

MAN ON BRIDGE

by
Brian W. Aldiss

Here is a rather grim little story with overtones of Orwell's 1984, in which Brian W. Aldiss deals with the coming of Homo superior—but not as the type of superman we would expect. Mr. Aldiss, undoubtedly Britain's foremost science fiction author at the moment, is noted for his off-trail and often macabre approaches to futuristic themes.

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View sliding down out of the west-moving clouds, among the mountains, to the roads that halt at the barbed wire. Sight of electrified fences, ray gun posts on stilts, uniformed guards, readily familiar to any inhabitant of this continent for the last two hundred, three hundred years. Sun comes out on to dustbins and big slosh buckets behind low cookhouse; guards cuddle rifles, protecting cookhouse and slosh buckets. Flies unafraid of rifles.

Chief living thing in camp: man. Many of them walking or being marched between buildings, which are long-established without losing air of semi-permanence. The inhabitants of this camp have an identification mark which merely makes them anonymous. On their backs is stuck a big yellow C.

C for Cerebral, yellow as prole-custard.

C for Cerebral, a pleasant splash of brains against the monochrome of existence.

A group of C's pushing a cart of refuse over to the tip, conversing angrily...

"Nonsense, Megrip, methadone hydrachloride may be a powerful analgesic, but its use would be impossible in those circumstances, because it would set up an addiction."

"Never liked the ring of that word analgesic..."

"Even postulating addiction, even postulating addiction, I still say---"

The wind blows, the cart creaks.

More C's, swabbing latrines, four of them in dingy grey, talking as the C's always talk, because they have joy in talking and wrangling. Never forget that this is a report of happiness, following the dictum of the great prole-leader, Keils: however much he may appear to suffer, the C is inwardly happy as long as he is permitted to talk freely; with cerebrals, debate replaces the natural prole urges such as action and drinking and procreation. These Cs conversing airily in the jakes...

"No, what we are witnessing today are the usual aftereffects of any barbarian invasion: the decline of almost all standards causes the conquered race to turn in despair to extremes of vice. This isn't the first time Europe has had to suffer the phenomenon, God knows."

"That would be feasible enough, Jeffers, if there had indeed been an invasion." This one talks intelligently, but through a streaming cold.

"The intelligent have been overwhelmed by the dull. Is not that an invasion?"

"More, I would say, of a self-betrayal, in that---"

Unison flushing of twenty closets drowns sound of cranky voices. The situation is analysed shrewdly enough; they mistake in thinking that analysis is sufficient, and swab contentedly in the grey water round their ankles.

Sun returning fitfully again. It penetrates a drab, damp camp room where stand three men. Two are anxious at their approaching visit to the camp commander. One is indifferent to the universe, for he has had half his brain removed. They call him Adam X. He can stand, sit, lie down, eat, and defecate when reminded to do so; he has no habits. One of the other two men, Morgern Grabowicz, thinks Adam X is free, while the other, Jon Winther, regards him as dead.

Adam stands there while the other two argue over him. Sometimes changes of expression steal over his face, gentle smiles, sadnesses, extreme grimaces, all coming and going gradually, as the part of his brain that is left slyly explores territory that belongs to the part of his brain that is gone. The smiles have no relation to the current situation; nor have the sadnesses; both are entirely manifestations of his nervous system.

The chief intelligence behind the complex system of operations

Adam has undergone is Grabowicz, cold and clever old Grabowicz. Winther was involved at every stage, but in a subordinate role. In long months and mazes of delirium, Adam has been where they could not follow. Now Adam is newly out of bed, and Roban Trabann, the camp commander, is prepared to take an interest in his maimed existence.

Grabowicz and Winther wish to converse with Adam, but as yet conversation is not possible in their meaning of the word. Jon Winther bears the C on his back with an air. He should have been a prole rather than a cerebral, for he has the warmth. He has kept the warmth because he sometimes sees his family, which is solid-prole. The other man, the older, is Morgern Grabowicz, brought here from Styria: hard, cunning, cold, should have two C's on his back. He made Adam X.

Adam X was once just another young C, born Adran Zatrobik, until Grabowicz began the operations on his brain, whittling it away, a slice here, a whole lobe there... carving the man himself, until he made Adam X.

Grabowicz is looking remote and withdrawn now, as some C's will when they are angry, instead of letting the true emotion show. Winther is speaking to him in a low voice, also angry. Their voices are relayed to the camp commander because the electricians have finally got the microphones going again in Block B. Two years they have been out of order, despite the highest priority for attention. There are too many cogs in the clumsy machine. The two C's have observed the electricians at work, but are indifferent to what is overheard.

Winther is talking.

"You know why he wants to see us, Morgern. Trabann is no fool. He is going to ask us to make more men like Adam X, and we can't do that."

Grabowicz replies: "As you say, Jon, Trabann is no fool—therefore he will see that we can make more men like Adam. What has once been done can be done again."

Winther replies: "But he doesn't care what happens to any C, or to anyone, for that matter. In your heart, you know that what we have done to Adam is to commit murder, and we cannot do it again!"

"In your descent into melodrama, you neglect a couple of points in logic. First, I care no more than Trabann what is to be the fate of any individual, since I believe the human race to be superfluous; it fulfils no purpose. Secondly, since Adam lives, he cannot be murdered within the

legal definition of the term. Thirdly, I say as I have before, that if Trabann gives us the facilities, we can very easily repeat our work, this time improving greatly on the prototype. And fourthly---

“Morgern, I beg of you, don’t go on! Don’t make yourself into something as inhuman as we have made Adam! I’ve only been your friend here for so long because I know that within you there is someone who suffers as much as—and for—the rest of us... Drop this stupid estranged attitude! We don’t want to collaborate with proles, even gifted ones like Trabann, and we know—you know, that Adam represents our failure, not our success.”

Grabowicz paced about the room. When he replied, his voice came distantly.

“You should have been a prole yourself,” he told his friend, in that cold, flat voice, still without anger. “You have lost the scientific spirit, or you would know that it is still too early to use emotive words like ‘success’ or ‘failure’ of our experiment here. Adam is an unknown factor as yet. Nor have scientists ever been morally responsible for the results of their work, any more than the engineer is responsible for the vehicles that collide on the bridge he has built. As to your claim on what you call friendship between us, that can only be based on respect, and in your case---

“You feel nothing!” Jon Winther exclaims. “You are as dead as Adam X!”

Listening to this argument, Commander Trabann is interested to hear a C using the very accusation the Prole Party brings against all the C’s. Since the world’s C’s were segregated in camps, the rest of the world has run much more smoothly—or run *down* much more smoothly, you may prefer to say—and the terrible rat-race known to both the old communist and capitalist blocks as “progress” has given way to the truly democratic grandeur of the present staticist Utopia, where not only all men but all intelligences are equal.

Now Grabowicz speaks to Adam, saying, “Are you ready to go and meet the camp commandant, Adam?”

“I am fully prepared, and await the order to move.” Adam’s voice is a light one, almost female, but with a slight throatiness. He rarely looks at the men he addresses.

“Are you feeling well this morning, Adam?”

“You will observe that I am standing up. That is to accustom myself to the fits of dizziness to which I am subject. Otherwise, I have no feelings in my body.”

Winther says: “Does your head ache, Adam?”

“By my body I implied my whole anatomy. I have no headache.”

To Grabowicz, Winther says: “An absence of headache! He makes it sound like a definition of happiness!”

Ignoring his assistant, Grabowicz asks Adam, “Did you dream last night, Adam?”

“I dreamed one dream, of five minutes duration.”

“Well, go on then, man. I have told you before to be alert for the way several following questions may be inferred from a lead question.”

“I recall that, Morgern,” Adam says meekly, “but I supposed that we were waiting for the signal to leave this room and go to the commander’s office. The answer to what I judge your implied question to be is that I dreamed of a bench.”

“Ah, that’s interesting! You see, Jon? And what was this bench like?”

Adam says: “It had a steel support at each end. It was perfectly smooth and unmarked. I think it stood on a polished floor.”

“And what happened?”

“I dreamed of it for five minutes.”

Winther says: “Didn’t you sit down on the bench?”

Adam: “I was not present in my dream.”

Winther: “What happened?”

Adam: “Nothing happened. There was just the bench.”

Grabowicz: “You see, Jon! Even his dreams are chemically clean! We have eradicated all the old muddle of hypothalamus and the visceral

areas of the brain. You have here your first purely cerebral man. Putting sentiment aside, you can see what our next task is; we must persuade Trabann to let us have, say, three male C's and three female. They will all undergo the same treatment that Adam has done, and we then segregate them—it will need much co-operation from Trabann and his bosses, of course—and let them breed and rear their children free from outside interference. The result will be the beginning of a clique dominated by pure intellect.”

“They'd be incapable of breeding!” Winther said disgustedly. “By by-passing Adam's visceral brain, we've deprived him of half his autonomic nervous system. He could no more make love than fly!”

Then the guards came shouting, cursing the three Cs out of their refuge of words into the real world of hard fact.

Patched boots on the patched concrete. On the distant ioo mountains, sunshine, lingering, then sweeping down toward the town of Saint Praz, below the camp. Sky almost all blue. Adam X walking carefully among them, looking at the ground to keep his balance as he was marched to the office.

Trabann makes a good camp commander. Not only is he formidably ugly, he has some pretensions of being “brainy”, and so is jealous of the two thousand C's under him, and treats them accordingly.

All the while Grabowicz is delivering his report, Trabann sits glaring at Adam X, his bulbous nose shining over the bristles of his moustache. Of course, Trabann can come to no decision: everything must be passed on to his superiors: but he does his best to look like a man about to come to a decision, as he stirs and shuffles inside his heavy clothes.

While Winther stands by, Grabowicz does most of the talking, going into lengthy technical details of the surgery, and quoting from his notes. Trabann becomes bored, ceasing to listen since this is all being recorded on a tape machine by a secretary. He becomes more interested when Grabowicz puts forward his idea for creating more men and women like Adam and trying to breed from them. Breeding Trabann understands, or at least the crude mechanics of it.

Finally, Trabann examines Adam X, speaking to him, and questioning him. Then he purses his lips and says slowly to Grabowicz, “What you did, told in plain language, is wipe out this man's subconscious.”

Grabowicz replies: “Don’t give me that antiquated freudian nonsense. I mean, sir, that the body of theoretic work incorporating the idea of the subconscious mind was discontinued over a century ago. At least, in the C camps it was.”

Trabann makes a note that once Grabowicz has served his purpose he undergoes treatment B35, or even B38. He sharply dismisses Grabowicz, who is marched off protesting, while Jon Winther and Adam X are made to stay. Trabann considers Winther a useful man for making trouble among C’s themselves; he has some prole features, despite such typical Cerebral habits as habitual use of forbidden past and future tenses in his speech.

Trabann says to Winther: “Suppose we are breeding these purely intellectual children, are they Cerebrals or Proles?”

Winther: “Neither. They will be new people, if they can be bred. I have my doubts about that.”

Trabann: “But *if* they are bred—they are on your side?”

Winther: “Who can say? You are thinking of something twenty years ahead.”

Trabann: “You are trying to trap me, for you know that such thinking is treasonable. It is not for a prisoner to trap his commandant.”

Winther, shrugging his shoulders: “You know why I am a prisoner—because the laws are so stupid that we prefer to break them than live by them, although it means lifelong imprisonment.”

Trabann: “For that retort, distorting reality of world situation, an hour’s D90 afterwards. You can admit to me freely that you and all C’s wish to rule the world.”

Winther: “Need we have that one again?”

The guards are summoned to administer the D90 on the spot. Before it is carried out, Winther defiantly claims Cerebrals more capable of governing well than what he terms “anti-intellectuals”. He adds that C’s undergo much of what they suffer as a sort of self-imposed discipline, since they believe that one must serve to rule. So again we meet this dangerous C heresy, first formulated in the forty-fifth chapter of the prime work of our great master Keils. How wise he was to categorize this belief

that dominance lies through servitude as “extreme cerebral terrorism”.

When the D90 is over, Adam X is given a few blows across the face, and the two C’s are dismissed and returned to the square.

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That day, Trabann works long over his report. Dimly, he senses great potential. He does not understand what Adam X can do. He gets bored with the effort of trying to think, and is unhappy because he knows thinking, or at least “thinking-to-a-purpose” is on the black list of party activities.

But, two nights later, Camp Commander Trabann is much more happy. The local militia bring him a document written by the C, Jon Winther, that tells Trabann things he feels his superiors desire to know. It tells them certain things about Adam’s abilities. He passes it on with a memorandum expressing his detestation at the cerebral attitudes expressed in the manuscript. Here follows the Winther manuscript, which begins as Winther is recovering from the administration of the D90 already mentioned.

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There was a long period when I lay between consciousness and unconsciousness, aware only of the palsy in my body (Jon Winther writes). They had injected the mouth of a quick-vacuum pump into one of my arteries and sucked all my blood from my body, syphoning it rapidly back again as I fell senseless. What finally drew my attention away from the jarring of my bruised heart was the sound of Adam X, breathing heavily near me.

I rolled myself over on to my stomach and looked at him. His nose was still bleeding slightly, his face and clothes disfigured with blood.

When he saw me looking at him, he said, “I do not wish to live, Jon.”

I don’t want to hate them, but I hated them when I looked at Adam; and I hated our side too, for Adam could be reckoned a collaboration between the two sides. “Wipe your face, Adam,” I said. He was incapable even of thinking of doing that for himself.

We lay about in a stupor of indifference until a guard came and told us it was time to move. Shakily, I got to my feet and helped Adam up. We moved outside, into warm and welcome afternoon sun.

“Time’s so short and so long,” I said. I was light-headed; even at the time, the words sounded foolish. But feeling that sun, I knew myself to be a living organism and blessed with a consciousness that lasted but a flash yet often seemed, subjectively, to be the burden of eternity.

Adam stood woodenly by me and said without changing his expression, “You see life as a contrast between misery and pleasure, Jon; that is not a correct interpretation.”

“It’s a pretty good rule of thumb, I should have thought.”

“Thought and non-thought is the only valid line of comparison.”

“Bit of a bird’s eye view, isn’t it? That puts us on the same level as the proles.”

“Exactly.”

Suddenly angry, I said, “Look, Adam, let me take you home. I’d like to get you away from the camp atmosphere. My sisters can look after us for a few hours. Knowing Trabann, I think there’s a pretty good chance the guard will let us through the gates.”

“They will not let me through because I am a specimen.”

“When Trabann is not sure what to do, he likes a bit of action.”

When he nodded indifferently, I took his arm and led him towards the gates. It was always an ordeal, moving towards those great slab-cheeked guards, so contemptuous of eye, so large in their rough uniforms and boots, as they stood there holding their rifles like paddles. We produced our identity sticks, which were taken from us, and were allowed to pass, and go through the side-gate, between the strands of barbed wire, into the free world outside.

“They enjoy their show of might,” Adam said. “These people have to express their unhappiness by using ugly things like guns and ill-fitting uniforms, and the whole conception of the camp.”

“We are unhappy, but we don’t find that sort of thing necessary.”

“No, Jon, I am not unhappy. I just feel empty and do not wish to live.”

His talk was full of that sort of conversation-stopper.

We strode down the road at increasing pace as the way steepened between cliffs. The ruined spires and roofs of the town were rising out of the dip ahead, and I wanted only to get home; but since I had never caught Adam in so communicative a frame of mind, I felt I had to take advantage of it and find out what I could from him.

“This not wishing to live, Adam—this is just post-operational depression. When it wears off, you will recover your spirits.”

“I think not. I have no spirits. Morgern Grabowicz cut them away. I can only reason, and I see that there is no point to life but death.”

“That I repudiate with all my heart. On the contrary, while there is life, there is no death. Even now, with all my limbs aching from that filthy prole punishment, I rejoice in every breath I take, and in the effect of the light on those houses, and the crunch of this track under our feet.”

“Well, Jon, you must be allowed your simple vegetable responses.” He spoke with such finality that my mouth was stopped.

The little town of Saint Praz is just above the line of the vine, though the brutal little river Quviv that cuts the town in two goes hurtling down to water the vineyards only ten kilometres away. The bridge that spans the Quviv marks the beginning of Saint Praz; next to it stands the green-domed church of Saint Praz And The Romantic Agony, and next to the church is the street in which the remains of my family live. As we climbed its cobbled way, I saw my sister Bynca leaning out of the upper window, talking to someone below. We went into the house, and Bynca ran to welcome me with cries of delight.

“Darling Jon, your face is so drawn!” she cried when she came almost to the end of hugging me. “They’ve been ill-treating you up in the C camp again! We will hide you here and you shall never go back to them.”

“Then they will come and burn this house down and chase you and poor Anr and Pappy into the mountains!”

“Then instead we will leave altogether for some far happy country, and keep a real cow, and Pappa and you can grow figs and catch tunny in the sea.”

“And you can start slimming, Bynca!”

“Pah, you’re jealous because I’m a well-built girl and you’re a reed.”

When I introduced her to Adam, some of her smile went. She made him welcome, nonetheless, and was getting us glasses of cold tea when my father came in. Father was thin and withered and bent, and smelt as ever pleasantly of his home-grown tobacco; like my sisters, he had the settled expression of a certain kind of peasant—the kind that accepts, with protest but without malice, the vagaries of life. It is the gift life sends to compensate for the lack of a high I.Q.

“It’s a long time since we saw you, son,” he said to me. “I thought you’d come down before the winter came. Things don’t get any better in Saint Praz, I can tell you. You know the power station broke down in Juli and they still haven’t mended it—can’t get the parts, Geri was telling me. We go to bed early, these cold nights, to save fuel. And you can’t buy a candle these days, not for love nor money.”

“Nonsense, Pappy, Anr brought us two last week from Novok market.”

“Maybe, my girl, but Novok’s a long way away.”

When my sister Anr came in, our family was complete again—as complete as it will be on this Earth, for my mother died of a fever a dozen years ago, my elder sister Myrtyr was killed in riots when I was a child, and my two brothers walked down the valley many years since, and have never been heard of again. There’s another sister, Saraj, but since she married, she has quarrelled with Pappy over a question of dowry, and the two sides are not on speaking terms.

Adam sat in our midst, sometimes sipping his tea, looking straight ahead and hardly appearing to bother to listen to our chatter. After a while, my father brought out a little leather bottle of plum brandy and dosed our coffees with some of its contents.

“Disgusting habit,” he said, winking, at me, “but p’raps it’ll put a bit of life into your friend, eh, Jon? You’re mighty like my idea of a cerebral, Mr. Adam, too intelligent to trouble yourself with poor people like us.”

“Do not become curious about me, Mr. Winther,” Adam said. “I am different from other men.”

“Is that a boast or a confession?” Anr asked, and she and Bynca went off into peals of laughter. I saw an old woman outside in the sunlight turn her head and smile at the sound as she went past. My cheeks flushed as I

sensed the hostility between Adam and the others; it leapt into being as if a tap had been turned on.

“Adam has just come through a series of painful operations,” I said, trying to apologize to both sides.

“Are you going to show us your scars, Mr. Adam?” Anr asked, still giggling.

“You don’t get any fancy hospital treatment in Saint Praz if you’re classified as Prole,” father said. I knew that he threw it in as a general observation, as a shrewd bit of information he felt was part of his life’s experience. But Adam’s chip of brain would not register such undertones.

“I have become a new sort of man,” he said flatly.

I saw their faces turned to him, flat and unreceptive. He did not amplify. They did not ask. Caught between them, I knew he did not think it worth while explaining anything to them; like most C’s, he reciprocated the dislike of the proles. They, in their turn, suspected him of boasting—and although there were many boasters in Saint Praz, the convention was that one did it with a smile on one’s face, to take away the sting, or the wrath of the devil, should he be listening.

“The curse of the human race has been animal feeling,” Adam said. He was staring up at the dark rafters, his face stiff and cold, but made ludicrous for all that by his red swollen nose. “There was a time, two or three centuries ago, when it looked as if the intellect might win over the body, and our species become something worth while. But too much procreation killed that illusion.”

“Are you—some sort of a better person than the rest of us?” father asked him.

“No. I am only a freak. I do not belong anywhere.”

Silence would have fallen had I not said roughly, “Come off it, Adam—you’re welcome here, or I wouldn’t have brought you.”

“And as usual you must be famished, poor things,” Bynca said, jumping up. “We’ll have a feast tonight, that’s what! Anr, run down to old Herr Sudkinzin and see what he has left of that sow his son slaughtered on Mondai. Pappa, if you light the fire, these two convicts can have a turn in the tub tonight. I think Jon smells a bit high, like an old swine in from a

muck-wallow!”

“Very like, Bynca,” I said, laughing, “but if so I’m perfectly ready to be home-cured.”

With a gesture that seemed halfway between reverence and contempt, my father pushed away the electric fire—useless since the power station ceased to function—from the centre of the hearth and began preparations to light the ancient iron stove. My sisters began bustling about, Anr fetching in kindling from the stack under the eaves. I stood up. They loved me here, but there was no real place for me. My real place was up in the camp, I thought—not without self-pity, but with truth; up there was my own room, shabby, yes, yet full of my books, shabby too, but duplicated right there on the camp press.

Christ’s blood, that was the place my kind had chosen, over a century ago. The common people had often revolted against the rich—but the rich were not identifiable once shorn of their money; then the tide of anger turned against the intelligent. You can always tell an intellectual, even when he cowers naked and bruised before you with his spectacles squashed in the muck; you only have to get him to talk. So the intellectuals had elected to live in camps, behind wire, for their own safety. Things were better now—because we were fewer and they infinitely more; but the situation had changed again: the stay was no longer voluntary, for we had lost our place in the world. We had even lost our standing in the camps. Throughout the more-than-mediaeval darkness that had fallen over Europe, our cerebral monasteries were ruled over by the pistol and whip; and the flagellation of the new order of monks was never self-inflicted.

“Some visitors coming see you, son,” father said, peering through the tiny panes of the window. He straightened his back and brushed at his coat, smiling and nodding to himself.

There was no time for thinking from then on. As Anr went down through the town to see the butcher, she called out to her friends that I was home and had brought along a strange man. Gradually those friends straggled round, to look in and drink my health in some of my father’s small store of wine, and cast many a curious look at Adam, and ask me many a question about what happened in the camp—was it true that we were going to invent a sort of ray that would keep the frost from the tender spring crops, and soon.

When I was tired of talking to them, and that moment came soon, they talked amiably to each other, exchanging the gossip of Saint Praz, drinking

the wine. The butcher came back with Anr, his son beside him carrying half a side of pig, and disappeared into the kitchen to help my sisters cook it. The son pushed himself a place beside our stove, and faced up to the wine with gusto. In time, my sisters, very red of cheek, returned to the room, thick by now with smoke and rumour, bearing with them a big steaming goulash, which the company devoured, laughing and splashing as they did so. We ate it with chunks of bread and followed it with black coffee. Afterwards, the visitors wished to stay and see Adam and me in the tub; but, with lewd jokes and roars of mirth, Anr and my father finally saw them off. We could hear them laughing and singing as they made their way down the street.

“You should come home more often, my boy,” father said, mopping his brow as he laced the latch on the last of his guests.

“So I would father, if your neighbours didn’t descend on you and eat you out of house and home every time I put in an appearance.”

“Spoken like a damned cerebral,” he said. “Always the thought for the morrow! No offence to you, son, but there’d be no joy in the world at all if your sort ruled... Life’s bad enough as it is... Eh, wish your mother were alive this night, Jon. The good wine makes me feel young and randy again.”

He staggered round the room while my sisters brought in the great tub in which the family’s infrequent baths had been taken since the day—some years back now—when the reservoir up in the hills was ruptured by earth tremors, and the taps in the bathroom ceased to yield anything but rust.

“Where’s your fragile friend Adam?” Anr asked.

For the first time, I noticed Adam was not there. His presence had been so withdrawn that his absence had left no gap. Tired though I was, I ran upstairs calling him, hurried into the yard at the back and called him there. Adam did not appear.

“Eh, leave him—he must have cleared off with the folks,” father said. “Let him stay away. We shall hardly miss him.”

“He’s not fit to wander around alone,” I said. “I must go and find him.”

“I’ll come with you,” Bynca said, slipping into an old fur wrap that had belonged to my mother. Anr called derisively that we were wasting our time, but Bynca could see how worried I was, seized my arm, and hustled out of

the door with me.

“What’s so important about this man? Can’t he look after himself like any other young chap?” she asked.

I tried to answer, but the cold had momentarily taken my breath away. The stars froze in the sky overhead; Jupiter steered over the shoulder of the mountain behind us, and beneath our feet the cobbles sparkled and rang. The cold immediately set up a strongpost of frost in my chest, which I tried to dislodge by coughing.

At last I said to her, “He’s important—had a brain operation. Could be the beginning of a pure brain kind of man who would overturn the regime—could be a mindless kind that would give the regime a race of slaves. Naturally, both regime and the C’s are interested in finding out which he is.”

“I wonder they let him come out if he’s so important.”

“You know them, Bynca—they’re keeping watch. They want to see how he behaves when he is free. So do I.”

The sound of the river, tumbling in its broken bed, accompanied us down the street. I thought I could also hear voices, although the street was deserted. As we rounded the bulk of the church, the voices came clear, and we saw the knot of people standing on the bridge.

Perhaps a dozen people clustered there, most of them lately the guests of my father’s house. Two of them carried lanterns, one a splendid pitch torch, which the owner held aloft. This beacon, smoking and flickering, gave the scene most of what light it had. So unexpected was the sight of them gathered there, that instinctively Bynca and I stopped dead in the middle of the road.

“Sweet Saviour!” Bynca exclaimed. I saw as she spoke what made her exclaim. Of the crowd that now partly turned to face us—was it imagination or a primitive visceral sense that instantly read their hostility?—only one figure was indifferent to our arrival. That figure was apart from the rest. It stood with its back partly turned to Bynca and me and, with its arms extended sideways at shoulder level in an attempt at balance, was trying to walk the narrow parapet that bounded the north side of the bridge.

So alarmed was I that anyone should undertake so foolish a feat, that

I did not realize for a moment that it was Adam X, even though I saw the yellow C on his back. The bridge over the Quviv has stood there for many centuries, and has probably not been repaired properly since the days of the Dual Monarchy, a couple of centuries ago at least. The chest-high walls that guard either side of it are crumbled and notched by the elements and the urchins who for generations have used the bridge as their playground. But it takes a bold urchin, even bare-foot and on a bright morning, to jump up on to the top of the wall and ignore the drop on to the rocks below. And now Adam, subject to giddiness, was walking along the wall by the fitful light of a torch.

As I ran forward, I shouted, "Who put him up to doing that? Get him down at once. That man is ill!"

A hand was planted sharply in the middle of my chest. I came face to face with the butcher's son, Yari Sudkinzin. I'd watched him earlier, when he was sitting against our stove, contriving to get more than his fair share of the wine.

"Keep out of this, you C!" he said. "Your buddy friend here is just showing us what he can do."

"If you made him get up there, get him down at once. He'll slip to his death at any minute."

"He insisted on doing it, get it? Said he would show us he was as good as us. You'd better stand back if you know what's good for you."

And as he was speaking, the women with him clustered about us, telling him earnestly, "We told him he was mad, but he would do it, he would do it, he would climb up there!"

Breaking through them, I went to Adam, carefully now, so that I would not startle him. His broken shoes rasped against the crumbled stone at the level of my chest. He moved very slowly, one small step at a time. He would be frozen before he got across, if he got across. He was coming now to the first of the little bays that hung out from the bridge and housed benches for the convenience of pedestrians. The angles he would have to turn would make his task more dangerous. Below us, the Quviv roared and splashed without cease.

"Come down, Adam," I said, "It's Jon Winther here. Let me help you down!"

He said only one thing to me, but it explained much that had led to his climbing up where he was: "I will show them what a superman can do."

"Adam—it's time we were tucked in a warm bed by the side of the fire. Give me your hand."

For answer, he kicked out sideways at me.

His shoe caught me a light knock on the cheek. He lost his footing entirely, and was falling even as he struck me. I grabbed at his foot, at his trousers, cried aloud, felt myself dragged sharply against the parapet, my elbows rasped over it, as his weight came into my grasp, and his body disappeared over the wall.

He made no sound!

For a ghastly moment I thought I too was going to be carried below with him. The roar of the Quviv over its rocks sounded horribly loud. Without thought, I let go of him—perhaps because of fear, perhaps because of the pain in my arms, or the cold in my body, or perhaps because of some deeper, destructive thing that emerged in me for a second. I let go of him, and he would have fallen to his death had not two of the men in the party managed to grasp him almost as I let go.

Panting and cursing, they pulled Adam up over the wall, and dumped him like a sack of potatoes on to the bench. His nose was bleeding, otherwise he seemed unharmed. But he did not speak.

"That's all your doing!" young Yari Sudkinzin said to me. "He was nearly a dead 'un, thanks to you!"

"I could draw a moral far less comforting for you," I told him. "Why don't you clear off home?"

In the end they did go, leaving Bynca and me to return with Adam's two rescuers, who supported Adam up the street. In the way that news travels in our towns, several people were already lighting up their lamps and peering from their windows and doors to see what was going on; along the road, I heard the militia questioning—I hoped—the butcher's son. With this prompting, we made what haste we could, home.

Father and Anr made a great bother when we got back. I went to lie down and warm myself by the fire, while all the aspects of what had happened were thrashed out with Bynca. After a while, Adam, who had

bathed his face in a bucket outside, came and slumped down beside me, stretching as I did on the reed mats before the stove.

“There is less irrationality up in the camp,” he said. “Let us go back. At least we understand that they hit us because they hate us.”

“You must tell me, Adam—Grabowicz will want to know—why you did that foolish thing on the bridge. To accept a stupid dare like that is the work of a child, but to show such a lack of fear is inhuman. What are you, how do you analyse yourself ?”

He made a noise that imitated a laugh. “Nobody can understand me,” he said. “I can’t understand myself until there are more like me.”

I told him then. “I can’t work on these brain operations any more.”

“Grabowicz can. Grabowicz will. You’re too late to be squeamish, Jon; already there is a new force in the world.”

After what I had seen on the bridge, I felt he might be right. But a new force for good or bad? How would the change come? What would it be? I closed my eyes and saw clearly the sort of world that Grabowicz and I, with the unwitting co-operation of the prole leaders, might have already brought into being. Given enough men and women like Adam, with their visceral brains removed, they would bring up children unswayed and unsoftened by human emotion, whose motives were inscrutable to the rest of mankind. The rulers of our world would find such people very useful at first, and so a place would be made for them. And from being instruments of power, they would turn into a power in their own right. It was a process often witnessed by history.

I rolled over and looked at Adam. He appeared to be already asleep. Perhaps he was dreaming one of his sterile dreams, without incident, or body, or turmoil. Despairing, I too tried to close down my mind.

As I lay there with my eyes shut, my old father, thinking me asleep, stooped to kiss my forehead before settling himself to sleep on the fireside bench.

“I must go back to camp tomorrow, father,” I murmured.

* * * *

But in the morning—this morning—my father and my sisters prevailed on

me to stay till the afternoon, to share their frugal midday meal with them and then go.

I sit now in the upstairs room where Anr and Bynca sleep, catching the first of the sun as it struggles clear of the mountain ridge, and trying to write this account. I feel that something awful is about to happen, that we are at one of those turning points in the story of the world. A secret record may be useful for those who come after.

Adam sits downstairs, silent. It is strange that one feeble man...

The militia are downstairs! They forced their way in, and I hear them shout for me and Adam. Of course the tale of last night got back up there. Dear Bynca will be downstairs, confronting them with her plump arms folded, giving me time to get away. But I must go back with them, to the camp. Perhaps if I killed Grabowicz...

This manuscript shall go under the loose floor board that we used to call "Bynca's board", when we were kids, so long ago. They'll never find it there, or get it except over her dead body.