything was disintegrating into mist—not that I took it seriously, although for a moment I was fright-ened by the basilisk stare of my jacket buttons, glar-ing up unwinkingly at me, so that I was

reminded of those lines of Rimbaud's about "the coat buttons that are eyes of wild creatures glaring at you from the end of the corridors." Then buttons and Rimbaud and I were gone into mist!

A feeling of sickness preceded me into Rastell's matrix.

I sat up shivering in the seat, my head suddenly clear and my body temperature low. The drug had built up a certain pitch and then abandoned me. It was as if a passionate love affair had been ended by an unexpected desertion, a betraying letter. In my misery, I looked about me and saw a room very like the room I had left.

The room was the same shape; it had the same doors and windows, with the same view out of the window; but the curtains were not drawn, and it was light outside. I fancied the furniture was different, but had not taken in the other room clearly enough to be positive. One thing I was sure of: the other room had not contained a little ugly man dressed in over-alls standing motionless by the door, staring at me.

As I got to my feet, Rastell materialized, pulling the collapsible screen with him.

"You'll soon feel better," he said. "The first time's always the worst. Now well have to get a move on. Can you walk all right? We'll catch a cab in the street."

"Where are we, Rastell? This is still Edinburgh. What's happened? If you are fooling with me...."

He snapped his fingers impatiently but answered in a quiet voice.

"You have left the Edinburgh of AA688, which is how we designate your home matrix. We are now in the Edinburgh of AA541. In many respects, one much resembles the other. In some ways you will find them identical. Only the workings of chance have brought divergencies from what you at first will think of as the norm. As you adjust to inter-matrix living, you'll realize that norms do not exist. Let's move."

"I don't understand what you are saying. Are you saying that I may find my brother and his wife here?"

"Why not? It's quite possible that you may find yourself here—here and in a thousand other matrices. It is a property of matter to imitate itself in all matrices and of chance to modify the imitations."

He said this as if repeating some sort of received idea, walking over as he did to the shabby fellow, who, all this time, had stood patiently unmoving by the door. I saw this fellow wore a bracelet over his overalls below one knee; from the bracelet radiated four short arms that bit into his flesh. Rastell produced a key from his pocket and thrust it into a lock in the bracelet. The four arms fell outward and hung loosely from their hinges on the bracelet's rim. The man rubbed his leg and hobbled around the room, restoring his circulation. He kept his eye on both Rastell and me, but especially on me, without looking at either of us directly, and without speaking.

"Who is this man? What are you doing?" I asked.

"He would have tried to escape while I was away if I had not locked him still," Rastell said. He produced a bottle from under his tunic. "They still have whiskey in this matrix, Meacher, you'll be glad to hear. Have a good pull—it will help you take control of yourself." Gratefully, I drank the warming stuff from the

"I'm in control of myself, Rastell. But this talk of matter imitating itself in all matrices-it's like a vision of hell. For God's sake, how many matrices are there?"

"There is not time to go into all that now. You shall have the answers if you help us. As yet, in any case, we have uncovered more questions than answers. Verification of the existence of the multimatrix uni-verse came no more than twenty years ago; the Matrix Investigation Corps was established only fifteen years ago, in 2027, the year the Fourth World War broke out in your matrix. In this matrix, the war did not take place."

"Rastell, I cannot accept a word you are saying. I want no part of this."

"You are a part of it. Dibbs, get the portal folded up."

Dibbs was the voiceless one. Keeping his eyes to the ground, he did as he was told, folding the portal to the size of a satchel and clipping it onto Rastell's back. Rastell grabbed my arm and pulled me around, not unkindly.

"Pull yourself together and let's get along. I know it's a shock at first, but you are a man of intelligence; you'll adjust."

I knocked his hand away.

"It's because I'm a man of intelligence that I reject all this. How many of these matrix worlds are there?"

"The Matrix Investigation Corps measures con-consciousness in dees. Spaced three dees apart from each other lies an infinity of matrices—yes, an infinity, Meacher, and I see the word does little to reassure you. Only a few dozen worlds are explored as yet. One or two we are using. Some are so nearly identical to ours that only by a few details—the taste maybe of the whiskey or the name of a Sunday newspaper—do they differ at all; others—we found one, Meacher, where the earth was in an improperly created state, just a ball of turbulent rivers of mud, lying under permanent cloud. On one, there were only winged things in a forest world."

He opened the door as he was speaking, and we went together down the winding stair and out into the street by a grimy door.

My adventure had begun. At the sight of that grimy alien door opening, I was myself again, excited by the challenging novelty of everything.

It had been evening when I went into that house, or a house like it. Now it was iron-gray day, with a daylight forged to match the stones of the city. Oh yes, this was Auld Reekie all right, unmistakably Auld Reekie—and unmistakably not the Edinburgh I had been born in.

True, the buildings looked similar, though a strangeness in the pattern they presented told me that some of them were altered in ways I did not recollect. The people looked different and dressed differently.

Gone were the shabby and talkative crowds among which Royal, Candida, and I had jostled only a short while before. The streets were almost empty, and those that moved about on them were easily observed to fall into two classes. Some men and women there were who traveled the streets with their heads held high, who walked briskly, who smiled and saluted each other; they were well dressed, in what I thought of then as a "futuristic" style, with wide plain collars and short cloaks of what looked like a stiff leather or plastic. Many of the men wore swords. This class of people walked on the sidewalks.

There was another class of people. These men were allowed to use only the road itself for walking. They

did not greet each other; they moved through the streets with no grace in their carriage, for whether they walked or loped—as many of them did—they kept their heads down and looked about furtively from under their brows. Like Dibbs, they all wore overalls, like him they carried spiked bracelets below one knee, and like him they bore a yellow disc on their backs, between their shoulder blades.

I had plenty of time to observe these people, for Rastell, as he had promised, had got us a cab, and in this we set off in the direction of Waverley Station.

The cab amazed me. It was worked by manpower. Three men in overalls—I was already, I think, referring to them mentally as the slave class—were chained to a seat behind the cab; Dibbs climbed up with them to make a fourth; together they worked away at foot pedals, and that was the way we moved, propelled by four sweating wretches.

In the streets, several similar cabs were bowling along, and there were even sedan chairs, well suited to the uneven nature of Edinburgh's topography. There were also men riding horseback and occasional conventional trucks with internal-combustion engines. I saw no buses or private cars. Remembering how the latter class of vehicle had been forbidden in my own matrix, I asked Rastell about it.

"We happen to have more manpower than we have fuels," he said. "And unlike your wretchedly proletarian matrix, here most free men have leisure and find no need to hurry everywhere."

"You impressed on me the need for hurry."

"We are hurrying because the balance of this entire matrix is in a state of crisis. Civilization is threatened and must be saved. You and others like you from other matrices are being brought here because we need the perspective that an extra-matrixial can give. Because your culture is inferior to ours does not mean that your abilities may not be invaluable.

"Inferior? What do you mean, inferior? You appear to be a couple of centuries behind us, with your antiquated sedans and these anachronistic pedal cabs."

"You don't measure progress just by materialistic standards, Meacher, I hope?" Up came his Gothic eyebrows as he spoke.

"Indeed I don't. I measure it by personal liberty, and from the bare glimpse I have had of your culture—your matrix—you live in nothing better than a slave state."

"There is nothing better than a slave state. You are a historian, aren't you, a man capable of judging not simply by the parochial standards of his own time? What race became great without slave labor, including the Soviet Union and the British Empire? Was not Classical Greece a community of slave states? Who but slaves left all the lasting monuments of the world? In any case, you are prejudging. We have here a subject population, which is a different thing from slavery."

"Is it different for the people concerned?"

"Oh, for Church's sake, be silent, Meacher. You do nothing but verbalize."

"Why invoke the church about it?"

"Because I am a member of the Church. Take care not to blaspheme, Meacher. During your stay here, you will naturally be subject to our laws, and the Church keeps a firmer hold over its rights than it does in

your matrix."

I fell gloomily silent. We had labored up onto George IV Bridge. Two of the slaves, working at the farthest extent of their chains, had jumped down from the back of the cab and pushed us over that stretch of the way. Having crossed the bridge, we began to go steeply down by The Mound, braking and freewheeling alternately, though a flywheel re-moved most of the unpleasant jerkiness from this method of progress. Edinburgh Castle, grandly high on our left, looked unchanged to me, but in the more modern part of the town before us I saw much change, without being able to identify any particular bit of it with certainty; for Royal, Candida, and I had not lived very long in Edinburgh, and we were not completely familiar with it.

Whistles sounded ahead. I took no notice, until Rastell stiffened and drew a revolver from his pocket. Ahead, by the steps of the Assembly Hall, a cab had crashed and turned over on its side. The three slaves attached to it could be seen—we had them in sight just around the bend—wrenching at their chains, try-ing to detach them from the cab. A passenger had survived the crash. He had his head out of the win-dow and was blowing a whistle.

"The subs have allowed another crash—this is their favorite spot," Rastell said. "They get too negligent."

"It's a difficult corner. How can you tell they al-lowed it to happen?"

Giving me no answer, Rastell half opened the door of our cab and leaned out to shout at our slaves.

"Hey, you subs, stop this cab at once. I want to get out. Dibbs, jump down!"

We squealed to a halt on the slope. When Rastell jumped out I did the same. The air was cold. I was stiff and uneasy, well aware that I was so far from home that the distance could not be measured in miles. I looked about, and Dibbs and the three ped-dlers watched me with their eyebrows.

"Better follow me, Meacher," Rastell called. He broke into a run toward the wrecked cab. One of the slaves there had wrenched his chain from its anchor-age in the wooden panels of the cab. Moving forward, he swung the loose end of the chain and brought it across the head of the passenger. The whistling stopped in mid-note. The passenger sagged to one side and then slid out of sight into the cab. By that time, the slave had jumped onto the top of the cab and turned to face Rastell. Other whistles began to shrill. A siren wailed.

When the slave on the cab saw that Rastell carried a gun, his expression changed. I saw his look of dismay as he motioned his fellows who were still captive and jumped down behind the cab. His fellows stood there trembling, no longer trying to get away.

Rastell did not fire. A car came tearing up the hill with sirens wailing and bucked to a halt between Rastell and the upturned cab. On the roof of the car was a winking sign that readchurch police. Black-and-white-uniformed men jumped out. They wore swords and carried guns. Rastell hurried over to them.

I stayed where I was, half in the shelter of our cab, undecided, not wanting any part of anything. Dibbs and his fellow subs stood where they were, not mov-ing, not speaking.

A crowd was collecting by the steps of the Assem-bly Hall, a crowd composed of the ruling class. The sub who had broken loose was kicked into the back of a police car. While the others indulged in argument, I had time to look at the police car more carefully. It was an odd vehicle, driven by an

internal-combustion engine, a powerful beast, but without any of the streamlining characteristic of the cars with which I grew up. It had a double door set in either side, and another, through which the wretched sub was pushed, at the back. Its windows were narrow, point-ed, and grouped in pairs, in the style of windows in Early English churches; even the windshield had been divided into six in this way. The whole thing was elaborately painted in white and light blue and yellow. Why not, I thought, if you have plenty of time and slave labor is cheap?

And the stained-glass motif about the windshield-why not, if most of the people you are likely to knock down are expendable and have no rights?

Rastell was returning, though the debate around the steps of the Assembly Hall was still in progress.

"Let's get on," Rastell said. He signaled curtly to Dibbs and the subs. We all climbed aboard and re-sumed our journey. I looked at the crowd about the church police car as we passed it. With a start, I thought I recognized one of the hangers-on in the crowd. He looked much like my brother Royal; then I told myself that my nerves were being irresponsible.

"There's too much of that sort of incident," Rastell said. "This trouble flared up all at once a few years ago. They must have a leader."

"I'd guess they also had a cause. What will happen to the man who broke free from the cab and clubbed the passenger?"

"That sub?" He looked at me, his lips curving in a smile not entirely free from malice. "He struck a churchgoer, I was not the only witness. Hell be hanged at the castle next week. What else could we do with him? Hell be granted last rites."

The grand stretch of Princes Street, a street fit for any capital, was changed, although many buildings were as I knew them. Their rather commercial gaiety had gone. They presented a drab uniformity now. Their windows were unwashed; the goods displayed for sale in the shop windows looked uninviting. I peered eagerly at them as we thudded by at a stiff walking pace. The big electronic showrooms had gone, the shops were not piled with the gadgets I knew.

On the sidewalks, greater variety was in evidence. Many people were about, looking cheerful as they shopped. Few slaves were in sight, and I now observed that among the free some were evidently far less prosperous than others. Sedans, pedal cabs, four-wheel bicycles, and little electrically powered cars moved busily about. I was sorry when we halted before a large gray building and Rastell signaled me to alight.

"This is the headquarters of my, chapter," he said, as we pushed through the door with Dibbs following.

"I believe it's a block of offices in my matrix."

"On the contrary, it is the Commission for Nuclear Rearmament. Are you already forgetting how war oriented your matrix is?" He relented then and said, in less ironic tones, "However, you'll probably find us too religious. It's a matter of viewpoint, really."

The place was bustling. The foyer reminded me of an old-fashioned hotel; its furniture was cumbersome and oddly designed, reminding me of the late Windsor style of fifty years ago or more, except that everything was so colorless.

Rastell marched over to a bulletin board and scanned it.

"We have half an hour before the next history briefing for extra-matriculials. You'd better attend; the less time wasted the better. I'll see you are found a room where you can wash and rest. I have one or two people I ought to speak to. We'll meet again, shortly, at the briefing."

A sub ran up to unclip the portal from his back. Another ran up with a glass of water. Captain Apos-tolic Rastell looked pleased to be home.

He signaled a passing servant, a girl dressed not in overalls but in a curious black and white pantaloons. I felt some anxiety at leaving Rastell, this one contact with my own matrix. He interpreted my expression and nodded at the girl.

"This sub girl will take good care of you, Meacher. Under the dispensation, she will serve you in any way you may require."

As he disappeared, I thought he was not an unlikable devil, given better circumstances. I followed the sub girl, noting the yellow disc between her shoulder blades. She led me up one flight of stairs and along a corridor and opened a door for me. When I was inside she followed, locked the door, and handed me the key. Despite myself, her air of submissiveness gave me ideas. In that awful dress she looked Polish, and her face was pasty, but she was young and had good features. "What's your name?"

She pointed to a button on her dress. On it was stamped the name Ann.

"You are Ann? Can't you talk?" She shook her head. Cold needles prickled in my chest; it occurred to me that I had not heard a word from Dibbs or from the slaves by the upturned cab. Moving toward her, I touched her chin. "Open your mouth, Ann."

Meekly, she let her jaw hang. No, her tongue was there as well as several teeth that needed stopping or pulling. The helplessness of the creature over-whelmed me.

"Why can't you speak, Ann?"

She closed her jaw and lifted up her chin. On the whiteness of her neck ran an ugly scar. They had severed her vocal cords. I clasped her thin shoulders and let anger burn over me. "Is this done to all slaves?" Shake of head. "To some—to most of them?"

Nod.

"Some sort of punishment?"

Nod.

"Hurt your Nod. So remote! "Are there other men like me, from other matrices, along this corridor?"

Blank look.

"I mean, other strangers from other places like me?"

Nod.

"Take me to one of them."

I gave her back the key. She unlocked the door and went into the corridor. At the door of the room next to mine she stopped. Her key fitted that lock, and the door swung open.

A fellow with a thatch of wispy yellow hair and stubble all around a great jaw sat at a table eating. He ate with a spoon, furiously. Though he looked up as I came in, pulling Ann in with me, he did not interrupt the ladling of food into his mouth.

"You're an extra-matrical?" I asked. He made noises of assent into his stew.

"So am I. The name's Sheridan Meacher. Historian, ex-army." When he made no answer save to gape, I went on. "We can't agree to give these people any help to bolster up their regime. Their entire system is evil and must be destroyed. I'm going to get people to help me."

He stood up, an ungainly lump of a man. He leaned over the table toward me, still gripping his spoon. "What's evil about the system here, Jack?"

I showed him Ann's scars, explaining what they were and how they had been caused. He laughed.

"You want to come and have a look at my home matrix," he said. "Ever since an unsuccessful revolution ten years ago, the Chinese have employed all scholars in chain gangs. They're busy making roads across the Cairngorms."

"The Chinese? What have they to do with it?"

"The Red Chinese. Didn't they win the Third World War in your matrix?"

"Win it? They didn't even fight it!"

"Well, then, you're just lucky, Jack, and if I were you I'd be inclined to keep my trap shut. Take what's offered, I say!"

Before I had backed out of his room, he was again spooning stew into his mouth.

In the next room was a little plump man, red in the face and bald of head, who jumped quickly back from fondling his sub girl as I entered with Ann.

"I'm extra-matrical like you," I told him, "and I don't like what I have seen here so far. I hope you feel that these people should not be helped in any way."

"We've rather got to make the best of things now we're here, that's my feeling," he said, coming forward to look at me. "What don't you like about this place?"

"Their system of slavery—of mutilating slaves—it alone is enough to convince anyone that the ruling regime should be overthrown. You must feel the same."

He scratched his bald head, considering the idea.

"You could have worse than slavery, you know. At least slavery guarantees that a part of the population lives above the level of animals. In the Britain of my matrix—and I expect you have found the same—the

standard of living has been declining ever since the beginning of the century. So much so that some people are beginning to whisper that communism may not after all be the solution we hoped when it was first generally adopted, and...."

"Communism in Britain? Since when?"

"You sound so surprised, anyone would have thought I said capitalism! After the success of the general strike of 1929, leading to glorious revolution, the first Communist government was established under the leadership of Sir Harold Pollitt. Then in the great People's War of 1940...."

"All right, thanks for the lecture! Just tell me this— will you back me in opposing this regime of slavery?"

"Well, I don't oppose you in opposing it, but first I'd have to confer with the comrades and get a ruling..."

I slammed the door on him. I had backed out hurriedly, and I bumped into another man moving rapidly down the corridor. Brought up short, we regarded each other challengingly. He was young and dark, about my weight and height, with a high bridge to his nose, and I liked the look of him immediately.

"You're an extra-matricular?"

He nodded, smiling gravely, and held out his hand. When I held out mine, he grasped my elbow instead; so I grasped his elbow.

"My name is Mark Claud Gale, at your service. I'm on an errand of revolt, and you look like a possible conscript. None of these spineless fellows will back me up, but I'm not going to give this black-frocked government any help."

"Ah, count me with you all the way, Mark! Great! I am Sherry Meacher, historian and soldier, and I also am recruiting. If we stick together and defy the regime, others may follow our example. And then perhaps the slaves...."

The brazen tongue of a bell interrupted me.

"Time for the historical briefing," Mark said. "Let's go and learn what we can, Sherry, of these altar-kissing hounds! Such knowledge may be turned to our use later. By my shrine, but this is an adventure!"

This aspect of the matter had not struck me before, but to have a sturdy, dependable ally heartened me immensely, and I felt ready for anything. A heady and pleasurable excitement filled me. I could not wait to get to the briefing and to hear, to listen, to be assaulted and insulted by a barrage of new facts that—only a day ago!—would have seemed the wild-est fantasy! Then Mark Claud Gale and I would write a page of history of our own.

A pair of dark-clothed church police appeared at the head of the stairs and began ushering us down. The bald man from Communist Britain (but for all I knew there were a million Communist Britains) tagged on with us but did not speak. Ann disappeared as we pressed downstairs. Counting heads, I noted that there were twenty-two of us extra-matriculars. As we filed into a hall at the back of the foyer, we found another thirty-odd people awaiting us. From the variety of clothes they were wearing, it was apparent that they were also extra-matriculars.

We seated ourselves at long tables on benches and looked to the head table, which stood on a dais and contained three men, each with a secretary, and church police standing behind them. One of the three men was Captain Apostolic Rastell; he gave no sign of having noticed me.

When a bell sounded, one of the men on the dais, a white-haired man of good bearing, rose to his feet and began to speak.

"Gentlemen and sinners, we welcome you to our peaceful God-fearing matrix. We thank you for coming here to bring us help and wisdom. Need I say that your services will be rewarded. I am the Lieutenant Deacon Administered Bligh, and with me are the two members of my committee. Captain Apostolic Rastell is now going to give you a brief history of this matrix so that you may have a correct perspective on our problems. A sub will come round distributing pens and paper to all who wish to make notes."

Rastell rose, bowed slightly to Bligh, and went straight into his talk.

He spoke for almost two hours. From the body of the hall, hardly a whisper came. We listened fascinated to the history of a world like – and yet so hauntingly unlike – ours. Rastell's version as lavishly trimmed by propaganda, yet the man's own personality enlivened even the heaviest passage of dialectic.

A few instances of the strange things Rastell told us must suffice. In this matrix, the concept of nationality has not arisen at as early a date as it had in the matrix I knew. In my home matrix (AA688 Rastell had called it, and I had committed the number to memory), although German and Italian nationality was not achieved until the second half of the nineteenth century, the other great European countries had achieved unity several centuries earlier.

In Rastell's matrix, the kings of England and France had been less successful in their struggles against the feudal lords; one reason for this was, I gathered, that the Church had looked less favorably on the concept of earthly kingdoms. The Church had played the barons against each other and against the Crown. Bishops held more power than kings or parliaments.

Consequently, Great Britain had not become a united kingdom until 1914, at the time of the Franco-German War, in which Britain remained neutral and the Consolidated Holy States of America sold armaments to both sides. In the First World War of 1939, the alignment of power was as I knew it, with a Nazi Germany fighting against Britain and France and, later, Holy Russia and Holy America entering as their allies, while Japan fought on the same side as Germany. Japan, however, had been Christianized. The Americans, having been less attracted to a less heavily industrialized Europe, had turned their attention and their missionaries to Japan earlier than they had done in my matrix.

This led to a crisis in the conduct of the war. American and British scientists developed an atomic bomb. Before using this weapon against their Japanese and German enemies, the thirty-fifth President of the United States Benedict H. Denning, consulted with the Convocation of Churches.

The Convocation was a powerful group. It not only forbade the use of such a weapon against nominally Christian countries; it gradually took over jurisdiction of the weapon. The war lasted until 1951, by which time the Church was completely in control of all nuclear-power development.

A long and hard war had vitiated the C.H.S.A. and her allies. At the end of the conflict, weak governments fell and a strong church with popular backing rose as a challenging power. Its rule had spread to other countries, particularly to Europe, which was occupied after the war, not by armed forces, but by battalions of militant churchmen.

In 1955, World Church waged a brief nuclear war against China and won.

Since that date, almost a century ago, World Church had kept the fruits and the secrets of nuclear power under her voluminous skirts.

Exhaustion of natural resources had necessitated the employment of subject populations, but there had been no war in the West since 1951. The rule of religion poured out its benefits on to all mankind. What Rastell did not mention were any negative or suppressive results of this rule.

Some of these suppressions were obvious enough. With an autocratic central control and the lack of incentives that wars provide, scientific and technological developments had dropped away. World population, on the other hand, had risen steeply. Rastell mentioned at one point that, after the amalgamation of the Universal Christian Church in 1979, methods of contraception were universally discouraged. The new populations were born into slavery.

"We have been able to turn away from materialism because we have a large subject population to perform the menial tasks of the world for us," Rastell said. It struck me at the time that this was a twisted way of saying that almost every nation without mechanical labor is forced to use slaves.

From what he said, and from what he omitted, it became apparent that almost the only scientific development since the 1960s was the portals, and trans-matrixial travel. The Church had not encouraged space travel. No doubt they would have been shocked to learn of the Battle of Venus in the Fifth World War, in which I had taken part.

When Rastell had finished speaking, silence lay over the hall. It had grown dusk while he talked; now lights came on reluctantly as we returned to awareness of our own situation. I could see by the faces about me that to many of the extra-matrixials, Rastell's material had been more astonishing than I found it.

What amazed me most was the way the Church had departed from what it represented in my matrix. Perhaps it was the possession of nuclear power that had worked the change. Such a possession would have needed strong men to control it, and obviously the strong men had ousted the meek. Another case of absolute power corrupting absolutely. So I said to myself, with the Church cast as villain of the piece. Then Administered Bligh rose again and said nothing to make me doubt my own reasoning.

"Now that you have a perspective with which to work," he said, "World Church can proceed to place before you the problem with which we are immediately faced. As you know, you were brought here to give us your help. All of you are students of history in some form or other, in your separate matrices. A meal is going to be served to you right away; afterward I shall explain our problem in detail and invite your advice; but now I will put it to you in general terms so that you can consider it while you eat.

"We try to instill into our subject population the eternal truth that life in this world is always accompanied by sorrow, alike for those that lead and those that are led, and that they must expect to find their rewards for virtue in the Hereafter. But subs do not learn.

"Several times they have risen against their masters, against World Church. Now—I will tell you frankly, gentlemen—we are faced with a much more serious revolt. The subs have captured the capital; London is in their hands. The Church there was ... somewhat decadent.... The question we are going to ask you, with all its ramifications, is this: will leniency or harshness be the most effective way of dealing with them?

"Should we destroy London with nuclear weapons and thus risk raising the specter of martyrdom, to

inspire other slaves communities? Or should we force them to surrender and forgive them, killing only the ringleaders—thus allowing them to believe that World Church held back not through mercy but weakness?

"Either course is open to us. But we need the benefit of historical knowledge from war-torn matrices to formulate the better solution.

"World Church will bless you for your aid."

He sat down. Already plates were clattering. Subs of both sexes poured forth from doors at the far end of the hall, bearing food. Greasy steam poured from the kitchens, and the smell of porridge and meat.

The little bald man from Communist Britain was sitting next to me.

"An interesting poser, that," he said. "Leniency al-ways impresses the uniformed mind, if it is properly stage-managed."

"Ah, but terror impresses them more," someone else said, and laughed.

"These Church people are dogs, spineless hypo-crites," Mark told him. "And you must come from a nasty bootlicking culture if you can seriously give their problem a minute's thought. Don't you agree Sherry?"

He turned his clouded, honest face to me.

"It cheers me immensely to hear that they are hav-ing trouble in London, Mark! There are about fifty extra-matricials here. Most of them must feel as we do and will refuse to help this regime. Let's find them and get together...."

Mark held up his hand.

"No, Sherry. Listen, I have a simpler idea!" He leaned forward to speak confidentially. Bald Head also leaned forward to catch his words. Mark put his palm over the man's nose and pushed him away.

"Go away and play in the bushes, smoothpate," he said. To me he said, "Two's never a crowd. An undis-ciplined bunch of men is nothing but a pain in the kilt. I know, I've had experience. In my own matrix, I'm history instructor in one of our military schools. I've served all over the world—I only got back from legion duty in Kashmir a week before these people grabbed me. Believe me, this paltry Church is used to dealing with slaves, not free men, or they could solve their own problems. The two of us can get away with murder."

"What are you planning?" I had a nasty feeling that I was letting myself in for more trouble than I had bargained for.

"First, we test their resourcefulness. At the same time we get weapons. Can you fight, Sherry? You look like a warrior to me."

"I fought in World War V, on Earth and Venus."

"All these world wars! My matrix is completely different—we only have local campaigns. Much more sensible! Much more civilized! When we have time, we must talk and talk—and listen, of course. First,

we must get to the kitchens. Kitchens are always well stocked with weapons, even if these curs are vegetari-an. Come on!"

He did not wait for my agreement. He had slipped from the table and was off, bent double so that he could not be seen from the dais. I did the only possible thing. Glad in my heart to be committed, I followed.

Double swing-doors of heavy wood led into the kitchens. We barged in. It was a huge place, bathed in steam, and gave an impression of darkness rather than dirt. All the equipment looked incredibly old-fashioned.

An overseer with a short whip in his hand saw us at once and came toward us. He had a long raw face and sandy eyebrows—yes, an Edinburgh type, I thought—even as I cast about and noted that there was only one other overseer in the whole place, to watch over the activities of perhaps thirty slaves. A plan formed in my mind.

"Leave this fellow to me," I told Mark.

As the overseer came up, with a "What do you gentlemen want, pray?" on his lips, I swung a metal tray from a table at my right hand. The edge of it caught him clean across the bridge of his nose, and he dropped as if dead, without a cry. I saw he had a yellow disc between his shoulder blades.

"I'll get the other foot-kisser," Mark said, clapping my shoulder as he passed.

There were thick-handled mops standing in buck-ets against one wall. I seized one and ran it through the handles of the doors into the hall. That would hold them temporarily. Another pair of swing doors led to a scullery; I fixed them in the same way. Another door led from the kitchen, a wide door giv-ing on to a courtyard. Pushing a great wooden table, I smashed it against the door and jammed it shut. For a moment, the kitchen was ours!

Turning, I saw that Mark had settled with his overseer. By now the slaves had grasped the fact that something was happening. They stopped their various tasks and stood gaping at us. Grabbing a butcher's knife lying on a bench, I jumped up on to the bench and shouted to them.

"Men, you can all be free! It's a man's right to be free! Better to die than be a slave! Arm yourselves and help us fight those who oppress you. You are not alone. If you help us, others will help you. Now is the time for revenge. Arm yourselves! Fight for your free-dom! Fight for your lives!"

I saw Mark turn to me in amazement and horror. Even more surprising was the response of the wretch-ed subs. They knotted together in fear, gazing at me as if I were about to slaughter them. I waved my arms and bellowed at them again. A hammering at the hall doors roused them. Crying, they rushed for it and began to try and tear away my mop, each imped-ing the other in their anxiety.

Jumping down among them, I pushed them back.

They were flimsy and frightened, falling away from my blows.

"I'm trying to help you! Are you cowards? Don't let them in—they'll kill you. You know they'll kill you. Barricade the doors with the tables! Strike for free-dom!"

All they did was shrink back. A few uttered a sort of unvocalized cry. Mark roughly grabbed my arm.

“Sherry, by my shrine, you’re crazy! These dogs are born slaves! Dregs! Outcasts! Scum! — Useless to us! They won’t fight! — Slaves never do unless they have tasted better days. Leave them, let them be butch-ered! Arm yourself and let’s get out of here.”

“But Mark, the whole idea “

He shoved a great bunched fist under my jaw, swinging it without touching me in time with his words.

“The idea is to overturn this rotting World Church! I know where my duty lies—it lies with the free, not with the servile! Forget this greasy-armed scum! Grab a bigger knife and move. Let’s get out of here!”

“But we can’t leave these people...”

“You liberal fool, we can and we will! They’re dirt, not people!”

He ran across to a long lead sink and pulled a heavy chopping knife from it, tossing it to me. As I caught it, he again bellowed at me to move. His fighting blood was up, his face was scarlet. By now, the ham-mering on the kitchen door had grown in volume. They would be breaking in at any moment. The slaves cowered in a group nearby, watching Mark and me anxiously. Some crossed themselves. I turned and ran after Mark.

He pointed to a large service elevator in one corner. We rushed to it.

“It only leads upstairs!”

“That’ll do. Get in and haul on the rope!”

We jumped into the cumbersome contraption. It could be maneuvered from inside by the ropes that supported it.

“Hey, stop! Wait for me!”

At the shout, both Mark and I turned. The overseer I had laid out with the tray was staggering toward us. “Let me join you,” he said. “I’d sooner die than carry on as I am. I’ll fight on your side. I’m for you!”

“You’re an overseer. We don’t want you!” I said. “No, wait,” Mark said. “He is a promoted slave, isn’t that right, fellow? They have plenty of fight in them because they’ve learned the difference between bet-ter and worse. Climb in, man, and be welcome. You can show us the layout of this infernal place.”

The overseer jumped in beside us and helped us haul on the ropes. We creaked up into darkness. As we bent to the task, Mark said, “We want church police uniforms as quickly as possible. Then we can walk out of die building unnoticed!”

“Och, that should be easy enough,” grunted the overseer. “Friends, whether we meet with death or daylight, my name’s Andy Campbell, and I’m glad to be in your company.”

“We’re Mark and Sherry, and that tray was not delivered in anger.”

“Man, I’d thought you’d cut my skull into two pieces! I must work off my sorrow on a churchgoer as soon as possible.”

He hadn't long to wait before he did that. We emerged on a poorly lighted landing; a portly man in gaiters and some sort of ecclesiastical garb was passing the hatchway. As he turned, saw us, and opened his mouth to shout, I was on him. He gave a shout before I could bring him to the ground, and a police officer appeared almost immediately. I'll never forget his look of horrified surprise as he rounded the corner and came upon three wild men. He went for his gun far too late. Andy was there, sinking a steel blade through his jacket, through his chest, into his heart. He died with a look of surprise still frozen on his face.

"Ah, blood of the bull, neatly done, my noble lads!" Mark exclaimed, smacking his fist into his palm. He pulled open a nearby door, and we dragged the two bodies into the room. A wood fire burned in an old-fashioned grate. It looked as if the occupant of the room might be back shortly.

"We've got two good sets of clothing here," I said. "You two climb into them if they'll fit. I'll see what's going on outside. I'm sure you wouldn't want anyone to catch you with your trousers down."

The portly man in gaiters was unconscious. Andy gagged him before beginning to strip off his clothes.

Prowling in the corridor, I could hear a din from below, rising up the elevator shaft. We were in the thick of trouble, and the knowledge delighted and excited me. When I got to the head of the stairs, I heard footsteps and knew someone was almost at the top of them, ascending rapidly but quietly. A sort of broom closet on wheels stood near me; hurriedly I slid behind it, into the shadows.

Whoever it was had gained the landing. A sort of fury to attack—based perhaps on fear—overcame me. I heaved the closet away from the wall and flung myself out. Falling, the closet struck the newcomer, sending him spinning against the wall. I was at his throat and had my thumbs deep in his windpipe before I realized it was Rastell.

"Mark!" I called. Mark appeared almost at once, and we dragged Rastell into our room and shut the door. Mark drew his knife.

"Don't kill him, Mark. I know him."

"Know him? He's our enemy, Sherry. Let me skewer him and you can wear his uniform. It looks about your size."

"Aye, skewer him, or I will," Andy said. "Death to the Church!"

"Leave him alone," I said. "His name's Rastell. He's okay. We'll strip him and leave him tied up here, but I won't see him killed."

"Well, hurry up," said Mark, and he and Andy lowered their knives. They were disguised now, their own clothes tossed on to the floor.

Rastell's face had turned ashy. He made no protest as I dragged off his jacket and trousers. I hated to see him look so craven.

"Remember what you said, Rastell? 'Men spend large parts of their lives awaiting a challenge.' Well, here it is!"

He did not answer a word. As I tugged his garments on I turned to Mark.

“What’s the plan? They’ll be searching this floor any moment.”

“These Church people aren’t efficient or they’d never have failed to post guards over us in the hall. They had no particular reason to think we should be friendly. But they can get mobilized against us more quickly than we can gather a force together against them. So we must leave Edinburgh.”

“Hey, devil’s luck, there’s a police car outside! We could steal that and join the rebellion in London, if either of you can drive,” Andy Campbell said. He was over by the window, peering out at the back of the building.

“In my matrix, transport is publicly owned, and I’m no driver,” I said.

“In mine, one learns to drive as part of the initiation rites at puberty,” Mark said. Going to stare down at the car with Andy, he said, “We’ll try it! Hurry up and get those clothes on, Sherry. But we won’t try for London. We must leave Edinburgh the way we came—by the portal machines. The one that brought me here was up on Arthur’s Seat, and there were others beside it. We’ll drive there at once. Once we get back to our own worlds—Andy, you come to mine with me—we must aid there, then reappear in London and join the rebellion, armed and properly prepared to fight. My government would welcome the chance!”

I was sure my government would not, vitiated as the nation’s resources were after a long war, but in outline Mark’s plan was a good one. It was no time to argue over details. Having buttoned up Rastell’s tunic over my chest, I ripped a length of cord from the blind on the window and tied Rastell to the bars at the back of the cumbersome sofa. As I finished doing this, something creaked in the corridor. We all three turned to the door at once.

“It’s the elevator going down!” Andy exclaimed. “Come on, Sherry, they’re on to us!”

With a whoop, Mark grabbed a heavy rug that lay before the fire. Burying his hands in it, he seized the fire basket out of the fireplace and ran with it blazing and smoking out of the room. He flung it; and burning logs, basket, and rug went flying down the shaft after the elevator. Hardly pausing, he ran to the top of the stairs with us after him. We raced down together.

A half-dozen church police, revolvers at the ready, came charging along the lower corridor. We met them at the bottom of the stairs. Before Mark could do anything rash, I gripped his arm and called to the police, pointing wildly back up the stairs as I did so, “Quickly, they’re up there—second floor! Six of them! Cover them while we go and get the hoses!”

The police burst past us, galloping up the stairs. The look of delight on Andy’s face! As we ran to the rear exit, we could hear screams from the direction of the kitchen. I wondered if the elevator was on fire or if the slaves were being lashed for letting us through.

We broke out into a courtyard, under surveillance from a hundred windows. Although it was dark, several subs were about, unloading meat from a van, lighting their way with long, waxy torches. Nearer to us stood the car we had seen from the upper window; a policeman in the black and white uniform sat at the wheel holding a paper, but looking uneasily about. As I wrenched open his door, he flung the paper in my face and fumbled for his gun. Yelling like a savage, I threw all my weight on him, knocking him sideways across the seat, springing on top of him. Andy had piled into the back seat. His hands came over to grasp the wretched man around the neck. At the same moment, the gun exploded.

Its noise, breaking only a foot away from my ear, seemed almost enough to kill me by itself, though the bullet tore through the roof. The man was struggling violently under me, but for the present I could do nothing; all fight had gone out of me. I lay across the policeman while Andy choked the life out of him.

While they were struggling, Mark started the car. His hands ran all over the controls as he tested their functions. The vehicle bucked violently. He cursed it, then it moved forward. In a daze, I saw what happened next.

Two police officers came dashing out of a doorway slightly ahead of us. The gunshot had brought them. They were armed only with short swords. Without a pause, they both jumped onto the running board on the near side of the car. Some of the narrow windows were open, and so they clung there.

One managed to draw his sword, thrusting it inside at Andy, who still struggled with my man. Andy let go and grasped the wrist that held the sword.

As if in slow motion, as we rolled forward, I saw the other hanger-on unsheath his sword and bring it through the window, preparing to finish Andy before he finished me. I could do nothing. The concussion of the explosion so near my head still left me dazed. I just slumped there, staring at that well-tended sword blade as it stabbed toward Andy.

Gathering speed, Mark twisted the wheel, We headed for the meat vans. Slaves shrieked and scattered. Mark swerved again, missing the other vehicle by inches. Agony distorted the faces of our two hangers-on. Their heads twisted, their mouths gaped open, their swords dropped, as they were crushed between the two vehicles and fell away from our sight.

Andy was patting us both on the back and cheering. He produced a small flask of whiskey—which he found in the hip pocket of the ecclesiastical trousers he had commandeered—and made me take a sizable swig. My throat burned and I felt better.

The fellow I was half-lying on was unconscious. Together, Andy and I dragged him over into the back seat.

"This is a crazy car to drive," Mark said, but he was doing well. We were clear on to the streets now. There was no sign of alarm. Mark was driving slowly so as not to excite attention.

The streets were poorly lighted, and there was little traffic. I had no idea of the time; it could not have been later than eight o'clock, yet hardly a soul was to be seen. The slaves, I thought, probably had a curfew; they were probably in bed or at prayers.

"It'll be wonderful to get another place to live," Andy said, "and while I think of it, slow down, Mark, and turn right, here, up Hanover Street. There's a big government store at the top.—Peace Militant it's called—that supplies only to officials, I've heard. One of the fellows in the kitchen had to work there once. If we can get in there, for sure it'll be shut, and we can get in and find some of these portals and slip out of this matrix at once."

"Mark had the idea we should get to Arthur's Seat."

Andy swore. "That lousy dump! It'll be swarming with Church Army. The Peace store will be safer."

That settled it.

Mark shifted gear, and we growled uphill. Off Princes Street lights were few and far between. At the top of the road we found the store. It was a great solid granite block with little pinchpenny ecclesiastical windows in which goods darkly lay. A board above a barred door said Peace Militant.

And Andy groaned.

At that moment I was taking another mouthful of whiskey. I turned to see what was the matter. The man he had half-strangled had revived and thrust a knife between his ribs. He was withdrawing the blade as I turned. Dim lights shone on the blade, and by that same tawdry glow I saw his teeth as he growled and came at me. I was already at him with the bottle.

The heel of it caught him in the eye. Involuntarily, he brought his hand up, and I grasped his wrist and wrenched the knife from his grip. He yelped. My fury was back. Tumbling over the seat at him, I bore him down into the darkness, while the knife—his own knife—sunk down and carried him into a night from which there would never be a dawn.

I found Mark was shaking me. The car had stopped.

"You did a good job, boy, but he can die only once, worse luck! Leave him! Come on, we've got to get into the shop quickly before they catch up with us."

"He's killed Andy. Andy Campbell's dead!"

"I'm sorry about it too. Weeping won't help it. Andy's dog's meat now. Come on, Sherry, you're a real warrior. Let's move!"

I got out onto the pavement. Mark stove in a window with his elbow, and we climbed through. As simple as that! The terrible feeling of excitement was on me, a state of possession.

We began tramping through the store.

The ground floor yielded nothing, though we separated and searched. We were about to go upstairs, when I found a floor directory. In the light filtering in from outside, I read a line that ran: Basement: Tropi-cal Plants Gardens, Cafe, Library, Extra-Matricial Equipment. Mark and I took the stairs at a run.

Below ground, we thought it safe enough to switch on a couple of lights. Here was the first evidence I had seen that this civilization boasted some sort of aesthetic sense. Heating was on, and in the warmth basked a perfect tropical garden. Flowering trees and shrubs, a line of banana plants, gaudy hibiscus, rioted here in carefully tended disorder. The centerpiece was a pool on which lilies floated and the lights were reflected back in dark water.

Beyond the pool, the cafe had been arranged with tables and chairs set on a terrace overlooking the pool. Attractive, I thought, and we pushed past the chairs and came to the adjoining department. Here stood a dozen portals made in several different sizes and models.

We both cheered up, dropped our knives, and got to work.

This was something about which we knew nothing. We had much to learn before we could return to our own worlds. To my relief, the portals we came across first were primed for immediate sale and contained vials of nicomiotine, as well as other drugs. There were instruction manuals provided, and we sat down to master their contents with what patience we had.

The business of returning to one's own matrix turned out to be fairly simple. One had a preliminary injection of a fluid with a complicated name which seemed to be a kind of tranquilizer, followed by a jab of nicomiotine in the stated quantity according to one's size/age ratio, and then sat in the portal seat, the vibratory rate of which could be adjusted to ma-trix numbers shown on a dial. When the drugs took and the body's vibratory rate reached the correct pitch, the return was effected.

"These people may have established a loathsome social order, but this invention is something to their credit," I said. "And if they would only educate and liberate their slaves, I can't help admiring any matrix that has escaped with not more than one world war."

"We've had no world wars," Mark growled.

"Then you look at it differently, but for the slaves...."

"Sherry, you keep talking about slaves. I'm tired of the subject. By the Phrygian birth, forget all about them! In every matrix there must be conquerors and conquered, dogs and masters. It's a law of human nature."

I dropped the instruction manual and stared.

"What are you saying? We have only done what we have done, fought as we have, for the sake of the poor wretches enslaved here. What else did we fight for?"

He was crouching beside me. His face set hard. His words fell from his lips like little graven images.

"I have done nothing for any slaves. What I have done has been against the Church."

"As far as that goes, I'm pretty startled by its conduct too. In my matrix, the Christian Church is a power for good. Although it condones war, its ten-ets. ..."

"Death to the Christian Church! It's the Christian Church I fight against!" He jumped to his feet. I leaped up too, my own anger awakened by his words, and we stood glaring at each other.

"You're crazy, Mark! We may not agree with the Church, but it has been the established church in Britain now for centuries. To start..."

"Not in my Britain! It's not established in my Brit-ain! Christianity is the faith of dogs and underlings where I come from. When Rastell started to tell us his history, he talked about the Roman Empire being established in the East by Constantine the Great, and he said that Constantine, followed by an emperor he called Theodosius, installed Christianity as the official creed of the Empire. Did it happen that way in your matrix?"

"Yes, just as Rastell said."

"Well, it didn't happen that way in mine! I know of this man you call Constantine; we call him Flavius Constantinus. Of Theodosius I have not heard. Constantinus was killed by his father-in-law Maximian and never became emperor. Maxentius the Great be-came emperor after Diocletian."

I was puzzled now, as well as angry. Gibbon no doubt would have been delighted to hear of this setback for Christianity, but its implications left me baffled.

"All this was seventeen centuries ago. What has it to do with us?"

He was rigid with hostility.

"Everything, my friend—everything! In your matrix and in this one, Christianity was imposed on the West by your two misguided emperors. In mine, Christiani-ty was stamped out, though it still survives among the barbarians and slaves whom we rule in the East, and the True Religion was fostered and grew, and flour-ishes irresistibly!"

"The True Religion?"

"By my shrine, Sherry, have you never heard of the soldier's god? Then bow down before the name of Mithras!"

I saw it then, saw above all my criminal stupidity in thinking that because we seemed to have a common purpose we might have a common past. This man, with whom I had spent the fiercest hour of my life, was my enemy!

How much of an enemy I saw before he did, and there lay my only advantage. He was less clear about conditions in my matrix than I was now about his. I saw that he would go back to his matrix and probably return with legions of warriors to tumble the unwarlike Church regime here. Though I wanted slavery abolished, I did not want that.

The thought of intermatrix war and conquest was horrifying. Knowledge of the portals must never get back to his Mithraic world. The conclusion was obvious—I had to kill Mark Claud Gale!

He saw murder in my eyes before I reached him. He was quick, Mark! As he stooped to grasp his knife, I kicked it flying and caught his shoulder with my knee. He fell, taking me with him, his fingers digging into my calf. A personal wrestle was what I did not want; he was probably in better condition than I. A weapon was what I wanted!

As his right hand came up to grasp me, I planted my free knee in his windpipe and wrenched his arm down hard over it, at the same time pulling myself loose from his grasp. Jumping up, I ran into the artificial garden.

Behind the cafe" were rows of garden tools on display. He hurled a can at me before I reached them. The can struck my shoulder and bounced through the front of the cafe in a shower of glass.

I turned. He was almost on me! I kicked one of the light tables between us and backed off to the tool racks. Feeling the shaft of one of the tools behind me, I brought it forward, flinging my weight with it as if it were a lance. I had hold of a rake. It struck Mark in the thigh as he jumped aside.

I had time to make another lunge, but he had the other end of the rake. Next moment, we were strug-gling face to face. He brought his skull down hard on my nose. Pain and fury burst like a volcanic eruption over me. I caught him by the throat, jabbing him in the groin with my knee. He hooked a leg around my other leg and jerked it. As I fell, I stamped on his instep. He doubled in pain, leaving the back of his neck unprotected. Even as I chopped the side of my hand down on it, I felt the weakness of my blow. I was dizzy from the pain in my face.

We broke apart. The rake lay between us. Gather-ing my strength, I turned, snatched another tool from

the rack behind, and swung it in a circle. He had stooped to grab the rake. Changing his mind, he backed away, and I ran at him with the tool upraised. It was a fool's move. I broke the shaft over his shoulders as we fell backward into the ornamental pool.

The water was warm, but the shock of it helped me to keep my senses. The pool was about three feet deep. I floundered to my feet, beating off slimy lily stalks, still grasping one end of the tool. I was bellowing for breath like a hungry sea lion.

Mark took longer to surface. From the way he moved, from the way his left arm hung limp and he clutched his shoulder, I knew I had broken something useful. He turned away from me and headed for the opposite bank, where banana trees and tall grasses grew.

Compassion rose in me. I had no heart to go on. Had he not been my ally? But in that moment of weakness, he turned and looked at me. I understood that look. We were enemies, and he was going for a weapon with which to kill me. There would be plenty about: pruning knives, shears, blades of all kinds. I could not let him get away.

He dragged himself onto the bank, using only one arm.

The broken half of the garden tool in my hand was the business end of some sort of edging implement, with a sharp crescent-shaped blade. I threw it hard.

Mark swayed and grasped at the banana tree. He missed. He tried to reach the shaft in his back with his good hand, but failed. He fell back into the pool and disappeared among the reeds. There was a good deal of thrashing about in the water, but it stopped at last. I climbed out of the pool.

Staggering, gasping incoherently, I made for the portals.

It is useless to ask me how I went through the vanishing routine. I don't know. Somehow I did all that was necessary, injected myself, tuned my portal. As I sat in the seat, I could hear noises outside the store, distant and meaningless, and the sound of a door being broken down, and the squeal of whistles. Then the effect overcame me.

Blackness. Blankness.

And—I was sprawling on a crowded night-club floor with three half-naked dancers shrieking their heads off in fright! I was back home!

They threw me out of the club without bothering to ask questions. Just as well! One thing I could not have told them: I could not remember the classification number of the matrix from which I had escaped. There was no going back there, except by accident. Rastell's world was lost among a myriad of others in the multidimensional universe.

This fortunate bit of ignorance saved me from a severe moral problem. Supposing we could have gotten back to Rastell's world, had we in fact any right to intervene on behalf of the slaves? Should we cultivate someone else's garden? In any one world, there's enough trouble in circulation without looking for it in others. Or so I explained the situation to Candida.

She pulled her moral face at me. Recovering from the influenza she had contracted at Noordoostburg-op-Langedijk, her pallor made her moral face even more moral than usual.

I am well enough to attend evensong in St. Giles today, Sheridan," she said. "And I suggest you come with me. After your unholy adventures in that benighted matrix, you are plainly in need of absolu-tion in this one."

At that time, I believed that she meant merely that the lolling of Mark in self-defense lay upon my con-science; and since it did, I meekly bowed to her suggestion.

I spent the day resting up. In the evening, as dusk settled over our festering old city, and before Royal and Turton could return home from work, Candida and I slipped down into the crowded streets and made our way up the hill to the grand old Gothic pile of Edinburgh's cathedral.

Resourceful little Candida led me by a shortcut down a slope between blank damp-stained walls. It was so narrow, we could not walk side by side; I went after her, noticing anew how slight was this strong-willed little fey sister-in-law. Footsteps sound-ed behind us—someone was catching up to us—a hand grasped my shoulder. I spun about, instinctively raising my fists, and stared into a strong square face with intense dark eyes. When I had last seen that face, it had quailed before death in fear, but there was no fear in it now.

"Captain Apostolic Rastell!"

"I am Captain Apostolic no longer," he said. "I am a man on the run—as you are!" He gave me a hard scrutinizing look as I pressed back against the wall.

Candida had stopped and was examining him haughtily.

"So this is one of your friends from that disgraceful matrix, Sherry.... Well, aren't you going to introduce me to him?"

With Candida, one always remembered one's man-ners. Only when I had performed hurried introduc-tions did I ask Rastell, "What do you mean "by saying I am. on the run? I am safe and in my proper matrix! I never thought to see you again! You are the fugitive here!"

"You are a fugitive as much as I!" He clutched my arm. "Is there somewhere that we can talk?"

"There is nowhere," Candida declared. "We are on our way to divine service. You may join us if you care to—and from what I hear of the goings-on in your dimension, you*should* care to, for the sake of your soul. After service, you can talk to Sheridan."

"As safe there as anywhere, I suppose," Rastell said, half to himself.

After the service, it was Candida who pointed out that the cathedral itself was the best place in which to talk. Perhaps she had no wish for Royal's inter-ference at that stage. But Rastell was convinced by the swarms of anonymous worshipers, and by the great darkness that towered up through the somber and fretted interior—a darkness which the meager light-ing could do no more than punctuate.

Persuaded by this general obscurity, if not by my sister-in-law, Rastell led us from the side chapel into the Moray aisle. Lurking under Moray's monument, he said, addressing us both, "Insurrection is now rife in my home matrix! No, not the subs, poor craven things—it's the extra-matricials we brought in who are causing the trouble. And you began that trouble, Sheridan Meacher!"

"I'm delighted to hear that things are going so well!"

"Things are going badly with you, never think otherwise! Both church police and Matrix Corps are already on your track, combing the nearest matrices. They are determined that you shall die for your part in the insurrection."

"Why do you come to warn me, Rastell? We are no friends!"

"Church knows, that is the truth. Yet you spared my life, Meacher. And I too am on the run. I was lucky to escape. They will have my blood for what they call my inefficiency—so I also have to get away from them."

I looked up bewildered, my eye catching the horrible stained-glass window representing Moray being murdered and John Knox grimly reading his funeral oration, to which the fading daylight lent stark emphasis. To be food for a similar oration was as yet far from my desire.

"Why have you bothered to come and inform Sherry of all this, Mr. Rastell?" Candida asked.

He turned to her. "Because he is the only person I know outside my own matrix—because we must co-operate if we are to escape death."

"And how do you propose to do that?"

"Why, we must flee together to another matrix, one far from our own probability line, and lie low there for a few months—longer if necessary—until they grow tired of searching for us."

"I see," said Candida, in a tone that could have frozen John Knox. "From that, I deduce that you have near at hand one of these extra-matrical portals and that you intend to whisk my brother-in-law away through it."

"Correct, madam."

"You will do no such thing! We are a small but devoted family. I will not have Sherry disappear into matrices even more perverted than ours. He has got himself into enough unholy trouble already."

"He is in danger here."

"He would be in danger there." They stared at each other in the waning light. I did not know what to say. Finally, Candida said, "There is a solution. I shall come with you. Through the portal."

"Madam!"

"Both of you are weak in the faith. I shall accompany you and see that you do not fall into sin. Lead on, Mr. Rastell!"

Rastell had left his portal in a seamy room in a lodginghouse not far from the church. He assembled it as Candida and I stood by. I tried to argue her out of her decision as Rastell prepared the nicomiotine injections, but she was adamant

"You have already made clear your somewhat lax attitude to other matrices, Sherry. 'There's enough trouble in circulation in our world without going looking for it in others.' That's what you said. I disagree. Christ's teaching shows that we are morally responsible for everyone. If they are human and have souls

to lose, then the people in other matrices are as we are, whether they happen to live in another dimension or not."

"But they have their own standards! Our moral obligation is to not judge them by our moral standards."

"Our moral standards? They are not ours, but come from On High. We merely follow them; and we must see that others follow them. The standards exist in their own right, whether acknowledged or not, just as God does."

The Meacher family enjoys such arguments and takes them up at a moment's notice, like embroidery.

Rastell had brought out a small black notebook and was looking up classification numbers.

"Then we will escape to a matrix far from this, where no God has ever been acknowledged on Earth," he said. There must have been irony in his voice, but Candida said eagerly, "There is such a matrix? Then indeed we can be of some positive good there!" She clapped her hands.

Rastell put her through the portal first. I went next. He came last, and I saw he materialized carrying the portal, like a circus clown who jumps through his own hoop. But I had no time to ponder this minor wonder of science, for Candida was already involved in a flaming row with an inhabitant of our new matrix!

The matrix or the inhabitant? Which to start with? The inhabitant—I had better not refer to him as a Scot—claimed all of Candida's attention, and so it was on him I looked first, and he shall be first described.

He was an undersized specimen, of brutal demeanor, with coarse hair that I suspected covered all his barrel-body under its coarse clothing. Evidently, he had grasped Candida as soon as she materialized. He was chattering at her in a language I could not understand—and getting the worst of the battle, for she was clouting him with the heavy shopping bag she had carried to church. Even as I ran to tackle her assailant, he broke away.

Just for a moment, he bent and made a gesture of such animal obscenity that Candida shrieked in indignation. Then he made off downhill fast, running flat-footedly along the paved street.

I say street-track would be a better word. For this Edinburgh—our fair Auld Reekie—hardly resembled in any way except the characteristic lie of the land the city of my or Rastell's dimension. The houses appeared to be merely senseless accumulations of stones and branches of trees. The street, as I say, was a mere track between these shacks and was piled with refuse and human droppings. Where, in our matrix, St. Giles had stood, was a rough building, almost like a crude parody of a church, with a sort of spire that on closer inspection proved to be the apex of a dead fir tree.

All this I could see because here it was happily still only midafternoon, and I resolved that we should be gone by dusk. Whatever had befallen the miserable inhabitants of Earth here, I saw no reason why we should inflict their lot on ourselves.

"So this is what a world is like without belief in the Lord!" exclaimed Candida. "The heathens! They look and act like godless ones! Yes, the devil rules here. Be off!"

This last was directed at a group of capering loons who had collected to see the fun. They jumped up and down with glee, cackled, turned cartwheels, mimicked our actions.

I turned to Rastell. "They're a pack of apes! Noth-ing but a pack of apes! What sort of trick is this? You've shot us into a kind of prehistoric matrix, haven't you?"

"No, it is no trick. This is a matrix exactly contem-porary with ours. Only the human race has taken a different path."

"Away from God!" said Candida. "If only I could speak their language!"

A piece of filth hit her on the shoulder. Our specta-tors—perhaps angered by the dullness of our per-formance—had started to throw things. I grasped Candida around the shoulders and urged her away. The spectators bunched fingers at both ends of their long lipless mouths and whistled in derision-wonderful, long, whooping, spiky, swooping, whistles; wish I could do it! With Rastell following, we hurried between two of the fetid shacks, nearly tripping over droves of little hairy black pigs as we went.

And there Edinburgh ended, in mud and wretched fields. What I knew as Cowgate was unkempt agricul-tural land. And it was being worked! Two groups were at work, engaged in some sort of plowing oper-ation. Above the plow itself sat, in each case, an ape overseer on a perch, which he grasped with his feet while wielding a crude thong whip over the backs bent before him. In one group, these backs were many: puny little monkey backs, where a dozen simi-an captives sought to drag the plow through the stony ground. In the other group, the back was but one: a broad black back, as some immense creature like an overgrown gorilla tugged at the shafts that moved the furrowing blade.

The magnificent horror of the scene got through to me at once. Only later did I see its significance and guess that this was a form of agriculture involving the use of captives of other tribes. The little figures toiled below tatty gray and fawn clouds bringing rain.

We had not long to look, for a straggle of weird shapes was progressing from behind the shacks toward us. Rastell held out a warning hand.

"No point in running. They will not hurt us."

"Who was going to run?" Candida asked indignant-ly. "We must learn their language and set to work converting them to Christianity. Nothing else can lift them from this animal state."

"I don't believe they have language as we know it," Rastell said.

The people approaching were long-legged and gro-tesque. Everything was so strange there that only when they had surrounded us did I realize that they went on stilts. There were six of them. All wore a kind of uniform. Since I was frantically trying to relate everything in that matrix to something in ours, I mistook the uniform for black leather, such as the young toughs of my Edinburgh wear; later I came to the firm conclusion that it must be the skin of their adversaries, the gorilla-people.

The people—no, let's say the ape-people, for so they were—the ape-people were using stilts about three feet high, which they manipulated very cleverly with their feet, leaving their hands free. When one reached out for my shoulder, I put up my hand sharply, and he at once was down to the ground and, swinging his stilt as a weapon without changing "hands," dealt me a considerable blow in the ribs— and in a twinkling had resumed his stilt walk.

"They won't attack you if you don't scare them!" Rastell said.

"How can you be sure?" Candida asked.

"Because they are not hostile like human beings, only suspicious like apes."

"Well, I'm both!"

But we allowed ourselves to be herded along docilely enough, for the stilt-walkers achieved what was evidently their aim, cowing us by overtopping us. The august effect was spoiled only by their chatter—at which I saw Candida frowning concentratedly, as if trying to distinguish words.

The stilt-walkers herded us up to the large shack that stood like a mockery where our fine Gothic cathedral was in the home matrix. Four of them took up positions by the entrance. The other two pushed us in, jumping deftly down from their stilts as they got inside.

Although dim, the interior was fairly large, as it had need to be, for a whole family of ape-people was here. With a dim memory of monkey behavior, I thought I could distinguish several old males squat-ting in the background, as well as more active fe-males, who moved about in coarse frocks of garish yellow which did not cover their posteriors. There were also children swarming here, though taking care to keep away from—I marveled that they had such an amenity!—a small fire burning to one side in a hollowed rock. The smells that assailed us were rich and strange.

Almost above our heads hung a trapeze. Sitting negligently on it, chewing a carrot, was a hefty young male. His black uniform was decorated with bright feathers, while around his ankles, I saw, he had two dangerous-looking spurs tied. He was glaring at us.

The stilt-walkers beside us had fallen to the floor and were groveling and uttering low moans.

"This is the boss," I said.

"We'd better kneel, just to show we're friendly," Rastell said. "Once we're accepted—no trouble."

"Quite right! If we are to teach him humility, we must be prepared to humble ourselves," Candida said. She looked at me severely. "Kneel, Sherry!" Thus, I believe, the kindly woman saved my face; I could obey her.

But as we were all going down, the boss above spat a piece of carrot which caught Rastell in the eye. He was up in an instant, forgetting discretion.

"You baboon!" he called, shaking his fist

It was immediately grasped. Before I could even leap up, the brute on the trapeze had swung Rastell right up, effortlessly, until for a moment their two faces were almost touching. There was a flash of canine teeth, we heard a cry, Rastell was tumbling unsupported to the ground. He sprawled. I saw his ear was bleeding. It had been torn by the boss's teeth.

The boss himself, snarling and spitting, landed lightly a few paces away, and was now advancing on Rastell, swinging his arms, leaping up and down, chattering. The children had all scattered back to their mothers, who huddled nervously together, say-ing nothing.

There was going to be a fight

Jumping up, I grabbed at one of the stilts lying by a prostrate guard. They were at once upon me. I swung the stick hard, striking them madly, but the gorilla hide protected them and they bore me down. I was flattened ignominiously, and the stilt twisted from my grip. They held me down, face pressed into the filthy ground, waiting like trained dogs for word from the master.

Their master was still circling Rastell. Rastell had picked himself up and was looking hopelessly around for a weapon. His ear was scattering blood. I saw that two old males had lumbered up from the back and held Candida, clumsily but not viciously. The females in the corner were whooping and leaping.

Then there was silence and the tableau held. The boss was about to spring, to throw himself, teeth and spurs, on Rastell, when the latter moved.

He bent down, almost into a crouch, touching the ground with his elbows, and smacked his lips. His body was presented sideways to the boss. The stance made him resemble an ape. The boss advanced and hesitated—we were all tense—and then jumped to the rear of Rastell. Momentarily, he seized him around the ribs and clouted him, and then he broke free. Rastell stood up.

All tension had disappeared. Candida and I were allowed to stand free. We brushed ourselves down; Rastell mopped his face and his ear. The children and the female ape-people began running and chat-tering again. As for the boss, he had lost interest in us. Whooping to the guards, he sprang onto his trapeze again. In a moment, we three human beings were led into the open again.

The stilt-walkers hustled us along to the end of the street and there, with gestures and calls, plainly said good-bye. I shook Rastell's hand. "You were quick-witted in there- You adopted ape-behavior and so probably saved us all from being killed."

"It was disgusting to see you kowtow to an animal," Candida said.

Laughing, Rastell said, "Aren't they our superiors in many ways? They have no interspecies fighting or killing, as men have. I merely observed their tribal customs."

"Our superiors, Mr. Rastell? Those godless beasts? No wonder they have not advanced from the ape if they have never found religion!"

"We can discuss that point at our leisure later, Mrs. Meacher," Rastell said coldly. Turning to me he added, "Now we've got a short walk."

A little herd of idlers had gathered and was running about us, whistling, calling, and mocking. They all dropped away as we set off from the village. I put my arm around Candida's shoulder to encourage her. The afternoon was growing very drab; rain threatened; and we were far from home. It was clear that we had passed some sort of inspection in the crude village and were now allowed to go free in this primitive world; clear, too, that Rastell knew what he was about; yet both Candida and I were reluctant to ask him questions.

As we walked westward, following a track leading beneath the rocky outcrop on which—in any sane matrix—sat Edinburgh Castle, I was thinking hard: Rastell was not to be trusted. The episode with that Mithras-lover, Mark Claud Gale, had warned me against alliances where unknown factors were involved.

Rastell's objectives were not mine, however he tried to make it look that way; and I clearly understood

that the time when our objectives were to be revealed as opposed was approaching. Rastell was taking us for no afternoon stroll. We were purposeful-ly going somewhere. And I could guess, at least in outline, the sort of place it would be.

I had no weapon. Rastell had a sidearm. He had not used it on the leader of the ape-people. So there was an arrangement of some sort with the ape-people. Rastell was familiar with this matrix.

No. I was guessing. No proof; it could merely be my fears prompting me. And if my fears were un-founded, then I needed to cooperate with this man. He could be the only man in the whole matrix ... but I doubted that.

As we walked, I watched him.

He was marching stolidly ahead, leading us toward the Water of Leith, which probably existed in this matrix as it did in his and mine. Candida, still ob-sessed with religious aspects, was talking volubly to him; Rastell hardly seemed to be listening.

"... all more terrible than anything I could imag-ine! You seem to understand their way of behaving— if we are to be here long, I also must try to understand them, to speak their language, so that I can bring the word of God to them. You will help, won't you, Mr. Rastell, as a man of God yourself?"

"They're better left as they are."

"How can you say that? How dare you say it? Isn't this entire matrix a proof of the power of God's love? They don't have it here—and they've stayed on the level of animals for a million years! We must bring Christ to them."

Rastell turned to her blank-faced and solid; no gleam there. "Think again, Mrs. Meacher! These peo-ple haven't developed as we have. We progressed from their man-ape stage, didn't we? We—our ances-tors—became hunters after the arboreal phase, and from hunters on to higher organizations. Where do you think God entered the arrangement, Mrs. Meacher?"

"God created the world."

He laughed, bitter and dragging, as if the sound hurt him.

"No, the reverse is true! Our world created God. In the arboreal stage, the monkey stage, where this ma-trix has stuck, there's no need for God."

"No need! You don't mean...."

"Monkeys have no need for God, I tell you. In-stead, each group has a boss, a leader, a tyrant, like the one we just met. He makes the law, dispenses rough justice, performs all the societal roles of your God. But when apes branch out into hunters and compete for food with clever carnivores like wolves, they have to reject such tyranny, because each mem-ber of the pack has to think for himself. So the leader's authority has to loosen. So he invents a shad-ow behind him, a supreme authority, in which all can believe. A moral law is intruded to keep order where before a fist ruled. A god is invented."

Idols! Graven images!"

"At first, yes. Then more sophisticated gods, gods omnipotent and invisible and angry—And finally—

God! Jehovah!"

We had scrambled down the banks of a little gorge. Before us flowed the narrow river called the Water of Leith. But in my time, it had been spanned by Telford's beautiful bridge. Now there was nothing there but a rotten little ferry—a flat-bottomed boat that could be dragged from one bank to the other by means of a wire secured across the stream. And I saw at once that even that humble arrangement was the work of men, not ape-people.

On the far bank, confirming all I suspected, stood a barbed-wire fence; there was a locked gate in it, directly opposite the ferry.

The rain began to fall. It was a moment of purest chill

Candida was saying, numbly, to Rastell, "You claim God is merely man's invention to back his own authority! You, a God-fearing man!"

"Keep quiet—we're almost there. Get into the boat. And you...."

Before he could finish, I dived sideways and grabbed at his gun. He struck my arm. I grasped him around the waist; he fought savagely and we sprawled to the ground.

I was on top of him, a knee in his stomach. With both hands, I grasped him around the throat, just as I had once before. His torn ear began to seep blood again. His thumbs came up, gouging at my eyes; his face was livid under my pressure. Candida pulled his gun free and rammed its muzzle against his ear.

"Lie still or I'll kill you!"

I knew she would. So did he! He lay flat, the fight knocked out of him.

Roughly, I rolled him over and started to untie the portal from his back.

"Sheridan," he said hoarsely, "I'm taking you to safety, I swear!"

"You swear, what do you swear by? By your honor? By God? You believe in nothing but power, Rastell—you've explained your philosophy to us. Anything is justified if it reinforces power. What's on the other side of the wire fence?"

He hesitated. I swung my arm back and caught him with open palm across the side of his face.

"What's the other side of the wire fence?"

"The boss-ape we met—we keep his enemies behind there—other tribes."

"Oh, he's your ally!" I said to Candida as I handed her the folded portal, "Rastell told me once there was no finer state than a slave state. This is a slave world—low-grade slaves, it's true, but amenable to discipline. Here you can rear slave armies to twitch through to your own matrix and assist in quelling rebellions—entirely expendable ape-armies. Right Rastell?"

I twisted his arm and enjoyed doing it

"They have to suffer for righteousness' sake," he said.

I took the gun from Candida and stood up. He started to rise and I told him to stay where he was in the mud. He propped himself on one elbow and lay glaring up at us—twice as dangerous as the boss-ape, I thought.

My sister-in-law was shivering. She clung to my free arm, looking away from Rastell. "Why did he want us here, in this awful place?"

"Someone has to train the ape-army. Am I right, Rastell? And you'd like revenge on me. You are no fugitive from your world. They need cynical minds like yours, don't they, to maintain their beastly status quo?"

He lay in the mud without speaking, the folds of his mouth bitter.

I said, "I was destined to guard the apes while your other exiles here trained them, wasn't I, Rastell? Something menial like that!"

With some of his old spirit, he said, "Only those we trust get easy jobs like guard duty. For the rest, there are plenty of dirty jobs. Someone has to swab out the ape-barracks."

He got up very slowly, watching me, his face gray, blood running over his cheeks and chin. He rubbed it away as if it were dirt.

"What are you going to do with him, Sherry?"

"I'll have to shoot him, won't I?"

"Yes, you'll have to shoot him."

I was nerving myself to do that. Unfortunately, I had to look into his square sullen face. How little I understood him! I had seen him in bravery and fear. Rastell fought to maintain the iniquitous systems of his own matrix (as we all instinctively did), yet he had muttered of the slaves here that they were better left as they were. He was both a hypocrite and a believer. No, I couldn't sum him up—and perhaps the easy confidence with which we gauge a man's character is never possible when wide cultural differences lie between us.

I couldn't sum him up. Equally, I couldn't kill him.

"Give me the key to the gate across the stream, Rastell."

He shook his head. "I haven't got a key."

"Hold the gun on him, Candida, while I search him!"

Rastell gestured defeatedly. Saying nothing, he unzipped a tunic pocket, pulled out a large key, and tossed it to me. I caught it, putting it in my own pocket without comment.

The rain ran down his face in spasmodic drops, and he made no attempt to brush them away. I gestured at him with the gun.

"Go back to the village," I said. "The boss-ape will look after you until someone comes to rescue you."

Rastell stared fixedly at us. He opened his mouth as if to speak. Then he made the sign of the cross and turned away, beginning to walk slowly back along the way we had come. Candida and I watched him go.

The rain was increasing now. Clutching the portal and the gun, we worked the ferry across the stream. I helped Candida up the slippery bank and we un-locked the gate. It led into a rank scrubby field; as we mounted the slope, the great enclosure beyond was revealed.

Despite the drizzle, there were ape-people moving in squads—marching, I suppose you would say. They were watched over by black-uniformed men: victims, no doubt, of Rastell's regime, who would be more than pleased to shelter us. Curtains of rain, sweeping over the tiny figures, part-revealed, part-concealed gaunt concrete buildings behind, stretching like barracks before a line of fir trees.

God knows, it was far from being a cheering prospect. Yet the sight of human misery and struggle—animal and spiritual always intermixed—seemed to reassure us in this strange place by its very familiarity. So Candida and I clutched each other's hands and trudged toward the gray buildings.

No doubt they would offer more than shelter. More than bread.

Over them, streaming water, a gigantic cross.

Faith in ferroconcrete.