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A STUNNING NEW NOVEL BY  
**JOHN BRUNNER**



WAS HE ONE OF THE PLAYERS—  
OR MERELY THE PAWN?

# PLAYERS AT THE GAME OF PEOPLE



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A Del Rey Book

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or merely the pawn?

PLAYERS

AT THE GAME OF

PEOPLE

GODWIN HARPIN SHIELD'S CALLING

A familiar pressure started to build at the back of Godwin's mind. He was being Called, and there was only one safe place to be when that happened. Home. Godwin scribbled a signature on the bill, having forgotten by what name they knew him here -- not that it mattered, for none of his bills was ever presented for payment -- and rushed back to the car.

Time was growing short. The pressure in his head sent bright shooting lights across his field of vision. Miraculously, there was a space in front of the house. He parked and scrambled out without bothering to lock up. If someone stole his car, he could always buy another. Half-blind with pain, Godwin rushed upstairs and, not sparing time to turn the room on, spent the last moments of awareness desperately trying to reach a decision about his Reward.

Inspiration struck him -- he didn't have to choose!

They knew Rewards he could never think of. Had Irma requested her Sirian plants? Had Hermann known about the alien's amazing powers? When had Hugo & Diana experienced free fall?

Thankful, convinced, Godwin Harpinshield surrendered.

And was Used.

Also by John Brunner Published by Ballantine Books: The Sheep Look Up The Whole Man The Squares of the City The Shockwave Rider Stand on Zanzibar Double, Double The Infinitive of C Players at the Game of People by John Brunner A Del Rey Book BALLANTINE BOOKS \* NEW YORK A Del Rey Book Published by Ballantine Books Copyright © 1980 by Brunner Fact & Fiction Limited All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copy- right Conventions. Published in the United States by Ballantine Books, a division of Random House, Inc., New York, and simultaneously in Canada by Random House of Canada, Limited, Toronto, Canada. Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 80-66561 ISBN 0-345-29235-9 Manufactured in the United States of America First Edition: December 1980 Cover illustration by: Bill Schmidt

The air was literally filthy. Godwin Harpinshield passed his tongue across his lips and it reported his teeth and palate grit: dust from the daytime air raid which had not yet settled. And now, again already, sirens were caterwauling under a darkling summer sky.

There was a slight ache in his right leg, but it was not unbearable. Rather, it was almost pleasant indicative of a healing wound. He had on too many clothes for such warm weather; his feet sweated in tightly laced black shoes, while on his head was a cap with a stiff peak. He was, to be precise, wearing an RAF officer's uniform with -- he glanced at the cuffs -- flight lieutenant's badges of rank. On his left breast were pilot's wings. His left palm and fingers were sticky, holding a pair of obligatory brown leather gloves. Smoke made his eyes and nose tingle, but a breeze was disturbing the still air as the sun went down.

Not that it could be seen from here, for he stood between double ranks of tenement houses that had known better days, faced partly with brick, partly with blue and yellow tile. Their windows were taped with brown adhesive paper and their doorways were labyrinthed with high walls of khaki sandbags. Here and there bites had been crunched out of their upper stories, as though a crazy aerial dog had clamped enormous jaws on what it mistook for food, then spat out disgusting rubble on the roadway. Prompted by the sirens, people could be seen turning lights off and drawing thick blackout curtains. None of the streetlamps was on.

Picking its way among piles of debris, here came a lumbering double-decker bus with its headlights masked. He stood at a bus stop, a temporary post on a street too narrow for public transport to use under normal circumstances, even though not a single car or van was to be seen parked along it. The reason for the detour was made plain by signs at the Street's two ends: DANGER -- BOMB DAMAGE -- NO RIGHT / NO LEFT TURN.

Respectively.

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A resigned voice said, "Oh, damn. Just when a Number Eight finally turns up."

There were others waiting at the bus stop: a tired elderly couple, two teenage girls with teeth like discolored tombstones.

Overhead a night fighter left a faint straight vapor trail from west to east. A searchlight beam sprang up and swiveled in great jerky arcs. At one point in its traverse it touched the silvery side of a barrage balloon, creating a fragment of artificial moon. Behind the sirens a drone began, the sound of several hundred bombers.

One of the girls said, "They're coming back, then," as flatly as though making a comment about the weather.

Almost in the same second there were soft crumping explosions: the reports of ack-ack shells far to the east, from ground batteries in Kent and along the Medway. The bus halted, but not to pick up passengers, only to discharge those it had. The driver stopped his engine and scrambled to the ground cursing. Not yet middle-aged, he looked old. His flesh was pulpy, testimony to years of a diet based on bread and marge and bacon.

Even as the passengers descended, grousing but not objecting, half a dozen boys and elderly men appeared from nearby doorways, donning tin hats marked fore and aft with the letters ARP, standing for "air raid precautions." The same acronym could be seen on numerous posters giving advice about what to do when the Luftwaffe struck at London. In an area where most people could scarcely read their own names, all those lines of close black print were clearly fruitless. The people milled about like frightened ants as they spilled into the roadway.

The ARP wardens did their amateur best, shouting through cupped hands that in the next street, out of sight but there all the same, a basement had been designated as an official shelter. But moving that way meant heading east, toward and not away from the noise of gunfire and by now probably the first salvos of bombs, and they were overwhelmed as the other occupants of the buildings came flooding forth. At first a trickle, then a spate of families with small children, led by women because almost all active men had already gone to war, rushed headlong toward the more credible sanctuary of a tube station a few hundred yards to the west.

Knowing when they were beaten, the wardens tried at least to keep the fugitives orderly. But the children, roused from bed and hastened into the street in nightclothes or tattered underwear, were frightened. They cried. Some of them screamed. Urgency threatened to turn into panic. The wardens shouted, but could not make the crowd obey. There was too much noise; there was the wail of sirens like banshees riding an invisible storm; there were ever more explosions, some of which by now must be from bombs dropped on Port of London, because the racket of enemy aircraft was almost deafening -- well over a hundred in this wave alone, each with a pair of thousand-horsepower engines; also there were shrill police whistles and the bells of fire engines and ambulances and the grinding slump of structures of brick and tile and concrete were laid low by the devastating onslaught.

~~Abruptly a vast redness lit the eastern sky. A heartbeat afterward there followed a puff of hot sound. Something very burnable had been hit: oil, wax, maybe even munitions. The people's cries and fear redoubled as they arrived at the tube station and realized how narrow the entry was, how steep the stairs-beyond.~~

At least the station staff were having the grace not to insist on the legal penny-halfpenny fare from every adult, though they were in duty bound to do so. Some duties, their humanity advised, must take precedence over what was officially laid down. These people, Godwin thought with a glow of pride, could never staff extermination camps . . .

But mere goodwill was not enough. Here was a crowd on the point of becoming a leaderless mob. Suppose a child tripped and was trampled to death!

Godwin took mental stock of his condition. The pain in his leg indicated one potential weakness, for it came from a bullet wound. But it was nearly healed. In contrast, the fact that he wore this of a soldier's uniforms would stand in good stead. Much publicity had made the world familiar with such a shade of gray-blue, and with RAF wings . . . even though he was already being looked at resentfully by some, though his presence -- that of a warrior armed against the foe -- might conjure down a doom on this street rather than another.

*Alternatively: what's he doing here instead of flying his plane and killing Jerries?*

Then the thrill of a right decision reached ran through his spare frame.

A few paces ahead of him was a woman wearing a gray coat over a nightdress, clutching a baby and trying to keep track of three little girls, all blond, all thin, all peaky from the undernourishment which had beset this nation during the Depression and which careful rationing of food had not yet rectified. Aged perhaps three, five, and seven, they gazed about them in dumb and wide-eyed wonder, as though fancying they were still in dreamland, where parents' orders did not have to be attended to.

The ground shook. Flakes of brick and mortar shivered from the façades of nearby buildings. Also the eastern sky was aflame as more and more incendiary bombs planted the seeds of inferno across the city.

Already the people converging on the station entrance were elbowing each other and shouting insults. In a minute there might be a fight. Wildfire was among the ancientest of terror-symbols; what to talk of as a symbol of calm?

That wizened three-year-old: she would do perfectly. With a stride and a wince and a stride Godwin was beside her, sweeping her into his arms as though he were her father.

"Come on now, you *men* !" he barked in his most parade-ground tone. There were some men helping to jam the stairs, and they were old enough to recall the other war. "Women and children first! Her make sure these little girls are safe!" And he disposed of his own load -- not unthankfully, for her hair and her very clothes were greasy to his touch -- to the tallest man within reach on a lower step, and turned to pick up her sister.

It worked. The panic halted. They handed the children over their heads at first -- and some giggled and squealed, but at least they weren't screaming in terror -- and the dense press of people lessened. Those below dispersed along the platforms, soothing the youngsters. In a moment or two it was possible for women to follow, the men standing aside to let them through. Backs straightened. There were smiles, especially from the wardens overjoyed at this helpful intrusion on the part of a member of the officer class, this renewed proof that it was always safe to rely on Squire.

Later, of course, nightly descents into the bowels of London would become commonplace, but now it was weird and incredible that one should lie on hard, cold platforms among neighbors who until today were strangers. The Germans had only just shifted their attention from airfields to cities; the name "Battle of Britain" was freshly coined. It was a beautiful summer and should never have been despoiled by those clouds of smoke, those pillars of rising dust.

Certain policemen were hovering, who had orders from Whitehall to refuse admission to the tube during a raid. They were embarrassed, and shuffled their feet, and made no move to comply with the instructions. As soon as they had an excuse to move off, like the shrill of ambulance bells, they seized it gratefully and disappeared.

"Thanks very much, sir," said a warden from under the shadowing brim of his helmet. "We need somebody to take charge." He moved slightly to let latecomers go by; now there was a steady, controlled, regular flow descending the stairs, and someone was trying to start a singsong with "Roll Out the Barrel."

"Last night," he added, "my old woman fell down and got 'er arm broke. Wouldn't 'ave been too much worse off if Jerry'd got 'er," he appended with a wry attempt at humor. "You from around 'ere, are you, sir?"

"My parents were," Godwin said, not looking at him. "I'm on convalescent leave, you see. Came to visit them today. But when I got there . . . Ruins. Rubble." He gave a shrug.

"Bastards, aren't they?" the warden said with enormous feeling. "Ruddy bastards! Well, I think we can go down now and join the others."

But his last word was cut short even as he and Godwin made to do so.

A salvo of bombs was being shed by an aircraft driven off the course of the main raid, perhaps evading a searchlight -- now a dozen were weaving back and forth overhead -- or chased by one of the pitiful few night fighters the RAF could muster to zero in on the attackers as darkness thickened. Jettisoned or aimed, those bombs were doing damage. The noise was like the crushing sound of a giant's boots as he marched over the fragile, contemptible creations of humanity.

"Down!" Godwin yelled, and hurled himself flat on the pavement, bringing the warden with him.

A vast detonation rent the air, and even before their tortured eardrums recovered from the blast, the exposed skins were peppered with tiny fragments of masonry. That one had struck within fifty yards or so, probably in the street the fleeing crowd had left mere minutes before.

~~And the rumble of collapsing walls was followed by a scream.~~

"Greer! Greer! *Where's my Greer?*"

Here, fighting her way back up the staircase without her baby, was the mother of the family Godwin had singled out. She clutched at his arm, whimpering.

"Greer, my oldest!" she babbled. "Myrna's there and Bette's there and Merle's there -- but where's my Greer? Where's my oldest? I did wake her up, I swear I did, but she was in the other room and -- *oh!*"

Her coherent words dissolved into sobbing.

Simultaneously, a sound of crunching mixed with the hiss of a gas main taking fire indicated that a block of flats just out of sight was being destroyed: maybe hers.

"I'll find her for you," Godwin promised. He spun on his heel, the ache from his leg wound instantly forgettable.

"Stop! Stop!" shouted the warden, who was portly and middle-aged and exempted from military service. After a pause to decide whether he might safely so address an officer, he added, "You bloody fool!"

But Godwin was already rounding the corner. There was nothing for it but to set out after him, at a waddling run.

The sky glowed redder and the air grew dirtier and the stench blew fouler and there were more and more horrible, hideous, gut-wrenching crump-crump-crump sounds as the metal birds overhead shuddered their loads of ruin on what had once been the richest city of the planet.

Godwin's thin leather shoe-soles reported every lump and bump of the rubble-strewn road. Also his trousers were of a coarse emergency material and rubbed his calves and he had dropped his glove somewhere on the way and his underpants chafed his crotch and his silly stiff-peaked cap kept trying to fall off, although he managed to keep it in position with reflex tosses of his head until he was back in the street where the temporary bus stop stood. There he lost it as he stumbled over an unseen block of debris that did his injured leg no good at all.

Still, he was able to pull himself upright and survey the scene.

The bomb had fallen, not on the tenement from which the family with film stars' names had come pouring out (what would the baby be called, who wearing only a vest was obviously a boy? Cary? Gary? Van?), but straight through the roof of the next building but one, and had exploded at basement level. Walls which had been upright canted insanely around him, uttering creaks and showers of dust. Taking a single step seemed like a terrifying commitment, not solely because glass and brickwork

crunched at every move, reminding him of the image of the trampling giant (but the aircraft were swerving away, lightened and quickened by the disposal of their bomb loads), but because those tall façades of masonry had been rendered precarious, the element of choice removed from them in favor of something random, something hazardous, something impervious to reason and to prayer . . .

Godwin had never been so exhilarated in his life.

One wall in particular was clearly about to collapse: the frontage of the building where (if she still lived) little Greer must be hiding. Apart from having shed all its glazing, it was rayed by huge, irregularly slanting cracks, springing from door- and window-corners. It was dark; the darkness stung the air was dry and dried out the mouth, the gullet, the guts of Godwin Harpinshield so that like a desiccated sketch for a reed pipe he sang unbearable chants of delicious agony to the basso continuo of the falling bombs and the rising shells and the tormented city.

Transfixed by the experience, he was a collected butterfly on the stark, bare mounting board of time.

A flare, or a flash from reflected searchlights, lent a gleam of whiteness to the world. Abruptly he saw a child clearly in the maw of the sandbagged entry: skeletally thin limbs poking out from a cotten nightdress much too small for her, peaked on her rib-ridged chest by fistlike breasts achieving the status of a nipple/knuckle, an O-wide mouth and O-wide eyes, obviously screaming . . . but the sound was drowned out by other and more awful noise. Now the building adjacent was alight from basement to attic and the flames created a blowtorch roar, the hiss of a dragon closing on his virgin prey. So much oxygen was being sucked from the air, it was growing hard to breathe.

Calm, Godwin assessed his chances, surveying the piles of rubble. The odds were bad but not prohibitive. Decision reached, he darted forward with the erratic, jinking run of a rugby three-quarter, treating the obstacles as though they were only opposing players. And the wall to the left, and then the wall to the right, began to buckle, dislodging bricks *clunk, clunk* .

"Stop!" howled the warden following Godwin. And, invoking the most powerful charm he knew  
"Stop, *sir* !"

Godwin paid no heed. His leg was hurting worse at every step, but it would last long enough. Greer rushed toward him. He seized her in both arms, spun around and fled back the way he had come, carrying her as lightly as a mere football. Only twenty yards to the corner . . . ten . . .

The shock of yet another bomb, falling a street or so away, was too much for the wall of the burning tenement. It opened brick-dribbling jaws at first-floor level, sliding, grinding, settling in a torrent of sparks, a wave of flames.

"Hurry!" the warden screamed, and Godwin lunged forward as though hurling his body across a goal line, the child thrust out before him at full stretch. He was not quite fast enough to save himself. A chunk of masonry hit him on the right arm, and he heard as much as felt the bones snap. But before pain wiped away consciousness he was able to register that he had saved the little girl, who could, he now realized, be no older than ten. She was staring at him by the flamelight with huge, dark, somehow



hungry eyes, as though to eat the very image of her rescuer.

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She was there also, with her mother and sisters and baby brother, in the crowd that lined the pavement to watch heroes arriving for the following week's royal investiture. The high iron railings before the palace yard had been taken away to build fighters, but loyal citizens would not have dreamed venturing uninvited into the grounds.

It was curious, Godwin thought as he marched smartly forward at the calling of his name and gave an awkward salute with his left arm because the right was in a sling -- it was curious and also somehow little disappointing that this king was not majestically tall as children would have wished, but only average height, and that his queen should be of such a comfortable housewifely plumpness . . . But there was a moment to be treasured forever when those thin, uncertain fingers lifted the George Medal named after a saint, and himself -- from the red velvet cushion on which it was proffered by an equerry and pinned it below the wings which he himself did not display, even though he wore the uniform of a Marshal of the Royal Air Force.

"Congratulations, Squadron Leader," he said. The promotion had been gazetted while Godwin lay in the hospital. "By the way, yours is an unusual name. Irish, one presumes?"

"Yes, Your Majesty." A little dryly, a little deprecatingly. "I've always been told -- excuse me -- we were descended from the High Kings of Erin."

That provoked a wan smile. "An older house than mine! Whose members had the good sense to go off to do business before they invented modern warfare."

It was known that there was a miniature factory in the palace, where bombs and shells were made by royal hands.

"I understand you lost your parents in a recent raid," the king continued after a brief hesitation.

"Yes, sir."

"I'm very sorry."

Pause. There were others waiting. Time to take a pace backward and again give the wrong-handed salute. It was returned, but distractedly. Another medal was on the red velvet pad; another name was being announced. It was over.

But of course he had to make it seem much more dramatic for Mrs. Gallon and her children and all the strangers who came swarming around him as he regained the street. The little girls were dressed to their best, and it was pitiful, but they had at least been thoroughly scrubbed and their well-washed hair shone in the sunlight and they shared a waiflike prettiness which, if one looked hard, might be discerned also behind the tired mask of their mother's features. He told them all about the ceremony with a garnish of invented detail because truly he had not paid much attention to the furnishings or decorations of the room he had been in; he had looked only at the king and queen.

Finally he said he had to go, and saluted Mrs. Gallon, who giggled and blushed, and rumbled the ha-

of each of the girls, leaving Greer to last. But she was not content to be patted on the head. She seized his hand as it approached and pulled him down and put her other arm behind his neck and astonished him with her precocity by kissing him open-mouthed, thrusting her tiny tongue between his teeth.

"Greer!" her mother said in horror. "You mustn't do that to the gentleman! I'm sorry, sir -- she's a real terror, that one, a proper caution! I'm sure I don't know where she gets it from!"

But the last thing Godwin wanted was for her to stop. The contact was incredibly erotic; sensation lanced down his spine like electric current, triggering every reflex on its way.

Must, though. Must! He visualized headlines about indecent assault in broad daylight. Never mind that she committed it.

Contenting himself with one answering passage of his tongue against hers, which conveniently trapped a trace of saliva that might otherwise have glistened on his chin -- and irrelevantly remembering that he had expected to have a mustache -- he hoisted Greer off her feet for a one-armed hug and grinned as he lowered her again.

Thinking of infection, and countless thousands of girls of this generation who would be given complete sets of false teeth for a twenty-first birthday present.

"Not to worry, Mrs. Gallon!" he said in the heartiest tone he could conjure up. "I'm sure it's kind meant. You take care of yourself, young Greer, and one day you'll make some man extremely happy. I'm convinced of it. And now" -- he glanced around -- "I really must go. There's my bus!"

Everybody knew buses were too precious to miss, these days. It was the right excuse. He went away.

Returning home, he landed his Fouga Magistère -- his current favorite of the available two-seater jet aircraft -- at Stag Lane aerodrome and drove into central London in his Lamiborghini Urraco. There was a reggae program playing on Capital Radio which served to distract him during the occasional traffic snarl-ups, but as ever he made excellent time; even the cowboys seemed reluctant to dice with a machine wearing that much horsepower. He dropped it off for a tuneup, wash, and polish at the usual garage and completed his journey on foot, raising the collar of his coat against a gray drizzle, carefully shielding his medal and the newspaper cutting which authenticated it.

So far nobody, he noted as he turned the corner of his home street, had turned up to collect the Jaguar Mark X which had been pushed into the curb when it ran out of petrol . . . how long ago? Long enough for piles of rubbish -- ice-lolly wrappers, fish-and-chip paper, empty soft-drink cans -- to have accumulated against its wheels. Its windscreen wipers and wing mirrors had been pilfered and kicked. He had tried to start a spectacular fire by setting a match to cardboard piled under its tank, but by then it had been too dry to yield the hoped-for pyrotechnics; they had only managed to blister some of the paint.

Shame about that.

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The rain was penetrating and the wind was chilly. As soon as he reached the upper floor of the house where he rented a room, he realized that what he needed was some bright warm sunshine. Careful closing the door behind him -- not that, in fact, even the old woman who owned the house and was overfond of gin and could be heard, until he shut the door, laughing her silly head off at some nondescript television comedy show, could have interrupted him without invitation . . . because that was one of the conditions -- he peeled off his Dunn's tweed hat and his Gannex raincoat (as patronized by a recent prime minister), and then his sweater and jeans and boots and socks and helped himself to a generous measure of José Cuervo tequila, complete with salt and lemon, en route to a refreshing shower. When he came out, sweating just enough not to want to don clothing again for the moment, he felt hungry. He lay down in sunshine, but with his head in shade, and ate a slice or two of smoked salmon with crisp fresh salad, washed down with a foaming mug of pilsner. Satisfied, he lit an El Rey del Mundo petit corona and debated where in his souvenir cabinet to put the George Medal and the accompanying scrap of newspaper dated 20th September 1940, two columns under a common headline saying LOCAL HEROES HONOURED AT PALACE; the left column gave a description of the award ceremony and a list of names, while the right one contained four passport-style photographs, the second of which was captioned *Sqn. Ldr. G. Harpinshield, G.M.* It was an excellent likeness. The photographer had gone to much trouble to capture the contrast between his pale, chiseled features and his dark eyes and hair.

Eventually he concluded the medal would look best next to the Schneider Cup and hung it there, intending to pin the cutting alongside.

Curiously enough, however, he found himself unable to rid his mind, every time he looked at it, of the memory of that scrawny little blond girl who had kissed him with a skill beyond her years. Indeed, the erotic associations were so fierce, he found his hand straying toward his crotch.

Before he reached a decision, however, concerning either where to put the press cutting or whether to masturbate, he was startled by a yawn. And also a little dismayed. It was not ordinary to be overcome in this fashion quite so soon after one of his rewards.

Still, there was no point in trying to resist -- or he assumed there wasn't; he had never made the attempt, and most likely never would. A little leeway was always permitted, and this time he used it to fold the press cutting carefully, slip it into an envelope, and pocket it. But that was all the margin he was given. Resigned, he switched off the room.

Surrounded now by stained and faded wallpaper, with cobwebs in the corners and a layer of grease coating the sink which doubled as a washbasin, he lay down on the unmade, creaky, narrow single bed and closed his eyes.

Time to pay.

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Both of that was mostly Thursdays, but it was obviously Saturday when came to himself again, his right calf aching in a manner that made him think of falling bombs and a child with fluffy fair hair and his mouth and belly sour with a sensation forty-eight foul hours of self-indulgence deep compound of overeating and overdrinking and far too many cigars. Without even bothering to activate the room again, he made for the sink and emptied his bladder and scrubbed his teeth so hard he made his gums sore, then gulped down a cup of powdered coffee and began to feel halfway normal, apart from the usual strains and bruises.

Catching sight of himself in the room's one fly-specked mirror, he grimaced. He looked more like fifty than his chosen thirty-two. A visit to Irma, therefore. No appointment necessary. His arrival would be taken for granted, as he took for granted the need for it. It was never pleasant, having her work him over, but awareness was burgeoning in his mind that tonight he had a task to perform: one of the tasks he was so superbly good at. He would far rather have taken time out -- gone to Bermuda or the Caribbean for a while, to recover from what had been done to his body -- but he did, after all, have his George Medal.

Fair do's.

Turning the room back on, he went to the wardrobe and found appropriate clothes: a white bomber jacket with gold stripes, new black trousers, black boots with thick elastic soles. Also on the table beside the enormous circular waterbed were dark glasses and the key to a room at the Global Hotel, Park Lane. Although he had never to his recollection been there, he knew he would be recognized when he arrived; it was part of the pattern.

The room automatically shut itself down as he left. Outside, he found the early-evening weather overcast and damp. A bunch of kids, two black and four white, had taken over the Mark X Jaguar as a playhouse, someone having forced its doors. Oh, well . . .

Only at the end of the street did he realize he had omitted to shave. But there must be a reason for that style, trendiness . . .

There was always a reason for everything he did, whether or not he understood it.

At one of Bond Street's most fashionable addresses there was *not* -- naturally! -- a sign to tell the world that here was where the Beautiful People spent most money on being made so. Word of mouth served infinitely better to support Irma's cherished, and fulfilled, ambition.

It being the day it was, nobody but one of her oldest acquaintances (friends? Somehow the concept rang false, but there it was, to be put up with) could have walked in and stated his, or her,

requirements. She was, though, awaiting Godwin; they had known each other for quite a while.

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It was preferable not to put a number to the years.

She looked him over in the high-ceilinged room, lit with pitiless fluorescents, where she plied her trade. She was a handsome, square-faced, ash-blond woman who had decided to appear forty and lay claim to fifty because of Signe Hasso in *L'Éternel Retour* . . . which, in fact, was the name of her shop. Her hobby, which dated back to the time when she was reading biology at university, was the raising of exotic plants. Currently she had a species which glowed with a rich deep sheen whenever it decided to cross the floor in search of a new location. She had half a dozen trays of earth set out, and electronic gear which provoked the response, and when Godwin came in, three of the things -- plump, luscious like cacti but luminous and far more graceful -- were under way from one to another rooting site. The first was ruby-red, the next yellow, and the third shone with a vibrant blue.

"Perfect timing!" Irma crowed as Godwin entered. "Aren't they darling? Are they not perfectly and entirely darling?"

She spoke with especial fervor. Almost all her clients -- for obvious reasons -- were forbidden to see and admire her treasures, and a visit from someone who was allowed to witness her achievement was to be exploited to the full.

Godwin, though, was aching from head to toe. Whatever his body had had to put up with recently, it had taken a gigantic toll of his resources. As he stripped off his clothes and prepared to lie down under the apparatus which Irma was marshaling, he could only say curtly, "Yes -- very pretty! But what happened to the Regulan plants you had before?"

"Rigelian!" she corrected sharply, pushing him with a firm hand into the right position on the table which was broad and white and cold, and very hard. "Yes, they were all very well in their way, but they couldn't stand the nitrogen . . . or was it the carbon monoxide? No, that was the ones I had before . . . Oh, never mind!" -- with a sketch for a laugh. "They are lovely, these, aren't they?"

"Gorgeous!" he said with feigned enthusiasm, shutting his eyes. "Where are they from?"

"Oh, I don't know! Somewhere interesting, I think . . . What *have* you been doing to yourself?" -- she probed and tested his body tissue. "I hope you've allowed plenty of time, because you don't look the least like you ought to at your age."

That was a gibe, and he resigned himself to it; it was deserved. It was Irma's talent to correct him so that every time he came back he would always leave here looking precisely as someone of thirty-two ought currently to look.

And not, of course, him alone.

Her mood improved as soon as she set about her work, as always. While she was removing his surplus fat she began to hum, and by the time she got around to erasing his wrinkles -- not just from his face but from every inch of his skin -- she was cheerful enough to start boasting.

"Say, know who I had in here yesterday? Bruce Bastard-Bitch of the Claimjumpers! *You* know! The Aussie sick-rock group they're all talking about now! Was he a *mess*! I swear, I don't know what they get up to down under to ruin their bodies in such short order. Of course if they had" -- archly -- guidance . . .!"

Meantime she was readjusting his hairline to correspond with the present fashion and dehydrating him of a kilo of superfluous fluid. He could feel the tingling sensation as it flowed out through his pores taking with it the fatigue products accumulated around his strains and bruises. He relaxed, and despite the discomfort began to feel quite sympathetic toward her. Almost, indeed, affectionate.

"I suppose you *do* have to keep up that level of 17-ketosteroids, but it sure plays hell with your follicles," she sighed as she checked his hormone count. It was one of her minor abilities, to be able to sigh at such length. But he tolerated it, just as he did her belief in being guided. It was, after all, one way of putting it . . .

"Now let's do something about the accommodation of that right eye of yours," she continued, shuffling her machines around and bringing to bear one which focused a dim green light on his retina. " Oh, yes. Still a bit lazy, just as I thought. Won't take a moment, though . . . What's new with you, by the way?"

"Oh, nothing much . . ." But it was scarcely worth the doing unless there were people he could tell, and there were so few of them. He came out with it directly.

"I won the George Medal for rescuing a kid during the Blitz. I saved her life."

"You never!" But it wasn't a contradiction, only an exclamation. "I always knew you had it in you. Well, well, you actually won a medal! Did you get it from the king in person?"

"Yes. Want me to prove it with a press cutting?"

Already on first recounting it seemed far away and irrelevant. His eye had been attended to and everything in the room, including the faint reflections on the bright white tiles as the plants wandered from soil tray to soil tray, gleaming amber now and russet and orange, was far too sharply in focus for his comfort. Next, he knew, needles would probe his neck and shoulder muscles, eliminating rheumatoid plaques, and after that she would set about the business of updating him. She was invariably meticulous; every time he left here, he looked exactly as a contemporary thirty-two-year-old should.

But it was not always a pleasant experience.

"A George Medal!" she was repeating, as though to savor the very shape of the words. "Well, well, God, I bet you wish you could go around telling everybody!"

That idea was so patently absurd it was uncomfortable. Rolling over at her insistence so she could insert her needles, he caught sight of the plants again and said with an effort, "They certainly are very pretty, these new things of yours. Where did you say they came from?"

"Oh -- one of the planets of Sirius, I think," she answered absently. "Just a second. Don't move, don't

even breathe . . . Got it. Ah -- yes, Sirius or somewhere. But you should see the big ones I have home! Taller than me, and so graceful! You really ought to drop around some time. What about tonight?"

He knew and she knew what the response was sure to be, but he was glad to be able to say honestly "I'm afraid not. I'm being called."

"I see. That's why you're here, hm?" she said with affected nonchalance. "Okay, there goes your rheumatism. Now we'll service your face and hands and that'll do."

Her voice betrayed her, though. It must have been a long while since she was called. Clearly she wasn't relishing retirement. Moreover, since she and he dated back to about the same time . . .

But she put a brave face on it, and a moment later as she reorganized his eyebrows she was saying "I'm going to win a trophy at the Chelsea Flower Show, you know. For gladioli, I think. And tomorrow -- I mean on Monday -- you'll never guess who's coming for the first time! Candida Bright! You know the actress who just won the best-of-year award on ITV?"

Not, of course, to enjoy this kind of treatment. Godwin said absently, "When?"

"Oh, last month some time, I think. It was in the papers."

"No, I meant the trophy."

Even before the words were out, he realized how tactless they were. "Soon, let's hope!" he added heartily as she stood back and indicated that he could get up and dress. The addition provoked a wry smile.

She ushered him personally to the door and kissed him on both cheeks before letting him out into the street. As he strode away, she called, "Do remember what I said about dropping by some time, won't you?"

That obliged him to turn around and wave back and thus look at her again. He would much have preferred not to see her as she was with her defenses down: as other people were not privileged to see her, as she should never have been seen at all.

For that insight, too, there was of course a reason.

A proper caution.

The evening was cool but at least it was dry. Godwin drove to the underground car-park in Park Lane and left the Urraco there, jingling the hotel key he had found. Crossing the road, he noticed that the whores and beggars were out in force tonight, though traffic was naturally as light as it always was

nowadays. Half a dozen couples of police -- one man, one woman -- were trying to prevent people being accosted, but it was a job like painting the Forth Bridge. Driven from one spot, the nuisance rematerialized elsewhere a moment later.

Seeing him approach, one of the commissionaires on duty before the Global Hotel reacted alertly. "Good evening, sir!" he exclaimed as he trod on the pad before the automatic sliding doors to save Godwin the fractional delay involved in doing so himself.

"Good evening -- ah . . . ?" Godwin said as he slid a pound into the man's white-gloved hand.

"Jackson, sir!"

"Thank you, Jackson."

He walked into the foyer, which at this time of evening was full of customers smartly dressed for an evening on the town. He recognized several people who were household names -- actors, politicians, businessmen -- and was himself recognized, even though he did not recall ever being here before. But that was the way of things in his life.

"No messages, sir!" the girl on the reception desk twinkled at him. "But I reserved your table in our disco, which opens at ten o'clock."

"Thank you, Molly," he said, reading her name off the badge she wore pinned to her crisp white shirt, and left another pound lying discreetly on the counter.

Glancing around as he turned away, he saw a head of fair hair above a lean, muscular back, and for a second could have imagined . . . but no. It belonged to a young man; when he turned, he revealed a beard. And why should he be paying attention to that kind of thing, anyhow?

All the staff he encountered as he went up to his room -- correction: "his" room -- beamed at him. Entering it, he discovered awaiting him a bottle of champagne and a basket of fruit, the card accompanying which said they came with the compliments of the management.

He nodded thoughtful approval of all that that implied. In the early days there had sometimes been disasters to sort out. As time passed, this kind of thing had become more and more typical. One might put it down to increasing skill, born of frequent practice.

Or perhaps it was due to something else entirely. There was no means of finding out, so there was no point in worrying about it.

He called room service for caviar, an underdone steak and a tossed salad, and ate quietly on his own, not touching the champagne. He could only drink in the safety of his own home. But he sampled the fruit and found it delicious.

Lighting another of his favorite petit coronas, he went down to the hotel discothèque a few minutes after ten.



This early, it was almost empty apart from staff. Its roof was mirrored at crazy angles. Chairs and tables were grouped to form a horseshoe. In the center was a dais of thick glass, over water kept constantly in motion, on which were reflected lights that constantly changed color. A bar ran down one wall, and at it sat some bored-looking prostitutes tolerated by the management -- conceivably because they kicked back a portion of their takings. It was a very stock scene indeed.

The DI looked bored as he sorted through his supply of tapes and records; the barmen were yawning though they had only just got up; the women were much too heavily painted, as though expecting to be viewed on stage by people the far side of footlights, not at close quarters. One girl, tawny-skinned and slender, was on the dance floor writhing and gyrating, but she was like the token coin in the collection tray.

"Ah, good evening, sir!" a waitress said, purring up to him. "We have the same table for you as last night and the night before. I'm afraid we weren't expecting you quite so early, so I haven't set out your champagne yet -- "

"Coke," he said.

She blinked at him. She was pretty, brown-haired, youthful.

"Coke," he repeated. Her face fell, but she only shrugged and said nothing as she turned away, expecting him -- of course -- to know which table he had reserved.

Instead, he remained where he was, glancing about him and wondering what he was here for. He knew, of course, in the broadest sense, but the details so far were elusive. There was nothing for it but to wait.

The girl returned, bringing his Coke and also carrying an enormous menu which, as she indicated his table and he sat down at it, she thrust into his hands. He did no more than glance at it, registering that it offered extremely basic food -- hamburgers, cheeseburgers, pizza, kebabs -- at stratospheric prices. . . not, of course, that that could worry him. But he gave it back to her almost at once with a shake of his head.

"I ate already," he muttered, and leaned back to savor the last of his cigar.

She gave him an extremely puzzled look, but departed with another shrug, and in a little while was seen to be talking with the headwaiter. Both of them kept casting glances in his direction. Godwin ignored them, and very shortly they were distracted as new customers arrived. Within half an hour so there were twenty people present and four young couples were dancing under the random changing lights -- and above them. The effect of the reflection from the ripples was colorful and imaginative; he watched it most of the time he was sitting alone.

Now and then he was interrupted by the passage of one or other waiter or waitress, each of whom greeted him cordially and hovered for a while, clearly expecting him to place an order. As each in turn moved away disappointed, they wore identical looks of perplexity.

It grew very warm in the room. One of the girls, who had come in with a fat, father-old escort, took o

her blouse and started dancing topless; another, not to be outdone, peeled off her dress and danced in bikini panties, barefooted. Both were young and quite attractive, and for a while Godwin wondered whether he should be interested in them. But neither seemed to show any sign of recognition.

It was not until nearly midnight -- by which time the place was crowded and his table, in single occupation and with nothing on it but a half-empty glass of Coke and a clean ashtray, formed the eye of a storm of noise and shouting and feverish activity -- that the girl he was expecting turned up.

Two young men, both apparently Arabs, both in impeccable dinner suits incongruously combined with pale fawn headdresses bound with green silk cords, entered ahead of two women: one plump and blond, about thirty, and the other slim and brown-haired but with a streak of silver, very much younger -- at most, eighteen. It was she who, glancing around, spotted him and gave a nervous wave and smile behind her companions' backs. She wore yellow satin pants, very tight, and a blue strapless top held up by a ruched elastic insert. On the left of her neck, inexpertly powdered over, there was a strawberry-colored bite mark. She looked tired and ill at ease. But she smiled the instant she caught sight of Godwin, and everything -- or almost everything -- became clear to him.

One table remained vacant, in a bad position well away from the dance-floor, and the party was shown to it and at once supplied with a bottle of whisky and a bowl of ice and a syphon of soda, along with dishes of junk food of the kind Godwin had been resolutely refusing since his arrival. Like alcohol that was something he would only risk in the security of home. He waited another couple of minutes until the group settled down, then rose and approached them with his most leonine strides. Thanks to Irma, his body tingled with vitality, and virtually everyone in the place stared at him as he moved.

The girl started up from her chair in excitement, holding out her hand to seize his as soon as he came in range.

"I'm so glad you're here!" she exclaimed. "Let me introduce my friends! This is Rashad. This is Afif. This is Peggy. This is Godwin!"

He acknowledged them with a succession of cool nods, not letting go of her hand. It was very clear from their expressions that neither Afif -- the older -- nor Rashad welcomed his intrusion. In fact both looked in a thoroughly bad temper. He sensed storm warnings, but continued anyhow.

"Hello . . . I came over to ask if you'd like to dance with me." Beautifully controlled, his voice lanced through the din.

"Yes, I'd love to! You will excuse me, won't you?" -- to Rashad, who was clearly her partner for the evening, wherever it had begun.

"No," he said.

Startled, she stared at him, poised half out of her chair.

He pointed at the dance floor. Some quiet persuasion from the management had removed from it the girls who were going topless and obliged them to dress again, but two or three who were up there now were in shorts and halters or strapless dresses slit to the thigh.

"No," he said again. "I have bought you for tonight. You have been paid for. If you dance, you w dance with me or with my brother."

The brother nodded firm agreement. Blond Peggy looked a trifle alarmed, but did her best to conce her reaction.

Godwin planted the knuckles of both fists on the table and leaned toward Rashad.

"I asked the lady if she'd like to dance with me and she said yes," he stated in level tones. "She sa yes. I don't care how you treat women in the slave markets of wog-land, but in this country they a not for buying and selling. They are people. Got that? Now let's go and dance," he concluded, turni to the girl again.

Rashad's hand flashed across the table and seized her by the wrist.

"You will do as you are told!" he hissed.

"Let go -- you're hurting!" she cried.

By now the attention of half the room was on them. Most of the dancers had checked in mi movement and were staring this way; eyes wide, lips apart, they were visibly hungry for somethi out of the ordinary run of events, and if it was violent they would be most pleased.

It was not going to turn out that way.

Three tall male members of the staff converged, two to take station either side of Godwin, one to ber deferentially over the Arabs' table and say, "Is this gentleman disturbing you?"

Rashad uttered an Arabic curse and made as though to spit. The deferential one turned to Godwin.

"I believe the manager would like a word with you, sir. This way, if you please."

After what Irma had done to him, Godwin was well aware he could have broken all three of them in small pieces and scarcely been out of breath at the end of it, but somehow this did not feel like th right response. Shrugging, he let himself be led through a door set inconspicuously at the end of th bar, and instantly he was in another world: one of hustle and bustle, of deliveries and shouted order of dust and litter and junk to be concealed from the gaze of the clientele. A few yards along a dim- corridor, and they entered the manager's office: a shabby room with functional furniture, an ol fashioned desk, telephones, filing cabinets, a worn rug on a concrete floor.

The manager, a balding man of fifty-odd, didn't even glance up as he spoke on Godwin's entrance.

"I don't know what your game is, chum, but I don't like it. I'm not even sure you're you, and not yo twin brother. Last night and the night before, you come in here like the original big spender, you mak with the tips and the champagne, you generally make yourself welcome. Tonight you don't eat, yo don't drink, you don't dance, you sit there like a bloody statue *and* , to crown it all, you make wav

with Prince Afif and Prince Rashad -- "

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One of the phones on his desk buzzed; it was an internal one. He barked at it, "Yes?" And listened.

"The hell you say," he said after a while. "That's exactly what we don't need!"

Cradling the receiver, he stared directly at Godwin for the first time.

"They marched out!" he snapped. "Said this wasn't the way they expected to be treated! I hope you're bloody satisfied!"

"What do you expect me to do if your rich chums behave like slave dealers?" Godwin countered.

"I don't give a damn what you do so long as it doesn't fuck up my operation!" He pulled himself to his feet; he overtopped Godwin by a good three inches.

"I gather you have a room in the hotel. Go to it! Get some beddy-byes! And don't come back in my disco, hear? Not until you're prepared to act like a customer again instead of a specter at the blood feast! Christ, what do you expect me to do -- carry you because you spent so much here already you ran out of money? It won't work on me, chummy, if that is your game! I've had 'em all in here, and I keep the ones who can afford it. And only those! Now you get lost, okay?" To one of the heavies he added, "Show him back to the foyer. And I mean show him! Don't turn him loose to 'lose his way' and sneak back into the disco!"

Meekly Godwin let himself be shown, knowing what was in store.

He just had time, eluding his escort, to vanish through the door marked Gentlemen before the pangs of punishment descended. There was one astonished young man in the toilet -- barely more than a boy who summed up his condition in a single glance and hurried away . . . and was wrong. Contrary to appearances, Godwin was not drunk enough to vomit, though his paleness and unsteady gait combined to give that impression.

He was simply suffering, and resigned to the fact. He had, after all, messed up his assignment . . . one of the sort he was good at.

In a bolted cubicle he struggled not to resist the pangs, recognizing them as just. But repressing the moans called forth from him cost all his energy, and when it was over he had to sit with head in hands for a long while before he dared venture forth again.

He used the time well, though, and made plans.

Miraculously, it appeared that no one had remembered to get at Jackson. Emerging cautiously into the hotel lobby, Godwin put on the boldest face he could contrive, and strolled toward the entrance though to glance at the weather. The commissionaire leaped to attention.

"Going out, sir?"

"Not right away," Godwin said musingly, and contrived to slide a fiver into the man's hand. "But . . . Well, you saw Prince Rashad and Prince Afif leave some time ago with a couple of girls?"

"Oh, yes! With Peggy and Gorse. I called them a cab."

"Well, I'm going to be in the lounge bar for a while" -- with a jerk of his head. "I'd like to know when they come back. I take it they will come back? They have rooms here?"

"The Imperial Suite on the second floor," Jackson confided. He had made the money vanish without so much as a rustle.

"Fine. I'll sit where I can see you reflected in that glass door," Godwin said, having rapidly checked several possibilities in his mind's eye. "Give me a signal -- wave your arm up and down, or something -- as soon as you recognize them. Okay?"

"Will do," Jackson said, and Godwin headed for the lounge.

It was almost two hours before the signal came. Thirty cabs had drawn up -- for want of any better way to pass the time, Godwin had kept score -- and this was the thirty-first. The lounge barman was reading a newspaper and trying not to yawn; the lights were lowered in the foyer; outside, the last of the beggars had quit for the night.

Godwin rose to his feet with electric rapidity and strode out through the automatic doors so fast that they would not have had time to open for him. Jackson, though, was already treading on the sensor pad against the arrival of the princes and their women. The taxi was drawing away. Godwin shouted commandingly, "Hang on, driver! I want you!"

Obediently the woman -- for it was a woman at the wheel -- braked and reversed.

The girl who had been identified by the peculiar name of Gorse was red-eyed and looked as though she had been crying. Peggy was attempting to comfort her. Both the brothers wore expressions of thundercloud rage and were talking to one another in rapid Arabic, paying no more attention to the girls than to make sure they were not trying to cut and run.

The moment they recognized Godwin, they halted in their tracks and flinched away from him. He closed on them with his fists raised to elbow height, wider apart than the width of his body, and the eyes of each fixed, fascinated, on one fist.

"I told you," he said mildly. "I don't care what you get up to in wog-land, but here we don't buy and sell women!"

And instead of punching, he kicked, leaping into the air like a ballet dancer. He caught Rashad first, just below the left kneecap and the man crumpled with a yell; then he took Afif in the crotch and strode between the pair of them with one hand poised to catch Gorse by the elbow. With his other hand he hauled open the taxi's door, and seconds later they were safely inside. Reflex made the driver start

up the instant the door shut.

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"Hey, I say!" she shouted over her shoulder. "I don't like what you just done! You get right out of the cab again, now! Or else I'll call a copper, understand?"

But before she could brake to a halt, Godwin said, "They were going to sell her as a white slave!"

Prompt on cue, the girl crumpled against his shoulder and began to utter huge gut-wrenching sobs.

Before the driver could say anything else Godwin gave her his address and leaned back, stroking Gorse's soft dark hair with its incongruous silver streak as though he were comforting a little child.

So far the whole episode had gone so smoothly he was already on the verge of being bored.

When they were nearly at their destination Gorse sat up without warning and said slowly and clearly "Please stop. I think I'm going to be sick."

Godwin tapped on the glass partition behind the driver, who understood instantly and pulled in at the curb. Deftly he opened the door and thrust her head out just far enough, keeping his other arm around her to steady her. She uttered a gush of liquid that made the air stink of gin.

Wiping her chin with a handkerchief, he sat her back and closed the door again, and they completed their journey without further incident.

In his home street all but two of the lamps were out. She shivered noticeably as he helped her to the ground, having already passed the cab fare plus a generous tip to the driver. Slowly, through the alcoholic fog, she registered the high-piled rubbish in the gutters, the derelict cars, the dark faces of the houses where many windows had been broken and mended, after a fashion, with cardboard sheets of plastic.

"What have you brought me here for?" she demanded between a cry and a sob.

"It's where I live," he answered, taking her arm and guiding her roughly up the steps of his home. She tried to rebel, tried to hang back -- but a fresh bout of nausea overcame her, and this time instead of spurting out, her vomit dribbled, staining the front of her clothes.

Godwin waited with forced patience until the spasm passed, then urged her indoors. "You're not going anywhere in that state," he muttered. But she scarcely paid attention. She was gesturing at herself, shuddering.

"I didn't mean to make such a mess of myself!" she wailed. "I'm so sorry, I'm so ashamed, I'm such a fool!"

"Right."

---

He got her up the stairs and into his room, turning it on as he opened the door. She was too befuddled with drink to notice its details, though he himself was rather pleased with them: his usual waterbed, some wall-sized enlargements of erotic pen-and-wash drawings by the French artist Bertrand, several more wardrobes than usual, and a cabinet of perfectly clear glass around the shower, bidet, and toilet bowl. Also the towels were black, a highly suitable color.

Quiet music began, intermingled with the wash of waves on a beach, and the air was warm and fresh, and the lamps, when they came on, shed the color of moonlight in irregular patches.

Not bad.

But he had other preoccupations. He said, "Get out of those filthy clothes."

She had begun to cry again as they came upstairs. The brusqueness of his command snapped her back to awareness. She stared at him with a hurt, little-girl look.

"I said get out of them! They reek of vomit!"

"But -- but I only bought them day before yesterday! This is my best gear! I can't just . . ."

The words tailed away as she gazed down at herself and realized just how much of a mess she had created. Before she could recover, he reached out with careful precision and tore the garments away from her: rr-rip, rr-rr-rip. He balled up the fabric and flung it in the direction of a waste bin.

Her sandals had come off along with her satin trousers, so now all she wore was a pair of white briefs and panties, also -- as she realized when she noticed his glare of distaste -- soiled. She whimpered with self-loathing.

"Get in there and clean yourself," he said, pointing at the glass cabinet.

"But . . . !" She stared for a drink-extended moment at the clear glass walls; the door stood wide. Then she reasoned out that on the one hand there was no alternative, and on the other she could scarcely be more humiliated than she was already. Sullen, tears still trickling down from her red-rimmed eyes, she obeyed: emptied her bowels into the pan, flushed the mess away, squatted on the bidet and scrubbed herself, though trying to punish herself.

"Here," he said, entering the compartment and handing her a glass half full of cloudy white fluid.  
"Drink this."

She obeyed as though he were a doctor and she a patient totally committed to his care. When the glass was empty, he took it back and threw her a towel.

"Dry yourself."

"Have you -- have you something I can put on?" she dared to whisper.

"Where do you think you're going?"

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He turned his back with deliberate contempt and, waiting for her to follow him out of the glass cage, sipped at a ballon of 1858 Armagnac, which had lost all its vinosity and tasted -- and smelled -- solely of the oak casks in which it had been matured prior to bottling. The flavor and the bouquet were unique; there was no other liquor like this in the world.

Behind him he heard her crying cease. When she stepped back into the main room, the towel wrapped around her body and tucked in above her breasts, her eyes were sparkling.

"It's incredible! What was it you gave me? I feel fine again!"

"That's what it's for."

"But it's amazing! I never heard of any medicine that could do that!"

"I'm not surprised," he grunted. And wasn't; it was nowhere on sale. Nowhere on Earth, at any rate.

Better or not, though, next moment her face fell. Her gaze had lit on the bundle of cloth he had torn from her.

"That was all I had to wear," she said timidly. "All my other clothes are at the -- the house where I rent a room. Please lend me something so I can go home!"

"No."

She stared at him like a child astonished by a promised punishment which had suddenly turned out to be real. Her lips trembled on the brink of renewed sobs.

He said harshly, "How much of tonight were you expecting to spend at home, you little tart?"

"But I -- but I . . . !"

Her last resistance crumbled. She dropped forward on her knees, her head in her hands, and the storm of sobbing which racked her this time was cathartic. Easing his way to a chair, he cajoled her gently closer so that she could rest her forehead on his lap while he stroked her hair, and piece by piece he assembled her story.

Half of it was, predictably, a tissue of lies.

She was eighteen. Her parents had divorced when she was so small she could scarcely remember her father, and into the bargain she hated the name he had bequeathed her -- "Simpkins! I mean honestly, who wants to be called Simpkins?" -- along with her given name, which was Dora -- "Isn't it terrible, bloody end? Dora Simpkins!"



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