

KEITH ROBERTS

The Lady Margaret

The year 1968 was one of the best years for SF novels in recent history, seeing the publication of memorable work such as Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, R. A. Lafferty's *Past Master*, John Brunner's *Stand on Zanzibar*, Joanna Russ's *Picnic on Paradise*, James Blish's *Black Easier* and Samuel R. Delany's *Nova*, among others. Even in this august company, however, Keith Robert's *Pavane* was a standout: a lyrically written and evocative book with a sweeping historical perspective across several generations, somberly beautiful, full of inventive detail, psychologically complex human characters, and a tragic vision of ordinary men and women doing the best they can against the immense, blank, grinding forces of history; it struck me with enormous force. It holds up just as well in retrospect, more than twenty years later—it is clearly one of the best books of the '60s, and one of the best alternate history novels ever written, rivaled only by books such as L. Sprague de Camp's *Lest Darkness Fall*, Ward Moore's *Bring the Jubilee*, and Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*. I have little doubt that it will turn out to be one of the enduring classics of the genre.

"The Lady Margaret" is probably the best of the stories that would later be melded into *Pavane*. In it, he takes us sideways in time to an alternate England where Queen Elizabeth was cut down by an assassin's bullet, and England itself fell to the Spanish Armada—a twentieth-century England where the deep shadow of the Church Militant stretches across a still-medieval land of forests and castles and little huddled towns; an England where travelers alone by night on the desolate, windswept expanses of the heath fear the sudden lantern gleam ahead in the darkness that signals an attack by the remorseless brigands known as *routiers*...

Pavane was the first work by Roberts to come to my attention, but he was already an important figure behind the scenes in Britain by the time of its American publication. Trained as an illustrator—he did work extensively as an illustrator and cover artist in the British SF world of the '60s—Roberts made his first sale to *Science Fantasy* in 1964. Later, he took over the editorship of *Science Fantasy*, by then called *SF Impulse*, as well as providing many of the magazine's striking covers; the *Pavane* stories originally appeared there, in 1966. Roberts's somewhat weak first novel, *The Furies*, appeared in 1966 as well.

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“Weihnachtsabend.” “The Grain Kings.” “Coranda,” “The Big Fans.” “I Lose Medea,” “The Lake of Tuonela.” “The God House,” but most of them were underappreciated, and some simply ignored, perhaps because of backlash against the British New Wave movement with which they were associated, although the majority of them are not experimental pieces, but work solidly in the central traditions of the field. “The God House” and a number of other linked stories were melded into *The Chalk Giants*, another marvelously evocative story-cycle, but that book was little noticed in America, perhaps because only a mutilated version of it was ever published in the United States.

In fact, in America at least, Roberts's reputation would fade throughout the late '70s and

'80s, until, by the beginning of the '90s, he was known only to a small group of insiders and *cognoscenti*. He remains somewhat better known in Britain, although, shamefully, most of his recent books have found no British trade editions either, appearing instead in small-press editions; most of them have had no American publication at all.

Roberts did attract some attention on both sides of the Atlantic, though, with his recent *Kiteworld*. He is still producing first-rate short fiction, and it's one of my foremost hopes for the '90s that this brilliant and severely

underappreciated author, one of the most powerful talents to enter the field in the last thirty years, will at last receive some of the attention and acclaim that he deserves.

Roberts's other books include *The Boat of Fate*, one of my favorite historical novels, *The Inner Wheel*, *Molly Zero*, and *Grainne*, and the collections *Machines and Men*, *The Grain Kings*, *The Passing of the Dragons*, *Ladies from Hell*, and *The Lordly Ones*.

* * * *

Durnovaria, England, 1968.

The appointed morning came, and they buried Eli Strange. The coffin, black and purple drapes twitched

aside, eased down into the grave; the white webbing slid through the hands of the bearers in nomine Patris, et Fili, et Spiritus Sancti...

The earth took back her own. And miles away Iron Margaret cried cold and wreathed with steam, drove her great sea-voice across the hills.

* * * *

At three in the afternoon the engine sheds were already gloomy with the coming night. Light, blue and vague, filtered through the long strips of the skylights, showing the roof ties stark like angular metal bones. Beneath, the locomotives waited brooding, hulks twice the height of a man, their canopies brushing the rafters. The light gleamed in

dull spindle shapes, here from the strappings of a boiler, there from the starred boss of a flywheel. The massive road wheels stood in pools of shadow.

Through the half-dark a man came walking. He moved steadily, whistling between his teeth, boot studs rasping on the worn brick floor. He wore the jeans and heavy reefer jacket of a haulier; the collar of the jacket was turned up against the cold. On his head was a woolen cap, once red, stained now with dirt and oil. The hair that showed beneath it was thickly black. A lamp swung in his hand, sending cusps of light flicking across the maroon livery of the engines.

He stopped by the last locomotive in line and reached up to hang the lamp

from her hornplate. He stood a moment gazing at the big shapes of the engines, chafing his hands unconsciously, sensing the faint ever-present stink of smoke and oil. Then he swung onto the footplate of the loco and opened the firebox doors. He crouched, working methodic-ally. The rake scraped against the fire bars; his breath jetted from him, rising in wisps over his shoulder. He laid the fire carefully, wadding paper, adding a crisscrossing of sticks, shoveling coal from the tender with rhythmic swings of his arms. Not too much fire to begin with, not under a cold boiler. Sudden heat meant sudden expansion and that meant cracking, leaks round the fire tube joints, endless trouble. For all their

power the locos had to be cosseted like children, coaxed and persuaded to give of their best.

The haulier laid the shovel aside and reached into the firebox mouth to sprinkle paraffin from a can. Then a soaked rag, a match... The lucifer flared brightly, sputtering. The oil caught with a faint *whoomph*. He closed the doors, opened the damper handles for draught. He straightened up, wiped his hands on cotton waste, then dropped from the footplate and began mechanically rubbing the brightwork of the engine. Over his head, long nameboards carried the style of the firm in swaggering, curlicued letters: *Strange and Sons of Dorset, Hauliers*. Lower, on the side of

the great boiler, was the name of the engine herself. The *Lady Margaret*. The hulk of rag paused when it reached the brass plate; then it polished it slowly, with loving care.

The *Margaret* hissed softly to herself, cracks of flame light showing round her ash pan. The shed foreman had filled her boiler and the belly and tender tanks that afternoon; her train was linked up across the yard, waiting by the warehouse loading bays. The haulier added more fuel to the fire, watched the pressure building slowly toward working head; lifted the heavy oak wheel scotches, stowed them in the steamer alongside the packaged water gauge glasses. The barrel of the loco was warming now,

giving out a faint heat that radiated toward the cab.

The driver looked above him broodingly at the skylights. Mid-December; and it seemed as always God was stinting the light itself so the days came and vanished like the blinking of a dim gray eye. The frost would come down hard as well, later on. It was freezing already; in the yard the puddles had crashed and tinkled under his boots, the skin of ice from the night before barely thinned. Bad weather for the hauliers, many of them had packed up already. This was the time for the wolves to leave their shelter, what wolves there were left. And the *routiers*... this was their season right

enough, ideal for quick raids and swoopings, rich hauls from the last road trains of the winter. The man shrugged under his coat. This would be the last run to the coast for a month or so at least, unless that old goat Serjeantson across the way tried a quick dash with his vaunted Fowler triple compound. In that case the *Margaret* would go out again; because Strange and Sons made the last run to the coast. Always had, always would...

Working head, a hundred and fifty pounds to the inch. The driver hooked the hand lamp over the push pole bracket on the front of the smokebox, climbed back to the footplate, checked gear for neutral, opened the cylinder cocks,

inched the regulator across. The *Lady Margaret* woke up, pistons thumping, crossheads sliding in their guides, exhaust beat-ing sudden thunder under the low roof. Steam whirled back and smoke, thick and cindery, catching at the throat. The driver grinned faintly and without humor. The starting drill was a part of him, burned on his mind. Gear check, cylinder cocks, regulator... He'd missed out just once, years back when he was a boy, opened up a four-horse Roby traction with her cocks shut, let the condensed water in front of the piston knock the end out of the bore. His heart had broken with the cracking iron; but old Eli had still taken a studded belt, and whipped him till he thought he was going

to die.

He closed the cocks, moved the reversing lever to forward full, and opened the regulator again. Old Dickon the yard foreman had materialized in the gloom of the shed; he hauled back on the heavy doors as the *Margaret*, jetting steam, rumbled into the open air, swung across the yard to where her train was parked.

Dickon, coatless despite the cold, snapped the linkage onto the *Lady Margaret's* drawbar, clicked the brake unions into place. Three waggons, and the water tender; a light enough haul this time. The foreman stood, hands on hips, in breeches and grubby, ruffed shirt, grizzled hair curling over his collar.

“Best let I come with ‘ee, Master Jesse...”

Jesse shook his head somberly, jaw set. They’d been through this before. His father had never believed in overstaffing; he’d worked his few men hard for the wages he paid, and got his money’s worth out of them. Though how long that would go on was anybody’s guess with the Guild of Mechanics stiffening its attitude all the time. Eli had stayed on the road himself up until a few days before his death; Jesse had steered for him not much more than a week before, taking the *Margaret* round the hill villages topside of Bridport to pick up serge and worsted from the combers there; part of the load that was now

outward bound for Poole. There'd been no sitting back in an office chair for old Strange, and his death had left the firm badly shorthanded; pointless taking on fresh drivers now, with the end of the season only days away. Jesse gripped Dickon's shoulder. "We can't spare thee, Dick. Run the yard, see my mother's all right. That's what he'd have wanted." He grimaced briefly. "If I can't take *Margaret* out by now, 'tis time I learned."

He walked back along the train pulling at the lashings of the tarps. The tender and numbers one and two were shipshape, all fast. No need to check the trail load; he'd packed it himself the day before, taken hours over it. He checked

it all the same, saw the tail lights and number plate lamp were burning before taking the cargo manifest from Dickon. He climbed back to the footplate, working his hands into the heavy driver's mitts with their leather-padded palms.

The foreman watched him stolidly. "Take care for the *routiers*. Norman bastards..."

Jesse grunted. "Let 'em take care for themselves. See to things, Dickon. Expect me tomorrow."

"God be with 'ee..."

Jesse eased the regulator forward, raised an arm as the stocky figure fell behind. The *Margaret* and her train clattered under the arch of the yard gate

and into the rutted streets of Durnovaria.

Jesse had a lot to occupy his mind as he steered his load into the town; for the moment, the *routiers* were the least of his worries. Now, with the first keen grief just starting to lose its edge, he was beginning to realize how much they'd all miss Eli. The firm was a heavy weight to have hung round his neck without warning; and it could be there were awkward times ahead. With the Church openly backing the clamor of the Guilds for shorter hours and higher pay it looked as if the haulage companies were going to have to tighten their belts again, though God knew profit margins were thin enough already. And there were rumors of more restrictions on the road

trains themselves; a maximum of six trailers it would be this time, and a water cart. Reason given had been the increasing congestion round the big towns. That, and the state of the roads; but what else could you expect, Jesse asked himself sourly, when half the tax levied in the country went to buy gold plate for its churches? Maybe though this was just the start of a new trade recession like the one engineered a couple of centuries back by Gisevius. The memory of that still rankled in the West at least. The economy of England was stable now, for the first time in years; stability meant wealth, gold reserves. And gold, stacked anywhere but in the half-legendary coffer of the

Vatican, meant danger...

Months back Eli, swearing blue fire, had set about getting round the new regulations. He'd had a dozen trailers modified to carry fifty gallons of water in a galvanized tank just abaft the drawbar. The tanks took up next to no space and left the rest of the bed for payload; but they'd be enough to satisfy the sheriffs dignity. Jesse could imagine the old devil cackling at his victory; only he hadn't lived to see it. His thoughts slid back to his father, as irrevocably as the coffin had slid into the earth. He remembered his last sight of him, the grey wax nose peeping above the drapes as the visitors, Eli's drivers among them, filed through the morning room of

the old house. Death hadn't softened Eli Strange; it had ravaged the face but left it strong, like the side of a quarried hill.

Queer how when you were driving you seemed to have more time to think. Even driving on your own when you had to watch the boiler gauge, steam head, fire...Jesse's hands felt the familiar thrilling in the wheel rim, the little stresses that on a long run would build and build till countering them brought burning aches to the shoulders and back. Only this was no long run; twenty, twenty-two miles, across to Wool then over the Great Heath to Poole. An easy trip for the *Lady Margaret*, with an easy load; thirty tons at the back of her, and flat ground most of the way. The loco

had only two gears; Jesse had started off in high, and that was where he meant to stay. The *Margaret's* nominal horsepower was ten, but that was on the old rating; one horsepower to be deemed equal often circular inches of piston area. Pulling against the brake the Burrell would clock seventy, eighty horse; enough to shift a rolling load of a hundred and thirty tons, old Eli had pulled a train that heavy once for a wager. And won...

Jesse checked the pressure gauge, eyes performing their work nearly automatically. Ten pounds under max. All right for a while; he could stoke on the move, he'd done it times enough before, but as yet there was no need. He

reached the first crossroads, glanced right and left and wound at the wheel, looking behind him to see each waggon of the train turning sweetly at the same spot. Good; Eli would have liked that turn. The trail load would pull across the road crown he knew, but that wasn't his concern. His lamps were burning, and any drivers who couldn't see the bulk of *Margaret* and her load deserved the smashing they would get. Forty-odd tons, rolling and thundering; bad luck on any butterfly cars that got too close.

Jesse had all the hauliers' ingrained contempt for internal combustion, though he'd followed the arguments for and against it keenly enough. Maybe one day petrol propulsion might amount to

something and there was that other system, what did they call it, *diesel*... But the hand of the Church would have to be lifted first. The Bull of 1910, *Petroleum Veto*, had limited the capacity of IC engines to 150 cc, and since then the hauliers had had no real competition. Petrol vehicles had been forced to fit gaudy sails to help tow themselves along; load hauling was a singularly bad joke.

Mother of God, but it was cold! Jesse shrugged himself deeper into his jacket. The *Lady Margaret* carried no spectacle plate; a lot of other steamers had installed them now, even one or two in the Strange fleet, but Eli had sworn not the *Margaret*, not on the *Margaret*...

She was a work of art, perfect in herself; as her makers had built her, so she would stay. Decking her out with gewgaws, the old man had been half sick at the thought. It would make her look like one of the railway engines Eli so despised. Jesse narrowed his eyes, forcing them to see against the searing bite of the wind. He glanced down at the tachometer. Road speed fifteen miles an hour, revs one fifty. One gloved hand pulled back on the reversing lever. Ten was the limit through towns, fixed by the laws of the realm; and Jesse had no intention of being run in for exceeding it. The firm of Strange had always kept well in with the JPs and Serjeants of police; it partially accounted for their

success.

Entering the long High Street, he cut his revs again. The *Margaret*, balked, made a frustrated thunder; the sound echoed back, clapping from the fronts of the gray stone buildings. Jesse felt through his boot soles the slackening pull on the drawbar and spun the brake wheel; a jack-knifed train was about the worst blot on a driver's record. Reflectors behind the tail lamp flames clicked upward, momentarily doubling their glare. The brakes bit; compensators pulled the trail load first, straightening the waggons. He eased back another notch on the reversing lever; steam admitted in front of the pistons checked *Margaret's* speed.

Ahead were the gas lamps of town centre, high on their standards; beyond, the walls and the East Gate.

The serjeant on duty saluted easily with his halberd, waving the Burrell forward. Jesse shoved at the lever, wound the brakes away from the wheels. Too much stress on the shoes and there could be a fire somewhere in the train; that would be bad, most of the load was inflammable this time.

He ran through the manifest in his mind. The *Margaret* was carrying bale on bale of serge; bulk wise it accounted for most of her cargo. English woollens were famous on the Continent; correspondingly, the serge combers were among the most powerful industrial

groups in the Southwest. Their manufactories and storing sheds dotted the villages for miles around; monopoly of the trade had helped keep old Eli out ahead of his rivals. Then there were dyed silks from Anthony Harcourt at Mells; Harcourt shifts were sought after as far abroad as Paris. And crate after crate of turned ware, products of the local bodgers, Erasmus Cox and Jed Roberts of Durnovaria, Jermiah Stringer out of Martinstown. Specie, under the county lieutenant's seal; the last of the season's levies, outward bound for Rome. And machine parts, high grade cheeses, all kinds of oddments. Clay pipes, horn buttons, ribbons and tape; even a shipment of cherrywood

Madonnas from that Newworld-financed firm over at Beaminster. What did they call themselves, *Calmers of the Soul, Inc...* ? Woolens and worsteds atop the water tender and in waggon number one, turned goods and the rest in number two. The trail load needed no consideration. That would look after itself.

The East Gate showed ahead, and the dark bulk of the wall. Jesse slowed in readiness. There was no need; the odd butterfly cars that were still braving the elements on this bitter night were already stopped, held back out of harm's way by the signals of the halberdiers. The *Margaret* hooted, left behind a cloud of steam that hung glowing against the evening sky. Passed through the

ramparts to the heath and hills beyond.

Jesse reached down to twirl the control of the injector valve. Water, preheated by its passage through an extension of the smokebox, swirled into the boiler. He allowed the engine to build up speed. Durnovaria vanished, lost in the gloom astern; the light was fading fast now. To right and left the land was featureless, dark; in front of him was the half-seen whirling of the crankshaft, the big thunder of the engine. The haulier grinned, still exhilarated by the physical act of driving. Flame light striking round the firebox doors showed the side, hard jaw, the deep-set eyes under brows that were level and thickly black. Just let old Serjeantson try and

sneak in a last trip. The *Margaret* would take his Fowler, uphill or down; and Eli would churn with glee in his fresh-made grave...

The *Lady Margaret*. A scene came unmasked into Jesse's mind. He saw himself as a boy, voice half broken. How long ago was that, eight seasons, ten?

The years had a way of piling themselves one atop the next, unnoticed and uncounted; that was how young men turned into old ones. He remembered the morning the *Margaret* first arrived in the yard. She'd come snorting and plunging through Durnovaria, fresh from Burrell's works in far-off Thetford, paintwork gleaming, whistle sounding, brasswork

a-twinkle in the sun; a compound locomotive of ten NHP, all her details specified from flywheel decoration to static discharge chains. Spud pan, belly pan, water lifts; Eli had got what he wanted all right, one of the finest steamers in the West. He'd fetched her himself, making the awkward journey across many counties to Norfolk; nobody else had been trusted to bring back the pride of the fleet. And she'd been his steamer ever since; if the old granite shell that had called itself Eli Strange ever loved anything on earth, it had been the huge Burrell.

Jesse had been there to meet her, and his kid brother Tim and the others; James and Micah, dead now—God rest

their souls—of the Plague that had taken them both that time in Bristol. He remembered how his father had swung off the footplate, looked up at the loco standing shaking like a live thing still and spewing steam. The firm's name had been painted there already, the letters glowing along the canopy edge, but as yet the Burrell had no name of her own. "What be 'ee g'wine call 'en?" his mother had shouted, over the noise of her idling; and Eli had rumpled his hair, pucked his red face. "Danged if I knows..." They had *Thunderer* already and *Apocalypse*, *Oberon* and *Ballard Down* and *Western Strength*; big-sounding names, right for the machines that carried them. "Danged if I *knows*,"

said old Eli, grinning; and Jesse's voice had spoken without his permission, faltering up in its adolescent yodel. "The *Lady Margaret*, sir... *Lady Margaret*.
..."

A bad thing that, speaking without being addressed. Eli had glared, shoved up his cap, scrubbed at his hair again and burst into a roar of laughter. "I *like* en...

bugger me if I *don't* like en..." And the *Lady Margaret* she had become, over the protests of his drivers, even over old Dickon's head. He claimed it "were downright luck" to call a loco after "some bloody 'oman..." Jesse remembered his ears burning, he couldn't tell whether with shame or

pride. He'd unwished the name a thousand times, but it had stuck. Eli liked it; and nobody crossed old Strange, not in the days of his strength.

So Eli was dead. There'd been no warning; just the coughing, the hands gripping the chair arms, the face that suddenly wasn't his father's face, staring. Quick dark spattering of blood, the lungs sighing and bubbling; and a clay-colored old man lying abed, one lamp burning, the priest in attendance, Jesse's mother watching empty-faced. Father Thomas had been cold, disapproving of the old sinner; the wind had souged round the house vicious with frost while the priest's lips absolved and mechanically blessed...

but that hadn't been death. A death was more than an ending; it was like pulling a thread from a richly patterned cloth. Eli had been a part of Jesse's life, as much part as his bedroom under the eaves of the old house. Death disrupted the processes of memory, jangled old chords that were maybe best left alone. It took so little imagination for Jesse to see his father still, the craggy face, weathered hands, haulier's greasy buckled cap pulled low over his eyes. The knotted muffler, ends anchored round the braces, the greatcoat, old thick working corduroys. It was here he missed him, in the clanking and the darkness, with the hot smell of oil, smoke blowing back from the tall stack

to burn his eyes. This was how he'd known it would be. Maybe this was what he'd wanted.

Time to feed the brute. Jesse took a quick look at the road stretching out straight in front of him. The steamer would hold her course, the worm steering couldn't kick back. He opened the firebox doors, grabbed the shovel. He stoked the fire quickly and efficiently, keeping it dished for maximum heat. Swung the doors shut, straightened up again. The steady thunder of the loco was part of him already, in his bloodstream. Heat struck up from the metal of the footplate, working through his boots; the warmth from the firebox blew back, breathed

against his face. Time later for the frost to reach him, nibbling at his bones.

Jesse had been born in the old house on the outskirts of Durnovaria soon after his father started up in business there with a couple of plowing engines, a thresher, and an Aveling and Porter tractor. The third of four brothers, he'd never seriously expected to own the fortunes of Strange and Sons. But God's ways were as inscrutable as the hills; two Strange boys had gone black-faced to Abraham's bosom, now Eli himself... Jesse thought back to long summers spent at home, summers when the engine sheds were boiling hot and reeking of smoke and oil. He'd spend his days there, watching the trains come in and

leave, helping unload on the warehouse steps, climbing over the endless stacks of crates and bales. There too were scents; richness of dried fruits in their boxes, apricots and figs and raisins; sweetness of fresh pine and deal, fragrance of cedarwood, thick headiness of twist tobacco cured in rum. Champagne and Oporto for the luxury trade, cognac, French lace; tangerines and pine-apples, rubber and saltpetre, jute and hemp...

Sometimes he'd cadge rides on the locos, down to Poole or Bourne Mouth, across to Bridport, Wey Mouth; or west down to Isca, Lindinis, He went to Londinium once, and northeast again to Camulodunum. The Burrells and

Claytons and Fodens ate miles; it was good to sit on the trail load of one of those old trains, the engine looking half a mile away, hooting and jetting steam. Jesse would pant on ahead to pay the toll keepers, stay behind to help them close the gates with their long white and red striped bars. He remembered the rumbling of the many wheels, the thick rising of dust from the rutted trackways. The dust lay on the verges and hedges, making the roads look like white scars crossing the land. Odd nights he'd spend away from home, squatting in some corner of a tavern bar while his father caroused. Sometimes Eli would turn morose, and cuff Jesse upstairs to bed; at others he'd get expansive and sit and

spin tall tales about when he himself was a boy, when the locos had shafts in front of their boilers and horses between them to steer. Jesse had been a brakeboy at eight, a steersman at ten for some of the shorter runs. It had been a wrench when he'd been sent away to school.

He wondered what had been in Eli's mind. "Get some bliddy eddycation"

was all the old man had said. "That's what counts, lad..." Jesse remembered how he'd felt; how he'd wandered in the orchards behind the house, seeing the cherry plums hanging thick on the old trees that were craggy and leaning, just right to climb. The apples, Bramleys and Lanes and Haley's Orange; Commodore pears hanging like rough-skinned bombs

against walls mellow with September sunlight. Always before, Jesse had helped bring in the crop; but not this year, not any more. His brothers had learned to write and read and figure in the little village school, and that was all; but Jesse had gone to Sherborne, and stayed on to college in the old university town. He'd worked hard at his languages and sciences, and done well; only there had been something wrong. It had taken him years to realize his hands were missing the touch of oiled steel, his nostrils needed the scent of steam. He'd packed up and come home and started work like any other haulier; and Eli had said not a word. No praise, no condemnation. Jesse shook his head.

Deep down he'd always known without any possibility of doubt just what he was going to do. At heart, he was a haulier; like Tim, like Dickon, like old Eli. That was all; and it would have to be enough.

The *Margaret* topped a rise and rumbled onto a down-slope. Jesse glanced at the long gauge glass by his knee and instinct more than vision made him open the injectors, valve water into the boiler. The loco had a long chassis; that meant caution descending hills. Too little water in her barrel and the forward tilt would uncover the firebox crown, melt the fusible plug there. All the steamers carried spares, but fitting one was a job to avoid. It meant drawing the fire, a crawl into a baking-hot firebox,

an eternity of wrestling overhead in darkness. Jesse had burned his quota of plugs in his time, like any other tyro; it had taught him to keep his firebox covered. Too high a level on the other hand meant water reaching the steam outlets, descending from the stack in a scalding cloud. He'd had that happen too.

He spun the valve and the hissing of the injectors stopped. The *Margaret* lumbered at the slope, increasing her speed. Jesse pulled back on the reversing lever, screwed the brakes on to check the train; heard the altered beat as the loco felt the rising gradient, and gave her back her steam. Light or dark, he knew every foot of the road; a good

driver had to.

A solitary gleam ahead of him told him he was nearing Wool. The *Margaret* shrieked a warning to the village, rumbled through between the shuttered cottages. A straight run now, across the heath to Poole. An hour to the town gates, say another half to get down to the quay. If the traffic holdups weren't too bad...Jesse chafed his hands, worked his shoulders inside his coat. The cold was getting to him now, he could feel it settling in his joints.

He looked out to either side of the road. It was full night, and the Great Heath was pitch black. Far off he saw or thought he saw the glimmer of a will-o'-the-wisp, haunting some stinking bog. A

chilling wind moaned in from the emptiness. Jesse listened to the steady pounding of the Burrell and as often before the image of a ship came to him. The *Lady Margaret*, a speck of light and warmth, forged through the waste like some vessel crossing a vast and inimical ocean.

This was the twentieth century, the age of reason; but the heath was still the home of superstitious fears. The haunt of wolves and witches, were-things and Fairies; and the *routiers*... Jesse curled his lip. "Norman bastards" Dickon had called them. It was as accurate a description as any. True, they claimed Norman descent; but in this Catholic England of more than a thousand years

after the Conquest, bloodlines of Norman, Saxon, and original Celt were hopelessly mixed. What distinctions existed were more or less arbitrary, reintroduced in accordance with the racial theories of Gisevius the Great a couple of centuries ago. Most people had at least a smattering of the five tongues of the land: the Norman French of the ruling classes, Latin of the Church, Modern English of commerce and trade, the outdated Middle English and Celtic of the churls. There were other languages of course: Gaelic, Cornish, and Welsh, all fostered by the Church, kept alive centuries after their use had worn thin. But it was good to chop a land piecemeal, set up barriers of

language as well as class. "Divide and rule" had long been the policy, unofficially at least, of Rome.

T h e *routiers* themselves were surrounded by a mass of legend. There had always been gangs of footpads in the Southwest, probably always would be; they smuggled, they stole, they looted the road trains. Usually, but not invariably, they stopped short at murder. Some years the hauliers suffered worse than others; Jesse could remember the *Lady Margaret* limping home one black night with her steersman dead from a crossbow quarrel, half her train ablaze and old Eli swearing death and destruction. Troops from as far off as Sorviodunum had combed the heath for

days, but it had been useless. The gang had dispersed; gone to their homes if Eli's theories had been correct, turned back into honest God-fearing citizens. There'd been nothing on the heath to find; the rumoured strongholds of the outlaws just didn't exist.

Jesse stoked again, shivering inside his coat. The *Margaret* carried no guns; you didn't fight the *routiers* if they came, not if you wanted to stay alive. At least not by conventional methods; Eli had had his own ideas on the matter though he hadn't lived long enough to see them carried out. Jesse set his mouth. If they came, they came; but all they'd get from the firm of Strange they'd be welcome to keep. The business hadn't been built on

softness; in this England, haulage wasn't a soft trade.

A mile or so ahead a brook, a tributary of the Frome, crossed the road. On this run the hauliers usually stopped there to replenish their tanks. There were no waterholes on the heath, the cost of making them would be prohibitive. Water standing in earth hollows would turn brackish and foul, unsafe for the boilers: the splashes would have to be concrete lined, and a job like that would set somebody back half a year's profits. Cement manufacture was controlled rigidly by Rome, its price prohibitive. The embargo was deliberate of course; the stuff was far too handy for the erection

of quick strong-points. Over the years there had been enough revolts in the country to teach caution even to the Popes.

Jesse, watching ahead, saw the sheen of water or ice. His hand went to the reversing lever and the train brakes. The *Margaret* stopped on the crown of a little bridge. Its parapets bore solemn warnings about “ponderous carriages” but few of the hauliers paid much attention to them after dark at least. He swung down and unstrapped the heavy armored hose from the side of the boiler, slung its end over the bridge. Ice broke with a clatter. The water lifts hissed noisily, steam pouring from their vents. A few minutes and the job was done.

The *Margaret* would have made Poole and beyond without trouble; but no haulier worth his salt ever felt truly secure with his tanks less than brimming full. Specially after dark, with the ever-present chance of attack. The steamer was ready now if needs be for a long, hard flight.

Jesse recoiled the hose and took the running lamps out of the tender. Four of them, one for each side of the boiler, two for the front axle. He hung them in place, turning the valves over the carbide, lifting the front glasses to sniff for acetylene. The lamps threw clear white fans of light ahead and to each side, making the frost crystals on the road surface sparkle. Jesse moved off

again. The cold was bitter; he guessed several degrees of frost already, and the worst of the night was still to come. This was the part of the journey where you started to think of the cold as a personal enemy. It caught at your throat, drove glassy claws into your back; it was a thing to be fought, continuously, with the body and brain. Cold could stun a man, freeze him on the footplate till his fire burned low and he lost steam and hadn't the sense to stoke. It had happened before; more than one haulier had lost his life like that out on the road. It would happen again.

T h e *Lady Margaret* bellowed steadily; the wind moaned in across the heath.

On the landward side, the houses and cottages of Poole huddled behind a massive rampart and ditch. Along the fortifications, cressets burned; their light was visible for miles across the waste ground. The *Margaret* raised the line of twinkling sparks, closed with them slowly. In sight of the West Gate Jesse spun the brake wheel and swore. Stretching out from the walls, dimly visible in torchlight, was a confusion of traffic; Burrows, Avelings, Claytons, Fowlers, each loco with a massive train. Officials scurried about; steam plumed into the air; the many engines made a muted thundering. The *Lady Margaret* slowed, jetting white clouds like exhaled breath, edged into the turmoil

alongside a ten horse Fowler liveried in the colors of the Merchant Adventurers.

Jesse was fifty yards from the gates, and the jam looked like taking an hour or better to sort out. The air was full of din; the noise of the engines; shouts from the steersmen and drivers, the bawling of town marshalls and traffic wardens. Bands of Pope's Angels wound between the massive wheels, chanting carols and holding up their cups for offerings. Jesse hailed a harassed-looking peeler. The Serjeant grounded his halberd, looked back at the *Lady Margaret's* load and grinned.

"Bishop Blaize's benison again, friend?"

Jesse grunted an affirmative;

alongside, the Fowler let fly by a deafening series of hoots.

“Belay that,” roared the policeman. “What’ve ye got up there, that needs so much hurry?”

The driver, a little sparrow of a man muffled in scarf and greatcoat, spat a cigarette butt overboard. “Shellfish for ‘Is ‘Oliness,” he quipped. “They’re burning Rome tonight...” The story of Pope Orlando dining on oysters while his mercenaries sacked Florence had already passed into legend.

“Any more of that,” shouted the Serjeant furiously, “and you’ll find the gates shut in your face. You’ll lie on the heath all night, and the *routiers* can have their pick of you. Now roll that pile of

junk, *roll* it I say...”

A gap had opened ahead; the Fowler thundered con-temptuously and moved into it. Jesse followed. An age of shunting and hooting and he was finally past the bottleneck, guiding his train down the long main street of Poole.

Strange and Sons maintained a bonded store on the quay, not far from the old customs house. The *Margaret* threaded her way to it, inching between piles of merchandise that had overflowed from loading bays. The docks were busy for so late in the season; Jesse passed a Scottish collier, a big German freighter, a Frenchman; a Newworlder, an ex-slaver by her raking lines, a handsome Swedish clipper still defiantly under

sail; and an old Dutch tramp, the *Groningen*, that he knew to be still equipped with the antiquated and curious mercury boilers. He swung his train eventually into the company warehouse, nearly an hour overdue.

The return load had already been made up; Jesse ditched the down-waggon thankfully, handed over the manifest to the firm's agent and backed onto the new haul. He saw again to the securing of the trail load, built steam, and headed out. The cold was deep inside him now, the windows of the waterfront pubs tempting with their promise of warmth, drink, and hot food; but tonight the *Margaret* wouldn't lie in Poole. It was nearly eight of the clock by

the time she reached the ramparts, and the press of traffic was gone. The gates were opened by a surly-faced Serjeant; Jesse guided his train through to the open road. The moon was high now, riding a clear sky, and the cold was intense.

A long drag southwest, across the top of Poole harbour to where the Wareham turn branched left from the road to Durnovaria. Jesse coaxed the waggons round it. He gave the *Margaret* her head, clocking twenty miles an hour on the open road. Then into Wareham, the awkward bend by the railway crossing; past the Black Bear with its monstrous carved sign and over the Frome where it ran into the sea, limning the northern boundary of Purbeck Island. After that

the heaths again; Stoborough, Slepe, Middlebere, Norden, empty and vast, full of droning wind. Finally a twinkle of light showed ahead, high off the road and to the right; the *Margaret* thundered into Corvesgeat, the ancient pass through the Purbeck hills. Foursquare in the cutting and commanding the road, the great castle of Corfe squatted atop its mound, windows blazing light like eyes. My Lord of Purbeck must be in residence then, receiving his guests for Christmas.

The steamer circled the high flanks of the *motte*, climbed to the village beyond. She crossed the square, wheels and engine reflecting a hollow clamour from the front of the Greyhound Inn, climbed

again through the long main street to where the heath was waiting once more, flat and desolate, haunted by wind and stars.

The Swanage road. Jesse, doped by the cold, fought the idea that the *Margaret* had been running through this void fuming her breath away into blackness like some spirit cursed and bound in a frozen hell. He would have welcomed any sign of life, even of the *routiers*; but there was nothing. Just the endless bitterness of the wind, the darkness stretching out each side of the road. He swung his mittened hands, stamping on the footplate, turning to see the tall shoulders of the load swaying against the night, way back the faint

reflection of the tail lamps. He'd long since given up cursing himself for an idiot. He should have laid up at Poole, moved out again with the dawn; he knew that well enough. But tonight he felt obscurely that he was not driving but being driven.

He valved water through the preheater, stoked, valved again. One day they'd swap these solid-burners for oil-fueled machines. The units had been available for years now; but oil firing was still a theory in limbo, awaiting the Papal verdict. Might be a decision next year, or the year after, or maybe not at all. The ways of Mother Church were devious, not to be questioned by the herd.

Old Eli would have fitted oil burners and damned the priests black to their faces, but his drivers and steersmen would have balked at the excommunication that would certainly have followed. Strange and Sons had bowed the knee there, not for the first time and not for the last. Jesse found himself thinking about his father again while the *Margaret* slogged upwards, back into the hills. It was odd; but *now* he felt he could talk to the old man. *Now* he could explain his hopes, his fears... Only now was too late; because Eli was dead and gone, six foot of Dorset muck on his chest. Was that the way of the world? Did people always feel they could talk, and talk, when it was just that

bit too late?

The big mason's yard outside Long Tun Matravers. The piles of stone thrust up, dimly visible in the light of the steamer's lamps, breaking at last the deadly emptiness of the heath. Jesse hooted a warning; the voice of the Burrell rushed across the housetops, mournful and huge. The place was deserted, like a town of the dead. On the right the King's Head showed dim lights; its sign creaked uneasily, rocking in the wind. The *Margaret's* wheels hit cobbles, slewed; Jesse spun the brakes on, snapping back the reversing lever to cut the power from the pistons. The frost had gathered thickly here, in places the road was like glass. At the crest of the

hill into Swanage he twisted the control that locked his differentials. The loco steadied and edged down, groping for her haven. The wind skirled, lifting a spray of snow crystals across her headlights.

The roofs of the little town seemed to cluster under their mantel of frost. Jesse hooted again, the sound enormous between the houses. A gang of kids appeared from some-where, ran yelling alongside the train. Ahead was a cross-roads, and the yellow lamps on the front of the George Hotel. Jesse aimed the loco for the yard entrance, edged forward. The smokestack brushed the passageway overhead. Here was where he needed a mate; the steam from the

Burrell, blowing back in the confined space, obscured his vision. The children had vanished; he gentled the reversing lever, easing in. The exhaust beats thrashed back from the walls, then the *Margaret* was clear, rumbling across the yard. The place had been enlarged years back to take the road trains; Jesse pulled across between a Garrett and a six-horse Clayton and Shuttleworth, neutralized the reversing lever and closed the regulator. The pounding stopped at last.

* * * *

The haulier rubbed his face and stretched. The shoulders of his coat were beaded with ice; he brushed at it and got down stiffly, shoved the scotches

under the engine's wheels, valved off her lamps. The hotel yard was deserted, the wind booming in the surrounding roofs; the boiler of the loco seethed gently. Jesse blew her excess steam, banked his fire and shut the dampers, stood on the front axle to set a bucket upside down atop the chimney. The *Margaret* would lie the night now safely. He stood back and looked at the bulk of her still radiating warmth, the faint glint of light from round the ash pan. He took his haversack from the cab and walked to the George to check in.

They showed him his room and left him. He used the loo, washed his face and hands, and left the hotel. A few yards down the street the windows of a

pub glowed crimson, light seeping through the drawn curtains. Its sign proclaimed it the Mermaid Inn. He trudged down the alley that ran alongside the bars. The back room was full of talk, the air thick with the fumes of tobacco. The Mermaid was a hauliers' pub; Jesse saw half a score of men he knew, Tom Skinner from Powerstock, Jeff Holroyd from Wey Mouth, two of old Serjeantson's boys. On the road, news travels fast; they crowded round him, talking against each other. He grunted answers, pushing his way to the bar. Yes, his father had had a sudden hemorrhage; no, he hadn't lived long after it. Five of the clock the next afternoon...

He pulled his coat open to reach his wallet, gave his order, took the pint and the double Scotch. A poker, thrust glowing into the tankard, mulled the ale; creamy froth spilled down the sides of the pot. The spirit burned Jesse's throat, made his eyes sting. He was fresh off the road; the others made room for him as he crouched knees apart in front of the fire. He swigged at the pint feeling heat invade his crotch, move into his stomach. Somehow his mind could still hear the pounding of the Burrell, the vibration of her wheel was still in his fingers. Time later for talk and questioning; first the warmth. A man had to be warm.

She managed somehow to cross and

stand behind him, spoke before he knew she was there. He stopped chafing his hands and straightened awkwardly, conscious now of his height and bulk.

“Hello, Jesse...”

Did she know? The thought always came. All those years back when he'd named the Burrell; she'd been a gawky stripling then, all legs and eyes, but she was the Lady he'd meant. She'd been the ghost that haunted him those hot, adolescent nights, trailing her scent among the scents of the garden flowers. He'd been on the steamer when Eli took that monstrous bet, sat and cried like a fool because when the Burrell breasted the last slope she wasn't winning fifty golden guineas for his father, she was

panting out the glory of Margaret. But Margaret wasn't a stripling now, not any more; the lamps put bright highlights on her brown hair, her eyes flickered at him, the mouth quirked...

He grunted at her. "Evenin', Margaret..."

She brought him his meal, set a corner table, sat with him awhile as he ate. That made his breath tighten in his throat; he had to force himself to remember it meant nothing. After all you don't have a father die every week of your life. She wore a chunky costume ring with a bright blue stone; she had a habit of turning it restlessly between her fingers as she talked. The fingers were thin with flat, polished nails, the hands wide

across the knuckles like the hands of a boy. He watched her hands now touching her hair, drumming at the table, stroking the ash of a cigarette sideways into a saucer. He could imagine them sweeping, dusting, cleaning, as well as doing the other things, the secret things women must do to themselves.

She asked him what he'd brought down. She always asked that. He said

"Lady" briefly, using the jargon of the hauliers. Wondering again if she ever watched the Burrell, if she knew she was the *Lady Margaret*; and whether it would matter to her if she did. Then she brought him another drink and said it was on the house, told him she must go back to the bar now and that she'd see

him again.

He watched her through the smoke, laughing with the men. She had an odd laugh, a kind of flat chortle that drew back the top lip and showed the teeth while the eyes watched and mocked. She was a good barmaid, was Margaret; her father was an old haulier, he'd run the house this twenty years. His wife had died a couple of seasons back, the other daughters had married and moved out but Margaret had stayed. She knew a soft touch when she saw one; leastways that was the talk among the hauliers. But that was crazy, running a pub wasn't an easy life. The long hours seven days a week, the polishing and scrubbing, mending and sewing and cooking... though they

did have a woman in the mornings for the rough work. Jesse knew that like he knew most other things about his Margaret. He knew her shoe size, and that her birthday was in May; he knew she was twenty-four inches round the waist and that she liked Chanel and had a dog called Joe. And he knew she'd sworn never to marry; she'd said running the Mermaid had taught her as much about men as she wanted to learn, five thousand down on the counter would buy her services but nothing else. She'd never met anybody that could raise the half of that, the ban was impossible. But maybe she hadn't said it at all; the village air swam with gossip, and amongst themselves the, hauliers yacked

like washerwomen.

Jesse pushed his plate away. Abruptly he felt the rising of a black self-contempt. Margaret was the reason for nearly everything; she was why he'd detoured miles out of his way, pulled his train to Swanage for a couple of boxes of *ficed* fish that wouldn't repay the hauling back. Well, he'd wanted to see her and he'd seen her. She'd talked to him, sat by him; she wouldn't come to him again. Now he could go. He remembered again the raw sides of a grave, the spattering of earth on Eli's coffin. That was what waited for him, for all God's so-called children; only he'd wait for his death alone. He wanted to drink now, wash out the image in a

warm brown haze of alcohol. But not here, not here... He headed for the door.

He collided with the stranger, growled an apology, walked on. He felt his arm caught; he turned back, stared into liquid brown eyes set in a straight-nosed, rakishly handsome face. "No." said the newcomer. "No, I don't believe it. By all tha's unholy, *Jesse Strange* ..."

For a moment the other's jaunty fringe of a beard baffled him; then Jesse started to grin in spite of himself. "Colin," he said slowly. "Col de la Haye..."

Col brought his other arm round to grip Jesse's biceps. "Well, hell," he said.

"Jesse, you're lookin' well. This calls

fr a drink, ol' boy. What you bin doin' with yourself? Hell, you're lookin' well..."

They leaned in a corner of the bar, full pints in front of them. "God damn, Jesse, that's lousy luck. Los' your ol' man, eh? Tha's rotten..." He lifted his tankard. "To you, ol' Jesse. Happier days..."

At college in Sherborne Jesse and Col had been fast friends. It had been the attraction of opposites; Jesse slow-talking, studious, and quiet, de la Haye the rake, the man-about-town. Col was the son of a west country businessman, a feminist and rogue at large; his tutors had always sworn that like the Fielding character he'd been born to be hanged. After college Jesse had lost touch with

him. He'd heard vaguely Col had given up the family business; importing and warehousing just hadn't been fast enough for him. He'd apparently spent a time as a strolling *jongleur*, working on a book of ballads that had never got written, had six months on the boards in Londinium before being invalided home the victim of a brawl in a brothel. "A'd show you the scar," said Col, grinning hideously, "but it's a bit bloody awkward in mixed comp'ny, ol' boy..." He'd later become, of all things, a haulier for a firm in Isca. That hadn't lasted long; halfway through his first week he'd howled into Bristol with an eight-horse Clayton and Shuttleworth, unreeled his hose and drained the corporation horse trough in

the town center before the peelers ran him in. The Clayton hadn't quite exploded but it had been a near go. He'd tried again, up in Aquae Sulis where he wasn't so well known; that time he lasted six months before a broken gauge glass stripped most of the skin from his ankles. De la Haye had moved on, seeking as he put it "less lethal employment." Jesse chuckled and shook his head. "So what be 'ee doin' now?"

The insolent eyes laughed back at him. "A' trade," said Col breezily. "A' take what comes; a li'l there... Times are hard, we must all live how we can. Drink up, ol' Jesse, the next one's mine..."

They chewed over old times while

Margaret served up pints and took the money, raising her eyebrows at Col. The night de la Haye, pot-valiant, had sworn to strip his professor's cherished walnut tree... "A' remember that like it was yes'day," said Col happily. "Lovely ol' moon there was, bright as day..." Jesse had held the ladder while Col climbed; but before he reached the branches the tree was shaken as if by a hurricane. "Nuts comin' down like bloody hailstones,"

chortled Col. "Y' remember, Jesse, y'must remember... An' there was that... that bloody ol' rogue of a peeler Toby Warrilow sittin' up there with his big ol' boots stuck out, shakin' the hell out of that bloody tree..." For weeks

after that, even de la Haye had been able to do nothing wrong in the eyes of the law; and a whole dormitory had gorged themselves on walnuts for nearly a month.

There'd been the business of the two nuns stolen from Sherborne Convent; they'd tried to pin that on de la Haye and hadn't quite managed it, but it had been an open secret who was responsible. Girls in Holy Orders had been removed odd times before, but only Col would have taken, two at once. And the affair of the Poet and Peasant. The landlord of that inn, thanks to some personal quirk, kept a large ape chained in the stables; Col, evicted after a singularly rowdy night, had managed to slit the creature's

collar. The Godforsaken animal caused troubles and panics for a month; men went armed, women stayed indoors. The thing had finally been shot by a militiaman who caught it in his room drinking a bowl of soup.

“So what you goin’ to do now?” asked de la Haye, swigging back his sixth or seventh beer. “Is your firm now, no?”

“Aye.” Jesse brooded, hands clasped, chin touching his knuckles. “Goin’ to run it, I guess...”

Col draped an arm round his shoulders. “You be okay,” he said. “You be okay pal, why so sad? Hey, tell you what. You get a li’l girl now, you be all right then. Tha’s what you need, ol’

Jesse; a' know the signs." He punched his friend in the ribs and roared with laughter. "Keep you warm nights better'n a stack of extra blankets. An' stop you getting fat, no?"

Jesse looked faintly startled. "Dunno 'bout *that*. . ."

"Ah, hell," said de la Haye. "Tha's the thing though. Ah, there's nothin' like it. *Mmmmyowwhh*... ." He wagged his hips, shut his eyes, drew shapes with his hands, contrived to look rapturous and lascivious at the same time. "Is no trouble now, o'l Jesse," he said, "You loaded now, you know that? Hell, man, you're *eligible*... They come runnin' when they hear, you have to fight 'em off with a... a pushpole couplin', no?" He

dissolved again in merriment.

Eleven of the clock came round far too quickly. Jesse struggled into his coat, followed Col up the alley beside the pub. It was only when the cold air hit him he realized how stoned he was. He stumbled against de la Haye, then ran into the wall. They reeled along the street laughing, parted company finally at the George. Col, roaring out promises, vanished into the night.

Jesse leaned against the *Margaret's* rear wheel, head laid back on its struts, and felt the beer fume in his brain. When he closed his eyes a slow movement began; the ground seemed to tilt forward and back under his feet. Man, but that last hour had been good. It had been

college all over again; he chuckled helplessly, wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. De la Haye was a no-good bastard all right but a nice guy, nice guy...Jesse opened his eyes blearily, looked up at the road train. Then he moved carefully, hand over hand along the engine, to test her boiler temperature with his palm. He hauled himself to the footplate, opened the firebox doors, spread coal, checked the dampers and water gauge. Everything secure. He tacked across the yard, feeling the odd snow crystals sting his face.

He fiddled with his key in the lock, swung the door open. His room was black and icily cold. He lit the single

lantern, left its glass ajar. The candle flame shivered in a draught. He dropped across the bed heavily, lay watching the one point of yellow light sway forward and back. Best get some sleep, make an early start tomorrow... His haversack lay where he'd slung it on the chair but he lacked the strength of will to unpack it now. He shut his eyes.

Almost instantly the images began to swirl. Somewhere in his head the Burrell was pounding; he flexed his hands, feeling the wheel rim thrill between them. That was how the locos got you, after a while; throbbing and throbbing hour on hour till the noise became a part of you, got in the blood and brain so you couldn't live without it.

Up at dawn, out on the road, driving till you couldn't stop; Londinium, Aquae Sulis, Isca; stone from the Purbeck quarries, coal from Kimmeridge, wool and grain and worsted, flour and wine, candlesticks, Madonnas, shovels, butter scoops, powder and shot, gold, lead, tin; out on contract to the Army, the Church... Cylinder cocks, dampers, regulator, reversing lever; the high iron shaking of the footplate...

He moved restlessly, muttering. The colors in his brain grew sharper. Maroon and gold of livery, red saliva on his father's chin, flowers bright against fresh earth; steam and lamplight, flames, the hard sky clamped against the hills.

His mind toyed with memories of Col,

hearing sentences, hearing him laugh; the little intake of breath, squeaky and distinctive, then the sharp machine gun barking while he screwed his eyes shut and hunched his shoulders, pounded with his fist on the counter. Col had promised to look him up in Durnovaria, reeled away shouting he wouldn't forget. But he would forget; he'd lose himself, get involved with some woman, forget the whole business, forget the meeting. Because Col wasn't like Jesse. No planning and waiting for de la Haye, no careful working out of odds; he lived for the moment, vividly. He would never change.

The locos thundered, cranks whirling, crossheads dipping, brass gleaming and

tinkling in the wind.

Jesse half sat up, shaking his head. The lamp burned steady now, its flame thin and tall, just vibrating slightly at the tip. The wind boomed, carrying with it the striking of a church clock. He listened, counting. Twelve strokes. He frowned. He'd slept, and dreamed; he'd thought it was nearly dawn. But the long, hard night had barely begun. He lay back with a grunt, feeling drunk but queerly wide awake. He couldn't take his beer any more; he'd had the horrors. Maybe there were more to come.

He started revolving idly the things de la Haye had said. The crack about getting a woman. That was crazy, typical of Col. No trouble maybe for him, but

for Jesse there had only ever been one little girl. And she was out of reach.

His mind, spinning, seemed to check and stop quite still. Now, he told himself irritably, forget it. You've got troubles enough, let it go... but a part of him stubbornly refused to obey. It turned the pages of mental ledgers, added, subtracted, thrust the totals insistently into his consciousness. He swore, damning de la Haye. The idea, once implanted, wouldn't leave him. It would haunt him now for weeks, maybe years.

He gave himself up, luxuriously, to dreaming. She knew all about him, that was certain; women knew such things unfailingly. He'd given himself away a hundred times, a thousand; little things, a

look, a gesture, a word, were all it needed. He'd kissed her once, years back. Only the one time; that was maybe why it had stayed so sharp and bright in his mind, why he could still relive it. It had been a nearly accidental thing; a New Year's Eve, the pub bright and noisy, a score or more of locals seeing the new season in. The church clock striking, the same clock that marked the hours now, doors in the village street popping undone, folk eating mince pies and drinking wine, shouting to each other across the dark, kissing; and she'd put down the tray she was holding, watching him. "Let's not be left out, Jesse," she said. "Us too..."

He remembered the sudden thumping

of his heart, like the fussing of a loco when her driver gives her steam. She'd turned her face up to him, he'd seen the lips parting; then she was pushing hard, using her tongue, making a little noise deep in her throat. He wondered if she made the sound every time automatically, like a cat purring when you rubbed its fur. And somehow too she'd guided his hand to her breast; it lay cupped there, hot under her dress, burning his palm. He'd tightened his arm across her back then, pulling her onto her toes till she wriggled away gasping. "*Whoosh*" she said. "Well done, Jesse. *Ouch* . . . well done..." Laughing at him again, patting her hair; and all past dreams and future visions had met in one

melting point of Time.

He remembered how he'd stoked the loco all the long haul back, tireless, while the wind sang and her wheels crashed through a glowing landscape of jewels. The images were back now; he saw Margaret at a thousand sweet moments, patting, touching, undressing, laughing. And he remembered, suddenly, a hauliers' wedding; the ill-fated marriage of his brother Micah to a girl from Sturminster Newton. The engines burnished to their canopies, beribboned and flag draped, each separate plank of their flatbed trailers gleaming white and scoured; drifts of confetti like bright-coloured snow, the priest standing laughing with his glass of

wine, old Eli, hair plastered miraculously flat, incongruous white collar clamped round his neck, beaming and red-faced, waving from the *Margaret's* footplate a quart of beer. Then, equally abruptly, the scene was gone; and Eli, in his Sunday suit, with his pewter mug and his polished hair, was whirled away into a dark space of wind.

“Father...!”

Jesse sat up, panting. The little room showed dim, shadows flicking as the candle flame guttered. Outside, the clock chimed for twelve-thirty. He stayed still, squatting on the edge of the bed with his head in his hands. No weddings for him, no gayness. Tomorrow he must go back

to a dark and still mourning house; to his father's unsolved worries and the family business and the same ancient, dreary round...

In the darkness, the image *of* Margaret danced like a solitary spark.

He was horrified at what his body was doing. His feet found the flight of wooden stairs, stumbled down them. He felt the cold air in the yard bite at his face. He tried to reason with himself but it seemed his legs would no longer obey him. He felt a sudden gladness, a lightening. You didn't stand the pain of an aching tooth forever; you took yourself to the barber, changed the nagging for a worse quick agony and then for blessed peace. He'd stood this

long enough; now it too was to be finished. Instantly, with no more waiting. He told himself ten years of hoping and dreaming, of wanting dumbly like an animal, that has to count. He asked himself, what had he expected her to do? She wouldn't come running to him pleading, throw herself across his feet, women weren't made like that, she had her dignity too... He tried to remember when the gulf between him and Margaret had been fixed. He told himself, never; by no token, no word... He'd never given her a chance, what if she'd been waiting too all these years? Just waiting to be *asked*. ... It had to be true. He knew, glowingly, it was true. As he tacked along the street, he started to sing.

The watchman loomed from a doorway, a darker shadow, gripping a halberd short.

“You all right, sir?”

The voice, penetrating as if from a distance, brought Jesse up short. He gulped, nodded, grinned. “Yeah. Yeah, sure...” He jerked a thumb behind him.

“Brought a... train down. Strange, Durnovaria...”

The man stood back. His attitude said plainly enough “One o’ they beggars...” He said gruffly, “Best get along then, sir, don’t want to have to run ‘ee in. ‘Tis well past twelve o’ the clock, y’know...”

“On m’way, officer,” said Jesse. “On m’way...” A dozen steps along the street

he turned back. “Officer... you m-married?”

The voice was uncompromising. “Get along now, sir...” Its owner vanished in blackness.

The little town, asleep. Frost glinting on the rooftops, puddles in the road ruts frozen to iron, houses shuttered blind. Somewhere an owl called; or was it the noise of a far-off engine, out there somewhere on the road... The Mermaid was silent, no lights showing. Jesse hammered at the door. Nothing. He knocked louder. A light flickered on across the street. He started to sob for breath. He’d done it all wrong, she wouldn’t open. They’d call the watch instead... But she’d know, she’d know

who was knocking, women always knew. He beat at the wood, terrified. “*Margaret ...*”

A shifting glint of yellow; then the door opened with a suddenness that sent him sprawling. He straightened up still breathing hard, trying to focus his eyes. She was standing holding a wrap across her throat, hair tousled. She held a lamp high; then, “You... !” She shut the door with a thump, snatched the bolt across and turned to face him. She said in a low, furious voice, “What the devil do you think you’re doing?”

He backed up. “I...” he said, “I...” He saw her face change. “Jesse,” she said,

“what’s wrong? Are you hurt, what

happened?”

“I... sorry,” he said. “Had to see you, Margaret. Couldn’t leave it no more...”

“Hush,” she said. Hissed. “You’ll wake my father, if you haven’t done it already. *What are you talking about?*”

He leaned on the wall, trying to stop the spinning in his head. “Five thousand,” he said thickly. “It’s... nothing, Margaret. Not any more. Margaret, I’m... rich, God help me. It don’t matter no more...”

“*What?*”

“On the roads,” he said desperately. “The... hauliers’ talk. They said you wanted five thousand. Margaret, I can do ten...”

A dawning comprehension. And for

God's sake, she was starting to laugh.

"Jesse Strange," she said, shaking her head. "What are you trying to say?"

And it was out, at last. "I love you, Margaret," he said simply. "Reckon I always have. And I... want you to be my wife."

She stopped smiling then, stood quite still and let her eyes close as if suddenly she was very tired. Then she reached forward quietly and took his hand.

"Come on," she said. "Just for a little while. Come and sit down."

In the back bar the firelight was dying. She sat by the hearth curled like a cat, watching him, her eyes big in the dimness; and Jesse talked. He told her everything he'd never imagined himself

speaking. How he'd wanted her, and hoped, and known it was no use; how he'd waited so many years he'd nearly forgotten a time when she hadn't filled his mind. She stayed still, holding his fingers, stroking the back of his hand with her thumb, thinking and brooding. He told her how she'd be mistress of the house and have the gardens, the orchards of cherry plums, the rose terraces, the servants, her drawing account in the bank; how she'd have nothing to do any more ever but be Margaret Strange, his wife.

The silence lengthened when he'd finished, till the ticking of the big bar clock sounded loud. She stirred her foot in the warmth of the ashes, wriggling her

toes; he gripped her instep softly, spanning it with finger and thumb. "I do love you, Margaret," he said. "I truly do..."

She still stayed quiet, staring at nothing visible, eyes opaque. She'd let the shawl fall off her shoulders; he could see her breasts, the nipples pushing against the flimsiness of the nightdress. She frowned, pursed her mouth, looked back at him. "Jesse," she said, "when I've finished talking, will you do something for me?

Will you promise?"

Quite suddenly, he was no longer drunk. The whirling and the warmth faded, leaving him shivering. Somewhere he was sure the loco hooted

again. “Yes, Margaret,” he said. “If that’s what you want.”

She came and sat by him. “Move up,” she whispered. “You’re taking all the room.” She saw the shivering; she put her hand inside his jacket, rubbed softly.

“Stop it,” she said. “Don’t do that, Jesse. Please...”

The spasm passed; she pulled her arm back, flicked at the shawl, gathered her dress round her knees. “When I’ve said what I’m going to, will you promise to go away? Very quietly, and not... make trouble for me? Please, Jesse. I did let you in...”

“That’s all right,” he said. “Don’t worry, Margaret, that’s all right.” His voice, talking, sounded like the voice of

a stranger. He didn't want to hear what she had to say; but listening to it meant he could stay close just a little longer. He felt suddenly he knew what it would be like to be given a cigarette just before you were hanged; how every puff would mean another second's life.

She twined her fingers together, looked down at the carpet. "I... want to get this just right," she said. "I want to... say it properly, Jesse, because I don't want to hurt you. I... like you too much for that.

"I... knew about it of course, I've known all the time. That was why I let you in. Because I... like you very much, Jesse, and didn't want to hurt. And now you see I've... trusted you, so you

mustn't let me down. I can't marry you, Jesse, because I don't love you. I never will. Can you understand that? It's terribly hard knowing... well, how you felt and all that and still having to say it to you but I've got to because it just wouldn't work. I... knew this was going to happen sometime, I used to lie awake at night thinking about it, thinking all about you, honestly I did, but it wasn't any good. It just... wouldn't work, that's all. So... no. I'm terribly sorry but... no."

How can a man balance his life on a dream, how can he be such a fool?

How can he live, when the dream gets knocked apart... ?

She saw his face alter and reached for

his hand again. “Jesse, *please* ... I...

think you’ve been terribly sweet waiting all this time and I... know about the money, I know why you said that, I know you just wanted to give me a... good life. It was terribly sweet of you to think like that about me and I... know you’d do it. But it just wouldn’t work... Oh God, isn’t this awful...”

You try to wake from what you know is a dream, and you can’t. Because you’re awake already, this is the dream they call life. You move in the dream and talk, even when something inside you wants to twist and die.

He rubbed her knee, feeling the firm smoothness. “Margaret,” he said. “I don’t want you to rush into anything.

Look, in a couple of months I shall be comin’

back through...”

She bit her lip. “I knew you were... going to say that as well. But... no, Jesse. It isn’t any use thinking about it, I’ve tried to and it wouldn’t work. I don’t want to... have to go through this again and hurt you all over another time. Please don’t ask me again. Ever.”

He thought dully, he couldn’t buy her. Couldn’t win her, and couldn’t buy. Because he wasn’t man enough, and that was the simple truth. Just not quite what she wanted. That was what he’d known all along, deep down, but he’d never faced it; he’d kissed his pillows nights, and whispered love for Margaret,

because he hadn't dared bring the truth into the light. And now he'd got the rest of time to try and forget... this.

She was still watching him. She said, "Please under-stand..."

And he felt better. God preserve him, some weight seemed to shift suddenly and let him talk. "Margaret," he said, "this sounds damn stupid, don't know how to say it..."

"Try..."

He said, "I don't want to... hold you down. It's... selfish, like somehow having a... bird in a cage, owning it... Only I didn't think on it that way before. Reckon I... really love you because I don't want that to happen to you. I wouldn't do anything to hurt. Don't you

worry, Margaret, it'll be all right. It'll be all right now. Reckon I'll just... well, get out o' your way like..."

She put a hand to her head. "God this is awful, I knew it would happen..."

Jesse don't just... well, vanish. You know, go off an'... never come back. You see I...

like you so very much, as a friend, I should feel terrible if you did that. Can't things be like they... were before, I mean can't you just sort of... come in and see me, like you used to? Don't go right away, please..."

Even that, he thought. God, I'll do even that.

She stood up. "And now go. Please..."

He nodded dumbly. "It'll be all right..."

"Jesse," she said. "I don't want to... get in any deeper. But—" She kissed him, quickly. There was no feeling there this time. No fire. He stood until she let him go; then he walked quickly to the door.

He heard, dimly, his boots ringing on the street. Some-where a long way off from him was a vague sighing, a susurrating; could have been the blood in his ears, could have been the sea. The house doorways and the dark-socketed windows seemed to lurch toward him of their own accord, fall away behind. He felt as a ghost might feel grappling with the concept of death, trying to assimilate

an idea too big for its consciousness. There was no Margaret now, not any more. No Margaret. Now he must leave the grown-up world where people married and loved and mated and mattered to each other, go back for all time to his child's universe of oil and steel. And the days would come, and the days would go, till on one of them he would die.

He crossed the road outside the George; then he was walking under the yard entrance, climbing the stairs, opening again the door of his room. Putting out the light, smelling Goody Thompson's fresh-sour sheets.

The bed felt cold as a tomb.

* * * *

The fishwives woke him, hawking their wares through the streets. Somewhere there was a clanking of milk churns; voices crisped in the cold air of the yard. He lay still, face down, and there was an empty time before the cold new fall of grief. He remembered he was dead; he got up and dressed, not feeling the icy air on his body. He washed, shaved the blue-chinned face of a stranger, went out to the Burrell. Her livery glowed in weak sunlight, topped by a thin bright icing of snow. He opened her firebox, raked the embers of the fire and fed it. He felt no desire to eat; he went down to the quay instead, haggled absentmindedly for the fish he was going to buy, arranged for its

delivery to the George. He saw the boxes stowed in time for late service at the church, stayed on for confession. He didn't go near the Mermaid; he wanted nothing now but to leave, get back on the road. He checked the *Lady Margaret* again, polished her nameplates, hubs, flywheel boss. Then he remembered seeing something in a shop window, something he'd intended to buy; a little tableau, the Virgin, Joseph, the Shepherds kneeling, the Christ-child in the manger. He knocked up the storekeeper, bought it and had it packed; his mother set great store by such things, and it would look well on the sideboard over Christmas.

By then it was lunchtime. He made

himself eat, swallow-ing food that tasted like string. He nearly paid his bill before he remembered. Now, it went on account; the account of Strange and Sons of Dorset. After the meal he went to one of the bars of the George, drank to try and wash the sour taste from his mouth. Subconsciously, he found himself waiting; for footsteps, a remembered voice, some message from Margaret to tell him not to go, she'd changed her mind. It was a bad state of mind to get into but he couldn't help himself. No message came.

It was nearly three of the clock before he walked out to the Burrell and built steam. He uncoupled the *Margaret* and turned her, shackled the load to the push

pole lug and backed it into the; road. A difficult feat but he did it without thinking. He disconnected the loco, brought her round again, hooked on, shoved the reversing lever forward and inched open on the regulator. The rumbling of the wheels started at last. He knew once clear of Purbeck he wouldn't come back. Couldn't, despite his promise. He'd send Tim or one of the others; the thing he had inside him wouldn't stay dead, if he saw her again it would have to be killed all over. And once was more than enough.

He had to pass the pub. The chimney smoked but there was no other sign of life. The train crashed behind him, thunderously obedient. Fifty yards on he

used the whistle, over and again, waking *Margaret's* huge iron voice, filling the street with steam. Childish, but he couldn't stop himself. Then he was clear. Swanage dropping away behind as he climbed toward the heath. He built up speed. He was late; in that other world he seemed to have left so long ago, a man called Dickon would be worrying.

Way off on the left a semaphore stood stark against the sky. He hooted to it, the two pips followed by the long call that all the hauliers used. For a moment the thing stayed dead; then he saw the arms flip an acknowledgement. Out there he knew Zeiss glasses would be trained on the Burrell. The Guildsmen had

answered; soon a message would be streaking north along the little local towers. *The Lady Margaret, locomotive, Strange and Sons, Durnovaria; out of Swanage routed for Corvesgat, fifteen thirty hours. All well...*

Night came quickly; night and the burning frost. Jesse swung west well before Wareham, cutting straight across the heath. The Burrell thundered steadily, gripping the road with her seven-foot drive wheels, leaving thin wraiths of steam behind her in the dark. He stopped once, to fill his tanks and light the lamps, then pushed on again into the heathland. A light mist or frost smoke was forming now; it clung to the hollows of the rough ground, glowing oddly in

the light from the side lamps. The wind souged and threatened. North of the Purbecks, off the narrow coastal strip, the winter could strike quick and hard; come morning the heath could be impassable, the trackways lost under two feet or more of snow.

An hour out from Swanage, and the *Margaret* still singing her tireless song of power. Jesse thought, blearily, that she at least kept faith. The semaphores had lost her now in the dark; there would be no more messages till she made her base. He could imagine old Dickon standing at the yard gate under the flaring cressets, worried, cocking his head to catch the beating of an exhaust miles away. The loco passed through Wool.

Soon be home, now; home, to whatever comfort remained...

The boarder took him nearly by surprise. The train had slowed near the crest of a rise when the man ran alongside, lunged for the footplate step. Jesse heard the scrape of a shoe on the road; some sixth sense warned him of movement in the darkness. The shovel was up, swinging for the stranger's head, before it was checked by an agonized yelp. "Hey ol' boy, don' you know your friends?"

Jesse, half off balance, grunted and grabbed at the steering. "*Col...* What the hell are you doin' here?"

De la Haye, still breathing hard, grinned at him in the reflection of the

sidelights. “Jus’ a fellow traveler, my friend. Happy to see you come along there, I tell you. Had a li’l bit of trouble, thought a’d have to spend the night on the bloody heath...”

“What trouble?”

“Oh, I was ridin’ out to a place a’ know,” said de la Haye. “Place out by Culliford, li’l farm. Christmas with friends. Nice daughters. Hey. Jesse, you know?”

He punched Jesse’s arm, started to laugh. Jesse set his mouth. “What happened to your horse?”

“Bloody thing foundered, broke its leg.”

“Where?”

“On the road back there,” said de la

Haye carelessly. "A' cut its throat an' rolled it in a ditch. Din' want the damn *routiers* spottin' it, gettin' on my tail..." He blew his hands, held them out to the firebox, shivered dramatically inside his sheepskin coat. "Damn cold, Jesse, cold as a bitch... How far you go?"

"Home. Durnovaria."

De la Haye peered at him. "Hey, you don' sound good. You sick, ol' Jesse?"

"No."

Col shook his arm insistently. "Whassamatter, ol' pal? Anythin' a friend can do to help?"

Jesse ignored him, eyes searching the road ahead. De la Haye bellowed suddenly with laughter. "Was the beer.

The beer, no? Ol'Jesse, your stomach has shrunk!" He held up a clenched fist. "Like the stomach of a li'l baby, no? Not the old Jesse any more; ah, life is hell..."

Jesse glanced down at the gauge, turned the belly tank cocks, heard water splash on the road, touched the injector controls, saw the burst of steam as the lifts fed the boiler. The pounding didn't change its beat. He said steadily, "Reckon it must have bin the beer that done it. Reckon I might go on the waggon. Gettin' old."

De la Haye peered at him again, intently. "Jesse," he said. "You got problems, my son. You got troubles.

What gives? C'mon, spill..."

That damnable intuition hadn't left him then. He'd had it right through college; seemed somehow to know what you were thinking nearly as soon as it came into your head. It was Col's big weapon; he used it to have his way with women. Jesse laughed bitterly; and suddenly the story was coming out. He didn't want to tell it; but he did, down to the last word. Once started, he couldn't stop.

Col heard him in silence; then he started to shake. The shaking was laughter. He leaned back against the cab side, holding onto a stanchion. "Jesse, Jesse, you are a lad. Christ, you never change... Oh, you bloody Saxon..." He

went off into fresh peals, wiped his eyes. “So... so she show you her pretty li’l scut, he? Jesse, you are a lad; when will you learn? What, you go to her with... with this...” He banged the *Margaret’s* hornplate. “An’ your face so earnest an’ black, oh, Jesse, a’ can see that face of yours. Man, she don’ want your great iron *destrier*. Christ above, no... But a’... a’ tell you what you do...”

Jesse turned down the corners of his lips. “Why don’t you just *shut up* . . .”

De la Haye shook his arm. “Nah, listen. Don’ get mad, listen. You... woo her, Jesse; she like that, that one. You know? Get the ol’ glad rags on, man, get a butterfly car, mak’ its wings of cloth of

gold. She like that... Only don' stand no shovin', ol' Jesse. An' don' ask her nothin', not no more. You tell her what you want, say you goin' to get it... Pay for your beer with a golden guinea, tell her you'll tak' the change upstairs, no? She's worth it, Jesse, she's worth havin' is that one. Oh but she's nice..."

"Go to hell..."

"You don' want her?" De la Haye looked hurt. "A'jus' try to help, ol' pal..."

You los' interest now?"

"Yeah," said Jesse. "I lost interest."

"Ahhh..." Col sighed. "Ah, but is a shame. Young love all blighted... Tell you what though." He brightened. "You given me a great idea, ol' Jesse. You

don' want her, a' have her myself. Okay?"

When you hear the wail that means your father's dead your hands go on wiping down a crosshead guide. When the world turns red and flashes, and drums roll inside your skull, your eyes watch ahead at the road, your fingers stay quiet on the wheel. Jesse heard his own voice speak dryly. "You're a lying bastard, Col, you always were. She wouldn't fall for you..."

Col snapped his fingers, danced on the footplate. "Man, a' got it halfway made. Oh but she's nice... Those li'l eyes, they were flashin' a bit las' night, no? Is easy, man, easy... A' tell you what, a' bet she be sadistic in bed. But

nice, ahhh, *nice*. . .” His gestures somehow suggested rapture. “I tak’ her five ways in a night,” he said. “An’ send you proof. Okay?”

Maybe he doesn’t mean it. Maybe he’s lying. But he isn’t. I know Col; and Col doesn’t lie. Not about this. What he says he’ll do, he’ll do.... Jesse grinned, just with his teeth. “You do that, Col. Break her in. Then I take her off you. Okay?”

De la Haye laughed and gripped his shoulder. “Jesse, you are a lad. Eh... ? Eh... ?”

A light flashed briefly, ahead and to the right, way out on the heathland. Col spun round, stared at where it had been, looked back to Jesse. “You see that?”

Grimly. “I saw.”

De la Haye looked round the footplate nervously. “You got a gun?”

“Why?”

“The bloody light. The *routiers* ...”

“You don’t fight the *routiers* with a gun.”

Col shook his head. “Man, I hope you know what you’re doin’...”

Jesse wrenched at the firebox doors, letting out a blaze of light and heat.

“Stoke...”

“What?”

“*Stoke!*”

“Okay, man,” said de la Haye. “All right, Okay...” He swung the shovel, building the fire. Kicked the doors shut, straightened up. “A’ love you an’ leave

you soon,” he said. “When we pass the light. If we pass the light...”

The signal, if it had been a signal, was not repeated. The heath stretched out empty and black. Ahead was a long series of ridges; the *Lady Margaret* bellowed heavily, breast-ing the first of them. Col stared round again uneasily, hung out the cab to look back along the train. The high shoulders of the tarps were vaguely visible in the night. “What you carryin’, Jesse?” he asked. “You got the goods?”

Jesse shrugged. “Bulk stuff. Cattle cake, sugar, dried fruit. Not worth their trouble.”

De la Haye nodded worriedly. “Wha’s in the trail load?”

“Brandy, some silks. Bit of tobacco. Veterinary supply. Animal castrators.”

He glanced sideways. “Cord grip. Bloodless.”

Col looked startled again, then started to laugh. “Jesse, you are a lad. A right bloody lad... But tha’s a good load, ol’ pal. Nice pickings...”

Jesse nodded, feeling empty. “Ten thousand quids’ worth. Give or take a few hundred.”

De la Haye whistled. “Yeah. Tha’s a good load...”

They passed the point where the light had appeared, left it behind. Nearly two hours out now, not much longer to run. The *Margaret* came off the down-slope, hit the second rise. The moon slid clear

of a cloud, showed the long ribbon of road stretching ahead. They were almost off the heath now, Durnovaria just over the horizon. Jesse saw a track running away to the left before the moon, veiling itself, gave the road back to darkness.

De la Haye gripped his shoulder. "You be fine now," he said. "We passed the bastards... You be all right. I drop off now, o'l pal; thanks for th' ride. An' remember, 'bout the li'l girl. You get in there punchin', you do what a' say. Okay, o'l Jesse?"

Jesse turned to stare at him. "Look after yourself, Col," he said.

The other swung onto the step. "A' be okay. A' be great." He let go, vanished in the night.

He'd misjudged the speed of the Burrell. He rolled forward, somersaulted on rough grass, sat up grinning. The lights on the steamer's trail load were already fading down the road. There were noises round him; six mounted men showed dark against the sky. They were leading a seventh horse, its saddle empty. Col saw the quick gleam of a gun barrel, the bulky shape of a crossbow. *Routiers*... He got up still laughing, swung onto the spare mount. Ahead the train was losing itself in the low fogbanks. De la Haye raised his arm. "The last waggon..." He rammed his heels into the flanks of his horse, and set off at a flat gallop.

Jesse watched his gauges. Full head, a

hundred and fifty pounds in the boiler. His mouth was still grim. It wouldn't be enough; down this next slope, halfway up the long rise beyond, that was where they would take him. He moved the regulator to its farthest position; the *Lady Margaret* started to build speed again, swaying as her wheels found the ruts. She hit the bottom of the slope at twenty-five, slowed as her engine felt the dead pull of the train.

Something struck the nearside hornplate with a ringing crash. An arrow roared overhead, lighting the sky as it went. Jesse smiled, because nothing mattered any more. The *Margaret* seethed and bellowed; he could see the horsemen now, galloping to either side.

A pale gleam that could have been the edge of a sheepskin coat. Another concussion, and he tensed himself for the iron shock of a crossbow bolt in his back. It never came. But that was typical of Col de la Haye; he'd steal your woman but not your dignity, he'd take your trail load but not your life. Arrows flew again, but not at the loco. Jesse, craning back past the shoulders of the waggons, saw flames running across the sides of the last tarp.

Halfway up the rise; the *Lady Margaret* labouring, panting with rage. The fire took hold fast, tongues of flame licking forward. Soon they would catch the next trailer in line. Jesse reached down. His hand closed slowly,

regretfully, round the emergency release. He eased upward, felt the catch disengage, heard the engine beat slacken as the load came clear. The burning truck slowed, faltered, and began to roll back away from the rest of the train. The horsemen galloped after it as it gathered speed down the slope, clustered round it in a knot of whooping and beating upward with their cloaks at the fire. Col passed them at the run, swung from the saddle and leaped. A scramble, a shout; and the *routiers* bellowed their laughter. Poised on top of the moving load, gesticulating with his one free hand, their leader was pissing valiantly onto the flames.

The *Lady Margaret* had topped the

rise when the cloud scud overhead lit with a white glare. The explosion cracked like a monstrous whip; the shock wave slapped at the trailers, skewed the steamer off course. Jesse fought her straight, hearing echoes growl back from distant hills. He leaned out from the footplate, stared down past the shoulders of the load. Behind him twinkled spots of fire where the hell-burner, two score kegs of fine-grain powder packed round with bricks and scrap iron, had scythed the valley clear of life.

Water was low. He worked the injectors, checked the gauge. "We must live how we can," he said, not hearing the words. "We must all live how we

can.” The firm of Strange had not been built on softness; what you stole from it, you were welcome to keep.

Somewhere a semaphore clacked to Emergency Attention, torches lighting its arms. The *Lady Margaret*, with her train behind her, fled to Durnovaria, huddled ahead in the dim silver elbow of the Frome.

* * * *