

PROLOGUE

Dusk was beginning to creep down from the mountains when the Witchfinder rode into Craighlowrie. His hunched position in the saddle of the black mare disguised his true height, yet all the same he was tall and terrible, the features beneath the dark broad-brimmed hat seemed like those of a sun-bleached skull from a distance. The grimace that revealed black and broken teeth; the eyes that glowed with the fire of a personal hatred, and seemed to search out each and every one of the peasants who trembled and watched behind the windows of their tumbledown bothies.

They remembered the last time he had come to this remote Scottish valley, a company of soldiers in his wake. Six villagers had been dragged from their homes and burned, the Witchfinder's long bony forefinger singling them out - judge and executioner - not speaking, just smiling evilly. And when he left, the stench of burned human flesh hung in the atmosphere for days afterwards as though he had commanded the elements not to disperse it - a grim reminder to those who still lived. That had been in 1580. And now, fifteen years later, he was back, a devil incarnate on a mission of death, hidden beneath the folds of his travel-worn cloak was a royal commission which none dared question.

The fact that he was alone now was in a way more terrifying to the watchers than if he had ridden in with an armed escort, for such was his aura of power that he seemed like a god of old come to torture and kill, to wreak mayhem wherever he travelled.

His eyes narrowed to slits, taking in the village in one sweeping glance, reviving old memories which brought a grim smile to the bloodless lips. There stood the kirk, a symbol of defiance against evil, in spite of its weatherworn structure. Almost contempt in the Witchfinder's expression now, perhaps wishing that he could burn the ageing, red-faced clergyman who peered from behind the partly open doors; another monarch, another Act, and perhaps one day that would come about. Eyes everywhere were watching him, like frightened fireflies ready to withdraw into the darkness.

Tall and erect now, straining his gaze to make out the half-demolished cottage some way up the mountain slope. He watched intently, as though looking for some movement from within but there was none. Just a faint wisp of peaty smoke rising straight up into the windless sky. That meant Balzur was at home. But there was no hurry; he would not be going anywhere.

The stranger nudged his horse forward, tired hooves scraping on the stony track. He rode slowly between the uneven line of dwellings until he reached a larger building at the far end beyond the kirk, its windows lighted and a door ajar - the hospitality of the inn, denied to none.

The Witchfinder dismounted in one easy movement, throwing the loose reins over a hitching-post. The animal stood there meekly as its master mounted the

narrow steps and threw the door wide open.

The single room which served as a hostelry for the inhabitants of Craighlowrie was primitive - trestle tables of planks placed across sawn tree butts, earthenware jugs and mugs, an acrid reek of ale and crudely-distilled spirit which caused the newcomer's nostrils to flare. A man straightened up from the fireplace, hunched by some deformity from birth, blistered lips moving beneath his red beard.

'Sire.' He gave a half-bow, sweeping downwards with the stump of a malformed hand. 'My humble inn, food and drink, are yours.'

There was a gleam in the Witchfinder's eyes as he scraped mud from the soles of his riding boots on to the rough floor. 'Aye, landlord, all that I want I'll take in the name of the King and his Kirk. Ale for now, and tell me of this man Balzur.'

Amber liquid was slopped into a vessel on the bar and when the innkeeper spoke his festered lips quivered. 'Sire,' he began, 'Balzur has ruled Craighlowrie and the people of these mountains ever since the royal soldiers left after quelling the uprising. His word is law ... until now!' Relief overcame fear. 'Thank God our message found you, Witchfinder.'

'My coming has nothing to do with your message' - a pause as the speaker took a long swallow of ale. 'I have travelled many miles because there is said to be one here whose magic offends the King and his Kirk. But tell me more of this Balzur and his black powers.'

'He communes with the devil' - a sudden rush of words. 'Young maidens and children have been snatched from their homes in the dead of night, and never seen again. The people live in terror, and bestow gifts upon Balzur in the hope that he might pass over their families. Only last week a wee lassie . . .
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'I'll warrant his power is not as strong as mine,' the Witchfinder gave a low laugh. 'But, nevertheless, I shall need the help of the people of Craighlowrie. All the brushwood they can find to make a fire so great that it will light up the English towns on the other side of Solway. Tonight the sky will radiate my power for all to see, driving the evil ones back into the darkness.'

'The people await your bidding, sire.' 'Then bid them hasten, for the time is nigh.' As the Witchfinder watched the dwarf-like figure step out through a rear doorway, he heard the mutter of low voices. Laughing, he refilled his mug. This coming night would be yet another to savour.

It was fully dark when the Witchfinder left the inn, a myriad of sparkling stars in the sky promising frost before morning - a night to huddle around a blazing fire. And tonight, the people of Craighlowrie would be able to do just that! The tall man glanced towards the mingled crowd further down the street.

He set off at a walk, his pace deceptive so that some of the older villagers had to break into a shambling run just to keep his silhouette in view. He permitted himself another smile as he noticed the dead branches piled high around the base of a lone oak which had once been struck by lightning. These peasants had wasted no time in their eagerness to be rid of Balzur.

The going was steeper now though he did not slow his step. His heart was pounding at the thought of what lay ahead. The remains of a hillside cottage were lit up - an ethereal glow that cast weird shadows across heather and gorse. So long as Balzur was at home, nothing else mattered.

As the Witchfinder paused, staring at the jagged stone entrance with its ill-fitting door, he heard the low mutterings of those who followed at a distance. They were afraid - Balzur's sorcery was feared from the Craighlowrie mountains to the Firth, and beyond. Even now they doubted the powers of the Witchfinder against the magic of Balzur.

There was a faint stench, barely noticeable - but once you recognised it you heaved and vomited. Burning human flesh! Yet to the Witchfinder it was the sweet fragrance of success, familiar to one such as himself. He moved forward, no longer hesitating. The time for savouring was over. His booted foot struck the door, and flung it back with a splintering of wood.

Balzur was there, at the far end of the littered room. The fire in the wide grate belched out poisonous-smelling smoke as though the soot-caked chimney above was rebelling against it. In some respects the wizard resembled the one who had encroached upon his domain. Beneath the grime on his scaly flesh the features were finely cut, as though nobility had existed in his ancestry. Old, so old it seemed incredible that he still lived and moved . . . until you looked into his eyes and then you understood! Two sunken, malevolent orbs that radiated the ultimate in evil - an invisible force that had men cowering back and babbling their fear of his magic. Except the Witchfinder; he met his adversary's gaze unflinchingly, then allowed his eyes to travel round the room.

He'd seen most of it before in similar abodes; verminous creatures scurrying and squeaking in their cages, dried and whitened bones, the jar of preserved foreskins. Only here the stench of death was predominant - a dismembered child's body smouldering and hissing amidst the peat and kindling wood. There were markings on floor, walls and ceiling; a few familiar but most beyond his ken. Balzur, truly, was a black magician supreme, a disciple of the Left Hand Path.

The Witchfinder's mouth was suddenly dry, and a momentary spasm of fear twanged his heartbeat out of rhythm. Then he had himself under control again - staring at the wizard's tall, skeletal figure, arrogant and defiant.

'I need no further proof of your vile sorcery,' the Witchfinder cried, with relief that his voice did not quaver. 'I see it all before me here. And for what I see you are condemned to die by fire, so that your evil may be consumed with you.'

'My power is greater than yours, Witchfinder. Molest me at your peril!'

'Seize him!' the other shouted, half-turned towards the villagers crowding into the room. 'Drag him to the stake.'

Then came a rush of angry, sweat-stinking bodies, and calloused hands grabbing for the old man whose upraised arm failed to hold off those who had so long yielded to his demands - touching him at first with the revulsion of an inquisitive child finding a dead reptile, then dragging him boldly out into the open. A chorus of abuse drowned his feeble protests as he was raised aloft and carried down the uneven slope. Burning torches illuminated the scene, reflecting on Balzur's features. The Witchfinder, bringing up the rear, gasped in amazement. Their power destroyed, his victims usually screamed and pleaded for mercy. But not Balzur! His face was an impassive mask, without so much as a glimmer of apprehension in the deep-sunken eyes - tight-lipped, angry, but unafraid!

Several stumbled on the long trek down to Craighlowrie village, and once the

wizard was almost dropped. But their anger had now escalated to a frenzy. Burn the fiend. Let Pluto, ruler of the underworld, take his own back into his fiery halls. They recalled the Bible readings in the kirk as the timid clergyman had relied upon its teachings to combat the evil hanging over them for so long. 'Thou shall not suffer a witch to live. He that sacrificeth unto any god save the Lord only, he shall be utterly destroyed.' It was time for those words to be put into action!

Balzur was lifted up and tied with stout ropes to the tree-trunk. Blazing torches were held at the ready as all heads turned towards the Witchfinder. The tall man emerged from the shadows, and approached the condemned man.

'This is the fate that awaits all who confer with demons, Balzur,' came his deep booming voice that seemed to echo through the village and along the valley. 'My power is greater than yours, my fire hotter than hell itself.'

'Wait!' It was no desperate plea from the bound man on top of the pyre, rather an insistence that his last words be heard. 'You know not what you do.'

'Blasphemy - words stolen from the Holy Book.'

'No. My words in truth, my warning. Burn me and all of you shall burn. You too, Witchfinder. The anger of Pluto will come upon those who destroy his disciple and he will send fire to consume you; you and your descendants after you. A heat that will consume you within and without, a fire that will live in this place for all time. This I promise. The curse of Pluto will be upon you and your offspring. Stop now, before it is too late!'

'Empty words, the hollow threats of a cowardly murderer.' The Witchfinder shouted, noticing that a few of those with torches had stepped back. 'This blasphemous cannot harm you. Do not listen to him. Fire him!'

A torch was thrust forward, with a loud crackling as the hungry flames found the dry tinder and began to spread. Other torches were thrown on to the fire, instantly igniting and sending up orange tongues and flying sparks. There was a loud roar as the flames amalgamated, the thickening smoke spiralled and mushroomed out into the blackness of night.

'Hear me. Listen to the curse of Balzur. Hear me, Pluto, mighty ruler of the world below!' Balzur's features seemed less wizened now, the wrinkles smoothing out into the tenderness of youth, no hint of the searing pain of the fire as it began to blacken the flesh beneath his blazing garments.

The crowd had fallen back in a frightened huddle, unable to take their eyes off Balzur.

'Don't look at him! Don't listen!' the Witchfinder shrieked through the crackle of burning branches and there was no mistaking the fear in his voice. 'He can't hurt you now,'

No, but his evil demons can. Pluto will take revenge for this. Far better to have fled Craighlowrie and left our village for Balzur to rule over.

The King's Witchfinder had now fallen back, wanting to turn and run, to mount his horse and leave this devilish place far behind. But he found his gaze irresistibly drawn back up to the face of his burning victim.

'You heard me, Witchfinder,' his blackened lips made themselves heard above the noise. 'You and these people, and all their families, shall die by the fire of Pluto. A living death. My agony is short-lived, before I go to join my

master. But yours will continue endlessly in everlasting hell fire.' A sudden collapse of burning debris, and the blazing body was momentarily screened by the eddying smoke. When this cleared, he still managed one last soul-chilling cry. 'Hear me, Pluto, whom I have served so long, and take my soul in return for a curse upon Craighlowrie. Burn these people and their children, and their children's children, with a fire that cannot be quenched!'

The Witchfinder found himself staggering away with the others, in a panic-stricken flight through the blinding smoke, clasping his hands over his ears in a futile attempt to shut out the words. And then through streaming eyes he spied his black mount pulling frantically at its tether, eyes rolling as it bucked and plunged . . . as if it, too, had heard and understood.

Grabbing the reins he somehow brought the animal to a standstill, gulping for breath as he hauled himself up into the saddle, trying to get the horse under control.

You, too, Witchfinder!

He spurred its flanks, knowing he could not stop the horse even if he wanted to, and crouching low over its neck, he thundered past the scattered hovels of Craighlowrie, the place now cursed by Balzur as he traded his soul for revenge upon his executioners.

Galloping through the night, the mare found its own path, slewing violently in places and almost throwing its rider. On, on - far beyond the glow of the dying fire now reflecting on the mountain slopes above the village.

Then suddenly the night sky was lit up with dazzling brilliance - a shooting ball of fire that seared the eyeballs, a brightness impossible to shut out. The Witchfinder felt his steed rear, knew that he was airborne, somersaulting, flying. Falling. A sickening crunch that seemed to break every bone in his body, then he was lying there blinded by fiery explosions that threatened to shatter his skull. Screaming for mercy until his voice was no more than a hoarse whisper.

Then came the pain with all its excruciating force, a burning that he had him gasping for water. Somewhere he could smell smoke - but that was impossible because he had covered many miles and Balzur's funeral pyre was far behind.

You, too, Witchfinder!

Oh God, the pain! His lungs racked him with every wheezing breath. He couldn't move, every limb was contorted with agony. And he could not get that face out of his mind, the cursing lips, the searching eyes. None would be spared.

And the Witchfinder knew that he was going to die. His body burned and yet there was no fire. Scorching heat and dancing flames. And Balzur still cursing, pursuing him into the black void of unconsciousness.

It was three days before the villagers emerged from their homes and crept towards the burned patch where Balzur's dwelling had stood. Past the ashes of the fire in which the ogre of Craighlowrie had perished, the blackened skeleton scarcely distinguishable from the charred branches of the old oak.

Shivering on a damp misty morning, but not because of the cold, they stood some fifty yards away from the blackened ruin, saw the heap of fallen stones that had once been walls, the timbers reduced to powdered ash.

And something else ... an object roughly the size of a large tombstone

embedded in the ground where once the door had stood. Uneven yet smooth and shining, glinting with a coppery colour as the first rays of the morning sun penetrated the swirling mist. Once they glanced at it they had to keep on looking, as though it was an eye that held them with a hypnotic stare.

As the sun rose, the mist vanished, but still they continued to stand there. So warm, like the glow of embers when the fire has died down. Getting warmer, the longer they stood there, until they began to sweat.

They assured each other that the strange heat came from the ashes - that beneath them the fire still burned and would continue to do so for weeks like the moorland fires in dry summers. But it was evening before they finally returned to their bothies and told their families what they had seen. And each of them vowed never to return to that awful place again, remembering Balzur's curse and his pact with Pluto.

Winter came with its howling blizzards, and deep snows that buried Craighlowrie, the villagers remaining in their cottages from November until the following March. And, as always, the winter brought its own deaths; the sick and infirm unable to survive the cold in spite of their incessant peat fires.

By February there were fifteen corpses awaiting burial; strong men who had died in indescribable agony in the claustrophobic blackness of their tomb-like homes, pleading for water as their bodies burned with festering rashes, wasting away in frenzied delirium.

Finally the snows began to melt and in the first week of April a tragic, fearful column of Craighlowrie's survivors wound its way up towards the foot of the mountain. The ascent up to where Balzur's cottage had once stood was treacherous yet they had to see, curiosity overcoming their terror in the bright sunlight.

They stood there aghast, huddled together for safety, the sweat on their bodies turning icy.

'May God have mercy on us ... and on all the people of Craighlowrie!' The ageing clergyman closed his eyes and prayed that the sinister blackened square which harboured not a flake of snow amidst the mountain drifts would disappear by the time he looked again. But it did not.

'It's . . . gone!' a shaking hand pointed to the place where a heap of rubble had once marked the site of the black magician's hovel. In its place was a gaping hole that seemed to drop on down into the bowels of the earth. None dared step forward to ascertain its depth. A yawning black pit had swallowed up both the stonework and the thunderbolt that had come in answer to Balzur's curse. Pluto had sent his messenger of destruction and, once its work was done, it had sunk back down to the underworld!

The villagers returned to their homes in terror, never daring to venture back up that hillside again - for when the lush summer growth began it was only too plain to see that not a single shoot of heather nor blade of grass grew on that spot they now called 'Pluto's Patch'.

And from that time onwards, according to legend, the people of Craighlowrie died terrible deaths, with a disease that spread over their bodies in burning rashes. But always a few survived - enough to transmit the curse through the following centuries. Then finally none remained, just a ghost village where strange lights in the sky and burning heath fires were reported by wandering shepherds in search of missing sheep.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, a town was built on the site of Craighlowrie's dereliction. New people moved in, and if perchance they heard stories of Balzur and the Witchfinder, they scoffed and dismissed these tales as folklore which had no part in a modern world. And in a growing population a few deaths went virtually unnoticed . . .

Chapter One

Muir-burning time; mid-February when the heather is brittle after a dry spell, the old growth igniting easily and the fire spreading, leaving in its wake a charred and ugly landscape. But only a temporary disfiguration of Nature's kingdom, for within weeks the new growth will sprout lush and green, tender shoots for the hungry grouse to devour, cover in which to hatch their young, hidden from the sharp eye of the gliding buzzard or eagle, safety from the prowling fox.

Moorland fires had their own special fascination for Jock Leggett. The dancing orange tongues, the way they ate up everything in their path, a leaping tide of destruction, crackling and hissing like an army of angry dragons, thwarted when they reached the fire-break which Jock had carefully scythed around the patch to be burned. Then he began all over again, working zestfully so that from his croft that night he could gaze out upon the big squares of smouldering ashes and know that it was all his own work. It crossed his mind once what he would have done had he lived within the bounds of a city, Edinburgh or Glasgow, instead of on the outskirts of Craighlowrie. It was a frightening thought because he knew he would have had to set fire to something. He couldn't live without fire, as though he had been spawned in hell.

The Balzur legend didn't frighten Jock - not one little bit. Balzur had been a man of fire, and he'd died as he'd lived, not uttering a single scream even when the blaze was at its fiercest, turning his flesh to dripping fat, like the burning of a candle.

All the same Jock wasn't happy. With the sweet smell of heather smoke in his nostrils he gazed down with smarting eyes upon the activity in the valley below him. Bulldozers levelled the rugged terrain, a gang of men were already erecting a high barbed-wire fence around the perimeter of what the Craighlowrie Herald announced would be the most up-to-date nuclear waste reprocessing plant in the world. Coyle, the editor, had nicknamed it 'Holocaust', and if anything went wrong that was what it would be, a blazing hell on earth. Jock conjured up a mental picture, sky-high flames that would light up the sky for miles around, the smell of burning flesh heavy in the atmosphere. It wasn't that which worried him most, though, because he didn't really understand anything about nuclear recycling. It was what these bastards were doing to the valley that upset him. This was just the start; they'd need more and more land and they'd take it as they wanted it, regardless of sheep or grouse or the hill folk who eked out a living the simple way. One day there would be nothing here but barbed-wire compounds and squat featureless buildings - like being taken

over by the Russians.

Jock coughed as some of the smoke got down into his lungs. It was sweet, like tobacco smoke, and made him feel heady until he couldn't breathe and had to back away out of the eddying clouds. He wondered what would happen to these slopes in years to come. They'd be barren - the moor above too - all incorporated in this latest foolhardy venture by Man, the suicide course of modern civilization. It would be nice to burn them off now, whilst there was still heather to burn, a kind of defiant gesture to this bureaucracy which was spreading up from south of the border. They wanted barren landscapes; then bloody well gi' it 'em, a black stinking charred desert!

The blood coursed fiercely through Jock Leggett's veins, his wizened, weatherbeaten features clouded with anger, gnarled hands clenched at the tiny moving dots down below. The grouse and their predators would be driven to another habitat, and then another, and another, until there was nowhere left for them to go. Man, too, would become an extinct species.

Jock had already seen the best of his life. Nostalgic memories flooded back: the moor as it used to be when the gentlemen shooters came by horse-drawn carriages in the days when his father was gamekeeper here, wining and dining in the lodges at night - lodges now fallen into decay because sportsmen today jetted up for a day's shooting and had no time to savour the other, more worthwhile aspects of their trip. A hundred brace was average for a day then; now thirty was considered good. Leisure had been replaced by haste, an urgency to get everything over and done with. Selfishness and greed . . .

Yes, Jock decided, today was as good a day as any for a big fire, a freshening westerly wind to fan the flames, and drive the blaze downwards towards the monstrosity that was destroying the valley below. Sweeping flames that would destroy everything in their path. And nobody would be able to prove a thing; since dozens of muir-burns got out of control every spring.

Hidden by the smoke from anybody who might be watching down below, Jock Leggett moved away, and picked out a clump of gorse suitable for starting the big blaze. He dropped to his knees in the heather, the matchbox rattling in his hand. No change of mind, no regrets. This was going to be the end of an era. In a way it was like being God.

Some dead gorse flared and crackled, sparks igniting several more fires in the rough brown grass that lay around. Wisps of smoke thickened. Soon rivers of flame merged into an ocean inferno - roaring as the wind caught it.

Jock Leggett remained kneeling, almost as though he had not the strength to struggle to his feet. And everywhere it had grown much darker, as the thickening smoke hung in the sky, shutting out the sun. The blaze was really getting a hold now. Jock smiled feebly as he moved downhill. Soon the smoke would block out the sunlight from the entire valley - a hellish night in the midst of day.

Let that day be darkness. Let not God regard it from above, neither let the light shine upon it. Let darkness and the shadow of death stain it. Let a cloud dwell upon it. Let the blackness of the day terrify it.

And then came the heat, scorching the old gamekeeper, smarting his eyes with a painful dryness. Through the billowing smoke he could clearly see a ten-foot wall of flame - coming back towards him!

He lost his balance as his foot caught up in some tangled heather, and he fell back. His mouth opened but the cry of terror was no more than a wheeze.

Let that day be darkness.

His fear escalated. The wind had changed suddenly to an easterly direction. No longer was the blaze being carried down towards Craighlowrie. Instead it was moving back uphill, the flames all around him as they raced towards the moor above.

Jock Leggett closed his eyes, but he could not shut out the living hell all around him. Then suddenly he was aware that he was no longer alone!

A man ... He could see him clearly, seemingly impervious to the fire which raged about him. A ragged figure materialising out of the black smoke. A face that belonged to a corpse in the final stages of decay. Hairless and blackened. Eyes that glowed brightly, or else reflected the inferno that surely must consume him any moment. Blistered lips stretched into a mirthless smile . . . uttering soundless words.

This is how it once was, and is now, and shall be again. A land of fires, destroying. Only I can live, for Pluto himself gave me everlasting life to carry out his bidding. You shall die- just as the people of this valley shall die. My curse is at hand. For I, Balzur, rule this place, and I shall rise again amidst its ashes. I have brought fire and death . . .

Leggett managed a scream, but he had not the strength to attempt a futile flight.

The heat scorched his flesh, his clothing smouldered. He sank back, staring wildly into the encroaching flames. But the old man was no longer visible - just a shapeless wisp of smoke amidst the inferno.

He prayed for death but it did not come. His body was now ablaze, with a hissing sound like wet logs make on a roaring fire. Strange shapes came and went - a host of demons mocking him in his last hour, delighting in his pain and terror. Shrill voices. Laughter.

Pledge your soul and Pluto will grant everlasting life.

Jock Leggett wanted to do just that. Somehow he forced his mouth open, but he couldn't find the words, his brain numbed.

And then the full force of the advancing fire was upon him, consuming him utterly and passing on.

Chapter 2

'You're crazy, every bloody one of you!'

The man who had spoken now looked steadily at each of the other eleven men occupying places at the same long table in the largest room of the Craighlowrie

town hall. Eyes met his, then dropped. Fingers drummed nervously on the polished mahogany table top. Somebody coughed ... an embarrassed silence . . . a match scraped.

'Furthermore' - Bob Coyle was not one to be deterred by an overwhelming contrasting opinion - 'you're greedy for power. How much more do you think this valley can take? Look what's happened to it. Remember the town most of us were brought up in? Sheep grazed the hillsides; we lived peacefully, happily, and we had security. Look at what we've got now, something that could be a third-class suburban area of any duty industrial town in Britain - only worse. We're living under a cloud of radioactivity. One leak . . . And now you're going to let them take the whole of the north end of the valley - the rest of it - until there isn't a blade of grass or a clump of heather left. What about us, our children? It's got to be stopped now, before it's too late!'

Silence again, each pair of eyes glancing at Bob Coyle. At thirty-seven he had the physique and appearance of a man ten years younger. Dark wavy hair reaching down to his collar with scarcely a fleck of grey, rugged features inherited from his forefathers, the flock masters who had eked a living from the steep, windswept slopes of the valley, the deep blue eyes that now flashed angrily. His clothes, too, indicated the individualism which he valued so highly. Never before, in the history of town council meetings, had sweater and slacks been worn. Tweed suits were reserved for these occasions, sometimes a kilt amongst the more traditional members.

'Well?'

Coyle was determined to force an answer one way or the other. Some of them hated him already - if not him personally, then his newspaper the Herald, brazenly outspoken, almost to the point of libel. Yet, there had never been a legal action against him. Always there was a glimmering of truth there, a spark which produced the wisp of smoke.

'Just look what it means to the town,' said Blackmead the butcher, staring down at the table almost timidly.

'Yes, just look,' snapped Coyle angrily. 'A future slum. Within a decade these cheapjack houses will be falling to bits. We're overcrowded already, and nobody seems to care a damn that just one leak will mean them having to blast these hills into the valley for a mass grave!'

'But they've overcome all that now. All that was in the early stages . . . '

'The risks are still there. The bigger they make this place, the more waste they'll be recycling. And the more waste lying about for processing, the greater the chances of a leak . . . maybe worse. We've gone far enough. Too far. Stop it now, in the name of humanity!'

Another uneasy silence, as the councillors glanced at each other, and looked away - anywhere except at Bob Coyle.

'Er, yes . . . well,' McLellan, the Planning Officer, shuffled the papers hi front of him. Though he knew their contents by heart, he made a pretence of studying them again. Only his bushy moustache disguised the fact that his upper lip was trembling.

'Er . . . yes,' he sorted through the papers again, stalling - knowing that he would have to support the other councillors and oppose Coyle. It wasn't so much the man himself he feared, but Coyle's paper, the Herald. A couple of recent clippings were attached to the closely-typewritten sheets he now

shuffled like a pack of cards. 'Well, er . . . we can find no objection to the plans submitted by Nuclear Fuels and Oxide Reprocessing. None, whatsoever,' he hesitated, anticipating another outburst from Coyle, but there was none, so he carried on, 'and as a result I must inform the necessary authorities that they have the approval of this council to proceed with their extensions. We must realise, gentlemen, the significant part we are playing in reducing the country's unemployment figures. At the moment there are over five thousand jobs at the recycling centre. Three years from now, that figure will be doubled, perhaps even trebled. Take the town, too. Businesses have expanded. Once we relied upon sheep farming and local craft. Look at the auxiliary industries which this recycling place has brought in. We shall be one of the wealthiest towns in the United Kingdom. We . . . '

Coyle stood up, scraping his chair noisily. McLellan stopped in mid-sentence, undecided whether to tell the man to sit down or to resume his own seat. He did neither. His top lip trembled even more violently.

'Gentlemen,' Coyle's voice was low, scarcely more than a whisper, but it carried to every corner of that large room, 'please accept my resignation from this council. I will confirm this in writing tomorrow. In the meantime, please understand that everything possible will be done to oppose your diabolical decision. My presses are already churning out petition forms, and I have every confidence that the townspeople will back me. I shall be calling upon the Secretary for the Environment to hold a full-scale public enquiry. The Secretary of State for Energy has already informed British Nuclear Fuels that they can go ahead and sign contracts to reprocess even greater quantities of nuclear fuels from abroad. It seems that this power game is being played at the highest level. My newspaper will play its own part, of that I can assure you. Good day to you, gentlemen.'

Coyle walked from the room, closing the door quietly behind him. He descended the long flight of steps which led to the street below, and slowly made his way to where his car was parked. It was a rusting blue Hillman Avenger which had seen better days but which was still mechanically sound.

The town was busy this morning. People scurried past him looking neither to right nor left: housewives with loaded shopping baskets, others heading towards the new Bingo Hall which had started opening in the early afternoon. They were faces that were unfamiliar to him. Once he would have known almost everybody who walked these streets. Once people would have stopped him to chat, or called out greetings from the other pavement. But that had all gone with the coming of this new plutonium industry. Familiar accents were replaced by dialects he scarcely recognised. All the casualness of life had gone, to be replaced by this new rat-race. And that was just what it was. Dyne, the Head of Oxide Reprocessing, and his colleagues - they were the Pied Pipers. And everybody hastened to their call like lemmings.

It took him twenty minutes to drive back to the printing works. He could have walked it in a third of the time. The old town could not absorb the traffic which the suburban new town had brought with it. Next time he would walk it. Next time . . . he laughed bitterly, giving vent to his hatred for McLellan - another great fat lemming. There would be no next time. Not at the town hall, anyway.

He swung into the printing works and braked to a halt. He switched off the engine, and just sat there - needing a few precious moments of solitude, time for a few private thoughts.

Jane sprang first to his mind. At thirty-six, after nineteen years of marriage, and two children, she hadn't lost either her looks or her figure.

Yet she had changed - that was the trouble, and he could not really determine the reason. Perhaps it was his own fault: too much time spent at the office, this obsession with plutonium and his efforts to shoulder the responsibilities of a nation. Maybe it was the kids. Richard had always been rebellious, a hereditary streak perhaps. Sarah too. A mature woman at seventeen, and she had to get mixed up with a married man when she had the pick of the best young men in town. But this was how it was today. The new society, the Plutonium Society of this town. Perhaps there was something in the atmosphere, not so much radiation as a kind of tension that made everybody behave in illogical fashion.

Himself, too. His thoughts turned to Anne. At twenty she was capable of running his business entirely on her own whenever he was away from the office. Perhaps that was why it had all started between them: his honest admiration for her at first, and her looks and youth did the rest. Every man's ego is boosted by the attentions of a younger woman.

Better if it could have been confined to an office affair, a screw on the carpet after hours. But it had gone much deeper than that. Worse, his daughter Sarah knew about it. That created a kind of stalemate blackmail situation in the household. Jane guessed something was wrong, but he prayed she would never discover the two adulterous affairs within her family. God, why didn't some guy come on the scene and lay her? It might ease his conscience to know that his wife had been unfaithful, too. Damn it, it wouldn't though. He got out of the car and slammed the door violently. He'd thrash the bastard, beat him till his features were unrecognisable.

Coyle sighed. He knew there was still a streak of Victoriana in him. A man could indulge in extra-marital sex, but God help a woman indiscreet enough to have a bit on the side.

He looked round at his premises. A rectangle of dilapidated sheds, converted crofter's barns, with patch-up jobs on the roofs, junk lying everywhere. Only the small office on the end was new - red brick, flat roof, and large windows.

Anne swivelled her stool round to face him, with that same smile, never any different. Her freckles never ceased to fascinate him, but he wished she wouldn't always tie up her hair in a pony-tail. For some reason he did not care for that style. Maybe it made her look too schoolgirlish -although not even the most mature sixth-former would have breasts like Anne's. She was tall, but everything about her was so perfectly proportioned. Tomorrow night he would undo that pony-tail and let her long blonde hair fall about her body, tantalisingly covering her unblemished flesh until he brushed the strands aside with one of his own fingers. Then it would all begin.

'Well?' her voice, so soft and husky, stimulated his loins. He often wondered if she knew exactly what she did to him.

'I resigned. Warned 'em of the fiery hell that waited for 'em, and told 'em they could go to it.'

'Good.'

'I thought maybe you'd say that. How are the petition forms going?'

'All printed and ready. I sent Ronnie into town with a van-load. I gave him a list of the guys who will go out and collect the signatures: Robson, Jackman, Doyle, Enderby, and, oh yes, Peterson. A hundred forms to each, and if we get them all filled with signatures, I guess even the Secretary of State for Energy will have second thoughts about giving the go-ahead for further

contracts.'

'What would I do without you?' he leaned over, and their lips met. His intention was a peck of gratitude; instead they clung fiercely to each other, tongues probing each other's mouth, and her slender fingers located the hardness inside his trousers. Had not the door-bell sounded in the outer-reception area, they would probably have made it there and then. Anne extricated herself from him with a mild curse, and Coyle admired the way her buttocks wiggled as she walked away from him.

He went through into his private office, a room no larger than the larder in his own house. Files overflowed, and the desk was strewn with correspondence. Perhaps next week he would get Anne in here to clear it all up, introduce some kind of system so he would know where everything was. He smiled as he realised there wouldn't be any work done at all if he let her in here. The cramped conditions would encourage the inevitable.

It was crazy. Life would just go on and on until something happened up at Oxide Reprocessing. Then it would all come to a stop. That would be it. Finis. The culmination of an age-old curse which nobody really believed in.

He reached into a cupboard beside his desk, and drew out a half-full bottle of whisky and a tumbler that could have done with a wash. He splashed some of the amber liquid into it and drank half at one gulp. He coughed and spluttered. He wasn't a drinking man, but it eased his feelings. Already it was beginning to relax him a little. Soon his thoughts came round to Anne again. It was always Anne nowadays. He remembered how it had begun between them - a gradual process, so gradual that at first neither of them realised they were becoming emotionally involved. If she had lived in a flat of her own, it would all have been too easy. It would have become their secret sex den, and possibly the whole affair would have remained purely physical.

Coyle's erection started again as he sat there in his office, sipping the whisky and staring at the peeling brown wallpaper. Even this comparatively new extension to the old premises was already in need of redecorating.

Anne lived with her parents, a very staid, typically Scottish couple who would likely suffer a stroke if realisation suddenly dawned that their daughter had actually lost her virginity.

It hadn't even begun as a result of working late in the office after the rest of the printing staff had gone home. It had simply come about through boredom. Coyle had been taking Anne home at night. It wasn't much out of his way, and he enjoyed the prospect of young female company for a quarter of an hour after a routine day.

Then one summer evening they had driven up on to the moorland above the valley, to view the building of the nuclear waste reprocessing plant from above - built directly over that place where for some inexplicable reason no grass grew. 'Sterile ground,' the surveyor had shrugged. 'Barren rock from which the elements have washed away the topsoil.' People seemed ready enough to accept that unlikely explanation. Coyle had taken a camera with him to get a picture for the following week's Herald. He could have sent Ross, the official photographer, but instead had suggested to Anne that they go and view for themselves the new ugliness creeping into the valley.

Coyle had taken his photographs, and then, on impulse, he persuaded Anne to let him snap her, too. Coyle, she had agreed. She had been wearing a thin nylon blouse, and a short skirt which had obligingly lifted in the breeze as he pressed the button. Nothing else had happened between them; he had not even

kissed her. During the drive back his hand had brushed hers, but she had not responded.

Coyle developed and printed those pictures himself. Those intended for publication he handed over to Ross, whose wry expression soundlessly criticised his boss's talents. But the one of Anne he hid in his wallet, and studied later that evening when Jane was out at the local branch of the Scottish Women's Rural Institute. Somehow, so much more had come out in the photograph. He could detect the firmness of her nipples through the scanty blouse and bra, and the almost transparent underwear beneath the lifted skirt showed an exciting dark V.

When Jane Coyle returned home, shortly after eleven o'clock, she was mildly surprised at the eager man who shared her bed. Her weekly S.W.R.I. meeting had not offered its usual pleasantries, and a petty quarrel with Mrs MacGregor had not improved the migraine which had been hovering in the background throughout the day. She had gently pushed her husband's hands from her bosom, and removed them more roughly from her lower regions. Her obvious revulsion had been a turning-point in their already waning sexual relationship.

The following day Coyle had asked Anne if she would care to go out for an evening meal with him. She had accepted readily and innocently, even telephoning her parents, who were flattered to think that the proprietor of the Herald had seen fit to reward their daughter thus for her efficiency. Coyle had also telephoned his wife, and told her he would be home late due to an article he was preparing. Jane had not even expressed regret.

After the meal they had driven up to that very same place from which Coyle had taken the photographs less than a week ago. The moorland was deserted, silent except for the lonely call of a nesting curlew. A three-quarter moon showed Coyle everything he wanted to see, a radiantly lovely young girl in silhouette at his side. The legend of Balzur was pushed from his mind.

He had asked if he could undo her pony-tail and see her with her hair down. She had agreed, giggling. Usually her parents let her drink only at Hogmanay, and then but sparingly. Tonight she had enjoyed a sherry before the meal, wine with it, then a couple of brandies, and she even thought it was a great joke when he undid her dress and loosened her bra. Those nipples were as large and firm as Coyle had expected.

She giggled again when he felt up her skirt, and squeezed a couple of fingers between the tight-fitting elastic of her pants. They began kissing - she clearly had never had a tongue thrust into her mouth before, but she liked it. AH the time he rubbed with his exploring fingers, then used his free hand to guide her fingers on to the hard bulge in his trousers. Five minutes later she was shuddering violently, clutching at him, sobbing - and then she was sober again, and asking to be taken home.

He wondered if she would turn up at the office next morning, and his stomach muscles grew taut when at ten minutes past nine there was still no sign of her. At twenty-five past he sighed with relief as she came trotting in, and later he could have shouted his joy to the whole world when, amidst blushes and stammers, she thanked him for a wonderful evening.

So he had asked her out again. It required more ingenuity this time, in order to allay any suspicions growing in the minds of her parents. He admired her for the convincing manner in which she lied to them over the telephone about going to the cinema with Margaret from the type-setting department. Had Anne's parents known Margaret they would have been far more concerned; for Margaret was a self-confessed lesbian.

Jane had not appeared the least concerned that Bob Coyle would be home late. Recently he had the impression that she preferred to have the house to herself in the evenings. If she suspected he had taken a mistress, she did not seem to care.

Coyle drove out to that same place again; there did not seem any reason to go elsewhere. By this time surely Anne was fully aware of his intentions. The fact that she lifted herself up so that he could slide her pants down, confirmed this. She was only too eager to clamber over on to the more spacious back seat.

That was how it had all begun. Coyle drained the last of his whisky, his gaze still fixed on the wallpaper, only dimly aware that he had an erection. He pondered over the problems involved in divorcing Jane. She certainly did not want him sexually nowadays.

Yet Anne had never once suggested a break-up of his marriage. His greatest fear was that one day she would find herself a boyfriend, a younger man, acceptable to her parents, who had a damned sight more to offer her than a married newspaperman fast approaching middle-age. Sometimes he contemplated getting her pregnant. He wondered what she would do if that happened. She would either have to demand a secure relationship or an abortion. Maybe he ought to try it and see. At least he would know where he stood.

Plutonium was to blame. He crushed the empty glass fiercely between his fingers. Pluto. And Balzur.

'Bob!'

He started, unaware that the office door had opened, and Anne stood there smiling, her gaze focused on the protrusion in his trousers.

'Sorry, I was miles away,' he swung his feet to the floor, and she advanced on him, perching delicately on his knee, one arm around his neck, the fingers of the other starting to caress his hardness almost immediately.

'I trust you were thinking about me.' Her eyebrows were raised mockingly.

'I was,' he admitted truthfully. 'I was just thinking about how it all happened, how we got together . . . and how you've been transformed from a sweet little innocent teenager into the most beautiful, sexually desirable woman imaginable.'

'And your journalistic training enables you to put it all so delightfully into words,' she continued to stroke him. 'That's something which an awful lot of women miss out on. You haven't forgotten we're going out tomorrow night?'

'I can hardly wait.'

'Perhaps your wife will oblige you tonight.'

'I shan't ask her.'

'Oh, by the way, Winston Dyne rang while you were out. He was a bit shirty. He didn't like your article in last week's edition; the reference to the Balzur legend and the link between Pluto and plutonium. He says you're playing on sensationalism which could have a detrimental psychological effect on the people of this town. He wants to see you, so I've arranged for you to be up there at ten in the morning.'

'Darling,' Coyle craned his neck up so that their lips brushed. 'You are Britain's number-one secretary, most definitely. Twice over the past few months I have been refused an interview with Dyne. Barbed wire, armed guards, and Christ knows what else, and now I'm actually going inside the devil's stronghold itself. And it took you to fix it.'

'He's having your pass delivered here later today,' she purred. 'My Bob's making quite a name for himself, isn't he? Even the Boffins are sitting up and taking notice of him.'

Trying to shut me up, you mean,' he laughed, and stiffened as he felt his zip being slowly pulled down. 'We'd better lock the door,' he signed.

Chapter 3

Coyle experienced an acute sense of uneasiness as he eased his foot off the Avenger's accelerator some twenty yards from the huge twenty-foot-high steel-barred barrier. An elevated enclosed platform was strategically positioned above the entrance to the nuclear waste disposal and recycling centre. He noticed a face behind a small aperture, eyes that watched him unwaveringly. Without a doubt the man was holding a rifle, possibly a submachine-gun, with his thumb positioned on the safety-catch.

The Avenger rolled forward until it was barely five yards from the checkpoint. A sentry-box stood to the right, outside the barbed-wire fencing.

Coyle wound the window down and held up the green card so that it was visible to the man on checkpoint. The newspaperman cursed beneath his breath, more to boost his own morale than from anger. All part of the process, he decided. Another Berlin Wall. Playing on my nerves - or trying to. He pitied the workers who had to pass to and fro daily. Just like a Siberian labour camp.

Perhaps both these guys watching him from their sentry positions had read his article in last week's Herald. Maybe Dyne had had it distributed amongst the men. 'This is the guy who is starting all the rumours, using a legend to help cause mass hysteria. Give him the treatment. One visit, and he won't want to come back again'. No, that wasn't right. It would all get in the paper, and that wouldn't be good publicity.

Nevertheless, nobody was in a hurry. Coyle lit a cigarette, carefully and deliberately, nonchalantly tossing the spent match in the direction of the lower checkpoint. He was genuinely angry now, and felt like sounding his horn, or calling out 'Hey you!' Instead he flicked cigarette ash into the wind, and wished that a spark would hit this gateway dictator in the eye.

At last the man advanced slowly towards him. He was heavily built, a tightly-buttoned uniform holding back rolls of fat. Slav features, too, or was that his imagination? Just plain flat-faced and ugly. He carried a revolver in a holster, the flap-type which prevented a fast draw. Coyle guessed that in

the event of trouble, the upper man would do the shooting.

The guard held out his hand for the pass. Coyle handed it over, intending to meet his gaze, but the other seemed interested only in the writing on the thin card. He certainly took his time over it, and Coyle considered perhaps the fellow was illiterate, but again decided it was all part of the demoralising process. Neither spoke, and there was no need to. Everything was written on that pass. Name. Date. Reason for visit. Time of admittance . . . The big man glanced at his watch. The card stated 9.55.a.m. It was now 9.50. He handed the card back, and returned to his post without a word. Everything had been conducted in total silence. Not even a grunt.

Coyle revved up his engine, expecting the gates to open automatically. Nothing happened. He was on the point of attracting the man's attention again, when he noticed the hands of his wristwatch: 9.54 a.m.

At 9.55 the gates swung back smoothly, and he drove slowly through. A black tarmac track headed directly across the red shale compound towards the giant towers, with 5 mph speed-limit signs spaced at intervals of a hundred yards. Several hundred cars were parked diagonally to his right, obviously belonging to the local labour-force. He kept going until he reached the second barrier.

Here the uniformed Atomic Energy Authority policeman almost smiled. Almost. Coyle had the impression that the man nearly forgot his orders, and then remembered them just in time. Again the revolver was worn in a covered holster, but the flap was undone.

The man took the green card, read it through minutely, and then pointed in the direction of a squat, one-storied building standing on its own beside what were obviously offices and laboratories.

'Park over there, sir. The man on duty will escort you to the HOR's office.'

Coyle did as directed. The uniformed officer inside the glass doors watched him closely as he climbed out of his car, and with a touch of irony Coyle carefully locked the Avenger and pocketed the keys. Two can play at this security game, he grinned to himself, as he ground out the cigarette with his heel.

Again a silent escort. Down one corridor, past numerous doors, a left turn, then a right, then another left. All the time Coyle was conscious of buzzing activity, a murmuring of voices, whirring machinery, but not once did he sight another human being. There was a hushed reverence within the place such as one might find within a cathedral. He glanced at the man by his side, but he was staring straight ahead without expression.

They halted, and the policeman knocked softly upon the door immediately before them. From a highly polished plaque Coyle noted what the initials HOR stood for: 'Head of Oxide Reprocessing - Winston Dyne.'

'Come in.'

Coyle stepped forward on to a lush carpet, the door closed behind him, and he was face to face with Winston Dyne for the first time.

The man behind the large mahogany desk was reclining in a plush, tall-backed chair, and he made no effort to rise or extend the customary hand. Coyle was instantly reminded of the times he had been summoned before the headmaster of his school, for a sharp 'six of the best'. You stood meekly with your hands clasped behind your back, repentance and fear in your expression. With an

effort he pulled himself together. He had hated every minute of that public-school life for which his parents had made stupid sacrifices. The system was the same here. 'Come and have your arse walloped, you naughty boy, and promise faithfully that you will not err again.' Not bloody likely.

Coyle relaxed. 'Mind if I take a seat?' He reached out and drew a three-legged, plastic-covered chair towards him. 'My feet are hurting like hell after that route-march down your maze of corridors.'

'Sit down.' The authoritative tone in Dyne's voice made it an order rather than an invitation.

They regarded each other steadily for half a minute of silence. Dyne was stroking his heavy moustache, his aquiline features never once giving a hint of his innermost thoughts.

'I read that article in the latest edition of your trashy weekly.' he said at last, the annoyance unveiled. 'I would term it sensational libellousness, the object being to instil fear into the townspeople and to disrupt something which is vital to the economy of this country. Your reference to the legend of Craiglowrie is preposterous, and many of your facts are totally inaccurate.'

'Sue me then.'

'It would not be worthwhile. Your bankruptcy would hardly benefit the Plutonium Economy. If I had my way, Coyle, every known communist would be deported back to the country where his sympathies lie. Your place is in the salt-mines of Siberia, along with a good many other traitors. Today the value of the pound dropped again. Overseas confidence is waning faster than ever before, and even the oil flowing from the North Sea seems incapable of restoring it. Plutonium is Britain's last hope - our very last hope. Extracts from your article appeared in certain national dailies. I would even assume you personally sent them the copy. You are a saboteur, Coyle, and I wish you could be arrested and put on trial as such.'

'And since I can't,' Coyle smiled, 'just how do you intend to shut me up? Have me murdered inside this place and dispose of my body in a bath of sulphuric acid?'

A flicker of unease appeared in Dyne's expression, but was instantly replaced by a wan smile.

'You could make your fortune writing science-fiction thrillers, Coyle,' he said. 'And your energy and talents would be far better spent in that field. However, my motive in summoning you . . . '

Inviting me,' Coyle interrupted.

'As you wish,' Dyne's features hardened. 'My motive is to explain to you the whole process of the disposal and recycling of nuclear waste. The complete facts will be put before you, and you may take notes if you wish. It is my hope that the lead article in the next edition of your newspaper will convey the true facts to the public, and thereby dispel any alarm you have generated by the balderdash already printed. And another thing, neither myself nor my colleagues appreciate the nickname you have given to this place. It seems to have caught on, as nicknames so very often do - and was even mentioned on the national news on both television channels last night. Holocaust is a word that sums up unholy terror, fire, wholesale death and destruction - and is therefore entirely inappropriate here. This is an entirely civilised concern.'

'Judging by the way your guards received me at both checkpoints, I'm not so sure about that . . . '

'Let's dispense with this flippancy.' With supreme effort Dyne controlled his rising anger. 'Now, firstly I'd like to explain to you the reprocessing of spent nuclear fuel in power-stations such as this. There is no doubt that plutonium is the fuel of the future, and as such we have no right to ignore its potential. Those who actually work on it are in complete agreement. There have been dangers in the past, certainly, but we are fully confident that these have now been overcome. Greater national prosperity is assured. In this valley, alone, over five thousand jobs have been created, and in a few years' time . . . '

'We know all this crap,' Coyle broke in harshly. 'We've had it shoved down our throats since they first started to build this place. Just give me the true scientific facts concerning plutonium and oxide, Dyne, otherwise I've work to do back at my office.'

'Very well. Most of the basic facts have been revealed on television or in the newspapers, many inaccurately, so for your benefit I will begin with the elementary stages. This nuclear waste disposal and recycling centre has been built in this valley because a twofold purpose can be served. With planning permission granted for an extension over another few hundred acres . . . It will be opposed.'

'That is not my concern, and please do not interrupt. At Windscale they had the added inconvenience and risk of transporting low-level waste elsewhere for disposal. Here, with the additional ground which we have acquired, it can all be dealt with inside the centre. A compact unit, if you understand me. But let me explain the functions of plutonium to you. One gram of plutonium produces as much electricity as three tons of coal. Imagine the labour and haulage saving . . . '

'And the closure of nine-tenths of the collieries in the United Kingdom. The NUM won't like that.'

'As we are all aware' - Dyne ignored Coyle's interruption - 'plutonium is the material from which atom bombs are made. It is highly radioactive, and should you inhale it, the consequences would be dire. However, safety precautions have never been more efficient. British Nuclear Fuels at this present time require plutonium for the prototype reactor at Dounreay. We, here, are hi the final stages of constructing our own prototype reactor. Again, you see, a complete, self-sufficient unit.'

'The first plutonium was manufactured here a comparatively short time ago. I witnessed the experiment myself. It is a green-coloured liquid, and currently we are producing a number of kilograms per day.' Dyne carefully avoided quoting figures that might appear in either Coyle's paper or in the national press.

'Eventually those kilograms will become tons, then tens of tons, when we are finally using the full resources at our disposal. It takes less than ten kilograms to make an atom bomb, a device that would be little greater in size than a coconut. World figures quote something like three thousand tons of plutonium in existence. Of course, we shall never have anything like that quantity here . . . '

Coyle almost laughed out loud, but held himself in check.

'Plutonium is man-made, produced by human ingenuity.' Dyne leaned back in his

chair, smoothing his moustache with his long nicotine-stained fingers, the beginnings of a self-satisfied smile on his face. Much responsibility had been placed on his shoulders lately. Whenever the opportunity arose to take credit for something, he seized it eagerly. Perhaps this newspaperman might see the light and give him a personal boost in his columns.

'That's something that Nature, in all her greatness, overlooked.' Dyne lit a cigarette, without offering the packet to the man seated opposite to him. 'So far it has only been produced for the bombs and rockets in our nuclear armoury, and it can be argued that plutonium has ensured our safety from a military point of view. Now it can also serve our national energy needs, and put the economy back on a sound footing. We have unlimited potential energy at our disposal, and the risks - which the press constantly exaggerates for the man in the street - are but a small consideration. Plutonium will soon be used to power nuclear Stations throughout the country. We are entering a new era . . . '

'Fair enough.' Coyle lit one of his own cigarettes. 'But now let's get on to this business of nuclear waste. That's what I want to know about.'

'Of course.' The other smiled with an air of contained patience. 'The spent nuclear fuel will be dealt with in our own plant here - which will be constructed surprisingly quickly, as you will learn. From it we shall produce uranium, which will also be invaluable. Let us consider our present atomic power stations, where the spent radioactive fuel is stored in tanks under water. This spent fuel is transported to a reprocessing plant to be broken down. We obtain our vital plutonium, but we now have a highly radioactive plutonium waste which will be dangerous for thousands of years to come. Our new plant here will deal safely with this substance, known as oxide. Oxide is an extremely dangerous material, but the risks here will be minimal, nonexistent in fact. Our nuclear laundry, for want of a better term, will be the first in the world to operate on a fully commercial scale, and the fuel can be stored almost indefinitely.'

'If it's as safe as all that, why don't these other countries reprocess it themselves, instead of paying us to do their dirty work for them?'

'Simply because they do not have the technology and the resources which we have in this very place. The Japanese are well aware of the perils. We can combat these dangers, and it would be a sad day for our economy if they decided to do it for themselves. Indeed, Windscale will be obsolete once this place is operating fully. There they have been reprocessing Japanese waste since 1969, on a very limited scale compared to that which we shall be capable of. In all, they have dealt with something like a thousand tons of old fuel from foreign countries, half as much again as has been reprocessed from solely British power stations.

'We can double, even treble, that amount in half the time. Look at their antiquated system. The fuel containers arrive on a single-track railway! The first reprocessed nuclear fuel is stored in ponds eighteen feet deep. These ponds are now filled to overflowing. Now that does represent a hazard. The longer the fuel remains there, the greater the difficulty of reprocessing, and the greater the danger.

'Improved reprocessing facilities are needed. We shall provide them here, a completely different reprocessing plant to deal with the more radioactive oxide fuel. It is a well-known fact that Windscale's pilot oxide plant ran into trouble. We have learnt from their mistakes. There were reports of an accident there in 1973, which resulted in the plant being shut down. In 1976 the contaminated area was still sealed off. I am confident that I know what,

went wrong. In effect, the plant broke down, but the dangers were greatly exaggerated by the media. It was an old military plant which had been renovated - case of putting a highly radiated fuel into something totally inadequate for the purpose. I am more than confident that our new plant will be adequate.

Take American Nuclear Fuel Services as another example of failure. The West Valley Reprocessing Plant was never able to operate on a commercial scale. It lost money instead of making it. It, too, was closed down in 1972, because it was too radioactive to work in. The cost of closing down the plant and clearing up the remaining waste is already running into millions of dollars, good money thrown after bad. All the waste had to be solidified before it could be removed, at a cost of 540 million dollars. The burial ground for the solidified waste had to be made one hundred per cent safe, at an estimated cost of a further billion dollars.

'Waste products at Windscale, too, present a major problem. Fortunately British Nuclear Fuels have learnt how to cope with oxide reprocessing, something which no other country in the world has so far achieved. That reprocessing system will be transferred here, but on a scale of greater magnitude. More reprocessing means more nuclear waste, and this waste will remain radioactive for something like a quarter of a million years. Lorries leave Windscale daily, carrying sealed containers of low-level nuclear waste. This stuff is not highly dangerous - just dangerous. Mostly these containers are filled with gloves, clothing, etc., which have been in contact with contamination, and are transported to Britain's "burial ground". It's a somewhat haphazard operation, the lorries not being escorted en route, but simply checked at their destination. In time this burial ground will become a forgotten tract of derelict ground, the low-level waste buried deep beneath it. Perhaps, foolishly, houses will be built upon it.

'Windscale also deposits low-level liquid waste into the sea, something like five hundred thousand litres every day. Of course, radioactive levels are kept strictly within the permitted limits, but the risk is still there. A few miles south lies the Ravensglass Estuary, and this waste is being washed back by the currents on the sea-bed. The plutonium is being picked up by fish, and that plutonium will still retain its radioactivity in a quarter of a million years' time. Bear this in mind, Coyle, next time you eat fish and chips! Mankind's food is being polluted at a time when not enough is known about plutonium waste. Therefore, how can the level of radioactivity which goes into the Irish Sea be contained, especially when even more waste is still being deposited into it?

'Radioactivity, therefore, can only increase, and the original intention of those at Windscale is to ensure that the radioactivity discharged into the environment does not increase. So 99.9 per cent of the radioactivity remains in the works, and does not enter the environment. Our concern is that remaining 0.1 per cent. At Windscale the bulk of that 99.9 per cent radioactive waste is stored behind 4-foot-thick walls, seven hundred cubic metres still seething with radioactivity. The tanks which contain these poisonous liquids are stainless steel, and more tanks are now being built to take waste which has been accumulating for a quarter of a century.

'Here, though, in this place which you have chosen to call "Holocaust", some further one hundred tanks will be constructed. The liquids inside these tanks are so radioactive that they would burn if it were not for the cooling systems. There will be seven separate systems in each tank. In January 1976, one of the tanks at Windscale sprang a radioactive leak, and as a result the system had to be shut down. High-active waste is still accumulating at Windscale, simply because they have been unable to dispose of it. We have that

method of disposal, and much of it will be transferred here.

'A technique for turning the liquid into glass has some promise of success. Already we have achieved it experimentally, and soon it will be done on a commercial scale. We believe that we shall be able to solidify radioactive liquids, and once they can be turned into cylinders or blocks of glass, on a commercial scale, then we have here the means to dispose of them safely. Consequently, the need to acquire the remaining part of this valley is paramount. Britain's Hazardous Materials Group has been searching for such a place, a last resting place for Britain's high-active nuclear waste, for a long time now. I cannot over-emphasise the urgency. It is incredible that the very place has been discovered in such close proximity to our latest reprocessing plant.

'Granite, Coyle, is the answer. We shall bury this waste in the granite of this very valley, at least a thousand feet below ground level, to ensure that no changes in the Earth's crust will disturb it. A last resting place, and with no danger to mankind. That is why we cannot allow anyone to stand in our way.'

Coyle drew deeply on the last half inch of his cigarette, leaned over, and stubbed out the butt in Dyne's ashtray.

'Very convincing,' he murmured, 'but it does not nullify the dangers involved before this waste is actually committed to its grave.'

'The risks are minimal.'

'Like sitting permanently on top of a few hundred atom bombs, trying to lead a normal life, and all the time hoping that we won't be blown to kingdom-come.'

'Again you are resorting to sensationalism.'

'I'm being practical.'

'It is not practical to imperil the country's economy, particularly in these times. Another thing, Nature's fuel supplies will run out one day. You don't think North Sea oil will last forever, do you?'

'One mistake here, and it'll all be lost in one mighty whoosh. You can't get away from the fact that this could be the biggest nuclear blow-up in history. And that's when history comes to a stop.'

'In theory, but not in practice.' A fresh edge of annoyance was creeping into Winston Dyne's tone. The schoolmaster having his facts queried by a raw pupil.

'And there's something else.' Coyle exhaled cigarette smoke slowly. 'Suppose a foreign power got in here, terrorists even. They could hold the whole world to ransom.'

'Not a chance.'

'A barbed-wire fence and a few armed police . . . '

'I can assure you that there is greater defence in-depth than you've ever dreamed of. Security here is top priority.'

'I'd appreciate a tour of your domain, just to satisfy ...'

'I'm afraid that is quite out of the question,' the Head of Oxide Reprocessing

replied abruptly. 'Our defences are not open to inspection . . . '

'And so the public are asked to resort to blind faith.' Coyle's eyes narrowed. 'I am supposed to report the facts of this interview, but when I add that I was refused permission to view the security arrangements, the inference is that they are frail - a sop to satisfy the fears of those who . . . '

'And you instigated these fears.' Dyne pointed a forefinger accusingly at the newspaperman. 'And you resorted to ridiculous legend to accelerate the terror.'

'Did I?' Coyle's eyebrows were raised. 'Let me point out a few facts for your benefit. Thirty thousand people marched on a nuclear power station near Hamburg to protest about a waste recycling process. Fifty people were injured in the riot which resulted. In Sweden, Japan and West Germany, similar plans are being met with protest. So we agree to do all their dirty washing for them!'

'And yet,' Dyne spoke with a note of triumph, 'a meeting in Trafalgar Square, organised by someone like yourself, attracted a mere one hundred and fifty people. From that one can only draw the conclusion that the British people are happy for us to strengthen our economy with the aid of plutonium. The go-ahead for the new Oxide fuels is worth five hundred million pounds to this country. We cannot allow it to be sabotaged by cranks like yourself!'

'It is a deal with the devil.' Coyle rose to his feet. 'In America, the Nuclear Regulator Commission is attempting to determine the full implications of nuclear reprocessing. Until new guidelines have been laid down, no nuclear reprocessing in the USA will be allowed to operate on a commercial basis. They no longer regard reprocessing as inevitable; and preventing proliferation of nuclear material must take precedence over economic benefits. The President has called for a worldwide standstill on the building of reprocessing plants until international controls are worked out. Yet Britain, apparently, is blatantly ignoring this. All countries with reprocessing facilities will automatically become atomic powers. Just think of the implications. Every new reprocessing plant is a potential trigger for a nuclear war!'

'And just what do you intend to do about it, Mr Coyle?' Dyne's features hardened.

'I shall emphasise the dangers of "Holocaust" even more strongly in my paper,' Coyle snapped. 'I shall continue to warn people of this town, and hope that the other media will support me. I'm already organising a petition. Any large technological development of a hazardous potential should be under the control of an international authority. I shall press the Secretary for the Environment to hasten a full-scale public enquiry.'

'You have an inflated opinion of yourself, Mr Coyle,' Winston Dyne sneered. 'You're attempting to prove that one man is mightier than the system. You are fighting a lost cause, and your foolishness will be apparent in a very short time. It is clear that this interview has been a waste of both my time and yours. As for this newspaper of yours . . . well, I advise you to tread carefully. The freedom of the press is not quite what it was a decade ago. Good day to you, Mr Coyle.'

Coyle turned away abruptly, and saw that the door was already opening in anticipation of his exit, the armed policeman motioning him back down the maze of featureless corridors.

Chapter 4

'Well?' Anne looked up from her typewriter as Bob Coyle strode into the office, allowing the outer reception door to slam noisily behind him. He nodded to her, but there was no hint of a smile on his rugged features.

The clock on the far wall showed the time as 2.45 p.m. He had been gone five hours.

'Well, at least we know where we stand now' - he flung his briefcase angrily into the corner - 'both with this lunatic town council and these other ruthless bastards. Get me a couple of calls through, will you, please. Firstly to the Secretary for the Environment, or as high up as you can get there. Secondly, I want a word with the Radiological Protection Board. Again, as far up the ladder as is possible.'

She consulted some telephone directories, and began dialling. He went through to his private office to take the calls.

It was ten minutes before Bob Coyle reappeared in the general office. His expression had not softened. If anything, he was more tight-lipped than ever.

Anne looked up, but did not speak.

'The Energy Department were rather abrupt, to say the least,' he said. 'They pointed out that they were well aware of all the aspects relating to the "harvest process", as they officially term the new method of disposing of nuclear waste. They promised to convey my concern to the Secretary of State for Energy himself. A lot of good that will do. The girl concerned has probably already forgotten about it.'

'And the Radiological Protection Board?'

'They're already looking into it.' He shook his head.

'We've got a real fight on our hands now. Anne.'

'It could be you're wrong, and nothing whatever will happen. Surely the Radiological Protection Board will investigate every detail, take steps to ensure that there cannot possibly be a leak.'

'I have no faith in officialdom,' he sighed. 'It's just another form of nationalisation. Everything botched up under a cloud of false efficiency, one big con, and I don't see that this is going to be one little bit different. All that worries me is when. A year, two, five, ten - who knows?'

'We'll fight them, though, won't we?'

'We?'

Tom with you all the way, Bob, no matter what'

He leaned over and kissed her, their tongues entwining briefly. She sensed his gratitude, and pulled him closer.

'Only one thing worries me, though' she murmured at last. 'How long before your wife finds out about us?'

'Or your parents?'

'That would be a minor catastrophe. They would be shocked, disgusted, but there would be no repercussions from my end. But what if Jane got to know? What would happen, Bob? What would you do?'

'I don't know.' he admitted frankly, 'but I wouldn't want to give you up . . . at any price. I couldn't.'

'I'm glad.' she sighed deeply. 'But you may be faced with a choice.'

'I know whom I'd choose, darling, but I don't think it'll come to that. Not yet, anyway.'

He noted a flash of disappointment on her face, and regretted his words instantly.

'What I mean is . . . well, we've time to get things sorted out. Us, I mean - not this damned plutonium business. God knows if anybody will ever sort that out, until it's too late.'

'It's an odd time to start discussing our future' - she blushed slightly, something which she rarely did these days - 'but, well, I suppose it's the thought that we may all be blown to Kingdom-come that's made me think about it more deeply. I mean, we don't spend much time together, do we? Once, maybe twice a week. She has you every night, even if you don't do anything.'

'We haven't made love for over two months now.' He admitted, and she knew he spoke the truth. 'I used to wonder if she was going into the change prematurely, but it's just that her sexual desires have gone. Otherwise, she performs the usual marital duties without complaining: cooking, washing, cleaning . . . '

'And the children?'

'Well, they aren't children any more, are they? Richard's nineteen, Sarah's seventeen, and they've made it quite plain that they don't need either of us. It doesn't make it any easier for me to have both of them working up at the nuclear centre. Either they're just plain rebellious, or else Dyne and Co. have done a first-class brainwashing job. Dad's just a trouble maker, they think; a silly bugger trying to stir up trouble. In a lot of ways I'm glad I don't see much of them. That doesn't sound very good coming from a father, does it? It's Sarah that worries me most, though.'

'You mean her affair with Houston?'

He nodded.

'That would really crucify Jane if she got to know. Far worse than if she found out about us. Sarah knows about you and me, of course. A sort of family blackmail. "Mind your own business, Dad, or else I'll let on to Mum about you and Anne, you dirty bugger. A man of your age carrying on with a young girl."

Damn it, Houston's only five years younger than I am. He's got three young children, and that's what makes it one hell of a lot worse. He only wants her for one thing. Thank Christ she's on the pill. Maybe it'll fizzle out. I just pray that he'll lose interest in her. Nothing I can do, anyway. Richard knows about both her and me. We've never been very close. He hit me once. He was sixteen at the time. I could have killed him. That was when the real breach started between us. He hates my guts. Sometimes I wish I could return the compliment, but it doesn't work out that way. He's still seeing that Lakin girl. I saw them together in town the other night.'

'She's a right slut.'

'That's putting it mildly. She came down here from Aberdeen, and her reputation wasn't long in following her. I've heard it said that she was making a hundred quid a week out of the oil-riggers. I slave my guts out to earn that. She did it easily, just lying on her back with her legs open. And now she has to come down here and latch on to my son. Maybe it's as well I resigned from the council.'

'You can't be held responsible for what your kids do when they grow up. These things sort themselves out.'

'Like we'll have to.' He shook his head sadly. 'I couldn't do without you, Anne, not now.'

'You won't have to.' She kissed him again. 'I don't need to guess the contents of next week's lead article, do I?'

'I'll knock it out tomorrow.' His expression became grim. 'The toughest yet. I'll phone Kent, too, and get it in the dailies as well. The people of this country will have been warned in the gravest possible terms. After that, it's up to them, but you know how lethargic the British people are a sort of it'll-never-happen-to-us attitude.'

The evening meal was already in progress when Bob Coyle walked into his semi-detached house on the outskirts of the old town. Richard looked up, his mouth full, his greasy unkempt hair straggling around his shoulders. He had not even bothered to change out of his overalls. Coyle's thoughts momentarily dwelled on the protective clothing his son would have worn during the day. No doubt it was already on its way somewhere as low-level waste. Then-eyes met - recognition but no greeting. Scorn from a son who knew his father would terminate his source of employment if it was within his power.

Coyle looked over at Sarah. Her petite figure was clad in a bright-green trouser-suit which showed off everything to perfection. No doubt Houston had bought it for her. Short dark hair, perfectly groomed, obviously she had been to the hairdressing salon that afternoon. Another favour from Houston? Perfectly moulded features, lips that almost smiled. Almost. He read her expression only too clearly. Contempt for an adulterous father. He wished he could reciprocate with a similar feeling, but he sensed only regret.

'Your dinner's in the oven. I'll fetch it for you.'

Coyle's gaze moved to Jane as she rose and crossed towards the oven. Even her apron could not hide her still shapely figure.

Coyle took his place at the head of the table, and began to eat mechanically. He wasn't hungry, but it was something to do in an atmosphere heavy with family discord.

'Enjoy your trip up to our place today?' Richard sneered.

Coyle paused, his fork halfway to his mouth. The omission of 'Dad' made the question seem all the more insolent.

'It was just business,' he replied slowly, and filled his mouth with curry.

'Maybe you'll get your facts right in this week's article.' Richard cleaned his plate with a chunk of bread, but did not raise his eyes. 'Or are you going to invent some more crazy legends?'

'The town now has its very own comic paper,' Sarah added. 'Why can't we have it all in cartoon-strip form, Dad? Something like the Beano or Dandy. Or maybe even a science-fiction thriller - you know, Dennis Wheatley style. "Balzur will come again to take vengeance on the offspring of those who burned him at the stake".'

Both of them laughed sarcastically. Only Jane's face was grave.

'I think the whole subject is better not discussed at the table,' she rapped. 'Your father's work is his own concern, and we shouldn't be talking shop at meal-times.'

'Shop!' Richard scraped his chair back. 'Dad's the laughing stock of our place. The trouble is he's a bad joke. Anyway, I'm going out. I can't stop here with this drivellish conversation.'

'Don't you think you should change your clothes before you go out?' Jane asked nervously, trying to exert her declining authority in the household.

Richard did not reply. Nor did he look at either of his parents as he opened the door, then slammed it behind him. Seconds later they heard the roar of his motor-cycle.

Sarah left the table and went upstairs. She came down a few minutes later wearing a three quarter-length coat which matched her trouser-suit. Her cheeks were flushed. Embarrassment and guilt, Coyle decided. She was fully aware that her father knew she was going back into town to get herself screwed. This father-daughter blackmail pact was becoming unnerving for both of them.

As Jane began to clear the dishes away, Bob lit a cigarette. She was drying the first of the dishes before she spoke.

'It's plain enough what your children think of you, isn't it? The laughing-stock of the nuclear station; the newspaperman attempting to create sensationalism at pulp literature level. So you've been up there today, have you? Aware yet that your imagination has been running riot?'

'No.' He tilted his chair backwards. 'In fact I've convinced myself that we're sitting right on top of the most devilish bomb ever conceived by mankind - one that could blow us to hell without warning.'

'They're distributing circulars in town. Petition forms. Scruffy youths handing them out in the streets. I see they're printed and distributed by the Herald. You're going too far, Bob. The whole thing has been fully explained on television and in the newspapers, and you're deliberately setting yourself up against the greatest scientists, technologists, and politicians in the world, waging a one-man war against this place you call "Holocaust". People are looking at me in the streets. My friends are sniggering behind my back. I can't stand it any longer! And all that nonsense you wrote about Pluto has

made a mockery of the whole thing - yourself particularly.'

Coyle remained silent, and lit another cigarette. Already he had presented his own arguments too many times in these last few weeks. And if his own wife would not support him, there was no point in going all over that same ground again. He was only glad he had Anne.

Neither of them spoke again until they adjourned to the next room. Usually Jane switched on the television, and Coyle hoped she would do that now. Instead she flung herself into an armchair, as if exhausted. That meant that there was a discussion in the offing. An argument. He sighed, and braced himself.

'Bob, there's something else I want to talk to you about.'

Her words jarred him. He felt his stomach muscles contracting. Always the unexpected - that was typical of a woman. Maybe Sarah had told on him, a sort of twisted revenge for all that he had printed about her employers.

'It's about Richard.'

Coyle tried not to show his relief too visibly.

'What about him?'

'He's seeing a girl. I don't know her first name, but Mrs Bean told me about her. The family live not far from here.'

Lakin's her name. Oh, Bob, she's a . . . she's a prostitute!' 'Nonsense.' He didn't make it sound very convincing.

'It's true. Mrs Bean is no gossip. She's been worrying herself stiff for a fortnight, wondering whether or not to tell me. Bob, what are we going to do? It's your responsibility. You must talk to him, man to man.'

Suddenly Coyle felt very angry. Always confrontations. Did nobody ever get anywhere in this life without direct conflict?

'Richard's old enough to look after himself. Every man has to gain experience somewhere. That's just what he's doing now.'

'But she's a prostitute!'

'It's only hearsay, vicious gossip.'

'Mrs Bean isn't a gossip.'

'Well, maybe she's mistaken. Anyway he hasn't announced his engagement to this whore, has he?'

'But . . . ' Jane blushed deeply. 'He'll be . . . having relationships with her.'

'You mean he's fucking her.' Bob threw every vestige of cruelty he could muster into those words. Never before had he used a four-letter word in front of his wife. Well, it was his intention to shock her.

'You . . . you what?'

'I said he's fucking her. And apart from the social stigma involved, your main

concern is that he might get a dose of the clap.'

Jane sank back into her chair, horrified, speechless.

'Then . . . you're not going to do anything about it,' she murmured, her face white.

'There's nothing I can do. He'll have to find out all about it for himself.'

He wished she would switch on the television. Instead they just sat there in silence, not even looking at each other. At eleven o'clock she made two cups of coffee, and they drank them in silence. Half an hour later they made ready for bed. There was no sign of either Richard or Sarah, but that was only to be expected. Their daughter would creep in some hours later, closing the door softly behind her, leaving her shoes down in the hall.

Richard, however, would come in noisily, rattling crockery in the kitchen as he made himself a snack, and then stamping up to his room in his heavy boots. Even then the nocturnal noises would not be finished. Taps ran unnecessarily, the toilet was flushed, and sometimes he even put his record player on.

By the time they climbed into bed, Bob Coyle was convinced that the conversation of earlier was finished. He put out the light, and rested his head on the pillow. His thoughts were a kaleidoscope of recent happenings and meetings: Balzur's curse, the nuclear disposal, Dyne, Anne, Richard, Sarah . . . and then, without any warning, Jane groped for him.

He was too astounded either to resist or to cooperate. Her fingers rumbled their way inside his pyjama trousers, sought and found his limpness. It began to stiffen and pulse. A vision of Anne crossed his mind, and he shuddered with betrayal. Jane mistook it for passion. She rubbed him more swiftly, more sensuously, her face moving close to his, her lips warm and demanding. The first time for two months, and it was too late to turn back. Why? Oh, God, why did she have to complicate everything? Maybe it was the four-letter word he had used which had aroused a slumbering eroticism within her.

His emotions were in a turmoil. He lay immobile -shocked. Her free hand began undoing the buttons of his pyjama jacket, loosening the cord around his waist and pulling the trousers down. He did not raise his body to cooperate, but that made no difference. She exerted all her strength, and soon his loins were bared. The bedclothes were thrown back. A sudden rustling of nylon, and he knew that she was naked. At least the light was out, otherwise she would surely have noticed the expression on his face - not exactly revulsion, but perplexity and unwillingness.

He felt her clambering astride him, her thigh muscles pressing against him, trapping him, then the engulfing warmth as she claimed him. She was breathing more heavily than he was, guiding his hands up to her breasts, wanting him, demanding him.

'I love you, Bob,' she murmured.

He should have replied, but the lie would not come. Even in his own bed, the marital bed, the events within this valley would not allow him to escape.

'Do you love me, Bob?' The question he had been dreading.

'Yes,' the lie came at last, unconvincingly, but she appeared not to notice.

'It's as though' - she paused, rocking herself softly to and fro on him -

'almost as though there's been a barrier between us for these last few months. It's been the tension . . . this whole nuclear business. It's been like . . . like another woman coming between us. I should have tried to understand you - and admired you for what you were trying to do. Well, I want you to know something. No matter who's against you, even if the whole town, my own friends, ostracise me, I'm with you all the way. And Richard can look after himself.'

He closed his eyes tightly, aware of the taste of blood on his lower lip. His fingers squeezed her breasts, and then everything was blasted into oblivion with the shuddering force of his orgasm.

At first the long night hours passed slowly. Coyle heard his wife's contented shallow breathing as she slept. He envied her as he tossed restlessly, his nakedness buffeting her but not disturbing her. He pitied her, for she believed her long mental struggle was over, and that she had triumphed. But for him, events were rising fast towards a crescendo.

Later that night he dreamed of a valley engulfed in flames, buildings and hillsides an inferno. And in the sky the mushroom-shaped smoke pall gradually taking the shape of a human head. A face that was dark and evil, its lips muttering a silent curse on Mankind . . . widening into a grin of triumph . . . festering and oozing pus.

Bob Coyle awoke in the blackness of night, his trembling body soaked with sweat, his mouth dry. He tried to recall that face. It had been oddly familiar, as though someone he knew, or had met just recently. But his memory failed him, and finally he drifted back into uneasy sleep.

He wakened sometime after daybreak, recalling only snatches of that fiery nightmare. He tried to visualise that face in the smoke - but it was gone as surely as if dispersed in the wind. But it left a lingering, torturing reminder . . . something he should have known, a sinister warning snatched away from him. Next time it came it could be reality . . . and too late!

Sarah Coyle struggled into her clothes in the cramped back seat of the Cortina. Her tall, rangy male companion was already dressed. His dexterity amazed her, the rapidity with which he always dressed, even to the perfect Windsor knot in his tie. A flick of a comb, and his blond hair was as neat as ever.

She cursed him silently as she struggled to groom herself with the aid of a small driving mirror and the interior light which he was reluctant to switch on. Always scared in case some passer-by recognised them in the lay-by on the outskirts of town. Damn him, he was only too eager to get her clothes off, but now that she had satisfied him, he was content to sit there smoking a cigarette, and watch her struggle to dress herself, occasionally clicking his tongue in annoyance at her slowness. Almost unwillingly he assisted her with a zip.

'Damn it, you're only going home to bed,' he muttered. She did not bother to explain for the hundredth time that there was always the chance that her parents might not have gone to bed early. No girl relishes returning to the parental nest in the early hours of the morning with evidence of illicit sexual encounters evident on her person. 'Anyway, I thought you were going to get a flat of your own, and move out?' he helped her over into the front passenger seat.

'I'm still thinking about it.'

'It can't be much fun living with a family like yours. Your dad still has this obsession about a radioactive leak. Does he ever talk about anything else except trying to close down "Holocaust"?'

'I don't take any notice now.'

'Well, you ought to. If that place closed down, you'd be out of a job. Still, I suppose he'd find you one at the Herald. 'You seem more worried about his efforts than he is.' 'It'd effect my livelihood. Probably kill off my business altogether. A few years ago I was living at subsistence-level out of one small hardware shop. Somebody's floorboards came loose, so I sold them half a pound of nails. Then the workers flocked into the new station. I've now got three shops. I employ a dozen people. If your dad had his way, I'd be back to relying on the sale of a few nails and screws for my living. See what I mean?'

'You really hate my dad, don't you?'

'No more than a lot of other tradesmen - like McLellan, and the rest of the council. Not him personally, just what he's trying to do.'

'If it wasn't for him you wouldn't get what you've had off me tonight, would you? Or maybe some other girl would serve just as well.'

'Don't be silly.' He slipped an arm around her, but she drew back, turning her head to avoid his lips.

'Don't start being bloody stupid.'

'I'm not. But all we ever do is screw on the back seat of your bloody car. Twice in the last month you've taken me for a drink. Eating out seems to have gone by the board, or are you afraid somebody will see us together in a restaurant?' The anger and sarcasm was building up in her voice. 'And what about this divorce? You haven't mentioned that lately, either. Seems to me you're getting the best of both worlds, David. Well, you'd better sort something out, and come up with a solution.'

'I bought you that new outfit last week,' he muttered sullenly.

'Gee, thanks, Sugar Daddy.' She turned her head away towards the window. 'You're turning me into a bloody prostitute now. I'd sooner do it for hard cash.'

He let in the clutch angrily, and slammed the gears. Ten minutes later they were parked a hundred yards from the Coyle house, the engine ticking over.

'I'm sorry.' He managed, successfully this time, to put his arm around her. Her lips met his, even though they were unresponsive.

'Get something worked out then,' she snapped.

'OK.' He squeezed her arm. 'I will. I promise. But don't forget one thing. Your old man is knocking off that bird in his office. It wouldn't do for that to get around town, would it?'

Sarah Coyle was sobbing quietly to herself as she let herself in the house, and crept up the stairs.

Richard Coyle stubbed out his cigarette in the battered tin lid which served as an ashtray. He reached for his shirt and crumpled jeans which lay on the floor, and looked up at the naked girl stretched out on the frayed couch above

him.

She smiled back at him, provocatively opening her thighs, which had once been very shapely but were now turning slightly to fat.

Turning away from her, Richard rested on one elbow, and gazed at his surroundings. One small dirty room. Dust on every item of shabby furniture, crumbled plaster on the floor where it had spilled from the multitude of cracks in the ceiling, a curtained alcove containing a stained loo and washbasin, an unmade bed. A heap of crumpled blankets and sheets. The smell. It was his wish that they made love on the couch nowadays; he had told her he found it more erotic there. He didn't want to offend her. Sometimes he wondered why he came here every night. Sex, of course - there was no other reason. He could get it elsewhere, no doubt about that. But would he have got it any better? He smiled to himself.

Linda Lakin was attractive - there was no doubt about that. A bath, a visit to the hairdresser's, and she would probably be classed as beautiful. She was always at her best naked. In a way she was like a drug - and he knew he was addicted to her.

'All this time and you've never taken me 'ome to meet your folks.'

'I don't like my home. Or my folks. My dad's a cunt.'

'I've read 'is bloody newspaper. D'you think it'll ever 'appen?'

'What?'

'Poison leakin' out and killin' us all. Or p'raps an explosion.'

'Naw. It's a bee in the old man's bonnet. I told you he's nuts. The guys I work with would lynch him if they could. They've come from all over the country, depressed areas, and now they've found jobs he's trying to take the bread out of their mouths. Mine too.'

'You could always work at 'is place on that newspaper.'

'That'll be the day. If they close down the nuclear station, I'll go on the dole. I wouldn't mind that. All the same, I'd hate to see him get his way.'

'Do you . . . do you love me, Richard?'

Always the same question. Every night.

'Of course I do.'

'That's all that matters then. Maybe one day we could get married, or live together, or something.'

He groaned inwardly.

'Maybe.'

'Even though you know I was on the game up in Aberdeen?'

'What the hell's that got to do with it?' he grabbed angrily for his shirt, and began pulling it over his head. 'We're all on the game in some way or other, whether it's sex or something else. My boss is on the game, or rather the government is. A prostitution of power. Anyway, I like a woman who's been

around a bit. My sister's a whore.'

'Get away!' A hoarse cackle of disbelief.

'It's a fact. This guy buys her clothes, drink, presents, meals out at expensive restaurants, and in return she lets him stuff her. Where's the difference between you and her, eh?'

Linda Lakin reached for another cigarette. She felt good at his words. On a par with these Coyles. Perhaps not socially, but at least morally,

Soon Richard was fully dressed. Buttoning his denim jacket, he glanced towards the door. His lust was spent, and it was time to be gone.

'I wouldn't let anyone else 'ave it with me, honest.' She swung herself off the couch, and gripped him by the arm. 'What's 'appenin' tomorrow night?'

'A few of us are going down to that transport place just off the motorway.' He resisted the temptation to push her aside. 'Bikers. There's too many in this place now. Used to be just us regulars. Some of the bastards have got to be sorted out. It's been on the cards for weeks now.'

'I'd like to come with you.'

'You might get hurt.'

'So might you.'

'No, there's too many of us. We'll give the bastards something they won't forget in a hurry. These things have to be attended to when a town gets too big.'

'You're talkin' like your dad, now.' There was vicious-ness in her tone. 'Keep the place for the privileged few.'

He kissed her without passion, descended the rickety flight of wooden stairs to the street below, and angrily kicked the Norton into life. That bitch's last remark had cut deep.

Hell, the last thing he would do would be to get like his dad.

It was the first time for weeks that Coyle had not kissed Anne at least once before she brought him his cup of morning coffee. He was obviously worried, and that worried her. She wondered if he wanted to postpone their evening's date, and did not know how to tell her. She took it out on the keys of her typewriter.

At 10.15 the telephone rang. She briefed Coyle on the internal line.

'It's the union.' Her tone was formal, cold.

A click of annoyance - but not directed at her. She knew how he hated the union. All unions.

He was on the line for twenty minutes. Then she heard the receiver slammed down, and he came out of his office.

'Further proof that one man can't beat the system,' he spoke bitterly.

'What's up now?'

'The freedom of the press has been stifled. Subtly, of course, but one can still read between the lines. Friend Dyne appears to have enlisted the full support of the power worker's union, who in turn have sought the co-operation of our union. Ross is 'the sleeper' here. I wish to God I could get rid of him, but I can't. There are others, too, of course. Any articles relating to oxide reprocessing have to be union vetted. Facts only, and those facts, in turn, have to be vetted by the nuclear authorities. Dyne again. Otherwise, they'll just close us down. Ross will have the printers and typesetters out before their morning tea has a chance to go cold.'

'Bastards!' She slipped a hand into his. 'I knew something was worrying you when you came in this morning. You must have a little crystal ball hidden away somewhere.'

'Yes,' he lied, thinking of Jane again. 'But in a way they're shutting the stable doors too late.' He laughed hollowly to boost his waning confidence. 'We got those petition forms printed and circulated before they had thought of plugging our machines.'

'And we're still going out tonight?' That was the thought that had been worrying her most.

'Of course,' he replied. 'Darling, we're going to enjoy ourselves as much as we can whilst there's still time. God only knows what will happen, but there's a nuclear cloud mushrooming on the horizon.'

Chapter 5

November 5th.

A group of ragged children were playing on a piece of waste-ground behind the latest demolition area at the north end of Craighlowrie. Their numbers had swelled towards late afternoon, standing watching for the departure of the men working on a row of tumbledown terraced cottages. Impatience, a few quarrelling.

Dusk came earlier than usual today, mingling with the hint of fog that had been creeping into the valley all afternoon. The whine and rumble of machinery ceased; cascading stone and brickwork lay strewn in an untidy range of miniature mountains. Then silence, except for a scurrying of tiny feet as the juvenile force moved in, eagerly gathering smashed woodwork, carrying and dragging it back to the centre of the open space, piling it up in layers on a foundation of cardboard boxes.

The bonfire was built just as night brought its mantle of darkness to blot out the unsightly pile of ragged lintels and skirting boards. The bonfire was huge because there was ample wood.

Then came the guy - a crazy caricature made from a Hessian sack stuffed with crumpled newspapers, legs and arms of rolled cardboard, with odd cast-off gloves and shoes for hands and feet. No hat because there wasn't one to be found. A handful of straw served as hair.

The face was an uneven oval of white cardboard with features crayoned on in a dozen different shades by industrious hands. Its expression seemed to change depending upon the angle it was viewed from, and how one's imagination reacted. Mostly it scowled from narrowed eyes and a mouth curved downward at the corners. One hated it automatically . . . couldn't wait to bum it! From an inbuilt instinct to incinerate an object of fear! Inhuman, alien.

Hoisted aloft, the effigy was precariously tied in a sitting position. Abuse came from all directions. The fireworks were very few, just some sparklers to light up the scene, creating weird moving shadows as they spluttered and fizzed.

Somebody struck a match. A crackling of flames devoured the dry timber which spat a feeble protest. Almost immediately leaping tongues of fire showered sparks high into the sky, belittling the puny sparklers.

A movement, a sudden lurching of the whole structure. It seemed to slip, settle again . . . as though the figure in the midst of the inferno had moved in a desperate attempt to escape!

The face. Oh God, that face!

Shrill screams, the onlookers falling back, closing their ranks as though to seek protection from the glowering countenance. The eyes bulged, and narrowed again. The nose was gone, burned to a black hole by a floating spark. The mouth was open, lips moving. Definitely moving, trying to speak!

Words. The children heard them, reverberating inside their heads. Incomprehensible mutterings as the eyes glowed fiercely, singling out each and every one of them.

Fools, you would burn me yet again, even when your own hour of fiery destruction is nigh. I shall be consumed by the fire which belongs to my master, but it will not destroy me. I shall come again, more terrible than before! And then you will scream as you burn.

Another shifting of the pyre broke the hypnotic spell which held the terrified audience, a column of black smoke gushing up from an old motor tyre and temporarily hiding the awfulness of it all. Nobody wanted to stay there any longer.

They ran with breathless cries of terror, scattering in all directions, leaving the bonfire to burn itself out. All through that windless night it glowed, a heap of smouldering ashes that still billowed its own warning when the demolition workers returned the following morning. But they scarcely noticed it.

The winter came and went. Coyle had hoped for severe weather, heavy snowfalls which would drift in the north end of the valley and prevent work from going ahead on the new 'harvest process' plant. Instead, the atmosphere remained mild and dry, with not even heavy rains to impede the labour-force. Still more houses were being added to the untidy sprawling suburbs.

Nothing had changed within the Coyle household. Coyle still found ample excuses to be absent from home in the evenings without arousing Jane's

suspicious. Sarah's wardrobe was now filled to overflowing, and she had taken to wearing expensive jewellery well beyond the means of her modest income. Richard still went out every night, and Coyle was aware that his son had been involved in that massive and brutal brawl at the lorry-park of the transport cafe by the motorway. The ugly wound across the boy's cheek had healed, but the scar would remain forever. One youth had died as a result of the affray, but fortunately the police had never visited the Coyle household. A clash of hooligans - and one less to terrorise society.

Yet there was a deadly calm in the valley that spring, a slow-climbing tension. There was something different about the townspeople, even those employed at the plutonium plant. Possibly a stranger visiting the town would not have noticed it. It was only evident amongst those who lived and worked together, a lack of small talk, tempers flaring at the slightest provocation, and people hurrying about their shopping chores with scarcely a word of greeting to each other.

A cloud hung over the valley. It was a time of waiting. For what? Coyle's petition forms had been filled with signatures, and only the union's ruling prevented the printing of a further supply. This problem was overcome by attaching additional sheets of plain paper.

The signatures were delivered to the Secretary of State for Energy, and a covering letter sent to the Prime Minister. Both were acknowledged, but by this time the work was already in progress. On 3 August the new oxide plant was fully operative. People's uncertainty was turning to something else, although none would have openly admitted it. It was fear - fear of the unknown, all the more diabolical in its inexplicableness.

Little did Coyle realise that the first hint of portending doom would be conveyed to him within his own household, and that he would have foreknowledge of the catastrophe he had predicted, of the disaster he was unable to convey to the people through the pages of the Herald.

September 13th. Richard had not been to work for three days. Actually there was nothing remarkable in that. Five jobs since leaving school - and every one lost because of absenteeism. It was a foregone conclusion for his parents that he would not remain much longer at the reprocessing plant.

Jane knocked loudly on his bedroom door at 7.30 a.m. She was answered by an unintelligible grunt, and returned downstairs. Sarah left at 8.15. Bob at 8.30. At 8.45 she went back upstairs, and knocked again on her son's door, this time somewhat timidly. On more than one occasion previously she had been the subject of verbal abuse.

'Are you ill, Richard?' There was a tremor in her voice.

'No, I'm fucking well not.'

The reply brought tears to her eyes, and she hurried back downstairs. In dealing with her son it was best to ride out the storm until they entered calmer waters.

At ten o'clock Richard came downstairs. He was wearing his polo-necked sweater and a pair of Wrangler jeans. Without even a glance in her direction, he went straight outside to the Norton standing alongside the garage. She heard the clink of spanners, more cursing. It always amazed her that anyone could swear so profusely whilst pursuing a hobby.

Twice during the morning she glanced outside. He appeared to have stripped

down the whole machine completely, though, as far as she was aware, there was nothing mechanically wrong with it. For him, this operation had the fascination of a jigsaw puzzle. He took it apart, put it together, then started all over again.

She sighed in resignation as she washed and vacuumed.

Midday. She usually prepared herself a snack of some sort, and wondered if Richard wanted anything to eat - but fearing further abuse she declined to ask him.

The afternoon wore on, and she began to prepare the evening meal. At 5.30 p.m. Richard came back inside, and marched straight upstairs in his oily boots. Soon she heard the bath running. Well, that was something anyway. Cleanliness was not one of his regular concerns.

Shortly after six o'clock, Sarah and Bob arrived home within a few minutes of each other. The meal was served, but still no sign of Richard. Jane decided to remark upon it.

'Richard hasn't been to work today.'

'Oh!' Bob Coyle looked up, surprise and concern on his face. 'I wondered how long he would stick it up there.'

'It's not his fault.' Sarah leaped to her brother's defence, with the kind of natural support that children give each other against parental disapproval. 'They've laid some of them off.'

'Laid them off!' Coyle dropped his knife on to his plate. 'That's nonsense. There's a half-page advert in my newspaper seeking to recruit more labour for this new "harvest process", as they call it. They've sunk thousand-foot shafts into the granite below the valley, and now they're working like hell to make this diabolical stuff into blocks of solid waste to store down there for evermore. They can't get enough men to work fast enough. The boy's lying.'

'No, he isn't,' Sarah retorted hotly. 'They've laid thirty men off on Richard's section. I should know. I had to deal with all the paperwork.'

Coyle did not reply. He continued chewing thoughtfully for some moments before he spoke again.

'Why have they laid them off?'

'I don't know. I'm only a clerk in the office.'

'Haven't you asked? I mean, aren't you interested in your job?'

'No. It's just boring clerical work, and if you want to know why the men have been laid off, you'd better ask Richard himself.'

That, of course, was the logical solution, but a task he did not relish. He finished the meal in silence. Sarah went upstairs to change.

Bob and Jane looked at each other across the table.

There was a half-taunting smile at the corners of her lips.

He rose to his feet, and mounted the stairs thoughtfully, slowly. Hell, of all the people to have to ask.

Coyle realised his first mistake the moment he entered his son's room. He should have knocked. This sanctum, adorned with posters of rock groups, speedway stars, and a host of other paraphernalia which he did not understand, was no longer the kid's bedroom to which he had right of entry at any time. It was a temple of teenage worship where homage was paid to cardboard idols.

Richard was lying on the bed, fully clothed, arms folded behind his head. He sat up as the door opened, his features twisting in fury and indignation.

'What the hell d'you mean by barging in here like this?' Wisely the youth had declined to use a four-lettered word.

Coyle closed the door quietly behind him. He stood with his back to it, regarding his son with an expression as hard as the granite below 'Holocaust'.

'You haven't been to work today.'

'No, I bloody well haven't. That's my business.'

'Not whilst you live under this roof.'

'I pay my keep. You even make a bloody profit out of me, like you do out of everything else.'

'That's because you're never here. Maybe that Lakin girl charges you board, too.'

Richard leapt to his feet, fists clenched and raised. Coyle realised his tactlessness. His feelings had come to the boil. Now it was going to be tough. Well, he would just have to prove that he was the tougher of the two - physically, if necessary.

'Don't you talk to me like that in my own house. I merely came in here to ask you a civil question.'

'Well, it doesn't seem that bloody way to me. If I don't want to go to work, I won't. Don't worry, I won't be sponging for cash.'

'You haven't been to work because you were laid off. Sent home.'

'If you know all the answers, why bother asking me?'

'I want to know why you were laid off.'

'Ah, I get it. Using me, eh? You need a spy inside Oxide Reprocessing. Well, you do your own dirty work. Ask Dyne? Maybe he'll tell you. Or see if you can get one of my workmates to part with the information for a tenner. Me, I don't take bribes.'

Coyle could contain himself no longer. Every nerve in his body shook; his vision was momentarily blurred. A split-second memory crossed his brain, from three years ago. His son's fist smashing into his jaw. This same room. The posters ... all this same teenage crap spinning around him.

His reaction, his provocation, powered the blow almost before he realised it. Knuckles met unresisting bone and flesh, just below the right eye. For perhaps a fraction of a second Richard was airborne, his calves catching on the side of the bed and propelling him backwards in a half-somersault. A soft landing except for the jarring of the back of his skull as it struck the headboard.

Coyle fell forward, checked himself, and retained his balance. Remorse threatened to swamp his anger. Forcefully he rejected it. It was too late to turn back now. He had waited three years to strike that blow, a father's revenge against a son. The score was even now. All he wanted were some answers to his questions, and he had been forced to fight for them.

'You bastard!'

Richard rubbed his face just below his eye. He wondered if the cheekbone was broken. Already the swelling was beginning. 'You bastard!'

'Yes, I'm a bastard,' Coyle tried to hide his regret in a flood of bitterness. 'Remember the time you did that to me?'

An uneasy silence. Heavy breathing. Coyle heard hesitant footsteps on the stairs. They receded. Jane or Sarah, whichever of them it was, had decided not to intervene.

'Why were you laid off? There's plenty of work up there.'

'How the hell should I know?'

'Every worker in any industry is informed why he's been laid off. The bloody unions see to that. Maybe this time they're content to hush it up.'

'Just a technical hitch.' There was a faint note of concession in Richard's voice. His eye was swelling up, and already the bruise was fully evident.

'What sort of technical hitch? A breakdown in machinery? There's certainly no shortage of waste being brought in for disposal.'

'How the hell should I know? They told us it might be a couple of days, even a week or a fortnight. Report back Monday.'

'You went through the decontamination chamber before leaving?'

'Everybody does, every day. It's a rule. Your protective clothing is removed, and you're given a new suit the next day.'

Go-operation - and it had taken a straight left to bring it about. Coyle knew that his son would be unable to tell him any more, even had he wished to.

'I'm . . . sorry . . . about that,' the newspaperman turned back to the door, his eyes resting on the floor.

'Just leave me be.'

The apology had been rejected. That made him feel a thousand times worse. Slowly he descended the stairs. Jane and Sarah were standing together in the living-room with strained expressions, their eyes boring into him. Explanations would be futile. They had undoubtedly heard it all.

Sarah was obviously on the point of going out. She was wearing a brand-new sheepskin coat. Brandon, the best quality, with leather-lined trims. Coyle hated it. He hated Houston. Maybe one day he'd hit him, too; only when that happened he would have no regrets.

'You bloody bully.'

Coyle winced at his daughter's words, but did not reply. There was nothing more to be said. He was relieved when she turned her back abruptly on him, and went out, banging the front door behind her.

'Did you have to hit him?' A mother's instinct to protect her son. 'Sarah hates you for it. She's hated you for some time now.'

'I know.'

Bob Coyle attempted to take her in his arms, but she pushed him away.

'Just look at what you've done to this household. Just when things were beginning to come right between us.'

That made him think of Anne. Sooner or later he would have to tell his wife. Maybe this new family rift would make it all the easier. He threw himself on to the settee, and picked up the Sun. Some guy owning a pack of vicious dogs had refused to have them destroyed. It had made the headlines. Oxide reprocessing had virtually disappeared from the papers these days. Even his own - but that wasn't his fault. He turned the pages. A bird with boobs which reminded him of Anne. He couldn't concentrate. Tomorrow there would be an awful lot to do. Somehow, something had to be brought to a head. But how?

He regretted that he wasn't seeing Anne that night. She would have understood. Jane had promised her support that night she had taken him, but it had not materialised - not that he was aware of, anyway. His whole family was opposed to him. That resulted from a culmination of events totally beyond his control. Perhaps he had got it all wrong . . . perhaps he was under the illusion that he was the only soldier in the whole regiment who was marching in step. It was a possibility - but he didn't think so.

He made a mental note of tomorrow's phone-calls in order of priority. Dyne, a rebuff, even if he succeeded in getting through to him. Eric Stafford, local representative of British Nuclear Fuels, honest but unsure of himself; he relied too much on Dyne. Tyler, of Britain's Hazardous Materials Group; a man with a conscience. Possibly he could be persuaded to give some hint, but not over the phone. Kent. The thought of speaking to his former colleague made him feel a lot better. Kent was a born 'stirrer', a sensationalist, who overdid it at times, cost his paper a packet on one occasion, an article concerning a cabinet minister. They hadn't sacked Kent, though; simply because they knew it had been true. Just lack of conclusive evidence, or rather, too many falsely substantiated lies from those in power. That was how it went. Coyle wished that he had Kent there with him now. The short fair-haired man was an army in himself, a terrier that could not be dislodged once he had a hold.

The door slammed loudly and they heard Richard's footsteps heading upstairs. Tonight he would not be going anywhere except to bed. Maybe he had decided to sleep his humiliation off.

Jane came back into the room and switched on the television. That was the best thing that had happened all evening..

The sound of voices stirred Richard Coyle from a deep slumber; angry voices, chanting, boots scraping on hard ground, the tinkle of breaking glass. A slow emergence from sleep into a shocked awakening, sitting up in bed, throwing back the bedclothes, aware that it was still dark outside except for the orange glow of streetlamps.

He ran to the window, snagged the curtains back, and stared with disbelief at what he saw in the street below: a crowd of some fifty people, maybe more,

pushing and shoving across the width of two pavements. Looking up at the window, seeing him, yelling obscenities. . 'Come on down, Coyle. We want you!'

Fear had his pyjama-clad figure trembling violently. Disbelief. He tried to make his confused brain work. The townspeople - and probably some of his own workmates. A frenzied mob, incensed because his father was fighting to get the recycling plant closed down - something that would cost them their jobs and throw them back into the dole queues. Their rage was understandable . . . except that Richard was one of them, on their side.

'It's not me you want,' he shouted into the din through the partly open window. 'It's my father.'

'We want you, Richard Coyle!'

He stepped back as a jagged half-brick bounced off the window-sill. And in that instant his terror rose to a climax. This was no ordinary group of protesting workers. And the light which reflected the ugly scene did not come from electric standards . . . The eerie, flickering orange glow came from a dozen or more burning torches held aloft, now revealing the uplifted faces in detail. Squat, almost inhuman features, grimed with filth and caked with dried blood. Mouths wide, with animal-like fangs. Clothing that was crude and ill-fitting - hand-sewn garments of some thick unfamiliar material. They were people who had no right to exist in this modern day and age!

And where were all the other houses? Just a street. . . no, a stony cart-track disappearing into black shadows in either direction, a world of darkness beyond the blazing torches. No glare from the new town or the processing centre emblazoning the night sky.

Something terrible had happened. Perhaps there had been a radioactive leak - or an explosion he had slept through - and the survivors had come to revenge themselves on him for some inexplicable reason.

'Come out, Richard Coyle. Or we'll drag you out!'

He glanced around his bedroom. Nothing here had changed: four walls covered with posters, the small dressing-table piled high with junk which his mother had been begging him to tidy up for weeks - everything lit up by that fiery glow from outside.

He was aware that he was shouting. 'Mom . . . Dad . . . Sarah . . . ' but his words came back at him in a hollow echo, as though the rest of the house was empty, his family gone wherever the other occupants of Craighlowrie had gone, leaving him at the mercy of these crazed, peasant-like monstrosities in an empty land.

Footsteps coming up the stairs. Richard Coyle shrank back, pressed against the wall, unable to take his eyes from the door, knowing it would burst open at any second . . . It flew back, bounced off the wall, the hinges creaking under the strain. Flaming torches bellowing black, acrid smoke showed him that his worst fears were confirmed. The landing was filled with sweat-stinking, unwashed bodies, their faces primeval masks of anger.

There was nowhere he could flee to escape the hands groping for him, broken fingernails gouging his flesh as calloused fingers closed over him. A last desperate struggle, clawing back at them in his panic, then something struck him in the genitals and he sagged unconscious into a cradle of arms.

It was all a dream, a nightmare. Dimly he was aware of his body being tossed

and turned, one way then the other. He wanted to open his eyes but his head ached abominably, and he was afraid of the light. So hot, sweating feverishly, a subconscious awareness of being ill but unable to come to terms with it logically.

At last his eyes flickered open, the pupils seared by a yellowish light. He tried to tell himself that it came from the streetlamps outside his bedroom window, but he knew it didn't. The scene which greeted him was the same as before - only a thousand times more devilish. The angry shouting crowd looking up at him, baying like a pack of wolves.

But he wasn't in his bedroom anymore. Now he was perched on top of a huge pile of dead branches, far larger than that built by the boys' brigade for the annual 5 November bonfire in the recreation park. He was securely bound to a thick stake, a human Guy Fawkes effigy with a dozen torches poised to start the blaze which would incinerate him! Panic . . . fighting his bonds although he knew it was useless . . . his body hot and dry, naked except for one remaining pyjama sleeve.

'Wait . . . you're making a big mistake!' This time his shout was audible.

Coarse laughter rippled through the watchers, a chorus of jibes, obscenities. Then a man smaller than the rest, a grotesque dwarf-like figure, shuffled forward, mouth strangely lopsided when he spoke.

'We are not mistaken. You are one of those sent to destroy us with magic - a disciple of Balzur. You bear his mark on your loins, the red plague by which his accursed are known.'

Richard tried to look down, but the ropes prevented him from seeing further than his waist. But there was a distinct burning sensation in the area of his genitals - probably from a blow one of them had delivered.

'Go join your master in the flames of hell!'

The dwarf thrust forward his burning brand and immediately the dry branches began to blaze and crackle at the foot of the pile. More torches were hurled, flames leaping higher, seeking out his feet to lick at them. Richard screamed, kept on screaming, and through a red haze of pain and fire he saw a sea of jeering faces.

'Burn as Balzur burned, Richard Coyle.'

His body was scorching, his flesh drying up, shrivelling - being burned alive! Cruelly he was denied unconsciousness.

Suddenly he was falling, in a shower of sparks like some bizarre firework explosion, the flames face-like, leering, seeming to reflect his own terror, distorted mirrors of fire. Hotter - a bed of embers leaping up to meet him. Crashing into it, writhing. Trying to scream, but no sound coming.

'Richard . . . Richard . . . 'a familiar voice so far away, a hand grasping him, shaking him. Feebly, he tried to fight it off but it clung to him with a firm persistence.

'Richard . . . Richard . . . ' The tone more insistent now.

Somehow his eyes opened . . . His own bedroom again, daylight streaming through the window, wan sunlight making patterns on the wall above the bed. Richard stared up in amazement at his mother, saw the concern on her features.

'You're ill,' she said. 'You've got a fever - had some sort of a nightmare. I heard you shouting from downstairs.'

'I'm all right.' His mouth was dry, his naked body lathered in sweat, the turmoil of bedclothes damp. 'Just . . . just a . . . a nightmare.' He started to show signs of getting up.

'You're not well enough to get up.' Maternal insistence, even though Jane Coyle knew that she addressed a rebellious teenage son. He'd get up just because she didn't want him to.

'I'm going out.' He grabbed for his shirt on the bedside chair, fought off a wave of dizziness. 'So don't try to stop me.'

'All right,' she sighed, turning away.

Somehow Richard Coyle struggled into his clothes. After a few moments he plucked up the strength to rise to his feet. He swayed, but remained upright as he tottered out to the toilet across the landing.

He didn't care if his mother heard him throwing up. After that he felt slightly better. He went downstairs and out to where the Norton was parked. He didn't want to face his mother, and he certainly couldn't face breakfast.

As he sat astride his bike, wondering if he had enough strength to kick the throttle, he glanced up and down the street. Just an everyday scene that could have been any suburb in the country: rows of box-like houses, cars backing out of driveways, a queue at the bus-stop. So beautifully mundane. Maybe last night's horror would wear off soon, seep out of his system in the sweat which was dampening his shirt and jeans, and trickling down his forehead.

Shivering, he used every ounce of his strength to kick the bike into life, and roared off into the cooling westerly wind.

'Been sortin' them bikers out again?'

Richard Coyle glared at Linda, and rubbed his eye, which was now virtually closed. The short ride from home had been difficult for him. Twice he had nearly swerved into oncoming traffic.

'My dad - like I keep saying, he's a bastard.'

I'm glad I never met 'im.'

'Don't worry. You won't have to. I'm not going back.'

'You mean . . . we can live together, maybe get married?'

He grimaced as he stood looking at her. She lay lewdly sprawled on the couch, wearing only one garment, a soiled and crumpled negligee. She had deliberately pulled it up, just far enough. In order to see between her thighs, he would need to pull it up just another couple of inches. Sometimes she was already naked when he arrived. A touch of seductive subtlety tonight, however. Well, as subtle as she ever was. She obviously wanted to play around a bit first.

He tenderly rubbed his face again, and then another thought occurred to him. He didn't feel randy as he usually did when he visited this filthy bed-sit. That was all he came for. Instead, there was an uncomfortable sensation below - a kind of stinging feeling in his genitals. Something else, too. He badly

wanted to urinate. He attempted a grin, and nodded towards the curtained alcove. She leered back, and nodded.

Richard loathed going into the smelly, uncleaned toilet which hadn't seen a bottle of lavatory cleaner in the last six months. It was certainly not the ideal prelude to a screw. But he had to go.

He took a deep breath, and pushed his way through the curtain. Silence in the room. It was almost as though she had stopped breathing. Maybe she was kinky, and obtained a thrill out of listening to him. Aim for the sides; spoil her sneaky fun, the bitch. He was certainly in a bad mood.

A single bulb lit the dingy interior. He pulled down his zip, foreskin right back, and then the pain had him gasping aloud. Burning, scalding. He glanced down, eyes wide, as the sudden horror of what he saw registered in his confused brain. The bloated head of his penis was covered in tiny, red pin-head rashes, with a yellowish fluid around the base. He clutched the wall for support, and the stream splattered on to the linoleum-covered floor.

'Christ!'

He stood immobile, unable to gather his thoughts. Linda - the dirty whore! So she hadn't left it all behind in Aberdeen. With an effort he pulled himself together, and began to struggle back into the main room, extricating himself from the folds of the rotting curtain. There was a ripping sound as some of it came away in shreds.

Linda still lay as before, her garment now pulled up around her waist, thighs wide, one foot resting on the floor, smiling in the knowledge that her offering was on full view. Her eyes alighted greedily on the open vent in the front of his trousers, and then narrowed with surprised disappointment at the sight of his flaccid organ.

'You dirty cow!' he spat in rage and contempt, advancing slowly and unsteadily towards her.

'What . . . what d'yer mean?' She scrambled up into a sitting position, her negligee slipping down again to cover her. 'What the bloody 'ell's got into yer?'

'This!'

He stood before her, holding his limpness, the foreskin held back to display the raw, weeping flesh.

'Gor' Blimey!' She edged as far away from him as the sofa would allow. 'You've got a dose of the pox!'

'And you've given it me!' he snarled. 'It's true what they say about you, you dirty little scrubber. You've been on the game all your life, and you can't get off it. You're hooked on it. Half the guys in this bleeding town are fucking you, and all the time you were trying to make out you had some sort of crush on me.'

'It's a lie!' she yelled. 'You're lookin' for a scapegoat. It's you what've been sleepin' around, and now you're tryin' to blame it on to me. You bleedin', low, dirty bastard. Go back to your poxy woman, and don't never come back 'ere!'

Richard Coyle's rage erupted. His one eye was virtually sightless. His

cheekbone felt as if it was broken. The pain throbbed right up and over his skull, terminating at the back of his neck. But that was as nothing compared with the searing sensation below, and the full implications of it all. In the space of only twelve hours he had been brutally struck by his father, and discovered that his girlfriend, no, his sex-partner, had given him VD. Someone had to pay for all that. Right now only revenge mattered - and somebody had to bear the brunt of it all.

'You fucking little whore!'

The full weight of his fourteen stone was transferred to the balls of his feet as he delivered the first blow, a stunning right uppercut which caught Linda Lakin full on the point of her jaw. Bone splintered, bloody broken teeth filled her mouth. Her head flew back. He hit her again - and felt sadistic satisfaction at the sound of her small nose breaking. Miraculously, she was still conscious, gurgling her screams as she swallowed blood, eyes wide with horror. She attempted to scramble up, but fell back, helpless.

Richard Coyle was now in an uncontrollable frenzy. He struck wildly at her eyes, laughing as they puffed up into blue-black swollen sightlessness. It wasn't her he was hitting now, it was his father - repaying that one blow with interest. Again and again. His knuckles began to bleed; they felt as though they were broken. The arms which had initially attempted to ward off his blows now lay still. Not so much as a whimper from her. Her head was twisted at an unnatural angle, the features totally unrecognisable, the nightdress saturated with blood.

Then he stopped, a numbness enveloping him from head to foot. He realised that she was dead, but it did not worry him. He hadn't meant to kill her - it was manslaughter, not murder. That would be the verdict. There was provocation. She had asked for it.

Slowly his brain began to function clearly again. He turned away from the revolting, bloody corpse and went back into that stinking alcove. He didn't even notice the smell this time. Turning on the single tap he ran water into the cracked basin and began to wash the blood from his hands. There was surprisingly little on his clothing: a few splatterings that would scarcely draw attention to him. He bathed his swollen eye. The cold water was soothing, but it seemed to have little effect on the burning within his member.

He went back into the main room, lit a cigarette, and pondered upon the course of action he would take. In no way could he disguise the fact that he had killed Linda Lakin. Her body would be discovered in a day or two, probably when the landlord came to collect the rent. Richard Coyle's arrest would then be a formality. Still, he would not make it all that easy for them.

He had no intention of returning home. In his present mood he would probably kill his father, too. Not that that would be a bad idea, but in his predicament it would not help.

First, he needed to visit a VD Clinic. That was what worried him most. He had read all about venereal diseases, but there was something about his own particular symptoms which worried him. He'd heard of guys going on for weeks with just minor discomfort, yet this pain was like a searing heat, radiating through the rest of his loins. Maybe it was a different type of pox.

He would head south! The thought came to him in an instant. The petrol tank of the Norton was almost full -enough to get him to London, maybe. He'd been there once before. Guys and girls slept rough. Nobody bothered them. They queued up at the VD clinics. Nobody would give him a second glance. That also

went for most of the major cities: Manchester, Birmingham, and such.

'I stayed in this fucking place one day too long.' He did not look back as he let himself out. 'Should've moved out months ago.'

He winced, almost cried out aloud, as his genitals came in contact with the saddle. Burning, blinding pain seemed to be eating away his lower regions, as if they were being consumed by fire . . .

He kicked the starter; it fired first time. Swaying precariously, mainly because one eye was now totally sightless, he hunched over the handlebars, and roared off into the early autumnal night. The journey south had begun.

Chapter 6

'Richard didn't come in at all last night. His bed hasn't been slept in.' Bob Coyle barely glanced up from the morning issue of the Sun, and replied with his mouth full of toast: 'So what? He's old enough. Sleeping rough probably.'

'More likely with that whore.'

'Well, I'm not going down to the police station to list him as a missing person. He'll come home when he runs out of money and gets hungry. Kids his age are doing the same all over the country.'

'And meanwhile, you'll pursue this obsession of yours about the world being blown up because some ancient wizard put a curse on Craighlowrie. Fathers all over the country aren't taking that time, thank God.'

'That's just the trouble with the British.' He pushed his empty plate away, stood up, and reached for his coat. He wanted to be out of the house before Sarah came down. One bickering woman was enough at that time of the morning.'

'Going out early aren't you?' There was resentment in Jane's voice, a hint of suspicion, too.

'I've a lot to do today.'

'Which means you'll be late home.'

'Yes, I'm afraid so.' He averted his eyes from her searching gaze. 'Don't fix anything for me. I'll eat out tonight . . . if I get time.'

'Sometimes I almost think it would be better if you had another woman,' she snapped. 'At least it'd make you more human. Work, work, work. And by the way, this boyfriend of Sarah's who keeps on lavishing all these clothes and things on her - why doesn't she bring him home? We don't even know his surname. Just David. What are his intentions?'

'Why don't you ask him?'

'How the hell can I, when I don't know who he is. I reckon he's a married man. Maybe Mrs Bean will have heard something.'

'The town's prophet of doom,' Coyle called back as he went out the door, hastening at the sound of Sarah's footsteps on the landing above. 'You'll never hear glad tidings from that source.'

The printers and typesetters were surprised to see Coyle arrive so early. He nodded to them as he passed through the workshops, and flung himself into the battered old chair in his tiny office. Anne would not be here for another three-quarters of an hour. God, how he needed her, just her company. He pulled the much depleted bottle of whisky from the cupboard, and poured some of it into the unwashed glass. He needed time to think. It was too early to make any phone-calls.

Something had definitely gone wrong up at Holocaust. Maybe it was just a repetition of what happened to Wind-scale's pilot oxide plant in 1973. That meant contamination, however slight. He wished Sarah didn't work up there. Christ, there were obstacles at every turn.

Anne arrived promptly at nine, in time to catch him draining the last of the whisky from the glass.

'My God!' There was concern on her face. 'You look bad, Bob. Domestic or . . .'

'Both,' he sighed. 'Something's definitely gone wrong up at the new plant. I'm afraid it's going to be one helluva day, today, one way or another.'

'Ajid it's still going to be one helluva night tonight.' She leaned over him, kissing him. 'God, I wish we were both away from here. Just the two of us. Anywhere. Away from it all.'

'That may be the answer,' he replied, staring unseeing at the wall in front of him, 'but only for us.'

But she knew that Bob Coyle would never break and run. He would stay and fight, whatever the odds, until the bitter end - victory or defeat.

At 10.15 a.m. Coyle tried to phone Dyne. The telephonist at the other end asked him to hold. At 10.30, when she requested him to hold again, he replaced the receiver. His next call was in quest of Stafford, representative of British Nuclear Fuels. The same number, just a different extension. The same telephonist. 'Please hold.' But a couple of minutes later he was through to Stafford.

'A technical hitch.' There was a hesitancy about the other's tone which was in contrast to the man's character. 'I've got the reports here on my desk, but I haven't had a chance to go through them yet. I've been away on a couple of days leave. Look, Coyle, if there's anything in them that might present a local or national threat, I'D phone you back. OK?'

Coyle was used to promises to ring back. On average twenty-five per cent of such calls materialised. He knew this one would not, simply because there would not be anything of a hazardous nature in those reports.

He tried Tyler, representative of Britain's Hazardous Materials Group. He got through almost immediately.

'Of course, we can't give any details at this stage,' the answer came just too smoothly for Coyle's satisfaction. 'The lay-off is merely precautionary. In fact, it is doubtful if anything is amiss at all. Until a thorough investigation has been completed, we cannot comment. Naturally, we wouldn't conceal anything of a hazardous nature. However, in all probability this is something entirely technical which will not be a breach of security at all, a purely internal business.'

Back to square one. Coyle slammed the receiver down. The patient has just undergone a critical operation, and a well-meaning relative has been fobbed off with hints of a grumbling appendix.

He tried Kent next. But it was 2.30 p.m. before the controversial journalist returned from a liquid lunch at the Cheshire Cheese. Coyle, himself, had not yet eaten, and the whisky bottle now reposed empty in the wastepaper-basket. Since its disposal Anne had been plying him constantly with cups of black coffee.

'You should have stayed on Fleet Street,' Kent's speech was slightly slurred. 'Life hums constantly around one . . .'

'It's humming here, too.' Coyle came to the point. 'Did you know that they've closed down part of the new nuclear disposal plant? Purely technical, I'm told, no need for concern . . .'

'The devil they have!' Kent's speech lost its slur, and Coyle could visualise the old gleam in those grey eyes, the tightening of the mouth. 'Smells fishy to me. No doubt you've made some enquiries?'

Tried to,' Coyle replied. 'The usual negative answers one expects when dealing with officialdom - particularly at this level. Of course the unions have combined to restrict my own personal views being expressed in the Herald.'

'Fuck the unions.' Kent was always conveniently forgetting to pay his subscription. 'Tell you what, there's nothing to hold me here at present. I'll drive up through the night, and see you tomorrow morning.'

Coyle replaced the receiver with mingled relief and apprehension. Relief that Kent might be going to throw a few spanners into Dyne's reprocessing works. Apprehension that . . . well, the London journalist had an uncanny nose for trouble. In the past, when they had worked together, there had been so many reports that had seemed scarcely worth the trouble of investigating, yet the little Fleet Street man had unearthed veritable . . . holocausts!

Linda Lakin's body was discovered at approximately three o'clock that same afternoon, in effect, shortly after Coyle had finished speaking to Kent. It was 4.10 p.m. when the police visited the premises of the Herald, a plain-clothes Chief Superintendent accompanied by two CID officers.

Coyle was well acquainted with all three of them. Rollason, the Superintendent, rarely smiled, possibly on account of the eternal cigarette which smouldered between his thick lips, depositing ash at intervals down his worn brown waistcoat. He had small eyes buried beneath fleshy sockets, which rarely disclosed his innermost feelings.

McLane, the inspector, was not so stolid as his superior, his clean-cut features an admirable advertisement for some brand of after-shave. He was a man destined to climb to the heights of his chosen profession, and he would be ruthless in that quest.

Sergeant Conniston stood respectfully behind them. Retirement was his goal in life now, and his toothbrush moustache was reminiscent of an era when local policemen commanded the respect of the entire community. That, too, had gone.

A mixed bunch, Coyle decided. The Superintendent's expression conveyed that he had a matter of a confidential nature to discuss. Coyle nodded to Anne. She understood, smiled and withdrew, closing the door behind her.

It was cramped in the tiny office, and there were not sufficient chairs available. Coyle pushed a sheaf of papers aside.

'And what can I do for you, gentlemen?'

'Your boy,' Rollason came straight to the point. 'Any idea where he is? He's not at work, nor home. We checked . . . '

The ringing of the telephone interrupted them. Coyle lifted the receiver. Anne's voice came over the internal line, 'Your wife wants to speak to you.'

Tell her I'll call her back.'

'I've already told her that. She says it's urgent, and she refuses to ring off.'

'Oh, all right. Put her through.' He placed a hand over the mouthpiece. 'Excuse me, it's my wife. I won't keep you a minute.'

'Bob.' Jane's voice had more than a ring of urgency to it. She was on the verge of panic. 'It's about Richard. The police have been here looking for him.'

Coyle gave no hint - either in his voice or in his expression - of his true feelings, the jarring of his nerves, the sensation of nausea as his stomach churned.

'I know. They're here now. Just arrived.'

'What's happened?'

'I don't know. Haven't had a chance to speak to them yet.'

'Something's terribly wrong, I know it. The police wouldn't say

'Look, I'll ring you back.' He cut her off abruptly by replacing the receiver.

'Well?' he looked at Rollason. 'Suppose you tell me what it's all about.'

'Does the name Linda Lakin mean anything to you?' the Superintendent lit a fresh cigarette with the butt of the old one before crushing it in the ashtray.

'Yes.' Coyle's uneasiness escalated. 'A girl my son used to knock about with. I've never met her. He never brought his girlfriends home.'

'Well, she's dead. Beaten up - one hell of a mess. And your lad's gone missing. My men are going over the scene of the murder now, and already there's ample evidence that he was there recently. What we want to know is where he is now? We've circulated his motor-cycle registration number to all patrol cars.'

'My God!' Coyle buried his face in his hands. It all came back to him - the quarrel, the blow. Already he was blaming himself. Finally, he looked up, his complexion ashen. 'I only wish you'd come here to me first. I've no idea where my son is right now.'

'We followed a methodical line of enquiries.'

Silence. Three men totally unmoved. And the fourth ... a few minutes ago he was challenging single-handed the rights of a nation to risk the lives of its entire population. Now he was just an ordinary father, shattered, dazed, everything else forgotten.

'We'll probably want to speak to you again.' Rollason moved towards the door. 'Call us if he shows up.'

Coyle nodded. He won't, though. He's gone. And I drove him away.

He watched them leave in single file - Conniston last. Their eyes met briefly. Coyle thought he read sympathy there, but he could have been mistaken. The door closed and he heard them go out through the reception area.

A tap on the door - Anne. She had sensed that something was terribly wrong. He called out for her to come in.

'It's Richard.' He picked up the sheaf of papers again, just for something to occupy his hands. His brain was in a daze. To all appearances, he's done that Lakin hussy in.'

'Oh, Christ!'

'I'd better get home fast.'

'Of course.'

'Kent will be here in the morning. I'm not backing out of this other business, no matter what. We're still going to fight 'em to the bitter end, to the very last atom.'

She admired him more at that moment than ever before. A family crisis of the worst kind, and still he was prepared to continue the fight.

Hardly before Coyle had got out of the car, Jane was at the front door. She seemed to have aged a decade since breakfast: the smooth skin on her face lined, black marks beneath her eyes, streaks of mascara where it had run with tears. And even now she did not know the truth.

'What's he done? Where is he?' Her voice rose almost to a scream. 'Where is Richard?'

Before replying, he took off his coat and hung it up. He needed time to think, time to choose his words.

'I don't know,' he said at last and went into the living-room, straight to the cocktail cabinet. He poured two whiskies - stiff ones.

'You've got to tell me. Where is he?'

'I've no idea.'

'But why the police?'

'The Lakin girl's dead. Murdered.'

'Oh, my God! No, no ... no!'

He slapped her hard across the face with the flat of his hand. He had read somewhere that it was the best way to prevent someone becoming hysterical.

She staggered back. The armchair happened to be in the right place, and she sprawled back into it. There was shocked silence.

'Murdered?' she gulped at last.

'Look, there's no reason to connect it with Richard. It's just that he was . . . friendly with her. They only want to ask him some questions.'

He hated himself for the lie - just stalling. It would all have to come out in the end. The link between their son and the dead girl would be mentioned on the television news, probably that night. He had to stop her from switching on. Though in her state she wasn't likely to. 'Look, you said yourself the girl was a - Prostitute!' she snapped viciously. 'You passed that off as Mrs Bean's gossip.'

'OK. So maybe I was wrong. That means she had other men. Violent types. Maybe one of them . . . '

She took the glass of whisky he offered her, and sipped it, then grimaced. She had never much liked spirits.

'Yet, suppose something turned Richard into a violent type . . . temporarily at least . . . ' 'Meaning?'

'You hit the boy . . . viciously!'

'He's not a boy. He's a grown man, responsible for his own actions.'

'He's our son still. You turned him into a monster of violence, Bob . . . ' She stopped with a sob.

An uneasy silence ensued. Coyle swallowed his whisky, and poured himself another. Jane merely toyed with her glass.

'Another thing, Bob.' Her lips tightened into a thin line. 'I spoke to Mrs Bean again today.'

'Oh, God, no. That woman . . . What is it this time?' 'Sarah.'

'What about her?'

'It's as I suspected - as I've been trying to get through your thick skull for months. She's having an affair with a married man. His name is David Houston, he's got three young children . . . '

'I'll speak to her about it.'

'No, you won't.' Jane's voice was low, loaded with menace. 'You're fast splitting this family up. I'll sort this one out. As a husband and father you're a dead loss!'

Coyle's eyes blazed. His jaw tightened. The day of confession had arrived.

'I agree with you,' he spoke softly, suddenly relieved that all these domestic falsehoods were collapsing around them. 'And I'll tell you something else, too. Before Mrs Bean does. I am having an affair with another woman. Not just a sexual relationship. I'm in love with her. It's been going on for a very long time now. You've been so confined within your own tiny little world that you've never once suspected a thing. I've kept it from you, trying to hold the family together, but now . . . now it doesn't matter any longer.'

Her whisky glass shattered into hundreds of tiny fragments on the wall behind him. The contents caught him full in the face.

Rupe had never had any inclination towards violence before. Indeed, he had never had any inclinations towards anything requiring either physical or mental effort. The kids at school had reduced him to the self-conscious, nervous, insignificant being that was to be his permanent character by the time he was ten years old. Rupert had always been a subject of ridicule, the victim of bullies, even after Mr Snell, his form-master, had so kindly taken to referring to him as 'Rupe'. It was too late then, though.

He was glad when the time came for him to leave school, though it meant being cast out into this vicious, unfriendly, new town where nobody paid him the slightest attention -except maybe to push him roughly aside when he chanced to idle in a main thoroughfare. He certainly didn't want to go back home again, to suffer either his father's drunken pummellings, or his mother's obscene cursings, which poured incessantly from those harsh lips.

So, Rupe just wandered aimlessly. Except there had been a kind of calling, a message that had come to him in a rare dream a few nights ago; from an old man speaking to Rupe out of the midst of a blazing furnace. 'The time is nigh. The oppressed must rise up. Craiglowrie shall be destroyed by fire, and only those who follow me shall live. Hide, and wait until I come. Kill if necessary.'

A kind of prophet, Rupe had decided, a holy man who could survive in the flames. A saviour. Like the Ayatollah he'd seen on TV, calling to the people to rise up and overthrow authority. It was all very exciting, gave him a purpose in life as never before.

The condemned houses, scheduled for demolition at some future date - their boardings covered with four-letter words daubed blatantly in varied colours - these provided him with shelter, if not warmth. Even in this vanishing slum area, the dustbins were always well stocked with edible refuse, so he certainly wouldn't starve. All he wanted was to be left alone, to live in the only way he knew - and to hate his fellow men. And all around him the new town was replacing the old. He could never easily accept change -but he savoured the one that had been promised in his dream.

Then he found Loup, or, to be more precise, Loup found him. He awoke one morning, the weak rays of sunlight dancing on his face through a hole in the brickwork above his head - and he knew that he wasn't alone. The dog sat quietly inside the entrance, beside a heap of rubble, just watching him, its greenish-grey eyes missing nothing. It appeared to be mostly Alsatian. Its coat was covered in mange, yet its face was alert and knowing, its pointed ears erect and listening to every sound. It, too, was a loner.

Rupe leaned over, and threw the dog a few scraps of bread from the cardboard box beneath the tarpaulin, which was his larder. When the animal had devoured them, never taking its eyes off him whilst it masticated, he offered a hand in friendship, and it licked his outstretched fingers with a deep red tongue,

displaying massive canine teeth, so white and glistening in contrast to the poor quality of its coat.

Rupe didn't know why he called his newly found friend Loup. He seemed to have heard the word somewhere, maybe long ago in school, and had stored it away in his memory. Anyway, it rhymed with his own name, and they were going to be partners for sure. Rupe and Loup.

They had to lie low in the daytime, scavenging for food at night, under cover of darkness. Sometimes they would slink through the deserted streets together, but usually Loup would disappear on his own after supper, returning before dawn to lie down on the length of frayed matting hi the corner, licking his chops with the satisfaction of a dog which has hunted and fed well, and ready to sleep for a few hours.

Then came the moment when Rupe killed. Not a bludgeoning or knifing on one of his nocturnal prowls, but in a busy street in broad daylight. He knew not why he had ventured out, mingling with the jostling crowds, hustled along like a cork in a millstream. Perhaps he was suddenly enjoying a sense of superiority, a dawning of the knowledge that he was not as others, a chosen disciple of the one who would surely come. He was tied by no bonds of convention.

It happened on the pedestrian crossing. The traffic lights showed green, and the vehicles roared by. The pedestrian control showed 'Wait', illuminated in red. Twenty or more people clustered together on each pavement, impatiently watching for it to change to the green light and 'Cross now'. The little old lady hi front of him picked up her heavily-laden shopping bags in anticipation. At that moment Rupe heard the old man's voice, loud and clear as though he was standing next to him. 'Go on, kill. Now!' Rupe pushed her, firmly but surreptitiously, so that nobody would notice the movement. Her scream of terror was drowned by the clanking of an approaching articulated lorry. Before the driver realised what was happening, she was beneath his front wheels with a screech of rubber, the rear wheels came to rest on her already lifeless body.

Rupe retired to the rear of the shocked, sensation-seeking crowd which gathered within seconds. He'd enjoyed that. He felt great. It had been so subtle. A touch of perfection. And the blood. He liked the colour, so richly delicious, and the odour, too. He'd never noticed the smell before. Such a delightful, tangy aroma. Nobody even glanced at him as he slunk away. And the voice, those same mellow tones - seeming further away this time - said 'Well done, my son'.

It was on one of his dustbin crawls on the edge of the old town that Rupe met the girl. He was on his own that night, as was usually the case - Loup having gone off on a foray to the deserted open-air market. The moon was full, and the young vagrant took extra care that he was not spotted by a patrolling panda car. As he turned into a side street, near the cinema, he saw the girl standing in the shadows of the Community Centre. He hadn't bothered with women before, classing both sexes of mankind as his natural enemies, but somehow he felt different at this moment. Perhaps it was the way she looked at him; the smiling, smirking invitation on her face caused a tightening of his muscles. The fact that her hair was straggly, her short topcoat creased and stained, and there were holes in her tights, was of no consequence to him. He just stood and stared.

'Ow about it then, lover boy?' she croaked. 'It don't matter if you ain't got no money. Elsie won't charge you ~ this time!'

For a few seconds they stood looking at each other in silence, Rupe

anticipating a thrill he'd never experienced before, and Elsie contemplating the enrolment of yet another regular client. Then, he allowed her to take him by the hand, and lead him towards the cinema car-park.

And he heard that voice again, very faintly: 'Go with her, my son. Enjoy yourself. . . and then kill!'

It was snug behind the deserted attendant's hut, and soon Rupe forgot everything else, until finally she pushed him off her partially clothed body.

'Christ!' she croaked. 'Yer don't 'arf stink. A bath wouldn't do yer no 'arm - nor a shave, for that matter. Yer like a bloody 'edge 'og!'

Rupe's fingers touched the face. Funny, he thought, I never noticed that before. He hadn't expected a beard to start for another year at least. But now, suddenly, he felt a roughness on his face, as though his skin was corrugated. But it was not hair. It was something else entirely - something which burned him as though he had passed through boiling steam.

'Yer'll learn in time,' Elsie was sneering now, adjusting her coat. 'Only next time it'll cost yer a couple o' quid. Worth a fiver to put up with that stink!'

Suddenly, his hands were around her throat, but not the small slender hands of youth. They were massive, strong . . . and they had choked the life out of the street-walker before she had time to scream. Then, with terrible ferocity, he began to mutilate the dead body lying beneath him, punching and tearing at the face with his bare hands - finally kicking and stamping on the now unrecognisable form with his heavy boots. At last he stood still, smiling into the darkness - waiting to hear those words of praise: 'Well done, my son.'

It was some hours later when Rupe returned to the den he shared with Loup. All that sudden strength seemed to have ebbed from him, and it required a supreme physical effort to peel the filthy rags from his grimy body. He dropped them on the floor, and then, with a groan, he flung himself on the stiff tarpaulin. He did not sleep, but just lay there, watching the sky grow lighter every minute through the hole in the wall. Something was dreadfully wrong, and he could not understand what.

Loup had been asleep when he entered - but now he opened his eyes and regarded his companion. Rupe looked back at him, then he glanced down at his own body, the dirt clinging to his flesh like scales. He stared at the marks that now covered him like a series of red rashes - millions of tiny pimples that oozed yellowish pus and burned with a scalding sensation. He felt weak, faint, and frightened. He tried to stand, but fell - his whole body stinging yet more painfully. He knew he needed help urgently. Despite his hatred of his fellow men, he would have to seek their aid. No longer were those mystic words of encouragement to be heard.

He began to crawl, slowly, painfully, dragging along on his stomach, instinctively heading towards the new suburbs. The burning now seemed to be growing inside him as well, as though his intestines were on fire.

He had covered almost two hundred yards, and it was full daylight now. The first rays of the rising sun lay on the rooftops. Soon the new town would be coming to life, people scurrying to and fro. Then someone would find him. He tried to shout for help, but the sound was scarcely a whisper - a hoarse croak that went unanswered.

That damned dog had deserted him in his hour of need.

He could hear footsteps. No. It was the thudding of his own heart, pumping frantically, faster than ever before.

Sheer terror gripped him. The burning. He was like a human inferno, except there were no flames. Never in his life had he known a day's illness, and now, so suddenly . . .

He covered another ten yards, and felt the flagstones of a pavement beneath him. And as he lay there he heard laughter, mocking tones inside his head, a familiar voice. 'All must die, Rupe. You are the first of many. This is the curse of Balzur.'

Then he died.

Chapter 7

'Two bloody murders within twenty-four hours, and one dead vagrant,' Chief Superintendent Rollason addressed Inspector McLane and Sergeant Conniston from behind his cigarette, its half inch or so of ash liable to fall at any second.

'And the vagrant kid could probably have done both,' McLane replied. 'What'd he die of, anyway? Looked like the bloody plague to me.'

'We'll have to wait for the autopsy' - Rollason's ash finally fell into his lap - 'but in the meantime we've got to find this Coyle kid. Personally, I don't think the murders are related, but we've got to solve 'em . . . even if the victims were only a couple of slags. It's getting like bloody Jack the Ripper round here.'

'Well, all the road-blocks are set up.' There was a note of pride in McLane's voice. 'Shouldn't be too difficult.'

'Except that he's got eighteen hours or so start on us,' Rollason muttered. 'But we'll pick him up, all right. He's no hardened criminal on the run. Just one scared yobbo.'

They were interrupted by a knock on the door. A young uniformed constable entered, a manila envelope clutched in his hand.

'The post-mortem, sir.'

'Thank you, Watkins. That will be all.'

The constable withdrew, and Rollason's podgy fingers tore at the envelope, like a pool's winner eager to see the cheque, wondering whether or not his expectations will be realised.

Three separate sheets of paper - typewritten. Lakin first: fractured skull,

multiple injuries. Regan, the whore: strangulation; also a cracked skull.
Rupert Copeland . . .

The Superintendent's hand shook. The papers fell on to the desk amidst another shower of cigarette ash. His face was white. The other two had never seen him react in that way before. Death was death to him. Only the means, the motives mattered. Personalities never entered into it.

'Is ... is there something wrong, sir?' McLane stepped forward, but he would not risk the chances of promotion by reaching across for the reports without permission. It all had to come from the Super himself.

'Wrong?' Rollason's cigarette bobbed up and down. 'That is something of an understatement, Inspector. The youth died from radioactive poisoning. Oxide, it would appear.'

He reached for the telephone and asked for a number. Clicking his tongue, he fidgeted with impatience till he got through to the reprocessing plant. 'Hold, please.' He swore under his breath. Minutes passed.

'Mr Dyne is in conference, sir. Would you care to speak to . . . '

'No, I would not,' he barked. 'This is Chief Superintendent Rollason speaking. Will you fetch Mr Dyne out of the conference at once, please. I wish to speak with him concerning a matter of the utmost gravity.'

Three minutes later he was talking to Winston Dyne.

The pain was becoming worse every second. Richard Coyle slowed his machine to a mere 20 m.p.h. God, he wished that he'd risked the motorway, but the police would have picked him up there for sure.

The old winding road through the Lakes. The full moon and clear skies helped. He was totally blind in one eye now. The agony in his genitals was so great that he was forced to half stand for long periods. That made his course even more erratic, and when the muscles in his legs could no longer stand the strain, he relapsed back into the saddle. It was almost as though his machine had a will of its own, deliberately singling out every pothole and bump in the narrow twisting road, an instrument of sadistic torture.

His stomach burned. He retched and vomited - the spew blowing back on to him. But still he kept going, not daring to stop even though his instincts told him to abandon the machine, and crawl away into one of the adjacent Forestry Commission thickets. Like a fox, a beast of the chase, licking its wounds in some hole before it finally died a lingering death.

Lake Windermere on his right. The large expanse of water shimmering in the moonlight was tempting. It would cool his burning body. Death by drowning was said to be pleasant. Just hallucinations, one's whole life returning in those few moments . . . Instead he increased his pressure on the throttle.

Dawn. The pain was no worse. No better, either. Kendal. He rode slowly through the town, passing a parked police patrol car. The two officers were enjoying a quiet smoke. They scarcely glanced at him.

Full daylight. The agony was not so intense now, though it was spreading to other parts of his body. He felt it on his chest and back - bringing back memories of early childhood when his mother had rubbed him with Vie ointment. An unrelenting smarting sensation - only this time it came from within. His thoughts turned again to VD. Surely that poxy wench couldn't have given him

all this.

He glanced down at the petrol gauge. More than half-full. Got to keep going. Anywhere. Just keep going - away from it all. He thought about chancing the M6, but decided against it. That was the route they'd expect him to take.

Still heading south. Not much traffic. They all used the motorways nowadays. The towns presented few problems. One just followed the main roads straight through them. Too many traffic lights; mostly he found them on red, and that was the worst part - the waiting.

The day was clear, dry and sunny. No spray from other vehicles. Lancaster. Preston. The big towns attracted him, but somehow he could not bring himself to stop. As long as there was petrol in the tank . . . Just keep going.

The pain remained constant - no better, no worse - all over his body. Once, whilst he waited for a set of traffic lights to change, he felt his face. The skin was rough, like emery paper. No growth of beard, though he had not shaved for the past two days.

Manchester. On, across the Ship Canal. Wigan. He had often wondered about the mythical pier, but this was certainly no time to investigate. Warrington. The sun was well past its zenith. Under normal conditions he would have been a hundred miles further on by now. However, time had ceased to matter any more. And 30 m.p.h. was the most he could manage with one good eye.

The petrol was low in the tank, which worried him. Now he began to think seriously about the coming night. Lichfield, its three spired cathedral looming on his left, a place of sanctuary. He cursed himself for even thinking about it. He wasn't going to turn back to God now. That would be a return to his childhood, the enforced church services. He'd make it on his own, but now all thoughts of death had deserted him. A fever of some sort, perhaps not even the clap. His spirits rose. But he had killed the girl. There was no getting away from that.

Then he saw the signs for Birmingham. He had been there once before, and they shone like welcoming beacons. The teeming masses, and young people sleeping rough in the subways. He would simply be another drop-out. He'd make it. It would be much the same as London.

The last lap was the most difficult. The coming dusk, the sprawling suburbs, the blindness in one eye and the burning in his body.

He recognised Spaghetti Junction, but was forced to skirt it. It would be ironical to be picked up by the law now. He branched off to the left - towards Aston. Some youths were idling on the pavement. West Indians. They shouted something at him. He yelled back viciously, but the Norton drowned his stream of abuse.

A huge roundabout. Confusing. He went round twice, then chanced his exit. He knew he was lost now. Another island. His engine coughed, spluttered, picked up again. He took an inconspicuous side road. A Salvation Army hostel on his left, an office-cleaning firm next-door, then a small car park. No barrier or gate, the attendant's hut boarded up. Two cars were parked over on the far side. They probably belonged to businessmen staying late at the office for the sole purpose of screwing their secretaries, he decided. It reminded him of his father, and he laughed aloud. Then the engine petered out altogether.

He began wheeling his machine on to the tract of open ground. It was as much as he could do to move it, as though every vestige of strength had deserted

his burning body. He leaned up against the wall, fighting for his breath, surveying his surroundings in the falling darkness.

He did not relish the idea of approaching the Salvation Army. Then his gaze was drawn towards a church-like building on the opposite side of the road. He watched two nuns cross towards it, their dark robes swishing as they moved. Some rough ground adjoining the building, long grass pressed flat by the bodies that lazed their days and nights away amidst the strewn litter. A narrow lighted entrance in the old stone wall further up. A queue - some young, some old. Others sitting on the ground, eating.

Then realisation dawned upon him. A nuns' free hand-out centre. Charity. Something he had always despised. Up until now he had not realised just how hungry he was. Thirsty, too. He had never been governed by principles. Only one: you took everything you could get your hands on. Nuns or no, he was determined to eat and drink.

Unsteadily he crossed the road, and gained the pavement opposite. A hiccough and a curse from the shadows. Irish without a doubt. Just another drunk in a city teeming with them, seeking oblivion in their own way: whisky on Thursdays when they drew their social security, meths the rest of the week.

By the time he had climbed the low wall and mounted the litter-strewn bank he was breathing even more heavily. The burning was in his lungs now. Everything around him was in shadow. Twice he almost fell over inert forms, men already bedded down for the night, but he didn't fancy sleeping outside in the autumnal atmosphere. Then he noticed the underpass opposite - it would be warmer in there. Already others seemed to have the same idea. He joined the end of the queue, and hoped he would not have long to wait. The scramble for bedding-down places was already in progress.

Several in front of him were quarrelling. Three youths were pushing an old man about. The latter slipped to the ground, and lay there, cursing them. The others stepped over him. Richard followed them. It was clearly a case of dog-eat-dog here. The old man clutched at Richard's foot, and received a weakened kick, which sent the vagrant flat on his back.

Laughter. Richard leaned against the wall. He must not let them know how weak he was. Otherwise his own place in the queue would be in jeopardy.

God, he could barely stand!

'Next please.'

The Sister of Mercy was ladling broth into a tin mug. She pushed it across the scrubbed trestle table towards him, her other hand reaching for thick chunk of bread.

Their eyes met. His were glazed, expressionless. Hers showed disbelief, horror! She recoiled, her scream already rising to a shrill pitch, her hand clutching the mug and knocking it over. Another nun came running down the passage. She, too, stopped abruptly, her hand going to her mouth to stifle her wail of terror.

Richard stepped back, half turned. A dozen men blocked his flight back down the narrow stone passage. Young men, old men, drop-outs, drug-addicts, meths-drinkers, the scum of the city. Some of them would willingly have murdered for a fivepence piece.

But not this time. The light from the single hanging bulb fell full upon his

features, the pain-distorted face, the weeping rashes, the puffed eye, the blazing hatred for his fellow creatures.

'Tis a demon from hell!' a drunken Irishman muttered, sprawling headlong over the prostrate old man in his own attempt at flight.

'The fuckin' plague!'

'Mother O'God!'

One of the nuns was still screaming. The other had fallen to the ground in a faint. Fear lent new strength to Richard's ailing body. Those blocking his escape route parted only too readily to let him pass, crossing themselves fervently, eyes closed lest they might be gazing upon the Evil One himself.

His progress was unimpeded across the litter-strewn forecourt, screams and wails ringing in his burning ears.

He fell rather than climbed over the wall which separated St Chad's Convent from the maze of underpasses. Dimly-lit passages faced him, lighting long smashed by vandals.

His breath came in fiery gulps, searing his own face. He fled blindly, though there was no pursuit. Only footsteps coming towards him, sneaker pumps padding frenziedly. The two parties met at an unlit junction.

Three youths: two of them carrying home-made coshes. The third held an open flick-knife in his right hand, an unopened handbag in the other. Muggers. They were breathing heavily after their fast sprint from the scene of the mugging in nearby St Philip's churchyard.

All four pulled up abruptly. The one with the handbag acted first. His knife-arm went back, then plunged forward swiftly. Richard fell to the ground, the blade embedded deep in his abdomen, fingers clawing desperately at the smooth concrete beneath him. Dirty broken nails split. His blood formed a spreading scarlet pool, but there was no further pain. Everyone has his limit, and Richard Coyle's had been reached at last.

The three youths paused momentarily, the killer intent on retrieving his knife, reluctant to leave behind any evidence. With his foot he rolled the limp body over on its back. As a faint beam of light from the adjoining passageway fell directly upon the festering face, a single eye stared up at him, slowly reddening as though liquid fire blazed within it.

All three froze in immobility.

'For fuck's sake!'

The murder weapon was forgotten as three terror-stricken muggers fled blindly. Evil in all its forms was abroad this night. That face belonged to Satan himself!

Kent looked no different from when Bob Coyle had last seen him, three years ago. The London journalist had an agelessness about him, short cropped fair hair that rendered flecks of grey invisible, a reddish bronzed complexion that somehow buried any lines that might since have appeared. He had a square jaw that bespoke determination, a stockiness that would not turn to fat, or at least would disguise it. Five feet eight. He had something else, too: a kind of sex appeal which was not apparent until a woman came to know him well. That seldom happened, for he was a loner. He had told Coyle once that he was forty.

Coyle had happened to know that he was forty-three, but he did not expose the lie. There was no point. Kent was Kent. A good friend if he took a liking to you, a bastard if he didn't. Nobody used his first name. Few even knew it. Just 'Kent'.

Kent walked into the offices of the Herald at 11.15 a.m. Everything about him was immaculate. Perhaps he had driven straight up from London without pause. Maybe he had snatched a couple of hours' sleep behind the wheel of his Mercedes in a lay-by. Either way there was not so much as a crumple in his Saville Row suit.

'Hi.' No handshake, just an easing of his body into the one vacant chair. He might even have been part of the regular set-up, for he had a knack of adapting himself to any situation. A politician's scandal or an oxide leak, it mattered not. He was the man for the job.

Kent and Coyle; it was a natural team-up. They spent a full hour in uninterrupted conversation, Coyle doing most of the talking. Several times they heard the telephone ring in the outer office, and Anne's muffled voice answering it. They were not disturbed. Even a call from the highest authority would not get past her impenetrable line of defence.

Coyle told Kent everything. His suspicions about an oxide leak. Jane. Anne. Sarah. Richard. And Balzur's curse. The other listened intently, filling and lighting his aluminium-stemmed pipe with meticulous care. The tiny room was soon filled with tobacco smoke. Something else, too. Tension.

'Jesus!' Kent was one of the few pipe-smokers who inhaled the strong smoke regularly. 'You've sure got problems, mate. Big ones. Any ideas about Richard? The last time I knew him he was a rebellious sixteen-year-old who would oppose authority in every form.'

'He hasn't changed.'

'But he wasn't a ... killer. I'm a pretty good judge of character. Something drastic has happened to him, a complete mental reversion.'

'You're right, but he wasn't the sort to go berserk overnight. Different if he'd gone on to drugs. But it wouldn't be easy up here. Not like London.'

'If you want drugs badly enough, you find 'em,' Kent said. 'Anywhere. However, the problem can wait until he turns up. In the meantime we've got to get cracking on this oxide business.'

'We're up against a brick wall there.'

'In your case, yes.' Kent tapped out his pipe in the ashtray and immediately began to refill it. 'I don't wish to belittle you, Bob. You were one of the best on Fleet Street once. You'd have made it big if you'd stayed there. But up here you just don't count. A small local paper - expanding, yes, but you're too easy to gag. They can't do that with me. To some extent you've cooked your own goose by direct opposition to the unions, to the men in power. I agree with your views, but these tin gods can't silence me. Freedom of the press still exists.'

Coyle nodded. He wished that he had sent for Kent earlier, and hoped it was not too late now.

Kent picked up the telephone. Coyle pushed across a scrap of paper with some digits scribbled on it. The Londoner nodded as he dialled.

Dyne, as usual, was unavailable - a conference. Kent said he would ring back in half an hour. He declined the offer to speak to either Stafford or Tyler.

Soon the two of them went out to lunch together, a newly opened restaurant some five minutes' walk from the Herald offices. Kent's gaze took in his surroundings as they walked down the street. Old properties, sound enough in construction yet scheduled for demolition. Queues forming outside confectionery and butchery shops, the premises not yet expanded to cope with the sudden increase in population. A town that was bursting at the seams, a valley that could barely accommodate the sprawling suburbs. A place that could disintegrate in a matter of seconds with one nuclear accident. And not just here, either. The whole country, too.

As they ate he casually observed those seated at the tables around them. It was a modern restaurant that had everything. An extensive menu, sophisticated soft lighting, background music, good service. Yet something was missing. He was well into his main course before he realised what it was. There was no buzz of conversation. A crowded room, the diners virtually silent, occasional comments, but no flow of small-talk. Already he knew that this was a town of fear, a population trapped by its own environment. Each and every one of them knew. They knew, too, that there wasn't a damned thing they could do about it. They were all victims of the new society, the Plutonium Society - the Pluto Pact. And whether it was Balzur's or Oxide Re-processing's mattered not.

At 3.30 p.m. Kent managed to get Dyne on the telephone. Coyle listened intently to his colleague's words from across the desk, and it was soon evident that this time there would be no rebuff. Once again Coyle recognised the power of Fleet Street, and particularly of Kent. The man, the name, it made all the difference.

Dyne was doing most of the talking. Coyle could not catch the words, but was aware that the big man was not now resorting to his usual mode of bluff.

'So, 2.p.m. tomorrow then,' Kent concluded. 'Coyle will be coming with me. Yes. Two passes, please. We'll collect them at the checkpoint . . . Oh, all right, send them down here, if you wish. Goodbye.'

He replaced the receiver, and his expression was grim.

'Crisis meeting tomorrow. Followed by a press conference at two o'clock. That means you and me, and half the journalists from Fleet Street are probably already making plans to head north. Something really big that they can't hide any longer. But they haven't shut down the whole plant. Just that one section. The Secretary of State for Energy will be arriving in the morning. This'H be my big story, boy . . . By the way, do you really believe that stuff you wrote . . . I mean about the curse, some sixteenth-century wizard condemning Craiglowrie to cremation and damnation?'

'Stranger things have happened.' Coyle's expression was grave. 'What is plutonium except a tool of Pluto, ruler of the fiery underworld? Is it coincidence that out of the whole of Britain this accursed valley was chosen for reprocessing the stuff? Still, I'd like to think there's nothing in it. A lot of the locals are getting scared, and the authorities are blaming me for scaremongering, but I felt a responsibility to my readers to put the picture before them.'

The internal phone rang. Anne's voice was apprehensive,

'Chief Superintendent Rollason, Bob.'

'Put him on.' There was an abruptness caused by fear in Coyle's voice. 'Any news of my boy?'

'Not yet,' the Superintendent's voice had a trace of weariness in it. Three hours' sleep snatched in twenty-four cannot easily be disguised. 'Another murder.'

'Oh, my God!'

'A known prostitute. She was killed by a youth known to us, Rupert Copeland. He was found dead some distance away from her body. The news is official now, if you want to print it.'

'Maybe he did the Lakin girl in.'

'No chance.'

Hopes raised and dashed instantly.

'What did Copeland die of?'

'It's all in the autopsy. Official secret at the moment. Maybe it'll be disclosed at the press conference tomorrow.'

'So you know about that, too.'

'I'm attending a crisis meeting up at the nuclear station in the morning.'

'Thanks, anyway.' Coyle realised the futility of asking further questions, 'Let me know the moment you have any news of my boy.'

He replaced the receiver, and turned to Kent. 'Another whore murdered, and a young local vagrant dead. They won't reveal the circumstances. Until tomorrow, anyway.'

'I see,' Kent puffed at his pipe more furiously than ever. 'Well, all we can do is wait. I'll look in at one of the hotels before the Fleet Street army arrives.'

'You're welcome to . . . '

Kent shook his head.

'You've got your problems, mate. Some that I can't help you with. I'll phone through to my editor about the murder just to let him know I haven't come up here for a holiday.'

Coyle put on his coat. In the outer office he paused and slipped an arm around Anne.

'I'm sorry about tonight, darling.'

'There'll be others. Plenty of them, I hope. Meanwhile, let's hope we'll have some news of Richard soon.'

Whatever the news, Coyle knew it would be bad. His son faced a murder charge. There was no getting away from that fact, and he would have to print the details in his own paper. Right now, though, there was another task which he did not relish. He must return home and face his wife and daughter.

Chapter 8

There was an air of emptiness about the house as Coyle let himself in. The temperature gauge below the barometer was proof that the central heating had not been switched on that day.

Fear stabbed at him. Almost in a frenzy he dashed from room to room, returning finally to the kitchen, the heart beating frantically. For one brief moment he had feared the worst. Jane wasn't the type to . . . But he knew only too well that there wasn't such a thing as a 'type'. People took their own lives for a variety of reasons - some for none at all. And Jane had reasons.

He stiffened as he heard a key being inserted and turned in the front door. A slim silhouette was framed in the doorway. Sarah.

'You're home early.' She did not meet his gaze as she took off her coat. 'Anne otherwise engaged tonight? Perhaps she doesn't want to associate with the father of a murderer!'

For the second successive day he felt the urge to strike one of his children. Probably only the fact that she was a female spared her the blow. His fists clenched, then relaxed.

'There's been another murder, did you know?'

'I was informed officially.'

'No word of Richard?'

'No.'

'I suppose I'd better get us something to eat.' There was a slight relaxing of the tension.

'Where's your mother?'

'Your wife is spending the day with Mrs Bean.' Sarcasm and disapproval. 'Although, I doubt there's much more the old bag can tell her. She now knows all about your affair with Anne.'

'And yours with Houston.'

'Well, that's stale news now. She's behind the times. I sent David packing - back to his wife, I hope. But he'll find another woman.'

Coyle hoped she did not hear his sigh of relief. At least something was turning out right.

Suddenly came the shrill ringing of the telephone. He lifted the receiver. 'Coyle.'

'Rollason, here.' The gravity of the Superintendent's tone conveyed the message ahead of the words.

'I take it you've found my boy.'

'Yes. I'm afraid we have.'

'Dead?'

'Yes. In Birmingham.'

'Christ!' Coyle was trembling. He sensed Sarah listening at his side, her face close to his shoulder. 'How?'

'Well . . . knifed. At least that's what finally killed him.'

'What do you mean?'

'I'm afraid I can't say any more. Official Secrets, I guess. More than my job's worth. No doubt it'll be revealed at the press conference tomorrow.'

'Thanks . . . thanks, anyway.'

Coyle turned to Sarah. He slipped an arm around her, and she made no move to resist him - two people needing each other and afraid to show it.

'He's dead then?'

Coyle nodded. She buried her head in his chest, sobs shaking her body. They had never been close, but he wished to God he could find some tears from somewhere right then. Instead he just had to bear it, the build-up like a volcano that can't reach an eruption.

He steered her into the adjoining room. Still holding her, he somehow managed to pour a couple of stiff whiskies. Fragments of broken glass still littered the carpet. The stains on the wall had dried.

Shortly before eleven o'clock Jane returned. She took her time removing her coat, hanging it up in the wardrobe, went upstairs to the toilet. Almost as though she was afraid. As though she knew, and was postponing having to face them.

At last she entered the living-room. Her face was white, with black lines beneath her eyes where the mascara had run. She had been crying. She stood looking at the two of them, wide-eyed, her voice low and husky when she finally spoke.

'Richard's dead, isn't he? I know. I don't know how, but I know.' She sat down in the nearest armchair.

Coyle knew that none of them would go to bed that night. Nobody spoke again. They just sat there, not looking at each other, a family which had fallen apart. And once again he was reminded of Balzur's curse.

That morning McLellan was an hour earlier than usual as he walked the short distance from the municipal car-park to the council offices. There were several matters that required his attention before his colleagues arrived.

There were a couple of letters concerning building contracts for the expanding estates, which he preferred to type himself. There would be no carbon copies; corruption was in the headlines all too frequently these days. He had nightmares about seeing his own name there in large type on the front page of one of the dailies. Yet he was still prepared to take the risks. The financial rewards could not be ignored.

His foot kicked against a dead pigeon, sending it bouncing and rolling into the gutter. It was strange the way so many feathers flew up from the small corpse - the wind whipping them into the air like a miniature snowstorm. He felt momentary anger. The old town was full of feral pigeons - and had been for the past decade. Those so-called pigeon-fanciers were to blame originally, just like those other people who dumped unwanted pets to roam the streets. The pigeon problem was worse, though. They shit all over the buildings and pavements. The Square stank of it. He could have solved the whole problem two years ago when he first came to office. Alpha-chloralose was the answer, a form of powdered chloroform which, when mixed with scattered grain, gave the birds a perfectly painless death. Once the Ministry of Agriculture had tested it on woodpigeons, but too many other species of bird life had died as well. The method had been declared illegal. Sod that! It would have saved the town some thousands of pounds in labour each year, and . . .

Then he saw a second dead pigeon - lying on its back in the centre of the road, wings spread, feet upwards. A third lay less than a yard away, squashed almost beyond recognition, except for the mass of blue-grey feathers which the wind was whipping up. Funny how the feathers came away so easily exposing ... he had always believed pigeon meat was dark, unwholesome looking. With revulsion he now paused to study the flesh, red raw and weeping a yellowish pus. Horrible.

McLellan felt the bile rising inside him, and quickened his step. Three less, anyway, and he had far more important matters to attend to. He rounded the corner into the Square, the only truly historical part of the town which still remained. A cobbled rectangle in the centre, a statue of Robert Burns copied from that in Dumfries. One day, perhaps, his own monument would stand alongside it. Burns and McLellan . . . He stopped and stared, dreams of future fame evaporating like the early morning mist as the sun began to creep over the peaks of the mountains which formed this valley.

The whole Square was littered with dead pigeons. Dozens of them, most lying on their backs. A few had clustered together as though seeking company in their last moments. Some were lodged on parapets, and most of the gutterings were blocked.

McLellan stood amazed, but felt no pity. Relief and excitement, yes. But why had they all suddenly died overnight? Even during recent severe winters only a few had perished. Of course, he laughed aloud as it dawned upon him. Someone had acted on the idea he had put forward two years ago. Alpha-chloralose. Some well-meaning citizen had distributed the doped grain during the nocturnal hours so that the birds would find it at dawn. It was mass extermination - and long overdue.

McLellan walked carefully across the cobbled square, stepping over the dead birds, noting with continued revulsion how clusters of feathers still fell away from the lifeless bodies. His small eyes darted everywhere, looking for scraps of the poisoned food, but there was not a grain of corn or a crust of bread to be seen. Only dead birds, their feathers still blowing in the wind, exposing more patches of bright red, festering flesh. He retched, and was grateful that he never breakfasted, otherwise he would have vomited.

A lorry trundled through the town centre, the driver apparently oblivious of the dead birds in his path. A veritable blizzard of feathers followed in the vehicle's wake - leaving crushed birds, blood and bones in a trail of wholesale destruction.

Otherwise there was no sign of human life - too early still. A dim fear gripped McLellan. He would have welcomed the presence of the old road-sweeper with his heavy barrow and broom. But McLellan remembered that the fellow had been made redundant only last week. The refuse-cart had taken over his duties now, much more efficiently. And it did not start out until 8.a.m. McLellan glanced up at the clock on the town-hall: 7.45.

A sudden movement startled him in this place of death. Squinting without his spectacles across at an alley opposite, he tried to discern the shape which was still half-hidden in the gloom.

Then recognition. A dog - an Alsatian. It was watching him, too. Involuntarily McLellan stepped back a pace. Never a dog-lover, he certainly did not like the look of this one. Its coat was covered with mange, its pointed ears erect. Lean and hungry-looking, it reminded him of a wolf.

He stood watching it, grateful that the entrance to the town-hall was only yards away.

But it appeared to lose interest in him, and moved forward to pick up one of the dead pigeons. In the still morning air McLellan could hear the large teeth crunching on frail bones.

With an exclamation of disgust he hurried into the town-hall, and hurried up the stairs which led to his private office. Those two letters had to be typed at any cost.

At 8.45 a.m. he managed to contact the refuse department and spoke to a junior clerk, giving orders for the dead pigeons to be removed as soon as possible. After that he stood in the window of his office over the Square, observing the reactions of people passing on their way to work. Horror, disgust, bewilderment. An overall fear that went deeper than the scene of feathered death all around them, Many of them were still nervous because of that silly article Coyle had written in the Herald. Damn him.

By 10.30 he was growing angry. There was still no sign of the refuse cart. That bloody Coyle would be printing yet another piece in the Herald about local government inefficiency. McLellan was on the point of picking up the telephone, to give the refuse department a bollocking, when he saw two large yellow vans enter the Square, and halt in the midst of the carnage. But they were not council vehicles! McLellan's curiosity was aroused. What was going on?

Four men climbed down from the rear of each vehicle - all clad in white protective clothing made from some stiff material, their faces hidden behind visors in the square-shaped headpieces. Knee-length boots of the same substance caused them to move jerkily and unnaturally, as if in an early silent film. Elbow-length gloves also hampered their movements, and soon they were operating huge pairs of tongs to pick up the dead pigeons and deposit them in rows of polythene sacks.

Throughout the whole operation, inquisitive bystanders were brusquely ordered away, but a small crowd gathered at the far end of the Square. The men worked diligently, ignoring them.

'Like bloody astronauts,' McLellan muttered to himself, but he was too intrigued by the bizarre proceedings to make enquiries at this stage. Perhaps the refuse department had invested in new equipment. If so, he had not been informed. He would oppose the matter at the next meeting. Such luxuries could not be tolerated during these times of drastic cuts in public expenditure.

The full sacks were stowed in the vans, and a series of aluminium collapsible ladders were produced. The ascent to the parapets and gutterings looked exceedingly dangerous. McLellan was forced to look away; he had always suffered from vertigo. The remaining pigeons, lodged on the buildings, were also collected and stowed away in the vans.

Next came the brooms: long handles, wide heads, pliable steel bristles. All six men swept the feathers, working downwind, driving them into a corner where two walls met. They seemed determined to gather every single one.

By midday the job was nearing completion, and the groups of bystanders had drifted away. Road-sweeping was hardly the most exciting of spectator sports. Except, seemingly, for McLellan.

For nearly two hours he had remained in that window, watching as though hypnotised. Now the vans were loaded - sacks of dead pigeons and feathers, ladders and brooms all stowed away. The drivers were back behind their wheels, engines ticking over.

Two of the strangely clad men walked slowly, purposefully, towards that alleyway opposite. This time McLellan was wearing his bifocals and could see everything plainly.

They stooped and lifted something of considerable weight, then began to lug it towards the nearer van.

A shiver ran down McLellan's spine and he moistened his dry lips as the men below him slung their load into the vehicle. Even in death its form was only too recognisable - the Alsatian dog!

The vans drove slowly away, and only then did McLellan move from the window. It was ten minutes to one, by his wristwatch. He picked up the telephone, and dialled the number of the refuse department. No reply. After a couple of minutes he slammed the receiver down angrily. The fact that they were clearly taking an extended lunch-hour would not go unnoticed.

He rang again at 2.15, but the line was engaged - permanently, it seemed. He tried a variety of other departments - Highways, Transport and Vehicles - but none could assist him in his enquiries.

At four o'clock the refuse department's line was still engaged.

McLellan experienced a peculiar sense of foreboding.

Coyle and Kent approached the checkpoint at 1.50 p.m. in the latter's Mercedes. The same stolid sentry emerged from his box. From the passenger seat, Coyle could see the face of the man in the upper box, peering down at them through the small aperture.

This time the entry was much easier, almost as though they were welcome. Coyle was sure they weren't, but there was no delay in the raising of the barriers once their passes had been scrutinised. Kent noticed three cars following them. The Press was certainly here in force.

Beyond the second checkpoint, Coyle noticed an array of cars parked outside the administrative offices, and counted them. There were twenty-four, including two Rolls-Royces, three Mercedes, four Jags. Maybe the Secretary of State for Energy had not yet left. Possibly the crisis meeting was still in progress. In that case the press conference would be late starting. What the hell.

'I want to know what all that business in the Square was about this morning,' he said to Kent.

'That's just one of a hell of a lot of questions I want to ask,' the other replied. 'Dead pigeons, dead whores, dead vagrants, details of your lad's death in Brum officially withheld . . . and it's all going to come out this afternoon! No half-truths. The whole story. Remember one thing, pal, it's these boffins who are doing the sweating. The advantage is ours. We've got the easy part. We've only got to ask the questions. They've got to answer them.'

After parking the Mercedes, they made their way to the main entrance. The same guard was on duty, and Coyle wondered idly what shifts they worked. 'Holocaust' had a kind of permanency about it, and a dedication shown by its servants.

Again Coyle was struck by the number of intersecting corridors, the closed doors on either side, the ceaseless murmur of voices, the distant hum of machinery. This time they took a different route - or at least he thought so. It was difficult to be certain. The Atomic Energy Authority's armed private policeman marched stoically ahead of them. Indeed, they had to increase their pace to keep up with him.

Reaching an unmarked door on their right, they were ushered inside. A large room with no windows, lit solely by fluorescent strips. It was crowded: some twenty men of varying ages occupied the available seats. Others stood.

'Hi there, Kent. Wondered when you'd be turning up.'

Kent nodded to several, but there was no hint of friendship, even towards those whom he had known for years. They were the Fleet Street army, with some provincial journalists and reporters, too. Ruthless newshounds with one single quest in mind. Later all the lines to London would be jammed.

Coyle felt strangely insignificant, a sensation akin to that of a student at a senior debate. It annoyed him. Damn it, he'd started all this. Without his initial perseverance none of them would be crowded into this waiting-room now.

Nobody was smoking. Even the might of the Press had conceded to the rules. Kent toyed with his pipe in his pocket, but left it there. He only ever contested major issues.

'Seems like this crisis meeting is continuing longer than they anticipated,' Kent said to Coyle. It was already 2.25.

Other reporters fidgeted. Only Kent appeared to be entirely at ease. He had played the waiting game too often through his career. Some of the others were already making anticipatory notes on their pads. Kent smiled softly to himself. Impetuosity. But there would be no jumping to conclusions on his part. He would make very few notes, anyway. Yet his story would be the first and the best to hit the country. No sensationalism - just the facts, and the way he interpreted them.

Suddenly the door was thrown open. Kent was already moving towards it, Coyle

at his side. It was 2.45.

'This way, gentlemen, please.'

Only as they re-emerged into the featureless corridor did Coyle realise just how tense he really was. Soon they would know the truth. Soon the entire country would know. That was what worried him most of all. Balzur hadn't just cursed Craiglowlrie and its inhabitants; his evil was now stretching out to embrace the whole world.

Chapter 9

The large room was again windowless and illuminated by strip-lighting. Rows of seats facing a raised platform - a psychological advantage for the men seated at the long curved table above. It might have been a television quiz programme, in which competitors would be made to feel nervous, a sensation of confronting superior knowledge.

Well, that was what it was, Coyle reminded himself. Those men up there were the ones who knew. But there was one important difference: they were the ones who had to supply the answers.

Kent noted immediately that the Secretary of State for Energy was not present. There was one empty seat, so he had already made his departure. A tactical move, or more pressing business back in the capital? It could have been either. The journalist reserved his judgement. He counted 'the panel'. Eight in all.

Coyle's gaze focused on each of them in turn. Winston Dyne sat in the centre, still outwardly confident, but a man like that would be capable of maintaining a bluff exterior at all times', no matter how grave the situation. Stafford, representative of British Nuclear Fuels, kept his eyes fixed on some papers in front of him, expressionless. Tyler, representative of Britain's Hazardous Materials Group, seemed decidedly nervous; he drummed incessantly with his fingers on the table top. Chief Superintendent Rollason was stolid, as usual, but without the eternal cigarette. There were four others, all bearing the stamp of high-ranking governmental service. One would almost certainly be from the Radiological Protection Board. They sat with elbows resting on the table, fingertips pressed together, a long-practised pose intended to convey a calmness, an illusion that all was perfectly under control.

There was an uneasy silence broken only by a few coughs from the press. They were eager to begin. Dyne appeared to be in no hurry. Another ploy to dispel any sense of panic, Kent decided.

Finally, the head of Oxide Reprocessing rose to his feet. His composure was perfection itself.

'Gentlemen.' His eyes flicked briefly over the audience below him. 'My colleagues and I are here this afternoon to counter certain rumours which

appear to have escalated to enormous heights. Firstly, I shall explain the true position to you, exactly what has happened here, and I beg you to bear with me until I have finished. After that we will do our best to answer your questions, but in an orderly fashion, please. I assure you that no facts will be withheld from the public.'

He paused. His eyes met Coyle's, and lingered for a brief second. Hatred. Coyle did not drop his gaze. It pleased him to think that perhaps he had brought about this conference, brought the facts to light. Dyne's gaze elevated. He stared at the rear of the room, addressing them all.

Kent noticed the four A.E. A. policemen standing at the rear. Total security. No chances were being taken.

'The whole country is aware,' Winston Dyne began, 'of the exact purpose of this place - to recycle imported nuclear waste, and give a boost to the economy. The rewards, if successful, will be a thousand times greater than from North Sea Oil. However, there are risks. To quote a much used phrase: nothing ventured, nothing gained . . .'. 'Get to the point,' somebody muttered in the background, but the remark was ignored. Dyne was not the type to be ruffled in his carefully prepared speech.

'We have taken risks, and, most unfortunately, we have experienced a setback. You will no doubt recall the leak at Windscale in 1973. Well, a similar thing happened here -although on a much smaller scale, to begin with. We located the leak in Section Number Eight, and laid off those workers concerned whilst repairs were carried out. This "harvest process", although far more advanced, presents greater problems in the case of a mishap. However, the blocks, stored for an eternity in a bed of granite more than a thousand feet below ground level, are perfectly safe. The leak did not come from there, but from a backlog of waste brought in and not yet processed. The delay was due both to increased importation from other countries and the fact that the reprocessing system can only operate at a certain speed. Unfortunately, some radioactivity escaped into the atmosphere. We have rectified that by the installation of a "trap-tower". The whole of our stock is now confined within this, and no further radioactivity can escape into the environment. You have my word on that. A government ban on further importation of nuclear waste is being brought in today. The Secretary of State for Energy has just left for a Cabinet Meeting to take place in London in a few hours' time. I expect the Prime Minister to make a broadcast to the nation sometime tonight.'

'Why the panic if you've already contained the leakage?' The question came from a reporter somewhere at the rear.

'The full effects of radioactivity in the environment can only be guessed at.' Dyne's answer revealed a note of irritation at being interrupted before the completion of his carefully prepared oration. 'A man has died in this town. Another - a worker actually engaged upon the section in question - fled south, and also died. Animal and bird life seem to be particularly vulnerable. Some pigeons and a stray dog died here this morning. However, the spread of radioactivity is governed by climatic conditions. Winds may carry and deposit it over a relatively harmless area.'

A note of optimism. Kent smiled wanly to himself; official pills always had a sweetener.

'Has the leak been fully checked, apart from being contained within a structure carefully prepared for such an occurrence?' It was Kent who spoke.

Hesitation on Dyne's part, a hint of embarrassment, but only for seconds.

'No, it has only been contained.'

'Then there is a build-up continuing in your structure -the equivalent of God-knows-how-many atom bombs!'

Reporters were on their feet. A barrage of angry questions. Kent remained seated. Coyle gripped the edge of his chair.

'How are you going to stop it? Let it all out? Poison everybody?' The jumbled questions were shouted by numerous angry voices.

'Order please!' Dyne held up a hand, and Coyle noted with satisfaction that the man's composure had been visibly shaken. His face was white, and he seemed to have aged decades.

'Silence please!'

The four security policemen had moved away from the corners of the room - poised for action. Any hint of a riot, and they would move in at once. Doubtless a score of others were within call.

'Let me finish!7 But it wasn't Dyne who restored order, and caused the reporters to resume their seats. It was the threat of state police, something hitherto unknown in Britain. It registered on every one of them - Big Brother.

'Thank you.' Dyne glanced at those seated on either side of him. T am merely putting the facts before you

'And trying to cover up a few too,' a sullen reporter heckled.

'Shut up.' A hard-faced policeman, one who craved for such action. Loader, chief of the A.E.A's Private Police Force.

'It is not our intention to withhold anything.' Dyne had almost a note of pleading in his voice. 'Facts - that is what I'm giving you, so you can go from here and phone your respective papers. I am stating that there is a dangerous build-up of radioactivity which currently is only being contained. Our only remedy at this moment is total reprocessing. All nuclear waste contained in this station - now stored in Section Number Eight - must be reprocessed in the quickest possible time, and the blocks laid to rest in granite with a minimum escape of radiation. All men previously laid off have now been recalled. Twenty-four hours of non-stop work is in process in the hope . . . in the hope that a disaster may be averted!

'Only two alternatives are open to us. We can either release this build-up of radiation and accept the terrible consequences, or face the possibility of a nuclear explosion, the like of which Mankind can never fully comprehend. Our gauges show a slow but steady rise in radioactive leakage within Section Eight. It is a race against time, gentlemen. Can we complete the reprocessing and thus avert a catastrophe?'

'How long have we got?' It was Kent who spoke, softly, but his voice carried to every corner of the room, which had suddenly become unnaturally silent. It was the question everybody wanted to ask, though fearing the answer.

'I don't honestly know,' Dyne replied slowly. 'That is something none of us knows. Britain's Hazardous Materials Group, British Nuclear Fuels, and the Radiological Protection Board are all working in conjunction. It is estimated that reprocessing could take up to ten days to complete, even with our much

advanced systems. But can we beat the rate of radioactive leakage and build-up? None of us can answer that one. The Prime Minister himself will inform the nation of the situation. There will, of course, be an official State of Emergency right away. People will panic, but we cannot hide the truth. It will be impossible to evacuate the whole country . . . but the effects of such a disaster would reach wider than Britain itself.'

Coyle was now on his feet. Questions hammered inside his brain, matters of national urgency. Yet his parental instincts predominated.

'The bodies of the two men who died from radioactive contact.' His voice was unsteady, fighting to get the words out. 'Copeland and my own son . . . what will happen to . . . ?' He could not finish.

Dyne looked down at the table as he replied.

'Cremation . . . a total extermination of the whole body, including disposal of the ashes, is the only answer. We . . . dared not contemplate anything else.'

'Dared not?'

'I'm afraid it was impossible for you to be informed before this press conference. But there had to be no delay. Everything . . . the two men . . . the women . . . the pigeons . . . the dog . . . They have all been cremated.'

Coyle felt his senses spinning, his vision blurred. A fleeting, fiery flash in his memory: a face illuminated by flames, so very old . . . almost recognition . . . then it was gone as though shutters had closed to blank it out. For a moment he thought that he was going to faint. A firm hand pulled him back into his seat. Kent knew that words would be superfluous.

'So that is the position, gentlemen,' Dyne's voice droned on. He had said it all now, told them everything. The barrage of questions was already beginning. But there were no real answers. No excuses - although there would be scapegoats. Himself, mainly. A country, a world, less than ten days away from potential annihilation, has little patience.

Questions and more questions, and still more. Dyne was grateful to Stafford and Tyler for helping him out. Eventually he glanced at his watch: 4.15. He was already late for his appointment with the representative of the power-workers' union. There could be no question of a walk-out by the labour force. A State of Emergency would be officially declared within a matter of hours. No negotiations. Pay? What the hell did pay matter? The men would be forced to work under armed guards if necessary. Tons of nuclear waste had to be committed to its last resting place in the shortest possible time - and the end justified the means.

His sympathies lay with the Prime Minister. In the event of the worst happening, he would have to make the decision. Release the radioactivity or risk an explosion? It was the sort of decision to be determined by a referendum, but there was no time to consult the country. An hour, a minute might determine success or failure at the very end. Coyle was aware of Kent leading him from the meeting. Questions were still being asked, parried, partially answered. It might go on for another hour. Nothing further was to be gained by remaining.

A policeman escorted them to the Mercedes, and Kent drove back to the Herald offices.

Anne looked up from her typewriter as they entered. She could tell from their

expressions that something had gone drastically wrong. Everybody in the town sensed it. Those pigeons. It wasn't natural. At lunchtime fellow diners in the Wimpy Bar had talked of nothing else. Pluto himself was bent on their destruction - with a curse more terrible than, even their primitive forefathers had dreamed of. 'I'll make some tea.' She moved towards the kettle. 'Strong and sweet.' Kent attempted to smile, pulled out his wallet, and dropped a ten-pound note on her desk. 'The whisky appears to have run dry . . . '

'Of course,' she picked it up and hurried outside. It was quite obvious to her that Coyle was badly shaken. She had never seen him quite that way before, and it hurt her. Five minutes later she returned with the whisky and a tray of tea, and withdrew. There are times when men need to be alone.

Kent swallowed a strong measure of whisky, and let his tea go cold whilst he telephoned his editor in London. He talked for twenty minutes before he replaced the receiver. He shook his head, trying to gather his thoughts.

'The Prime Minister will speak to the nation tonight,' Kent said. 'My story will be in the early morning editions, along with everyone else's. By then the nation will know, and all hell will be let loose. We're going to witness something which has hitherto only been the figment of fiction writers' imaginations. I'll put a fiver on one thing, though. A coalition government.'

'That figures.'

'And Canverdale for Prime Minister.'

'You reckon?'

'He's the best we've had since Winston Churchill.'

'Winnie had a flesh-and-blood enemy to fight, but this is different. Nothing tangible. Reminds me of something my dad once said about the danger of electricity: "You can't see it or hear it coming until it gets you". This is the same. If it blows, we'll probably never know a thing about it.'

'Canverdale's still our man.' Kent poured some more whisky for both of them. 'Maybe he's the one person who can keep the country calm . . . Bob, we're staring anarchy in the face. God knows what's going to happen, but, whatever it is, it'll be breaking within a matter of hours.'

Coyle fell silent, thinking again of Richard. They'd burned his boy's body in a furnace along with a vagrant, a couple of whores, some sacks full of pigeons, and a dead dog. And he had to explain it all to Jane. She would not understand but, all the same, he had to tell her. There was Anne, too. He wanted her to know about everything before the broadcasts started.

Kent seemed to read his mind. 'I'll leave you to it for the rest of the day.' He stood up, glancing at his watch. It was 5.15.

'Going back to London?'

The other shook his head. 'Last place I want to be right now. Somehow I don't fancy Fleet Street any more. Maybe in ten days' time it won't exist at all. Funny thought, no dailies - no one to read 'em. I guess this is as good a place to die as any.'

'It used to be.' Coyle said bitterly. They made it like this, Dyne and his boffins. Used to be just heather, grouse and sheep. Now these scientists are

going to destroy it. A dead world, just as an old wizard prophesied four hundred years ago. The contamination will last a quarter of a million years. I wonder if life will begin again then, and what form it'll take if it does. Anyway, thanks a million, Kent. Just having you around ...'

But Kent was gone. Gratitude always embarrassed him. He looked up at the sky as he walked slowly back to his hotel. It was blue and cloudless, the surrounding mountains already hazy with the gathering autumnal mist. An unexpected sadness engulfed him. Somehow he had missed out on an awful lot of life. And now time was running out. Ten days, perhaps less. The span of his life was now determined by the radioactivity rising within that single giant reactor known as Section Eight.

Anne listened in silence as Coyle talked. She was not afraid; in some ways she was glad. She wondered vaguely in whose arms her lover would decide to spend his last hours - hers or Jane's.

'We've a lot of living to do in just ten days,' she ventured when he had finished.

'We'll go out together.' The words she had hoped to hear. 'I shall have to tell Jane about Richard tonight. She'll hate me even more after that.'

'Maybe I'll tell my parents about us, too.' She smiled. 'It would be nice to clear up all these lies and deceptions before . . . '

'That's up to you,' he said.

'And what about the Herald?'

'Not much point in bringing out another edition, is there? I mean, everything will be in the dailies. Nobody'll be interested in local news. We could always print a mass obituary in advance!'

They both laughed. Morbid, but anything that made light of the situation seemed funny. Every minute, every second, was precious.

An embrace. A lengthy one. Those few nights apart had seemed an eternity.

'Tomorrow night, Bob?'

'I promise.'

He drove home slowly through the traffic, reluctant to reach his destination. Any diversion would have been welcome - a breakdown, a puncture. But the old Avenger was determined to remain faithful to the very end.

Coyle was surprised to find another vehicle blocking his driveway: a ten-year-old Morris Minor, immaculately clean in spite of the corrosion on the sills. He parked in the roadway.

The car was familiar, and he had decided upon its ownership before he stepped into the house. The elderly male voice coming from the sitting-room confirmed his guess. The local clergy had called in person: the Reverend James Mortimer.

Coyle took off his coat, and lingered over hanging it up in the hail wardrobe. Mortimer and he were acquainted on business terms, mostly through the printing of church notices in the Herald - obituaries, special services, and such. That was where it ended, though. Coyle had little time for organised religion.

Mortimer had a ruddy face that was just too cherubic to be true, a black homburg hat and knee-length overcoat, a long-stemmed black rustic briar pipe. He smoked a strong-smelling Latakia mixture, much in contrast to Kent's sweet bonded flake.

The clergyman was seated in an armchair, still wearing the coat, hat on his lap, pipe between his teeth. Jane sat opposite, wearing a charcoal-grey dress, and it was obvious that she had been crying for most of the day.

'Mr Coyle.' The Reverend Mortimer rose shakily, plump pink hand outstretched. 'My deepest sympathies in your tragic loss. I came as soon as I heard. I have spent the afternoon with your wife, and I trust that I've been of some comfort to her during this terrible time.'

Jane's eyes met her husband's. They narrowed; there was no forgiveness in them. She did not speak.

'A very painful subject.' Mortimer resumed his seat, talking incessantly. Bob wished the clergyman would leave, but a freshly poured cup of tea told him that would not happen for the next quarter of an hour.

'The funeral.' Mortimer struck a match and proceeded to relight his pipe. 'Your wife is in favour of cremation . . . '

'It's already been carried out,' Coyle broke in cruelly, recent events bringing about a desire to hurt Jane. And if he offended the vicar as well . . . well, that couldn't be helped. 'Richard was cremated this morning . . . along with a couple of slags, a tramp, ninety-seven pigeons, and one Alsatian of doubtful pedigree.'

There was stunned silence, and Mortimer's pipe fell into his lap. Jane just stared with disbelief, then contempt. It was clearly a joke in very bad taste.

'You're very unkind and hurtful.' She restrained a whiplash of words, and held back the tears. 'We're arranging it with Mr Wain for next Tuesday - '

'Then forget it,' Coyle snapped. 'The bodies were radioactive. There's been a leak up at "Holocaust" - as will be described by the Prime Minister on television tonight. I was at a press conference there this afternoon. It's no longer an official secret. Ten days, and we live or bust. It's as simple as that. They had to get rid of the dead bodies as quickly as possible. It hurt me just as much as you, but there was no other way. We must face up to facts. There isn't much time left.'

Jane was becoming hysterical again. The Reverend Mortimer moved quickly to her side, and a comforting arm saved the situation, temporarily.

Coyle wished he could find some excuse to leave them to it.

'Your statement confirms rumours which have been circulating in town recently, Mr Coyle,' Coyle was surprised how philosophically Mortimer took the news. Possibly it was easier at his advanced age. 'For five years, apart from christenings, weddings, and funerals, my congregation has barely exceeded three full pews. Three weeks ago it began filling up, at communion, matins, and evensong. Pleasing to some extent, but in my heart I knew the reason. Fear. A turning back to a forsaken God, repenting, praying for deliverance . . . deliverance from this hell which has sprung up in our very midst, our valley turned into Hades itself. I noted your recent article on Balzur's pact with Pluto to destroy the people of Craighlowrie - a very old legend, referred to in some of the church archives, passed on by word of mouth down the generations.'

I wish you hadn't printed it. Old beliefs can be very frightening at times like these. Of course, there's no truth in it. Just an old fable. Nevertheless, with people's nerves now stretched to breaking point, it could spread hysteria. I beg of you not to print anything more about Balzur.' The ruddy cheeks had paled.

Coyle lit a cigarette. He wished Mortimer would go away and leave them to it. This was the end of his marriage to Jane, and he wanted to get it over with. There would be no time for divorce proceedings. What the hell did it matter, anyway?

'But we mustn't overlook the fate of your poor boy.' Satisfied that Jane was not going to break down, the vicar returned to his chair, and once more attempted to light his pipe. 'Of course, he was not responsible for his actions. We must proceed with the memorial service, as arranged, Mrs Coyle. Leave everything to me. Tuesday, at 2.30 p.m.'

Coyle showed him to the door, but did not remain to see him reverse hesitantly out into the road. He went straight back into the living-room.

Jane sat still and silent, with no sign of tears. They had all been shed. Only the bitterness remained.

In the awkward silence, he poured himself a whisky. He decided against offering her one. There were still fragments of glass on the carpet.

'Is it true what you said?' Jane spoke at last, her eyes fixed on her husband.

'I'd hardly lie about a thing like that, would I?'

'No, I suppose not. Only life's been nothing but lies lately. Lies, lies, and more lies. Still, it'll all soon be over, won't it? Over for all of us. This crazy Balzur you're obsessed with will have his way in the end.'

'It rather looks that way, with a radioactive leak. Either it'll have to be released into the atmosphere, which will poison us all, or else there'll be the equivalent of countless atomic bombs exploding just up the road. Exactly who will make the decision, I've no idea.'

'And even if the level of radioactivity isn't reached,' Jane said, 'they'll be left with a cloud of deadly vapour which they won't know what to do with.'

'They'll probably find some way of solidifying it, and disposing of it along with the rest of this bloody waste.'

'And we'll all live,' she laughed, this time hysteria predominant. 'I pray God that we don't. Oh, God, how I pray that we don't have to live on any longer, any of us!'

Friday, midnight. The Prime Minister's broadcast to the nation followed the late-night horror movie, fantasy suddenly becoming reality. Earlier announcements meant that many people stayed up late for it, though most had no idea of its context beforehand. Possibly the pound had crashed. Others went to bed at their usual time. It would all be in the morning papers, anyway.

Coyle sat beside a silent Jane. Neither had spoken for the past three hours. The television had blared on, none of the programmes registering in their bemused brains. At last came the special announcement. Coyle wondered why all earlier programmes had not been suspended. No, that would have been a mistake. The facts had to be put before the nation with a total absence of melodrama. The full effects would be felt on the morrow. In spite of everything, life had to maintain a level of routine. Everything could not suddenly come to a halt.

Coyle became aware that the Prime Minister was simply reading the same speech which Dyne had delivered at the press conference earlier that day. Word for word. It was like sitting in a cinema, watching the whole performance for the second time.

The PM looked grave, as he had every reason to be, but his job was much easier than Dyne's. There were no questions to answer, no live audience to vent their wrath on him.

'And the very fact that this disaster could happen,' he concluded, 'has forced the government to introduce an immediate state of Emergency. All airports, private airfields, and shipping ports are henceforth closed down, and this action will be under the direct supervision of the armed forces. I must stress that these bans may be lifted within a matter of days. All steps taken are of a temporary nature, with the interests of the public foremost.'

The sweetener, Coyle smiled grimly to himself. The treat after the medicine. The nation was being treated like a small child, but this was how it suited the government. Stop panic and rioting at all costs. Democracy itself was at stake.

Coyle wondered how many planes had already left the country carrying people who had received a tip-off from friends in high places. Their efforts to find sanctuary would only be temporary. A disaster of this nature would have worldwide repercussions. There would be no escape for any of them.

He switched off the television. All over the country now, people would be sitting in their homes staring in shock at a square of nothingness, a crystal-ball forecasting their futures. Oblivion.

He resumed his seat and lit a cigarette, wondering if the two of them would sit there all night, not speaking, totally divorced from every human relationship they had known.

He glanced sideways at Jane. Maybe he ought to make some coffee.

'Where's Sarah?' - the thought suddenly came to him. He remembered his daughter's admission that she had terminated her affair with Houston. Without him she had no reason to stay out late. Of course, there were other men . . .

'Upstairs in bed. She went straight up when she came in from work, or maybe you didn't notice.'

Bitterness. He did not reply. Sarah would be upset at the break-up with

Houston. Coyle wondered whether he should go up and check if she was all right. He decided against it. She would be in total ignorance of the threat they afi faced. No point in telling her now - she could use all the sleep she could get.

Finally, he got up and made some coffee, strong and black. Jane drank hers in silence.

Everywhere, right now, Coyle realised, people would be making coffee. Beds would be ignored. A long night lay ahead for the nation, sustained by alcohol, coffee, and tobacco whilst their brains reluctantly accepted the situation.

Saturday morning dawned cold and grey. The mist was thicker than the Met. Office had forecast - and slower to clear. The surrounding mountains were invisible as Kent made his way along the deserted streets towards the Herald offices. Coyle had given him a key, but he had no idea what he was going to do there. No point in ringing London again yet. Perhaps towards midday he would try and get hold of Dyne, attempt to discover how fast the radioactivity level was rising, and then make another report.

The newsagent's stall on the corner of the Square was not open yet. That angered him. A world crisis, but one had to wait until normal opening time to read about it. He had half expected to see crowds on the streets, people loading their precious belongings into their cars in an attempt to put even a couple of hundred miles between themselves and this impending doom.

He was almost at his destination when he heard the rumble of heavy vehicles. The pavement beneath him vibrated slightly.

The leading vehicle rounded the corner - an armoured truck. Another. Three . . . four . . . five ... he counted ten in all as they passed him slowly and came to a halt in the Square. Soldiers began disembarking.

Kent stood in the doorway of the Herald, automatically stuffing tobacco into the bowl of his pipe, his keen eyes missing nothing. He noted how the heavy vehicles were parked in a line that completely blocked the road running through the centre of the valley, perfectly positioned from kerb to kerb.

The soldiers moved with quiet efficiency - no bawled orders from a senior NCO. Each man knew what was expected of him; each carried a slung rifle. Kent wondered if the bullets were rubber. He noted, too, the riot shields being unloaded, and the open crate on the tailboard of the centre vehicle. Tear gas!

Soldiers stood around the vehicles, wary, not lounging. Steel helmets, too. Not a beret to be seen. A couple of officers wore battledress and peaked hats. They merely watched the proceedings, all so thorough in every aspect.

Kent's eyes wandered up towards the still invisible mountain peaks. Possibly the southern ones would remain shrouded hi mist throughout the day. He knew the army would be there, too, blocking the pass - the road that led down through Moniaive towards Dumfries. He admired their sheer efficiency. He had seen it before, on his several trips to Belfast. The army just moved in, nothing spectacular, but one knew they were ready for any eventuality. This platoon had probably come direct from Edinburgh, their orders issued prior to the Prime Minister's speech last night. A nocturnal military takeover. This, the dawn squad, would have been the last to arrive. Nobody would be entering or leaving the valley!

He let himself into the building, fully aware that the soldiers were watching his every move until the door closed behind him. They were not concerned with

what he did inside.

Contrary to his earlier plans, he picked up the telephone, as an experiment. He guessed what would happen, and he was correct. No sooner had his forefinger dialled the first two digits, 01, than the disengaged signal was sounding, a perpetual monotone. Communications had been suspended.

Kent sat down in the swivel chair, and relit his pipe, then reached in the cupboard for the whisky bottle. His recent promise to Coyle to remain here until the end was now an enforced one.

McLellan had sat in a daze throughout the hours of darkness. His wife Edith, a small frail woman, was virtually in a state of collapse after the broadcast, and having helped her upstairs to bed, he had come downstairs again. By 3.a.m. the ashtray was full of chewed cigar butts, and the atmosphere in this spacious room was thicker even than the rolling mist outside.

His first fear was of dying. He would never forget the sight of those dead pigeons and the Alsatian in the Square. Yet, until this massive conurbation had claimed the valley, he had looked forward eagerly to the weekly grouse-shoots. That was a form of death that had pleased him, elated him when a dead grouse rolled on the sparse heather, a measure of his skill. It had put him amongst the landed gentry. It was pursuit of this sport that had resulted in his first meeting with McLoughlin. He remembered, word for word, those two letters he had typed. McLoughlin's tender for the new estate would be granted; McLellan would see to that. Would have seen to it! He chewed angrily on yet another cigar. The houses would not be built now. Nobody would need them. Those already erected would be blown up with the rest of the valley, the whole country.

A movement in the corner of the room caught his eye. A sudden stiffening of his corpulent body, a tensing of every nerve. He saw that Alsatian again, skulking in the alleyway, scavenging the diseased pigeons, the way it had regarded him steadily as if to say, 'You're going to die, just like me!'

Then he relaxed again, with a sigh of relief. The yellow Labrador, ageing now, moved out from its resting place, and came towards him. It, too, remembered those glorious days amidst the heather, the dead birds waiting to be retrieved.

McLellan stroked the smooth head, something to occupy his restless, flabby hand. He would have had the dog put down after the grouse moor had been built over, if it hadn't been for Edith. She loved this dog a lot more than she loved him. It was funny, he hadn't petted the animal for ages. Perhaps all this business had something to do with it, a kind of reconciliation.

His thoughts moved to the gun in the hall wardrobe. A Purdey, worth at least a couple of grand, a sign of affluence at any shooting party. There were cartridges, too. Maybe half a box. One shell would be sufficient. So easy. He could opt out of this waiting game, settle for death and have done with it.

He half rose, but flopped back in the chair. He tried to find excuses why he would not go through with it. The radioactive level might fall, life would revert to normal, McLoughlin's tender would be accepted, and McLellan would get his pay-off. All in hard cash, as agreed. Perhaps he would move out, leave Edith here in this place with her beloved dog. She wouldn't object.

Another cigar. More melancholy thoughts again. Everything closing in upon him. Something in the Prime Minister's speech came back to him: 'Animal and bird life is apparently more vulnerable to radioactivity than are humans'. He sat

bolt upright, gripping the upholstered arms of the plush chair. Damn it, those grey squirrels that infested the garden every morning! Surely the squirrels would be affected, too. And he could stop them. Something to do. He had to take it out on someone or something. One small shred of satisfaction before . . .

He struggled out of the chair and lumbered into the hall, listening for a moment. There was no sound from upstairs. He did not want Edith to hear him assembling the Purdey. She might jump to the wrong conclusion.

He returned to the lounge with the gun-case and that last box of cartridges. There was a clinking of steel as he fumbled, assembling stock and barrels, snapping the fore-end loudly to secure the weapon. The well-oiled breech opened noiselessly; he dropped a cartridge into each chamber, and closed it. Then he flopped back into the chair, breathing heavily. The dog, ears pricked in anticipation of an outing, nuzzled against him. Roughly he pushed it away. With a whimper of disappointment, it retired to its earlier resting place behind the settee.

Gun across his knees, McLellan lit another cigar, and settled back to await the coming of daylight.

His cigar smouldered for a while, then went out. His eyes closed, and he fell into a fitful doze. Somewhere, far away, he heard the rumble of heavy wheels. Probably more waste being brought in for reprocessing ...

It was full daylight when he awoke, stirring slowly at first, then struggling to his feet as everything came flooding back to him. A moment of panic as he stumbled towards the bow windows overlooking his large garden. Perhaps he was too late. He opened one of the windows quietly. His head ached abominably, but he ignored it. Only one thing mattered - so long as the creatures had not already come and gone.

This damned mist. He cursed as he saw it swirl around these upper reaches of the valley, resting the gun on the sill whilst he put on his spectacles to see more clearly. He peered intently. A faint movement, a breath of sudden mountain breeze which temporarily cleared away a patch of the grey vapour. He pushed the window even wider, and picked up the shotgun.

The squirrels were there again, as he knew they would be. They hadn't missed a morning in his garden for a month now. Horrible, rat-like grey creatures, they scuttled through the small orchard, ravaging the unpicked fruit.

He stood and watched from behind the open window, revulsion building up inside him. His hands, clasping the loaded twelve-bore, were clammy. He glanced at his watch: 7.a.m. The yellow Labrador by his side growled softly. The dog knew they were out there, too. It looked at the door, and whined softly.

'Not today, old son,' McLellan muttered grimly.

Naturally, the Labrador didn't understand. It wasn't worth the risk of radioactive contact, anyway. McLellan turned his attention to the squirrels again. Four of them were in the nearest tree. The two old ones and a couple of youngsters. Somewhere there were two more. He eased the safety-catch forward on the gun. He should have shot them weeks ago. All too easy.

He raised the gun to his shoulder. He had already gone over in his mind last night how he was going to do it. The old ones first. They wouldn't know what had hit them. Then a rapid reload. The young ones would be too surprised to run. He took a bead on the adult male first. She was looking towards the

house, beady eyes glinting evilly, but didn't appear to see McLellan. The creature was munching ravenously - his fruit. His hand shook, but he steadied his aim, and squeezed the trigger gently.

The report was deafening in the confined space of the room. The dog jumped up and ran to the door, whining and scratching at it. McLellan moved the twin barrels a foot to the left, and followed the course of the female as she ran out on to a thick branch. The other two followed in her wake. She had sounded the retreat.

McLellan winced under the recoil of the second explosion, but he saw the squirrel drop instantly, plummeting earthwards to disappear into the long grass beneath. Her offspring stopped, looking about them, fear evident in their tiny eyes. Orphans at his mercy.

He opened the breech of the shotgun, and the two spent cases bounced across the room. He grabbed two more from the open carton on the windowsill, fumbling them into the chambers, fearful that his next two victims would suddenly spring from sight and be lost. But they still crouched there on the branch.

He took aim again - a sense of elation surging through him. It had been easy, and he had enjoyed it. This time two shots rang out in quick succession as he transferred the barrels to the two younger squirrels, squeezing the rear trigger almost before the dead creature in the lead had hit the ground.

Four shots, four kills. As he opened the door, he felt something squeeze past his legs - then Simon, the Labrador, was dashing into the garden, nose to the ground in search of a scent.

'Come back!' he yelled. 'Heel, you bloody idiot!'

It was no good. The dog had always run in-to-shot, and this occasion was going to be no exception. Whatever else he lacked, Simon certainly made up for it with his nose. Even as McLellan rounded the corner of the house he saw the Labrador emerging from the long grass with a squirrel in his mouth.

Then McLellan stared in horror. It wasn't dead! It was kicking furiously in the dog's jaws, head darting upwards, trying to reach the throat. It was the female, and she was squeaking with rage, determined to inflict her revenge upon those who had killed her family.

Suddenly, the dog dropped her and bent to pick her up again, intent on securing a grip that would crush the life from her. She was too swift for him. A wriggle and a leap, and she was hanging on to his lower lip. The still morning air was disturbed by a canine yelp of pain. McLellan stood transfixed as he watched this duel to the death.

Simon flung his head upwards, which dislodged the squirrel and sent her spinning a yard in to the air, catching her on the way down, this time he made no mistake. Her tiny bones crunched in his jaws, and then he dropped her, a lifeless, bloody, grey bundle in the grass. Blood dripped from the dog's lower lip, but he turned and went in search of the others.

Minutes later, four dead squirrels lay on the path at McLellan's feet. Simon wagged his tail, and looked up. His lip had almost stopped bleeding now. McLellan glanced at the corpses, and thought again about radioactivity. Well, they looked healthy enough, but he could not take any chances. Suddenly, he vomited, forgetting the dog for a moment.

Then it happened. It was all so sudden that McLellan had no time to think. Out

of the corner of his eye he saw Simon's lips drawn back in a vicious snarl, his eyes rolling, and he was bounding towards his master, snarling ferociously.

It was the sight of the open mouth which panicked McLellan into instant action. The dog's jaws were foaming! Those squirrels - he had been right about them after all. And if Simon bit him . . . McLellan had automatically reloaded after the last two shots. He threw the gun to his shoulder, fumbled, and pulled both triggers simultaneously. His eyes were tightly shut as the recoil threw him backwards. He sprawled headlong, fearful lest those awful frothing jaws should fasten in his throat, aghast at the possible consequences. He lay there, listening, afraid to look. Apart from the cooing of woodpigeons in some distant trees there was silence. Then he went back inside the house. The local telephone exchange appeared to be functioning normally as he put through a call to the Radiological Protection Board.

A van arrived within ten minutes. Its colour, yellow, reminded McLellan of the larger ones used to clear up the dead pigeons in the Square. The two men also wore protective clothing.

'Where are they, mate?'

McLellan stared at a pair of eyes behind the mask. Instinctively he found himself backing away, pointing towards the rear garden with a trembling hand. The voice reminded him of a transistor radio which was not properly tuned to the right station. Everything about them, their puppet-like movements, total impartiality, suggested robots.

He forced himself to follow them at a distance, holding his throat.

They went to the squirrels first, picking them up one by one. A cursory examination, aided by some kind of matchbox-sized instrument placed against the rough fur. All four were cast to one side, rolling over and lying inert on the gravel path.

Their instrument had not detected any radioactivity. They were satisfied. All just routine. Only the dead dog remained unexamined. 'Well, I suppose we'd better have a look at him.'

Together the two visored men pulled this dead labrador on to the path. Both knelt down as they applied the small detector again. One shook his head slowly.

His companion had prised open the dog's jaws with gloved hands.

'Look at this.' A nod of a head indicated that McLellan should step closer. He approached hesitantly to within a yard of them.

The dead dog's mouth was still held wide. McLellan peered forward, adjusted his spectacles. Bloodied gums. Something else, too. A swelling the size of a songbird's egg at the back of the throat. He looked for the familiar yellow puss, but could see none.

'That's wot 'is trouble was' - a cockney accent, discernible even through the filtered mouthpiece as the man from the Radiological Protection Board released the jaws. 'Bloody wasp stung 'im in the mouth.'

The two of them were already on their way back to their van. Call-outs would be many - some genuine, others false alarms - but none could be overlooked.

'Sent 'im crazy with pain. E'd 'ave been all right, though. 'Appens to lots o' dogs. No need to 'ave shot 'im. Squirrels neither. Still, s'pose you can't take chances these days. Pity about the dog, though.'

The engine purred into life, and McLellan watched the van disappear around the bend in the drive, beyond the rhododendrons.

After some minutes, he walked slowly into the house. The effort of climbing the wide staircase was greater than usual. For the first time since he had met her, McLellan felt afraid of Edith. For thirty years he had dictated, dominated . . . and she had cowered before him. And now he had destroyed the only living thing for which she had any love.

He quietly pushed open the bedroom door. The curtains were still drawn, and he could barely discern the details of the room. He moved towards the bed, walking on tiptoe. She lay on the nearside, still sleeping. Clumsily his hand knocked against something on the bedside table - a small bottle. It fell on to the thick carpet, and rolled a few inches. Even in his dazed condition he knew that it should have rattled. It sounded empty. He did not trouble to unscrew the cap to ascertain his worst fears. Neither did he pull back the bedclothes. His sudden fear of a timid woman blended into another kind of cowardice.

He retraced his steps, more slowly than before. Down the stairs, across the hall, into the room where the Purdey lay on the table. The window was still wide open. The mist outside had thickened again, infiltrating the house.

A slight acrid smell as he opened the breech again. Only one cartridge this time. The left-hand chamber.

He had no idea why he went back out into the garden. Perhaps it was an inbred respect for his domestic chattels, the rewards of corruption. He experienced some difficulty in reversing the shotgun barrels so that the cold steel penetrated his open mouth whilst enabling his short arms to bring his stubby thumb to bear upon the lower of the two triggers.

After several attempts he managed the required stance. A short laugh trumpeted down the gun barrels. McLoughlin certainly wouldn't get his tender accepted now, even if . . .

The booming report echoed around the surrounding hills, dying away slowly in the still atmosphere.

In the offices of the Herald, Kent and Coyle regarded each other grimly. They had counted the number of shots during the past hour. Maybe seven.

'Some stupid bastards are trying to break out over the hills,' Coyle said. 'The army cordon must form a complete circle. They don't mean anybody to get out - or in. They're trying to isolate this radioactivity, hoping that whatever has already escaped into the atmosphere will be contained in this valley by the surrounding mountains. All depends on whether a strong wind gets up. Not even the mountains could stop it then. We're caged in. It's like putting a mesh fence around a warren of rabbits which have contracted myxamatosis.'

Chapter 11

Even in a time of nationwide crisis, Saturday is a day of leisure amongst the British people. Sport predominates, no matter what. It is estimated that, on average, half a million people normally attend soccer matches on that day. Thousands follow racing, rugby, and other outdoor pursuits. Millions more follow radio and television coverage.

In this respect the Prime Minister's broadcast was well timed. Saturday's sporting fixtures remained unaffected. The full implication of the impending disaster would not be realised for another few hours. A breathing space had been gained by those in authority. Except in one sprawling town within the valley of the shadow of death.

Coyle was surprised to see Anne walk in shortly before eleven o'clock. Normally the Herald offices were closed on Saturdays. She smiled, but could not hide the strain she was feeling.

'You needn't have bothered . . . '

'I felt I had to get out ~ just go somewhere. I knew you'd be here.'

'You'd better join us in a whisky then.'

An hour later Kent managed to contact Winston Dyne.

'How's it going?' The reporter came to the point quickly.

'Still rising. Not as fast as it might, though. The shifts are working very hard. Trouble is, there's only room for the allocated number of men. Too many would get in each other's way.'

'Any trouble - with the workers, I mean?'

'A spot of bother with the shop-stewards to begin with. The men were out for twenty minutes. They've gone back on treble pay. Quadruple for the weekend work.'

'I tried to phone my paper.'

'All external communications have been suspended.'

'Except that you've got a direct line to Whitehall.' A shrewd guess on Kent's part.

'Naturally. I can get messages out for you - so long as they go through me personally.'

'OK. Fair enough. But I'll need a couple of passes to get in and out of your place.'

'A couple?'

'Coyle and myself.'

'I see.' A pause. 'Well, I suppose it can be arranged.'

'Seeing that you do all the arranging I don't see any problems.'

'We can't declare an open day, you know, but I'll see to it. Can't fix it before Monday, though. I'll have them delivered. But you won't be allowed anywhere near Section Eight.'

'That's the last place in this goddamned valley I want to go.'

Kent replaced the receiver.

'Well, we've season tickets for the show.' He laughed softly. 'Let's hope it isn't another Mousetrap. In the meantime, I'm going to take a stroll around town. I want to see how the man-in-the-street is reacting to military law.'

Coyle was grateful to be alone with Anne. It seemed an eternity since they had last been together in private.

'How did your folks take it?' he asked. 'The news about us.'

'A bit shocked. I think they were under the illusion that it was some kind of platonic relationship, maybe just a flirtation. They didn't make the fuss I expected, though. By the way, where are we going tonight?'

'Originally to the Nith Hotel in Glencaple - best meal on the west coast of Scotland. Followed by a couple of hours of passion down by Brow Well, Robbie Burn's area. I'll bet he laid more than one wench down there! However, we'll never get out of this valley, so I guess we might as well try that new Chinese restaurant that opened last week.'

'And you'll be ... going home afterwards?' She had to make an effort to voice her innermost fear.

He scratched his head thoughtfully.

'No privacy at either your place or mine. Suppose we bring sleeping-bags and a blow-up mattress down to the office here?'

'Anywhere.' Her arms were around him, their lips crushed together. 'Just anywhere, Bob, so long as we're together. Time's running out fast. I want to spend every possible minute with you.'

Attendances at football grounds throughout Britain more than doubled on that Saturday afternoon following the PM's announcement. Yet many sensed it was but a brief respite before anarchy commenced. One last spree. And indeed there was trouble brewing at every ground before the ninety minutes were up. No ardent fan likes to see his team defeated - especially when it could be the last match the club would ever play. Ibrox was packed beyond capacity. The disaster of the early seventies was forgotten, and police diverted to crowd control had not a hope of enforcing the attendance limit. If they had tried to do so, the riots would have begun even before the game kicked off. The old firm: Rangers versus Celtic. Trouble was brewing, and it had to come to the boil. A Final to end all Cup Finals. The ultimate victors. Only, in the end, everybody would lose, teams and supporters alike.

At Old Trafford safety-fences had a frail look about them, with sixty-five thousand King Kongs about to burst their chains and go on the rampage. The hooligan element had already devised a human ladder by which followers could gain access to the pitch. The bottom rungs would soon be crushed beneath the

clambering stampede, but that was immaterial.

Londoners were willing to spill blood at Highbury, where an influx of Spurs supporters had infiltrated the home terraces. And so it was, nationwide.

And all of this was preceded by a mad Saturday-morning shopping and drinking spree. Money would soon be useless, so spend it now. On anything. To hell with the law, too. No prison sentences would be completed.

A total breakdown in the system was beginning - but sport must come first. By midday Saturday decisions had been reached about a coalition government. Canverdale was appointed Prime Minister, although it would not be announced until Monday morning. Meanwhile, the rest of the world just watched and waited.

Police forces throughout Britain were stretched beyond their limits, even with help from the armed forces. All leave was cancelled, and tanks occupied the entrances to Heathrow and major airports. Still the crowds formed, laden with suitcases and hold-alls, huddling together. But mechanics had rendered the huge standing aircraft temporarily immobile.

Trouble arose at Biggin Hill, when an angry group of owners of small private aircraft demanded their machines. When an official informed them from a distance, by megaphone, that all flights had been suspended, this provoked outrage. A dozen men with fully qualified pilots' licences marched out in a column towards their silent machines. Suddenly a shot was fired over their heads by a young soldier, sweat pouring down his youthful face, praying to God that they would stop. Fortunately, they did. There was a huddled conversation, some arguments. A few wanted to risk it, the majority decided against, so they returned to their parked cars. There had to be other ways.

The Royal Navy was doing its best to close all seaports. Their task was a much more difficult one than that of the Army or the RAF. Destroyers formed a barrier across the harbour entrances of Dover, Southampton, and Portsmouth. Only foreign ships were allowed to leave. This meant a thorough search of all vessels, but no doubt a few stowaways made it safely.

But some smaller boats managed to leave from various points around the coastline with little trouble. Aberdovey harbour, carnival-like with its multi-coloured sails throughout the summer, now presented a drab picture, one or two crafts bobbing restlessly at anchor. The season was at an end, and most owners had towed their boats back inland for the winter months - a decision regretted by those enthusiasts who could have waited another couple of weeks. But some had fled out to sea, small crafts riding low in the water, dangerously overloaded with children, pets, and valuables. The incoming tide brought many of them back, dozens of lifeless bodies strewn amongst the debris of capsized dinghies and driftwood.

Small parties of beachcombers ignored the corpses.

Jewellery and rings were left untouched. But occasionally an outboard motor was discovered, still attached to the remains of some small boat which had failed miserably in its mammoth task. Then eager hands seized it; angry voices quarrelled over who had sighted it first. Sometimes there was a fight, before the victor hurried from the beach with his prize. A hurried rebuilding would occupy his next few days, skilled or otherwise. Then another attempt at crossing to the Irish shore. It was a continual process: fleeing from death; dying in the process.

Britain was now in total isolation from the rest of the world. Messages of

sympathy flooded in from all parts of the globe, and offers of help were unceasing - but there was no time. A whole country cannot be evacuated in a matter of ten days, so Canverdale adopted a policy of total impartiality: nobody would be allowed to leave. He and his ministers would remain to share the fate of the British people. Perhaps that gauge needle in Section Eight would drop back. Canverdale believed in facing reality, but he was also an optimist.

That Saturday the towns were packed with a Christmas-like rush that lacked any atmosphere of festivity. The stores exceeded all previous trading records, but there was no gaiety. It was indiscriminate buying, almost in silence except for the jostling of bodies and the ringing of tills. Wines and spirits were most in demand - for alcohol offered oblivion.

Football fans flocked into the towns, but the usual pre-match rampages were few and far between. Instead there was a tension, a hint of terrible things to come, a build-up of frustration that would explode before the day was over.

By 2.15 p.m. almost every means of access to football stadiums throughout the country had been officially closed. But that made no difference to the crowds still queuing in the streets outside. Officials and stewards watched helplessly as young and old clambered over the locked turnstiles or crawled beneath them. Police made no move to intervene, except to break up one or two brawls.

Some early trouble began in the stands when season-ticket holders found their seats occupied by types who normally stood on the open terraces. Despite 'no standing' signs, the gangways were packed with long-haired hooligans determined to support their more fortunate companions who had taken over the seating. A well-dressed man with a large cigar was bodily thrown from his customary place in the Waterloo Road stand at Molineux, Wolverhampton - down into the enclosure below. He suffered a fractured arm, and injured two young children in his fall. It took the St John's ambulance men twenty minutes to force their way through, and their attempts to reach the ambulance outside were hampered by an unyielding mob. Cars were double-parked everywhere, and in his frustration the driver ripped the wing off a Mini. A pack of chanting hooligans was charging down the centre of the road, waving their scarves like banners of victory, as they anticipated fighting their way into the already overcrowded ground.

This mob barred the path of the ambulance, ignoring its flashing blue light and blaring siren. The driver kept his foot on the accelerator. They would jump aside at the last moment . . . But they left it until the very last second, and, the driver felt a bump on the nearside wing. He did not stop, rage welling up inside him. Gladly would he have run over the whole bloody lot of them. More traffic jams. Forty-five minutes before they finally pulled into the hospital. One of the children, a girl of about nine, was certified dead on arrival.

But in all the stadiums a kind of hush prevailed amongst the fans as coins were tossed and teams lined up. Many of the spectators had not been to a match for years, and for some it was a totally new experience - an involuntary instinct to congregate.

A nationwide blowing of referees' whistles, synchronised for 3 p.m., was followed by the expected roar, as frustrations pent-up during the preceding week were relieved at last. But on this particular Saturday afternoon this roar was magnified a thousand fold. The plutonium threat was temporarily relegated, and the national sport took over for a brief period. Ninety minutes at the most.

People fainted in their dozens amongst the throngs. Under normal circumstances they would have been passed over the heads of surrounding fans or down a gangway. But today the fallen bodies went unnoticed, as the remaining spectators swarmed over them.

A multitude of voices in one continuous roar as the football matches got underway. The more violent fans felt increasingly inclined to take their revenge on opposing supporters, as they might never get another chance. They were determined to turn this into the bloodiest clash in soccer history before the final whistles brought it all to a close.

The mode of play was noticeably lack-lustre that day. Packed grounds and deafening crowds usually lift players, spurring them beyond the normal limits. But today, this was not in evidence. Passes went astray, and good opportunities were missed. Possibly the players experienced that feeling known only too well by the veteran playing his final match before retirement. This was the end. After today they might never kick a ball again. What the hell did it matter?

So roars of encouragement turned to hoots of derision. There began a monotonous thumping of feet throughout Britain's football grounds, regardless of the bodies of the fallen. The bower boys had never had it so good. Unprotected heads to kick in, blood trickling down the stone terraces - and nobody taking the slightest bit of notice.

Half-time. Radio-commentators conveyed the news to those listening in the comparative safety of their homes. A host of draws, game after game, mostly scoreless, as though the incentive to win had gone before the players had even taken the field.

Bars within the grounds had been deserted by their regular staff. The drinks were simply left for the taking. In most cases everything was gone before the kick-off, the regular hooligans helping themselves to everything in sight. Vandalism was only slight to begin with, but followed in earnest during the interval. Stalls and vending equipment were smashed, but the police remained unmoved.

All over the country, when the players emerged for the second half, the tension went far beyond football itself.

The shouting was now incessant - but jeers predominated. More bodies lay beneath the masses, but nobody cared. Tension was rising fast, and the explosion was bound to come before the remaining time was up.

Facts and figures gathered later showed an almost coincidental timing of events. It was certainly no more than 15 minutes into the second half before it all began.

Ibrox first - or was it Old Trafford? Nobody really knew. And still no goals.

The human ladders went into action - the dead and dying forming the lower rungs. Youths clambered on to others' shoulders. Sometimes a whole human structure collapsed, screams muffled in the pile-up. And that made it all the easier for those following on, clambering over the dead and injured, breaching the security fences.

Disaster resulted as exits collapsed beneath the mass exodus of the terrified. Rival factions battled on pitches everywhere. Players sought refuge in the dressing-rooms. Vainly the police tried to intervene.

At Villa Park a giant hooligan with a pockmarked face was wielding an axe - the blade honed to razor-sharpness. Even his own comrades screamed and scattered before him, a madmen bent on destruction. There was no logic in his final gruesome act before being pulled down by four policemen. A claret and blue scarf knotted around his waist, Villa in the lead - and he beheaded the referee with one powerful swing! It just didn't make sense.

At Wolverhampton a linesman was knifed. Highbury saw the bloodiest battle of all, twenty-seven dead, their blood staining the lush green September grass. One hundred and eighty wounded, seventy-five not expected to live. But that did not include the number who had died on the terraces and in the stands. It was the same story everywhere.

Military vehicles assisted ambulances in transporting the injured. Hospital emergency services reached their limits, and temporary centres were set up in civic centres and town-halls. Doctors worked ceaselessly alongside skilled surgeons, but there was a limit to what could be accomplished. Many died before they received that vital surgery.

Bodies remained on football pitches overnight, covered by tarpaulins. The mortuaries were full. As many carried no means of identification a television announcement was made asking friends or relatives to report missing persons. A terrible ordeal was in store for many - a slow walk down row upon row of mutilated bodies, hoping to God that one did not recognise a son or brother, At police stations the telephone lines were permanently jammed.

Eventually the football grounds were empty, except for the dead, the floodlights enhancing the gruesome scene. But still the battles raged outside. Now the mobs rampaged through the towns, hell-bent on destruction of every kind. Not just the hooligan element now. There were office-workers, bank-clerks, shop-assistants . . . normal people under abnormal circumstances.

In Glasgow shop windows were smashed, and a fire begun at a petrol station resulted in a devastating explosion which killed eleven people instantly. It was the same story everywhere.

The Battle of Highbury was moving south. Rival factions appeared to have formed a coalition. Red-and-white and blue-and-white scarves were brandished side by side. Other groups joined them, crazy mobs with no interest in either team. Football was forgotten - it was plain mob-law now.

They had remembered the threat; and they had a destination - Westminster, and Downing Street. They blazed a trail of destruction as they marched-shop windows, private houses, parked cars overturned. Mass frenzy.

Then, suddenly, it all came to a stop as a line of armoured trucks barred their way. Soldiers fired shots into the air. The retreat was disorderly, panic-stricken, a total anti climax.

Three rioters were trampled to death.

The OC was not fooled by the simplicity of it all. A dangerous mob had been halted by one volley of shots over their heads simply because they had never come up against military resistance before. They would retreat, lick their wounds - but next time a few warning shots would not halt them. A bluff is seldom successfully called twice.

Canverdale had snatched a few hours sleep following his appointment as Prime Minister and by midday Sunday he was working with the efficiency of a

well-oiled machine. Tall and lean, almost totally bald, he had a resilience that was well-known to all who had worked with him in his party in the past. Odds meant nothing to him; he never gave up. He ate sandwiches at his desk as he talked on the telephone. He had no reservations about speaking with his mouth full, and he had little patience with those who asked him to repeat a sentence.

The re-establishment of law and order was his priority, for no government can tackle a crisis efficiently in the midst of anarchy. He had the facts and figures of the previous day's rioting on his desk before him. They did not make pleasant reading.

His first call was direct to Belfast. He wanted up-to-date information, ahead of the press. Already he had contemplated a partial withdrawal of troops from Northern Ireland. An auxiliary force; a show of extra strength to curb the rising anarchy.

He groaned at the news. Saturday had been the worst night of terror in Belfast for six years. He had no time to listen to the details.

He sat through a call to the head of Oxide Reprocessing. Dyne sounded weary, as though he had not been to bed all night.

'Well,' Canverdale barked, 'what's the current reading on our very own atomic bomb?'

'Bad.' Dyne's sigh was audible over the line. 'It's risen three degrees during the night. At the previous rate of escaping radioactivity, it wouldn't have attained this level until Tuesday.'

'Which brings Doomsday two days nearer.' Canverdale pushed the plate of ham sandwiches away. 'Next Saturday, in fact. A decision will have to be made on Friday - maybe sooner. Ring me if the pressure shows any signs of a further rate of increase.'

He replaced the receiver, and then made another call.

Chapter 12

Sunday. Transistor radios had conveyed into the valley the news of the widespread rioting throughout Britain.

Coyle and Anne lay listening to the extended bulletin. It was warm between the folds of the two sleeping-bags which they had zipped together. The inflated mattress beneath gave them added comfort. Apart from the stark surroundings of filing cabinets and a desk heaped with pending correspondence, they might as well have spent an adulterous night in some three-star hotel. Still clasped in the embrace in which they had slept, they listened to every detail of the early morning London news.

The night of terror had now subsided somewhat. The rioters were licking their wounds, their losses heavy. It was emphasised that no casualties were due to action by military law. Those who had suffered had done so through their own behaviour, many unwittingly swept along in a tide of human madness. There was no hint of further measures being taken to safeguard life and property. The situation was static. Emergency services would be maintained. People were urged to go to work as usual on the morrow. There was optimism in the newscaster's voice - all part of the policy: keep the people calm. There was no mention of fuel rationing, either. Coyle supposed there were sufficient supplies to enable Britain to carry on until it disintegrated - or, by some miracle, normality returned.

He leaned over to switch off the tiny transistor, wondering what Jane was doing without him. The thought troubled his conscience: it was bloody selfish of him. He hadn't intended being absent the whole night, but it had been impossible to drag himself away from Anne. There was so little time left ...

'D'you know what I'd like most from you, Bob?' she murmured, beginning to fondle him again.

'What's that?'

'I'd like to be pregnant. A baby. By you.'

The idea flattered him. Something they had guarded against throughout the whole of their affair, and now when she - no, both of them - wanted it most, it was impossible. A strange quirk of fate. He sighed deeply.

'Well, we certainly didn't take any precautions last night.'

'And we're not going to now.' She took the initiative and clambered on top of him. 'The time of the month is right, too. Even . . . even if there isn't time left, I'd still know.'

'How?'

'Intuition. Something you just can't put into words. Some women are sure within a couple of days. Just something you know but can't explain.'

They fell silent except for a quickening of their breath and the movement of their bodies. She was pressing down hard on him, then they were jerking in harmony, clutching at each other, her fingernails gouging his shoulders, rolling out of the warmth of the sleeping-bag on to the hardness of the floor. They never even noticed it, lying coupled for some time afterwards, basking in the warmth of mutual love. Coyle hoped that he had given her what she wanted, though precious few days were left. Intuition or not, he wanted to hear those words from her own lips: 'You've given me a baby, Bob.'

The ringing of the telephone caused them to disengage with reluctance.

'Who the hell can be ringing the office on a Sunday morning?' he muttered, picking up the receiver, and perching on the edge of the desk, stark naked.

'Coyle speaking.'

'Rollason here. I tried to get you at home but your wife said you didn't come in last night. Getting a special edition out?' A hint of sarcasm?

'No, I just had . . . things to catch up on.'

'I wondered if you were going to bring out a ... a final edition of the Herald.'

'You're being pessimistic, Rollason. It may not happen.'

'That's something we won't know until it either does or doesn't. Anyway, I just wanted to ask you to play it down as much as possible. A personal favour. You must be fully aware of what's happening outside, throughout the rest of the country. I'm worried about when it's going to start here, so I'd appreciate it if you didn't dig up any more legends.'

'The military seem to be pretty well in control.'

Too much. People are resenting it, particularly the younger generation. They might try and organise a mass exit from the valley, or else storm the reprocessing centre. Either way it'll mean bloodshed. The army will open fire. A few warning shots first, but after that

'It's a possibility,' Coyle admitted.

'A probability, I'd say. By the way, have you heard about McLellan?'

'No.'

'All this must have sent him round the twist. He slaughtered some grey squirrels in his garden, then shot his dog. His wife had already taken an overdose of sleeping tablets. So he shot himself.'

'I see.' Coyle did not experience one twinge of regret. 'There'll be a lot of suicides before this business is concluded - people who'd sooner get it over and done with.'

Coyle wished he could hang up. Anne was becoming impatient, now stroking herself with her fingertips, so that Coyle could watch her every movement. Coyle dropped his free hand to his lower regions. Anne smiled.

Then they heard a key turning in the outer door.

'I'll have to ring off,' Coyle spoke quickly. 'Someone's just arrived.'

He replaced the receiver.

'Be with you in a minute,' he called out, struggling with a shirt and slacks, as Anne dressed with haste also. Who the hell could it be? The printers' foreman? Ross? Not on a Sunday, surely.

They heard the rasping of a match, then the aroma of sweet-smelling pipe tobacco crept under the door and their nostrils twitched with relief. Of course - it was Kent.

'You can come in.'

The London journalist looked like someone who had enjoyed a good night's sleep. He seemed perfectly relaxed, as always, smoke curling lazily from the pipe between his teeth. His eyes noted the crumpled sleeping bags, but dismissed them.

'I'm sorry' - a genuine apology - 'if I'd thought ...'

'You couldn't be expected to.' Coyle no longer resented the intrusion.

'Just the need to be up and about. I find hotels claustrophobic, particularly on Sundays.'

'Anne will make some coffee.' She was already filling the kettle. 'There are some biscuits somewhere.'

I've already breakfasted, thanks, but don't let me stop you.'

Three cups of coffee, a tin of biscuits which nobody seemed interested in, Coyle seated in the swivel-chair, Anne reclining on the inflated mattress, Kent leaning with his back against the wall. One of many conferences taking place all over the world right now, on the universal subject,

'Rollason just rang me,' Coyle said. 'Said his main concern was rioting starting here in the valley. He's got a point.'

'I passed the church on my way down,' Kent spoke softly. 'Never seen anything like it. I've seen folks queuing at cinemas for top billings, at Wembley for Cup Finals. Beats me why a place this size has only one church.'

'They never filled it before,' Coyle replied. 'It was adequate in the old days. The regulars were a few devout parishioners. The town mushroomed, but the newcomers had no use for religion. Old Mortimer had the cushiest job in the valley. Visited the aged and sick, free meals wherever he chose to get 'em . . . '

'Well, he's working bloody harder now than he's ever done in his life before, I'll warrant.' Kent placed his pipe in the ashtray, and picked up his cup. 'Not only is the church bursting at the seams, but they're packing the churchyard outside. Communion. There'll never be enough bread or wine to go round unless he can conjure up some miracle akin to the feeding of the five thousand. All types - youngsters, too. The kind who'll pray today and riot tomorrow. Still, I suppose it gives the authorities a breathing space.'

'I'll be in church myself on Tuesday.' Coyle failed to keep the huskiness out of his voice. 'A memorial service . . . my boy. I was hoping it would just be a small, private affair.'

'Maybe the army could keep the crowds out for you,' Kent said. 'Just for half an hour. But we don't know what the situation will be by then.'

'I'd better be getting home.' Anne rose to her feet. 'Sunday lunch is a sort of ritual there, always has been, ever since I was a kid. Mum and Dad aren't happy if I'm not there. I'd like to make this one something special for them, It could be the last one ever.'

She donned her coat and moved towards the door, then turned. Her gaze moved from the sleeping-bag to Coyle. Her eyes asked a question. Coyle nodded. They would both return here tonight, no matter what.

The two men listened to her footsteps receding across the outer office, the gentle closing of the door.

'Any plans for today?' Coyle asked at length.

'Not really. Nothing much I can do for the moment, except hang around and await developments like everybody else. Maybe I'll take a stroll around the town.'

'I'll come with you.'

Together they stepped out into the street. The mist was clearing more quickly today; the towering mountain peaks were silhouetted against the skyline through the thinning haze. Later on it would probably be warm and sunny. Another bonus for those maintaining law and order. Inclement weather is always an inducement to depression.

Neither spoke as they crossed the deserted Square. A couple of pigeons flew from the head of Robert Burns's statue and alighted on one of the upper parapets of the town-hall, The two birds cooed softly and contentedly. The drifting cloud of radioactivity had passed on. Coyle wondered if it had crossed the range of mountains, how far it had travelled, and in which direction. It had to go somewhere.

This speculation was interrupted by the sound of voices - hundreds of them. Low incantations, not in unison, the words incomprehensible, unceasing.

'The church congregation,' Kent told him. He looked at his watch. 'Ten-thirty. Communion started at eight. Still going strong, or maybe they've gone straight on to matins.' Somehow the voices seemed to draw their footsteps. Coyle found himself turning right at the end of the Square. Kent had intended to bypass the crowd this time, but instead he followed his companion's route. It was strange. Two self-confessed atheists, but still they headed towards the church. Both told themselves that it was just curiosity. A few minutes later they saw the massed congregation - men, women, and children, temporarily united in worship. No, that was the wrong term, Coyle decided. None of them worshipped anything outside their own little lives. It was a gathering of people seeking to allay the terror which hung over them. Clutching at age-old beliefs, just as their ancestors had done in Balzur's day. Maybe, elsewhere, others were delving into the occult. God or the devil, they would sell themselves to whichever they thought might save them. They had turned their fear-crazed minds back centuries, resorted to the old ways. A terrible realisation; this was all part of the Curse - a subtle surrender to the Left Hand Path! Not one of them realised it, but subconsciously they were making a pact, willing to trade their souls for an extended period of life.

Coyle and Kent stood and watched from the opposite pavement, looking across the low wall surrounding the churchyard.

Coyle had no difficulty in recognising the figure of the Reverend James Mortimer moving with difficulty amongst the crowds, who were kneeling with heads bowed, oblivious of the dew-soaked grass of the churchyard. The vicar's long black cassock was creased as he moved from person to person, chalice in one hand, gold plate in the other. The server, a youth in his early teens wearing a soiled surplice, hampered by a large carton carried in his free hand. Additional supplies of wine and bread.

Mortimer's voice carried to the two spectators, above the incessant murmurings. 'In the name of the Father, the Son, the Holy Ghost . . . this is my Body . . . take . . . eat . . . this is my Blood . . . drink . . . may God save us all . . . have mercy on our souls . . . '

Coyle and Kent watched as though hypnotised, neither feeling any cynicism. Suddenly, Coyle stiffened, his fingers instinctively clutching at the arm of the man beside him. Kent followed his gaze. An attractive woman in her mid-thirties and a girl in her late teens knelt side by side, their features grief-stricken. He recognised them both - Jane and Sarah!

Almost in a trance, Coyle crossed the road, looking neither to right nor left, his movements jerky, like a human automaton.

Kent made as if to follow, then checked himself. This was one time Coyle did not need him.

Coyle pushed his way over kneeling, muttering figures, his progress slow.

Finally, he reached the two kneeling persons he sought, jostling for a place alongside Jane. The ground was cold and wet, saturating his trousers where he knelt. He bowed his head. After a time he sensed his wife glancing sideways at him, and he turned his head. Their eyes met. No surprise on her part; certainly no forgiveness. Not even hatred. Nothing. For her, he was just another one amongst this multitude. She turned her head away, praying. Everybody prayed except Coyle.

The Reverend Mortimer's voice was closer now. ' . . . This is My Blood . . . take, drink . . . may God have mercy on us all.'

Face to face, Coyle noted the amazement in the vicar's large round eyes. The chalice was thrust into his hands. He took it clumsily, almost dropped it. The wine was tasteless, watered liberally to cater for the numbers. The bread dissolved on his palate before he could swallow it. He managed to mumble 'Amen' as Mortimer moved on to Jane and Sarah. It was only then that Coyle remembered that he had never been confirmed.

As more people arrived in the street, those who had taken communion left to make room for them. Coyle rose unsteadily to his feet, but Jane and Sarah had moved on ahead. They were lost to his view.

Soon he found himself out in the street again, where an even larger queue had formed awaiting their turn. A sudden shout, and bowed heads lifted in unison. A man rose up amidst the praying throng - a ragged vagrant, his tattered garments exposing glimpses of grimy skin, an almost skeletal hand held aloft. His face was hidden amidst a mangy beard, so that it was virtually impossible to determine his age. His high-pitched voice was rising to a frenzied crescendo, eyes blazing insanely, his mouth was a toothless cavity.

'Fools!' he yelled. 'Do you not realise that this is the Day of Judgement - the long awaited day that Balzur prophesied, when Pluto shall come to claim his own . . . to take us down into his fiery underworld, where there is nothing but eternal agony!'

A gasp of horror rippled through the congregation. A woman began screaming, a child crying. Then, with unbelievable agility, the speaker leaped away, hurdling the cringing people in his path until he was lost to sight, his shrill warning still echoing in their minds.

Silence. Except for the monotonous, apparently unmoved tones of the Reverend Mortimer as he shuffled between the rows. Take eat ... this is My blood . . .

The opposite pavement was deserted. Coyle's eyes scanned it for Kent, but there was no sign of the Londoner. Out of this teeming mass only Kent had not turned back to God. He would see it through on his own, right up until the end, whichever way it went - an atheist and a fatalist.

Coyle debated with himself for some minutes. His wife and daughter had doubtless gone home. He could follow them, but he knew he would not be welcome. Alternatively, he could roam the streets in search of Kent. In the

end he decided to go back to his office. He could prepare some copy for an edition which would probably never reach the printing presses. At least it was something to do until Anne returned.

As he moved slowly away, an armoured truck rounded the corner and drew up some fifty yards away from the packed churchyard.

The military were taking no chances. For firmly held between two soldiers was the miserable tramp-like figure, now silent and subdued.

Canverdale spent the rest of Sunday attempting to list his new duties in order of priority. Everything, of course, was a priority nowadays - especially with the unexpected three degrees rise in the radioactivity pressure gauge earlier that day - but, nevertheless, certain things had to take precedence.

The public would be informed on television at the end of the evening's programmes that the Prime Minister (they had no knowledge yet of the change of leadership) had another broadcast to make. That meant that at midday on the Monday the coalition would be officially announced. Canverdale would then be fully in charge.

The banks would remain closed tomorrow, also building societies and post offices. That, too, would be announced on tonight's late-night news, but only as a temporary measure, and not in any way to provoke sensationalism. He decided against closing the stock market. Shares would crash, obviously, but there might remain some spark of hope if he allowed trading to continue. Likewise the foreign exchange market; countries abroad must not presume that Britain had capitulated to the disaster. Bluff and stall - and keep in constant touch with Dyne. He sighed with relief at having made these decisions, and fitted a cigarette into his long ivory holder. Flicking his lighter, he considered some other factors.

The safety of the public. The map in front of him showed the sitings of special shelters for use in the event of nuclear attack. He approved the efforts of the Authorities in constructing them, but there were two main drawbacks. Firstly, they could only accommodate a small percentage of the populations within easy reach of them; and secondly this was no ordinary nuclear attack. It was not a case of one or two atomic bombs, but the effect of thousands of them exploding simultaneously, with fall-out coming like a raging blizzard!

The London Undergrounds would be packed with people. Perhaps there was some way of filtering the ventilation shafts against fall-out. He made a note to investigate this possibility further, then added another concerning the length of time it would be necessary for people, to remain below ground. He envisaged a new rat-like population, human savages existing in tunnels of squalor. There would be neither lighting nor sewage, nor any of the other amenities which had been taken for granted for years.

Finally, the main decision would have to be made by himself: release the build-up or chance an explosion? Die above or below ground?

He drank yet another cold cup of tea, and put through a call to Dyne. A slight sigh of relief. The needle had risen only one more degree since the morning - the expected rate. That still made Saturday D-Day, and the needle might decide to jump madly at any moment.

Hardly had he replaced the receiver when another call came through. The Sabbath was over. One day of respite, and now Saturday's madness had returned. He jotted down the names of the places as he listened. Notting Hill.

Birmingham. Wolverhampton. Leicester. Coventry. Nottingham. Bradford.

'Alert all troops!' Canverdale's voice was weary. The order was superfluous, but he could not think of anything better.

The riots had begun again! It was the desperate rebellion of frightened people trapped on an island of death.

Canverdale knew that he would not have the chance of any sleep. Anarchy had forestalled his predictions by some twenty-four hours. How long before it spread to other countries, whole continents. A worldwide holocaust was imminent!

Chapter 13

Monday. Again Coyle and Anne had spent the night in the office, but they were up and dressed before Kent arrived.

'What's the programme for today?' Anne enquired as she adjusted her skirt.

'Same as for any normal Monday.' Coyle smiled wanly. 'I'm just wondering how many will turn up. Doesn't matter really, but we've got to make a pretence of some kind of normality. The copy I worked on yesterday can go to the type-setters. The printers will be kept fully occupied for the next couple of days with the parish magazine. I see there's a lot of forthcoming weddings in the next fortnight.'

'Poor sods.'

'Maybe a few will be brought forward. Anyway, it's only a technicality. A few words, a bit of paper. Stupid really, but that's the society in which we live.'

'Bob' - she hesitated, met his gaze, dropped her eyes - 'Bob ... we are ... you and I, I mean . . . we're married to each other, aren't we? I mean . . . well, you know what I mean. I'd just like to think that . . .'

'Yes.' He slipped an arm around her slender waist, and drew her close to him. 'We're married. I guess bits of paper, legal documents, have lost all their meaning now to just about everybody. Morally, Jane has already divorced me. Of course, I shall have to help her through tomorrow. It will be a difficult day for all of us. A funeral service always is, but this type of memorial service is worse. People feel a lot better after it. It's a sort of release. Afterwards, you heave a sigh of relief, shed a few more tears, and life returns to normal.'

Anne fell silent. A lot of things worried her. After the church service on the morrow, would there be a reconciliation between Coyle and Jane? Perhaps the marital ties were stronger than they appeared. Perhaps Sarah would try to

bring her parents back together. And what if all this business up at the reprocessing centre turned out to be a damp squid? No explosion, no radioactive release. What then? Had her own affair with Coyle escalated to such heights simply because there was so little time left? Under normal conditions would they have simply remained clandestine mistress and lover until finally the affair petered out? She, too, had prayed along with millions of others on the previous day. She had asked God to grant her a pregnancy. Whatever happened she would not give up her man without a fight.

Kent arrived shortly before ten o'clock. A few minutes later a uniformed man in a chauffeur-driven car delivered a sealed envelope addressed to the London journalist. Two checkpoint passes. Coyle noted the date of expiry - the following Saturday.

'Maybe they don't want us around for the big blow on Monday.'

Kent pocketed both green cards, picked up the telephone, and was through to Dyne within a couple of minutes. A meeting was arranged for two-thirty; no delay or excuses this time.

'Seems like we've got the world's most important press conference all to ourselves.' Kent laughed as he replaced the receiver. 'All those other silly buggers raced back to London with their red-hot stories, and now they're not allowed back into the valley. I'm hoping Dyne will let me use his London line to speak to my editor.'

Coyle stared out of the window across the untidy yard. Only two absentees this morning, and even they had taken the trouble to phone in with excuses. Perhaps, here in this valley, life would continue more or less as normal for a day or two - a kind of isolated sanity, cut off from the violence which raged elsewhere.

He phoned Rollason. The Superintendent promised to seek the help of the military in keeping the crowds away from the church during the twenty minutes whilst grief dominated a small disunited family.

The meeting with Dyne was a mere formality. The head of Oxide Reprocessing did not reveal that the danger level had jumped an unexpected three degrees on the previous day. It was a closely guarded secret. If the public was to be warned of the advance of Doomsday, then that was up to the Prime Minister.

'The initial escape of radiation . . . ' Kent made an attempt to establish what he and Coyle had discussed earlier. 'It seems quite clear to me, and surely to others too, that it has moved out of this valley.'

'Yes, it probably has moved away.' Dyne fidgeted uneasily. 'However, there have been no reports of contamination elsewhere in the country.'

'So we cross our fingers and hope that it has just evaporated,' Kent said, 'until there are reports of people breaking out in festering rashes, or birds and animals dying in great numbers in a particular area.'

'It may not happen like that. Atmospheric conditions are capable of reducing its density. Obviously the Square suffered its most concentrated form, before it had had a chance to disperse. Fortunately, it happened at a time when the resident population was absent.'

'What other effects might it have on animals - or humans?'

'Who can say? Mild skin irritations, blindness, deafness . . . madness. We can

only speculate. It could take years for a person to succumb to it.'

'I'd like to phone my editor.'

Dyne nodded, but insisted on dialling the number himself. He ascertained that he was in touch with the Chief Editor himself before passing the receiver across to Kent. The conversation lasted less than five minutes, with Kent doing most of the listening. After all, there was little to report from the valley. The government was keeping the public constantly informed of events, telling them only as much as it wanted them to know.

'The riots are the worst problem at the moment,' Kent said as he replaced the receiver. 'Bloody full-scale war, but fortunately confined to certain areas - so long as the army can contain them. Otherwise it'll be total anarchy. There are rumours in Fleet Street of US troops being flown in, but that could present a dangerous threat to world peace.'

Russia has made a similar offer, apparently. Just imagine it, American and Russian troops meeting on top of the biggest nuclear bomb in existence.'

'Rumours!' Dyne became his abrupt self once more, rising to his feet to make it clear that the meeting was at an end. 'That's half the trouble in a crisis such as this. Everybody speculates, particularly the press. If only people would stick to facts . . . '

Coyle and Kent were escorted back to the Mercedes, and drove slowly back through the checkpoints.

'Nothing much gained there, I'm afraid,' Coyle muttered as they reached the outskirts of the town.

'It isn't what they tell you that counts; it's what they don't tell you. You have to learn to read between the lines. Danger level still rising at the estimated rate. But is it? How the hell would anybody know except them? They don't know where the escaped radioactivity has gone, however. I'm sure of that. Our only means of communication with the outside world is through battery-operated radios, transistors, home-made crystal-sets. They don't want us to see television. The nearest transmitter has been temporarily put out of action. Why? I'll tell you. Because they don't want the people of this valley to see the things happening outside. It's one thing to read or hear about something. Quite another to view it with your own eyes. See what I mean?'

'Yes. They've got to prevent rioting in the valley at any cost,' Coyle replied. 'They can't take any risks of the centre being stormed. That might set the whole thing off days before its time is up. In other words, they're still desperately trying to buy time. By letting you talk to your editor, Dyne knows you can't tell him anything that hasn't already been officially announced. A good move on his part. I'd love to be able to bug the line when he talks to Canverdale, though.'

Apart from one valley in the south-west of Scotland, the whole nation watched the ten o'clock TV news. Portable sets occupied prominent places on the bars of crowded public houses; hotel lounges were crowded. Without a doubt it was record viewing. A number of cities were covered, brief glimpses of the after-effects of street battles - the damaged property, the fires still blazing despite the unceasing efforts of local brigades. The worst scene was kept until last: a half-demolished street, army vehicles blocking one end, an inferno engulfing a row of terraced houses, fire-engines, ambulances, blankets, discarded clothing covering huddled corpses yet to be collected. A vicious multi-racial mob having been forced to retreat some two hundred yards,

still shouting, hurling missiles, which were parried by riot-shields. Half-bricks, broken tiles, anything. No gunfire, though. So far the rioters had not been able to obtain weapons. They had relied upon numbers, but in the end they had been driven back. Volatile leaders urged the hordes to stand their ground. There were promises of guns, and already crude fire-bombs had devastated much property - bottles half filled with petrol or paraffin, burning rags for fuses. Many of the blazing houses belonged to the people themselves. They did not care; they would fight on until the city was razed to the ground. The army would not be able to hold them in the end.

The television reporter was shielded behind a reinforced Champ, a relic of the same model used in the campaign against Rommel - with a Rolls-Royce engine which was why it was still in use. The camera crew, however, were forced to expose themselves to the dangers of the missile-throwing crowd to obtain the most spectacular and horrific of the day's events on film. The reporter - a stubble of beard on his chin, eyes red-rimmed, clothing smoke-stained - raised his voice in an effort to make himself heard.

'Rioting began early yesterday evening, and continued throughout the night. This is just one of many similar cases. Troops, firemen and ambulances have fought an unceasing battle. In this area alone it is estimated that the number of dead exceeds fifty, the wounded many more. Military casualties have been slight, but it's clear that these mobs have no intentions of letting up, and the cost of damage is already into millions of pounds. Tonight there will be no sleep for either troops or auxiliary forces. However, in the city centre itself, today life has continued fairly normally, given the conditions. Most office-workers have reported for work as usual, and public transport has been operating satisfactorily. But, after another night of terror, it is doubtful whether many commuters will venture into the city tomorrow. Gerald Watson, News at Ten, Birmingham.'

Monday, 11.30 p.m. Canverdale made another broadcast. In the calmest voice he could muster, he advised commuters to stay out of the cities on the following day. He added, hopefully, that soon the army and police would have everything under control.

The moment he was off the air he fitted a cigarette into the long holder, applied the flame with a shaking hand, and drew the smoke deep into his lungs. If there was one thing he detested it was having to lie deliberately. The truth was that in many areas the troops and police were being forced back. The tide had turned, and a backwash of bloody terror was swamping Britain.

Already a military escort waited outside for the evacuation of Downing Street. Canverdale was well aware that his next broadcast would be made from a secret underground headquarters in Hertfordshire.

Chapter 14

On Monday night Coyle returned home, and Anne reluctantly went back to her

parents. Just for a few hours out of the precious few left.

Jane and Sarah were seated before the small electric fire in the living-room, and both looked up as he entered. Their forced smiles meant nothing more than an acknowledgement. They had guessed he would come.

Sarah prepared a snack which none of them really wanted, but they must pretend to eat something in the midst of this forced family reunion. Nobody spoke, but the silence was worse than any backlash of words, and Coyle wondered how they would get through the long evening ahead. The television was out of action, of course, and his transistor radio was still at the office. He knew Sarah had one in her room, but that was not really a solution to their problem.

He took upon himself the chore of washing the dishes, simply as something to do. The thought of the long night frightened him.

At half-past eight the front-door bell rang, and Sarah went to answer it. From the kitchen he recognised the voice of the caller - the Reverend James Mortimer.

The vicar had come on a mission of solace. It was a valuable diversion, Coyle decided, as he made some coffee. He hoped that Mortimer would not refer to his presence at the communion service. The memory was distasteful to Coyle, because in his own mind he felt he had capitulated to everything he had opposed in the past. No longer could he claim openly to be an atheist. He had knelt and asked God for deliverance along with everybody else. Jane and Sarah probably despised him for it; and perhaps Mortimer thought he had won a long battle, and converted yet another to his fold. Coyle winced at the thought.

'Superintendent Rollason telephoned me.' Mortimer drank coffee even slower than he consumed tea, with constant stirrings, purely a habit because he did not take sugar. 'The authorities will keep the crowds out of the church tomorrow. Just for the service, of course. I want to leave it a family affair just for you. The population of this town are not interested in your grief.'

Jane and Sarah looked at Coyle. He dropped his gaze. There would be no reconciliation - that was obvious. Their last outward show of unity would be a bereavement. After that it was all over.

The vicar left an hour later. Sarah came back from seeing him out, kissed her mother briefly, ignored her father, and went upstairs to her room.

At ten o'clock Coyle suggested that they too go to bed. They would need every bit of rest they could get to prepare for the morrow. He was somewhat surprised when Jane followed him upstairs. They undressed. It was a sort of brother and sister affair as though both were being forced to use the same room. She turned away from him as she took her clothes off - unwilling even to allow him a brief glimpse of her naked breasts.

She was in bed before him, on the far side, facing the wall, her back towards him. He switched off the bedside light, and climbed in beside her. He could tell by her breathing that she was still awake, and he contemplated slipping an arm around her, one small gesture of comfort, perhaps understanding. He thought about it for a minute, decided against it, and turned over. Back to back. Their marriage was finished, all right, and he realised there was nothing he could do to save it. He told himself that he had no regrets.

Margaret Houston was surprised when, for the second evening in succession, her husband did not go out. A small flame of hope kindled inside her and she made a half-promise to herself to visit the hair-dressers's the following day.

Perhaps she could start a diet, too. Since her husband's affair began, she had let herself go, seeking solace in the company of the children, eating the foods she enjoyed most, heedless of calories. She had no intention of finding another man, even if David left her for good. Nobody could replace him.

She had seen Sarah Coyle about town. Attractive, a young body, but it could not be any more willing than her own. But now David had stayed at home for two evenings. Sullen, certainly, but that gave Margaret encouragement. The affair bore all the signs of having come to an end. Perhaps Sarah had found a younger lover - a real boyfriend. Margaret was determined to seize the opportunity. She would win David back again.

At least it was nice to go upstairs to bed together. He did not make love to her on the Sunday night, but she did not expect it. It would take time to get back together again.

Deep within him, David Houston smouldered with hatred. That stupid little bitch - all he had given her, too. That was all she had wanted from him. Her wardrobe was full, so was her jewellery box. That made her no better than a prostitute, as surely as if she solicited on the streets. Damn her, he was well rid of her, but his eager sexual appetite was already crying out for another woman. He could have taken Margaret, of course, but he dismissed the thought. Too easy. Too familiar. He craved for a woman who would excite him with unexpected techniques, one who would take the initiative. He knew a woman who would fill his purpose, though he had not visited her for six months. He had no doubts he would be welcome, but there was one serious snag: the military! The girl in question lived in Dumfries. And the fucking army was trapping him and his incessant lust in this bloody valley!

He thought a lot about it in bed on that Sunday night. At one stage he was almost tempted to pull his wife towards him and take her. On Monday his mind was made up. He formulated his plans carefully throughout the day. The pass was blocked; there was no chance there. There was a cordon around the moors beyond the surrounding mountains, but how effective was it? Probably soldiers stationed at intervals, crouched down in the springy heather for warmth during the cold nocturnal hours. They did not know the moors like David Houston did. The old sheep-track up to Comharrow Peak, treacherous if one was not familiar with the climb, a long crawl across the Manquhill Moor. Past the sentries; then less than half a mile to the road down to Moniaive. He would follow it, keeping to the edges, diving into the undergrowth at the approach of every vehicle. Three miles to Moniaive. He knew he could pick up a car there. Donald would lend him his; he would understand. The army wouldn't bother barricading the roads into Dumfries. They would be too concerned with patrolling the Solway shores, to prevent people leaving the country in small boats.

With luck he could be in Dumfries by eleven o'clock. In bed with this free-and-easy wench by midnight. And, of course, he would not be coming back. Nobody in their right mind would return to this valley of death, once they had escaped from it.

He left the house at nine o'clock on the Monday night. Margaret's hopes fell, but rose again when she realised he had not taken the car.

Once clear of the sprawling suburbs, David Houston moved stealthily. The moon would not be up for another couple of hours and by then it would not matter. His keen eyes quickly grew accustomed to the darkness, picking out any obstacles in his path. Several times he stumbled, catching his foot in an unseen rabbit hole. Then the ground began to rise, becoming steeper with every step. He was now on the narrow sheep-track leading up to Cornharrow Peak.

The most difficult part. Twenty yards or so, one slip . . . He tried to push from his mind that accident two or three years ago. A couple of hikers - both had gone over, the one who slipped grabbing at the other and taking him too. Houston held his breath. He felt the pounding of his heart; a brief spell of vertigo. Then the path widened, levelled out, and the springy heather of Manquhill Moor was beneath his feet.

He breathed a long sigh of relief. He needed a smoke, but it was too risky. All around him a black void. No need even to crawl. Just tread warily.

Jubilation! It had come off. He had beaten them. They were too busy turning back cars at the pass.

But he had overlooked one factor, a scientific innovation - infra-red lenses on telescopic rifle-sights! Realisation came to him in the vicious whine of an M1 Carbine bullet, passing a foot above his head. The sharp report followed a tenth of a second later.

He remained standing; the idea of flinging himself headlong into the heather never even occurred to him. He stood in total surprise as footsteps approached. One man, not even using a torch. Damn the fucking army!

'Stay where you are, mate. That one was intended to miss. The next won't!'

Just a vague shape, denser than the enveloping darkness. Houston did not move. The voice was young: just a kid, not too old to have his arse tanned. Except for that rifle. Houston wondered if there were others with him. Sure to be - but how close?

'Back the way you came, mate. And don't hang about!'

He could not think of a suitable reply - not even curses. He had made the attempt and failed. Now he had to go back.

'Move!'

The command had more than just a ring of authority about it. Power! After hours of boredom the soldier would probably delight in shooting again.

Houston contemplated the return trip along that eighteen-inch-wide sheep-track, with an almost sheer drop on the one side for almost twenty yards.

'Are you going, or ain't you?'

A metallic click. He turned slowly away. A finger rested on that trigger, all the more dangerous because it belonged to a raw recruit.

Margaret Houston did not speak as her husband came into the bedroom and began to undress, without switching on the light. He was earlier than usual, but he had been out tonight. Just when she thought that it was all over. She couldn't hold back the sobs as he slid into bed alongside her.

Tuesday. The church was cold, the primitive heating off. Too spacious for just four people. Three of them in the front pew: Coyle, Jane, and Sarah. The Reverend James Mortimer stood on the altar steps. His voice was low, and at times the three could not discern his words.

No tears; those had all been shed. Coyle felt the absence of a coffin made a mockery of it all. The two women wished the vicar would get it over quickly so

that they could return home. No longer did this place have an aura of a sanctuary. So much had changed since Sunday. It was more like a tomb. As was this whole valley - and the living just waiting to be buried. Balzur's curse was now a grim reality.

The minister's voice droned on. The clamouring of the crowd outside was louder now, penetrating the almost empty building. They resented the army cordoning them off from their God. Some were threatening to rush the line of soldiers.

Coyle sighed with frustration, and risked a surreptitious glance at his watch. No more than five minutes, surely. Then they could go, and the masses would fill the pews once more. They would not notice the cold as they huddled together, united in a common cause, prayer overshadowed by terror. A last plea for deliverance.

Outside the soldiers had unslung their rifles, a demonstration of military authority which the O.C. hoped would be sufficient. The bullets were no longer rubber.

'Let us through!'

'You can't keep us out of the church.'

'For God's sake, what next?'

A man had pushed his way through the milling crowd, his face white and strained. He wore an old-fashioned mackintosh reaching below his knees. He came to a halt barely five yards away from the muzzle of the nearest rifle. It was David Houston!

'Get back!'

'I'm a relative.'

'The service will be over in a few minutes.'

'Couldn't get through the crowds. Let me go in, just for the end. Please!'

The soldier glanced sideways at his commanding officer, the barrel of his rifle unwavering. The latter sighed, nodded reluctantly. Houston walked forward through the line of soldiers, hastening towards the rotting wooden porch of the church. They had not even asked for proof of his identity.

His nerve was almost at breaking point - sheer desperation, blind vengeance swamping all reason. Nothing else mattered; there was nothing else to live for. He clutched at something beneath the raincoat. It weighed the garment down on the one side, but nobody noticed.

Everything now depended upon the gun which bulged in Houston's pocket. His long dead father's favourite poaching weapon, a single-barrelled .410 folding shotgun. Less than three hours ago it had undergone a few improvisations - carried out with a hacksaw. The skeleton wire stock had been removed, leaving only the pistol-grip. The barrel had been reduced in length, cut down to five inches just above the chamber. The range and penetration had gone along with the choke. All that remained was a scatter-pistol, capable of inflicting a terrible wound if fired at close range. After a lengthy search, Houston had discovered a cartridge in the tool-box in the shed. The paper case was damp and swollen, and he had needed to force it into the breech. Yet the percussion cap was sound. It would ignite. Three-eighths of an ounce of No. 5 shot, destined for Sarah Coyle's head. Her features would be unrecognisable

afterwards. As for himself, he did not care. Everybody was under sentence of death, anyway. There would not be time left for a trial.

His tense fingers closed over the handle of the church door, but it refused to yield. He used his shoulder, restraining the panic which suddenly engulfed him. The bastards!

They had locked the door - determined to go through with their memorial service to that useless lout, uninterrupted.

Houston stood back, knowing he could not force an entrance. A hail of bullets would cut him down if he tried. Instead he listened. Above the shouting of the crowd he could hear the Reverend Mortimer's voice inside, a low monotone. 'May the blessing of God Almighty . . . Holy Ghost . . . now and always . . . ' followed by a halfhearted, almost inaudible 'Amen'.

The service was over. Houston shook his head, and retreated slowly down the gravelled path as far as the dilapidated gates hanging precariously on rusted hinges. His mac was undone, his right hand gripping the gun inside its spacious folds. They would have to pass this way.

'They took their time coming out, and the crowd in the street was becoming even more restless, only the rifles holding them at bay.

Then the door opened slowly. A gasp of relief from the surging watchers, two hundred or more. Mortimer first, a black cape over his white cassock. Jane, unseeing. Coyle, eyes on the ground. Sarah . . . she looked up and saw him.

Recognition and hate, but no fear. She had no suspicions, looking away in contempt. That was the moment when Houston's rage erupted. A red haze before his eyes as he saw her finely moulded, almost aristocratic features. His hate boiled, then was ice-cold in the same instant. The home-made pistol was aligned with the striking speed of a card-sharper's derringer. Three yards separated them. Ample. His finger tightened on the trigger. Nobody would ever look upon that face again!

A shot rang out, crisp and clear. Somebody screamed, continued to scream. Jane. Coyle was ashen-faced, rendered immobile by the suddenness of it all. The crowd fell silent, staring in stunned horror.

Jane stopped screaming. There was a faint mechanical sound, scarcely audible, as another shell replaced the spent one in the rifle held by the nearest soldier. His features revealed a bitterness towards life itself; death meant nothing to him. It was routine. A two-year posting in Belfast had made him that way. It had also taught him to shoot fast, accurately, and instinctively. You sensed trouble before it began, and it was the first shot that counted, determining who lived and who died. A wisp of smoke trickled upwards from the barrel of his rifle. He looked coldly at the body of the man in the raincoat lying less than ten yards away, the gaping bloody hole in the back of the head, the unfired .410 still clutched in the lifeless fingers.

Then Sarah began to sob. The crowd burst forward in one human tidal wave, the scene before them a minor diversion as they fought their way into the church.

Chapter 15

Tuesday night. Winston Dyne was still at his desk. He ate there, and snatched the odd half hour of troubled sleep slumped across the paper-strewn surface, leaving the room only to answer the most urgent calls of nature. He was afraid to leave the telephone - even more afraid when it jangled harshly. But it was the dreams which frightened him most: nightmares that vanished on waking, leaving instead a fear that he could not recall. Nevertheless, he was left with a feeling that something was dreadfully wrong . . . something he ought to know. Then came the headache, throbbing like a distant jungle drum. As he drew the back of his hand across his forehead, the fingers came away warm and damp. His vision, too, was affected, as though he was standing across the room watching his own feeble actions. As though . . . he no longer had full control of himself! His head dropped forward, his eyelids heavy -fighting to keep awake in case the dreams came back.

At 8.35 p.m. he was suddenly aware that he was wide awake again, with a feeling almost of being totally refreshed. Perhaps he had reached his tiredness peak and surpassed it. He would not need to rest again for another few hours.

He picked up some reports, and began to browse through them. Old ones; like newsreels of past events.

This disaster had been forecast a couple of years ago, but not on this scale. Nobody, not even the most sensation-seeking reporter, had envisaged the whole of Britain's nuclear reprocessing being carried out in one unit. They warned of the mere possibility of people dying by tens of thousands in an area stretching six miles downwind of any particular reactor. Mentally Dyne tried to multiply those figures to fit the current threat. Soon he gave up - mostly because it hurt his conscience - and read on. For apart from the immediate danger zone there could be a toll of human life for as much as one hundred and twenty miles downwind. Thousands more would die, mostly from cancer, during the following decades. One report stated that a radius of sixty miles from the exploded reactor would need to be kept clear of human habitation for a couple of years. But at that period the true extent of contamination and its lasting effect was unknown. Nowadays they knew that in fact the radioactivity would last for up to a quarter of a million years. He shuddered at the ignorance of his predecessors, and continued reading, as though some strange compulsion had him in its hold. Somebody had even believed that in calm weather there would possibly be no casualties outside the reactor complex.

The report concluded that 'This postulated combination of circumstances, itself very unlikely, combined with the severe and extremely unlikely accident to the reactor, would cause several thousand deaths within a few weeks of the accident'. Dyne wondered whose the italics were. Somebody trying to play it down? He wished he had him here now, sitting at this very desk. He would have put him on a direct line to Canverdale. 'Convince the rioters, mate. Restore the country to a normality until Saturday - or else come up with a solution.'

Still more reports - sheets of them. Mostly about a plan to turn marshland into radioactive dumps. There were fears that thousands of acres of land surrounding Rainham Marshes in Essex could be rendered sterile as a result. All that had been solved by making one huge dump here, in this valley! What had Coyle called it? 'Holocaust.' The ruddy man hadn't been far wrong.

There was one further note that future contracts were likely to include an option to return high-activity material - once it had undergone the new 'harvest process', of course - to the country of origin. That, most certainly, was out of the question now. He wondered how the recycling was going. His was the worst job of all, being chained to this desk, helpless. God, if only they could find some way of speeding up the process: bury it all in that bed of granite, a thousand feet below ground, before danger level was reached. That would be just one problem solved. Even then they would still be left with what resembled a giant pyramid filled with radioactivity. Tyler and his fellow boffins were working on a new process for solidifying it; then it, too, could go down into that granite grave with all the rest. Untried, of course. Everything here was untried, experimental. There had been outcries over reactors throughout the country, so they had picked on one remote valley, and now they had something a million times worse. This was the Plutonium Society, indeed.

He folded up all the reports and dropped them back into the file. He referred to it as the 'dead file' - the understatement of the century.

Just then the telephone rang. Dyne recognised Tyler's voice at once. The gravity of the other's tone warned him to expect the worst. They had tolerated the usual one-degree daily rise. It was too much to hope for even a steadying - certainly not a drop, until the new solidifying system was tried.

'Two degrees,' Tyler said.

Dyne sighed as he replaced the receiver. Doomsday was one day nearer - Friday!

He phoned Canverdale at once.

When he replaced the receiver for the second time, that earlier sensation of drowsiness crept back over him. Only this time it was different, a kind of numbing of his brain, a slowing down of his movements. And something else . . . a strange sort of smug satisfaction that brought a slow smile to his thick lips, freezing them into a grimace like a child's halloween mask.

There was not even shock when full realisation filtered through to him, just sitting there at his desk with that same glib expression . . . knowing that which he had failed to recognise earlier. And he remembered the dreams, too. Understood them!

Winston Dyne laughed softly, a harsh sound like the croaking of a distant raven. He knew why Section Eight was going to explode in a very short time. Only he could stop the imminent holocaust. But he wasn't going to!

At 10.30 p.m, Canverdale again spoke to the nation, this time from his secret headquarters in Hertfordshire. His speech was the frankest he had ever made in his whole political career. He did not, however, confess to the people about his former omission concerning the advance of D-Day from Monday to Friday. He simply stated that because of an increased rate of escaping radioactivity - assuring them at the same time that it was being contained - Friday would be crisis day. His cabinet would meet tomorrow, and on Thursday night a decision would be announced.

'Obviously,' he concluded, 'this radioactivity will not be released into the environment until the last possible moment when it is absolutely clear that an explosion is inevitable - the like of which cannot be comprehended by mankind. It has been pointed out to me that, in the event of this holocaust, the radioactivity will enter the atmosphere, anyway. The margin hi deciding

between the lesser of the two evils is minute. Sanity must prevail. Every one of us clings to the hope that the structure in which the vapour is at present contained can withstand the pressure, perhaps even beyond the limit our scientists have imposed upon it. Work is continuing ceaselessly in an attempt to deal with the remaining nuclear waste and thus reduce the rate of escape. It is a fight against time, a battle which can only be fought by a limited number of men within Section Eight.

Tomorrow night I shall disclose the locations of nuclear shelters situated in or near major cities. Unfortunately, these places can only accommodate a small percentage of the population. The Ministry of Environment will issue instructions about the most suitable evasive action for the less fortunate to take. I beseech you - every single one of you - to remain calm, for only in this way can we avert the most terrible disaster in the history of mankind. Mass hysteria will only hamper our efforts - and has already resulted in an alarming death-toll.'

Once his address had been delivered, Canverdale felt somewhat easier. Of course releasing the radioactivity would be preferable to an explosion. And if the rate of escape was consistent, the problem would be much easier. Yet, twice the gauge had risen alarmingly and unexpectedly. The reactor could go up at any minute - even before he had finished smoking this very cigarette. He wondered if they would make it to Friday.

The phones rang incessantly, five secretaries taking the calls, and bringing him only the most urgent messages throughout the night. Rioting everywhere - an infection now spreading to all corners of the globe.

Scotland had made panic-stricken attempts to evacuate itself. 'Flee south' was the cry that resulted in a twenty-mile tail-back of traffic over Shap; and on all other routes vehicles soon came to a total stand-still. There was no longer any regard for the highway code. A small minority drove north - the ghouls who head for any major disaster in quest of horrific spectacular. This accounted for several head-on collisions, major accidents which blocked roads completely. Vehicles were abandoned, and their occupants set off on foot over fields and hills, trudging for miles along fast-flowing rivers in search of a shallow crossing place. Some were drowned. Whole families, totally exhausted, slept out in the open with not even a blanket to cover them. Many died during this pilgrimage of terror. Towns were looted, battles raging between those fleeing from the north, and southern residents who were determined to protect their property at all costs. Fires raged unchecked.

Wednesday, 3.30 a.m. Canverdale received an offer from the Kremlin. Fleets of airliners would be sent in the following day to evacuate as many people as possible. Soviet troops would repel rioters at every airfield. Canverdale rejected this offer with dignity, but was curtly advised that the rescue bid would still take place. It was not a promise, but a threat - and, under present circumstances, it would be difficult to interpret as an act of war. The cunning of the Soviet bear knew no limits.

The Prime Minister consulted three of his leading ministers immediately by telephone, and then called Washington. It took him less than ten minutes to locate the President of the United States.

At 7.30 a.m. the White House contacted the Kremlin, tactfully at first, voluntarily offering to take over the rescue bid. The offer was abruptly refused. America then sternly warned the USSR to desist from their scheme. At 10.a.m. the President of the USA telephoned Canverdale.

The Prime Minister's hands were visibly shaking as he addressed the crisis

Cabinet Meeting half an hour later.

'Gentlemen,' he began, his voice disclosing the weariness now threatening to engulf him. 'We have another Cuba situation on our hands, and we are absolutely powerless to intervene in any way. We are the meat in the sandwich for a Third World War. I can offer neither suggestions nor a solution. One way or another, Britain is finished. Perhaps it would be best, after all, if Section Eight exploded!'

In his hotel bedroom, Kent listened to Canverdale's broadcast on the transistor radio. Eventually he switched off, intending to retire to bed. Then he had a change of mind which surprised even himself. Instead of donning his pyjamas, he put on his three-quarter-length sheepskin coat, walked downstairs and outside to his parked Mercedes.

Every action was slow, with none of his usual decisiveness, even the way he drove, almost as though he was unsure of himself, even of his destination - a man who had finally lost hope and run out of ideas.

The streets were crowded, and twice he had to pull up to avoid a bunch of pedestrians idling in the middle of the road. Gatherings, some small, some large, some quiet, others noisy. Everybody had heard the broadcast. Perhaps, like himself, they were trying to reach a decision, desperately seeking a way to escape death.

As the Mercedes nosed its way through the Square he slowed momentarily, taking in the scene before him. Several hundred townspeople packed the cobbled area. A man had climbed on to the pedestal of Burns's statue to address them. He was a volatile speaker, fists clenched, gesticulating wildly, frequently pointing back towards the north end of the valley. Constant cheers drowned his words. A continual oration - an incitement! Kent knew only too well that before long this ugly throng, joined by countless others, would be marching on the nuclear station. David versus Goliath, only this time no well-aimed stone would win the battle. It was lost before it had even begun.

He took the left-hand road, accelerating once he was clear of the crowds, the sound of their voices growing fainter. Now the side-streets were deserted. Once again indecision caused him to ease up on the throttle. It would be so much simpler to turn around and head back to the hotel. But there are times when even a loner needs company. So he kept on driving.

He saw Coyle's house at the end of the road - an ordinary semi-detached suburban dwelling. He slowed to a crawl, almost prepared to pass it by and carry on elsewhere, maybe for a drink in a bar. The garage doors were wide open, and there was no sign of the Avenger. But a light showed in one of the front downstairs rooms.

A last moment of hesitation, then he pulled the Mercedes into the drive, switching off the engine and lights. Previous doubts were now replaced by an unaccustomed nervousness. Of what? After all, he only sought company. He had been a man alone too long. He had half expected to find Coyle at home, particularly after today's events. But evidently the Herald's proprietor had gone to visit Anne.

Kent pulled the pipe from his pocket. Its bowl was still full of half-smoked tobacco. He lit it and drew deeply, savouring the flavour of the tobacco in his lungs. At last he rang the bell.

A long wait. Perhaps there was nobody there. Then he could go back to his hotel, satisfied that it was not he who had backed down. It was stupid, but he

just needed somebody to talk to. About what? Anything except . . . Nervousness again. He couldn't even pretend that he was looking for Coyle. The absence of the Avenger made it clear that Coyle was not at home. Another thing, it was no time to call upon a bereaved family . . .

Then he heard footsteps in the hall, the click of the lock, and Jane stood there, looking at him. Surprise filtered through her grief. One hand rested on the door handle; the other sought the support of the lintel.

'I'm sorry.' Kent thought that his voice sounded distant, like a trans-Atlantic telephone call, barely audible. 'I . . . '

'Come in.' She held the door wide, indicating him to enter the living-room. 'Slip your coat off. I was just about to make some coffee.'

Half an hour passed. Two empty cups. Two people who needed company, but spoke little. Kent still had not told her why he had come. Nor had she asked.

'Sarah's in bed.' It was as though she suddenly felt the need to talk, had forced herself to break the barrier of silence. 'I called the doctor. It didn't really hit her until later . . . a terrible experience for any girl.' No mention of Coyle.

They lapsed into an uneasy silence. There was so much they did not want to discuss. Kent realised just how poor he was as a conversationalist. A man of many words in print, but when it came to situations like this . . . He was paying the penalty for being a loner - unsociable by nature.

He glanced up at the clock on the mantle shelf. God, he'd been here an hour already, and so much remained unsaid. What was there to say?

At last it was Jane who broke the lingering silence, the uneasy tension which existed between them. It was she who put into words everything he had thought about since leaving the hotel.

'What's it like being alone, Kent?' She smiled faintly, a hint of sadness in her eyes that was noticeably distinct from her previous smouldering grief. 'I mean, really alone. No ties. Nobody depending on you . . . '

'It has its advantages,' he spoke slowly, staring at the glowing electric bars, then raising his eyes to meet hers. 'But sometimes it can be hell. You brood over things, bottle problems up inside . . . '

'That's why you came here tonight.'

He nodded slowly. Partially the truth, maybe. Even he was not sure now why he had come.

'Kent.' She hesitated, as though struggling to choose her words carefully, maybe fearful of offending him. 'Do . . . do you ever miss not having a woman? I mean, a regular woman.'

He gave a deep sigh. She had asked the question he most wanted her to ask. Also the one he feared. Kent of Fleet Street, the man who interviewed politicians, personalities, and tricked them into revealing facts they desperately sought to withhold. Now everything was in reverse. He knew now how it felt to be on the receiving end.

'It's hell sometimes.' A confessional mood was on him now. 'I know a lot of women in London. I can always have one when I need one. Not prostitutes. Women

who just need a man the same way I need them. Call it lust if you like. Something just physical. But afterwards you feel a thousand times worse. Loneliness is made so much more apparent to you. So you work it off, work like hell. Try and forget it. But sooner or later you have to go in search of another woman. Sex is like a curse then. You wish you could do without it, but you can't, and you know it.'

'I know.' She leaned back in her chair and the movement brought a faint stirring in his loins. He wanted to fight it off. Hell, her husband was his best friend. She had just lost a son. Her daughter was asleep upstairs under sedation.

'Kent.' Her voice was more decisive now, her eyes meeting his. 'I know precisely how you feel. That's exactly the position I'm in now.'

'But you have a husband . . . ' He felt he had to make some kind of token resistance.

'I don't have a husband . . . ' She sat up again, leaning towards him. 'He's gone. He won't come back. He's hi love with that girl. I can only supply him with his physical needs. As you just said, it isn't enough. Tonight, after I'd given Sarah her sleeping tablets, I sat with the pill bottle in my hand for a long time. The way out would have been so easy. Richard's gone. So is Bob. It was only the thought of Sarah that prevented me from taking all those tablets myself. She needs me. I'd only just made the decision to carry on with life, see it through to the end . . . Then you arrived. God, I was glad to see you!'

She stood up, seeming to tower above him. He noted the fullness of her bosom, the sum hips, legs, ankles. He preferred her to Anne in every way, although he would not have admitted it. Every man has his own particular fancy; Kent certainly had his right now.

'Kent,' she moved a step nearer. 'Would you stop here with me tonight?'

He nodded, smiling, watching in a daze as she switched off the fire. He stood up and followed her out of the room, then up the narrow staircase, following every movement of her buttocks just ahead of him.

The bed looked the most comfortable and inviting thing he had ever seen.

Even now she was starting to undress. By the time he had removed his shirt and tie she was naked beneath the sheets, waiting for him.

It was silly to turn off the light, he told himself, but somehow he had to make it different from all his previous relationships. This was not just another physical encounter. Jane really wanted him. He hoped that he would not disappoint her. She was groping for him even as he crawled in beside her.

Section Eight exploded shortly after midnight!

Coyle was aware of the time because, even as the walls of the office came in at him, the huge fireball which lit the sky showed up the face of the cheap alarm clock on the desk. Doomtime - 12.07a.m.!

In that split second he was forcing his numbed, sleep-bemused mind to work. Heedless of his own safety, he flung himself across the sleeping bag as a human shield to protect Anne.

Then came the awful shock, a terror that divorced him from the holocaust all around. His body hit the limp quilt with jarring force. It was empty. Anne was gone!

There was flying debris everywhere; cascading brickwork showered all around him, yet miraculously left him unscathed. Thick choking dust, glowing orange like hazy sunlight, was filtering through the grimy window pane. Heat scorched his naked flesh, withering it on his body. But he ignored the pain, scrambling over piles of rubble, clawing at it frantically, trying to shout Anne's name - but no words came out, not even a hoarse whisper. He was outside in the open - though, to be precise, there was no longer any indoors or outdoors. A fiery sky lit up the whole scene, revealing the entire length of the valley, a flattened landscape over which the towering mountains were starting to avalanche, with mighty rock falls that slid and bounced slowly and silently. And everywhere there was total silence, because Bob Coyle could no longer hear. He was reduced to a panic-stricken human robot that staggered haphazardly, tearing at immovable heaps of rubble, crying inwardly because his tears were dried by the heat as soon as they began.

Alone! Where was everyone else? Oh God, why could he not have died along with everybody else? Yes, he wanted to be dead - to be with Anne.

Fires were erupting everywhere, small blazes starting up and spreading, the hot wind fanning their flames to an inferno. Flashes of reason came to him. Anne must have crept out soon after he'd fallen asleep. But why? Perhaps she'd crossed the yard to the toilet. He looked around, trying to shield his smarting eyes from the glare and the smoke. Everywhere was totally unrecognisable; he didn't even know where the office had stood, or if he was in the right street. Total destruction, just as they had forecast - the last and greatest holocaust of all!

Still wandering, searching. His brain couldn't cope with the situation much longer. Maybe he was shouting, maybe he wasn't. Inside he still cried.

Once he paused to glance down at his own tortured body - just a mass of blisters that wept thick matter like melted syrup, hands and feet that no longer bled because the thick ooze stemmed the blood flowing from the abrasions. Hairless, a walking festering cinder. Still searching although he'd given up hope.

Then he saw the man! Coyle stood staring, scraping at his eyes in an attempt to make the mirage go away. A thing in human shape that stood atop a blazing pyre, seemingly unharmed by the crackling flames. It was clothed in ragged garments that neither burned nor shrivelled, its revolting flesh clearly visible through the tatters. Its head had a sparse covering of hair, and seemed too large for the frail body on which it rested. Its eyes picked him out of the smoke, and forced Bob Coyle to meet a gaze that blazed with contempt and hatred, that had him shivering in spite of the terrible heat. The lips moved over a toothless cavity of a mouth.

'I, Balzur, have returned to witness the fruits of my curse, sent here by Pluto who will soon come to rule over this fiery hell. You, wretch, are the last survivor of those who tried to destroy me in vain. You live only because I decreed it. And your sufferings are only just beginning. For you will experience the eternal fire, Witchfinder. Yea, you are of his blood-line, and so you shall suffer the agonies of hell. . . '

Coyle wanted to shrink away but he could not move. It was as though every muscle in his body had melted, condemning him to remain watching, with eyes that burned in their sockets. Seeing, understanding, and . . . oh, God, suddenly he understood!

His terror came in shuddering waves with the realisation of what he saw before him. For now he recognised the face before him, reflected in this weird unearthly glow; features he had seen in those recent nightmares but had been snatched from his memory on waking. Balzur, the wizard of old Craighlowrie, had come back to walk amongst them in human form, and he, Coyle had been blind to it. And now he knew when it was too late . . . knew that Balzur had returned in the person of Winston Dyne.

Insane mocking laughter, inflicting the last wounds on a tortured soul. Too late! You realise too late. And you shall suffer for eternity, Witchfinder!

Everything was starting to go black for Coyle. A cooling wave of unconsciousness was coming out of the fires to calm him, and he wasn't going to fight against it. Rage and disbelief appeared on those centuries-old features as Balzur saw what was happening. Now it was Coyle's turn to mock, screaming incomprehensible insults with blistered lips that somehow found they could move. Crying real tears that were wet again. Screaming because of Anne. Writhing on a welcoming bed of cinders. Trying to fight off hands that gripped rum.

Then suddenly Coyle was back in a world of cool darkness; the familiar office with walls and ceiling intact; his naked flesh unscathed. Still struggling, trying to control his confused brain. But it was not the talon-like fingers of Balzur which brought him back to consciousness. Instead the hands were soft and sensuous; there was a heady aroma of musk where previously he had smelled only acrid burning.

Anne!

'Bob . . . snap out of it!' She shook him again, less urgently now that his eyes were open. 'You've had a nightmare. A bad one.'

He nodded, choking with sheer relief, crying now for a different reason. Yes, it had been a bad one, the worst ever. Only this time it was different; he remembered those evil features and knew to whom they belonged.

'I'll make some coffee.'

'Sure.' He managed a smile and hoisted himself to his feet. 'You do that, darling. But first I've got to ring Kent. Try to make him believe me.'

'Pull yourself together!' There was a sudden flicker of fear on her face - fear that the enormity of his nightmare had disturbed his reasoning. 'You can't go fetching Kent out in the night just because of a bad dream.'

'Don't worry, I'm not going round the bend.' He forced another smile. 'Something that's been eluding me these past nights. The dreams, a face . . .'

now I know that Balzur has come back, that he's been amongst us for some time ... a reincarnation maybe, or some inexplicable evil psychic force that's taken over a human body and soul. Balzur is now Winston Dyne, Head of Oxide Reprocessing!'

Life appeared to be full of totally new experiences for Kent at present. Yet another assailed him on arrival at the Herald premises the following morning. Guilt! It was crazy. The neatly folded sleeping-bags in Coyle's tiny office served as a tiny sop to his conscience, but all the same, he knew he would have to tell Coyle, and the sooner he got it over with, the better.

'By the way.' Kent was grateful that he did not gulp or stammer when the words came out. T stayed at your place overnight.'

Coyle regarded him slowly. Surprise, but certainly no resentment. A moment's silence. He, too, was searching for the right words.

'Thanks,' he smiled. 'Thanks for telling me, Kent. I guess it took a lot of guts. And thanks for what you did. I hope it was . . . successful.'

'Mutually.' Kent's relief was evident. T have an invitation to return there tonight if . . . '

'Please do.' Coyle experienced a sudden unburdening of responsibilities which he knew he had previously shirked. It made him feel a lot easier. 'How's Sarah?'

'Still asleep when I came out. She'll be OK.'

Their conversation was drowned by the drone of a low-flying helicopter. They listened to its progress, the noise fading slightly, then shutting off altogether.

'Sounds like it's landed at the nuclear station,' Coyle's eyebrows were raised. No helicopter had entered the valley, not even a military air patrol, since the army had moved in,

'Must be somebody visiting Dyne and his friends,' Kent suggested. 'Some VIP come to see for himself. Judging from the mass meetings in town last night it won't be long before the crowds try to storm the station.'

'Suicidal.'

'Everything's suicidal these days.'

'By the way.' Coyle felt suddenly foolish. Everything seemed so different, so realistic since dawn had blended into full daylight and swept away the nocturnal terrors. 'Something silly, but . . . well, you know my feelings concerning the ancient curse. Maybe you'll think my mind's snapped under the pressure, but I believe Balzur has come back somehow . . . in the person of Winston Dyne!'

Kent pursed his lips, then he nodded slowly. 'I've come across stranger things. When I was out in Uganda doing some stories on Amin's atrocities, I met up with things that I didn't dare write about for fear I'd be laughed out of Fleet Street. Come on, Bob, let's hear your theory.'

Briefly Coyle related the dream, and when he had finished, Kent was silent, stuffing tobacco into the bowl of his pipe. His rugged features were grim.

'It's up to us to stop him,' he spoke in matter-of-fact tones. 'You and me, Bob. As simple as that. It's no good trying to convince anybody else; there isn't time anyway. But we'll have to play our cards carefully because we won't get a second chance. My guess is the devil will invite us up there again today, another load of PR shit. Then we'll have to play it by ear.'

It was 1.30p.m. The three of them had eaten sandwiches in the office rather than go into town, where the storm-clouds of rioting were gathering. Shouting and chanting reached their ears, and they guessed that the Square was packed to capacity. Kent wondered just how long it would be before the storm finally broke. Not just yet, he hoped, because he needed time.

At 1.40 p.m. Dyne telephoned. Kent and Coyle were both invited to attend a crisis meeting at the reprocessing centre in an hour's time. Dyne sounded harassed. Carefully chosen words, too, as though there were others in his office, men of higher authority than himself.

'We'll be there,' Coyle replied, replacing the receiver.

'A gathering of chieftains,' Kent muttered. 'We'll be right in the heart of the action. I guess my name will be mud in the Cheshire Cheese - if I ever get back to Fleet Street. But this is it, Bob. Our big chance. Let's hope we don't fall down on it!'

They travelled in the Mercedes. Passing through the initial checkpoint was a mere formality, but Coyle was surprised to note that the guard in the outer sentry-box was Loader himself. Why had the Atomic Energy Authority's private police chief taken such a menial task upon himself? Certainly not because of a shortage of security forces, Army reinforcements were also in evidence, and obviously the military now considered defence of the nuclear station of greater importance than attempting to quell the unrest in the town itself.

'Funny about Loader being there,' Coyle mused as they drove slowly towards the second checkpoint.

'Perhaps he needed some fresh air,' Kent dismissed the affair as one of minor importance. He had briefly summed up the man during the inspection of their green pass-cards. Mean, with a killer instinct - shoot first and ask questions later.

The routine guard had been no less surprised when Loader had suddenly transferred him to duties within the compound. There had to be a reason, but he wasn't paid to think - just obey.

The usual escort down the maze of corridors, this time into the core of the main building. They took an elevator, and alighted at the fourth floor. Then into a small room with three walls of floor-to-ceiling windows. The whole extent of 'Holocaust' lay spread out below them - the 'pyramid trap' towering like a monument to death and destruction. Section Eight - the bomb that could wipe out civilisation!

Tyler gave them a nod, but there was no sign of Winston Dyne. It was strange, indeed, that the big man himself was missing. A couple of vacant chairs were placed in readiness for them. A dozen other men occupied seats at the long table. Kent recognised Canverdale at once. Also, Stafford and some resident boffins. There were three others who looked like governmental men, probably Canverdale's private staff. AEA police were noticeable by their absence. This was no press conference, so no trouble was envisaged.

Canverdale spoke first. A brief summary of recent events. The USSR airliners

would be landing at all major airports tomorrow afternoon. He fully believed that they had no intention of taking off again. In other words, it was an advance invasion force. Parachutists would drop into the valley, with a rearguard to back them up on Manquhill Moor. The USAF intended to beat them to it. There could only be one outcome. Tonight the nation would be told. He, Canverdale, would broadcast from this very room at 8p.m.

Coyle and Kent looked grimly at each other. They had never envisaged such a turn of events - not at such short notice, anyway. But time was running out for everybody. It really made very little difference to the British, anyway. The rest of the world would suffer in due course. Both men spared a thought for their women. Just one more night . . .

Tyler was on his feet the moment Canverdale sat down. The representative of Britain's Hazardous Materials Group produced a sheaf of blueprints from a manilla folder, and spread them out on the table before him. Complicated diagrams and figures meaningless to almost everyone else in that room.

Tyler had not slept in forty-eight hours. Twice he swayed slightly on his feet, gripping the table for support. Two whole days of rapid calculations - the early stages proved, the latter still theory. Three floors below, in one of the many laboratories, skilled technicians were working frenziedly on a copy of these final plans. Constructing two radioactive solidifying instruments, no larger in size than the average chest-style deep-freeze.

'The Solidifiers will be completed within two hours, gentlemen.' A note of triumph penetrated the weariness of his normally slow semi-American drawl. 'We cannot afford to wait a second longer than completion. These must be put into operation right away, even whilst reprocessing and waste disposal is being carried out in Section Eight.'

'But there have been no experiments.' Stafford interrupted. 'The machines might not work.'

'In which case we shall be no worse off than we are at this very moment,' Tyler snapped irritably. 'Our only hope of checking the rise in radioactivity is to solidify it and dispose of it as it escapes. I myself will join a team of three men - wearing the same protective clothing as the labour force. We hope to commence work at 5.p.m. We shall not know the results for twelve hours. I would advise you, Prime Minister, to delay your broadcast for a few more hours. We are playing our last card, win or lose. Let's hope that it's an ace . . .'

An internal telephone buzzed, interrupting him. Stafford answered it.

'Thank you.' He replaced the receiver, and mustered all the dignity which his state of exhaustion would allow. 'A report from Section Eight. The pressure gauge has jumped a further two degrees. Tomorrow, gentlemen, is D-Day! It could even be sooner if there's another rise!'

Canverdale gasped inwardly. 'My broadcast must go ahead as previously scheduled,' he said. 'May God grant you success, Mr Tyler.'

Tyler nodded, folded his blueprints, and hurried from the room. His men would be spurred to even greater efforts.

'You may remain here if you wish, gentlemen,' Stafford addressed the journalists, knowing full well that they would. 'We have canteen facilities should you require them.'

'One thing.' Kent was on his feet. 'Where's Dyne?'

Stafford seemed taken aback by the suddenness of the question, or the lack of respect shown for his chief by this upstart journalist. When he replied there was a note of reprimand in his voice. 'Mr Dyne is temporarily confined to his quarters. A migraine headache brought on by long hours without sleep. A short rest and doubtless he will be back in charge.'

Kent glanced down at Coyle and both of them knew the time of the apocalypse was speeding up. Unless something drastic happened quickly, tomorrow would never dawn. Somehow they had to locate Winston Dyne.

At 5.25 p.m. Tyler and his assistants wheeled their bulky radioactivity-solidifying machines into the pyramid of death which was officially known as Section Eight. The immediate fate of a nation rested upon their shoulders, but their protective headgear hid their individual expressions.

At 6.30 p.m. a column of angry, frightened people marched out of the Square in the old town, heading north. The few remaining soldiers watched from a distance. At the moment it was little more than a demonstration, with home-made banners and painted slogans held aloft. Yet, beneath this semi-orderliness fear and anger seethed. Soon it would come to the boil, and sheer terror would destroy all reason.

Loader was the first to hear the shouts of the advancing columns, possibly because his ears were tuned in anticipation. He wanted them to come. Christ, how he wanted that mob to show up!

The inbred killer instinct in Loader dominated his every action. He recalled the Special Powers Act. Now a State of Emergency reigned throughout the country. He could do just anything he wanted in the interests of the security of the reactor. They would back him up. That was why he had this job. Because he was the best there was - totally ruthless, and an obedient servant to authority ... so long as it suited him.

He had even resented the arrival of the army within the Centre - took it as a personal insult. He didn't need them. Nobody got into the compound, unless it suited him personally. Now he had to prove it to them.

He wished he could fry every one of the bastards now headed this way, one at a time. He'd stop 'em, all right. He'd stop the riot before the fucking army even knew it had begun.

Nearer. Louder. The shouting more frenzied with every passing second.

Now he could see them, even more than he had anticipated. Five hundred at a rough estimation - with banners and sticks - mostly just yelling abuse. Terrified, every single one of them, and not even a shotgun amongst them.

Loader remained inside the shelter. He eased the heavy .45 automatic pistol out of its leather holster. The very feel of it sent the blood coursing through his veins. It was fully loaded, and there was a spare clip in his left hand. He eased the safety-catch forward, his narrowed eyes measuring the marchers' progress - the range. Two hundred yards . . . , one hundred and fifty . . . one hundred . . . fifty.

He stepped out into the open, pistol dangling almost casually in his right hand, nostrils flared, lips compressed into a narrow bloodless line, feet slightly apart. Timing, stance, all perfect. One against five hundred. The

kind of odds he liked.

Thirty yards.

'Hold it! Stay where you are!'

It was doubtful whether his voice was heard above the clamour.

Twenty yards; they saw him now and they weren't stopping for anybody!

'Get out of our way, you fucking bastard!'

The very words he wanted to hear. A half crouch, a blur of movement, his whole body perfectly co-ordinated, the shots so close together that they might have come from a machine-gun. With every one he picked a target, moving from one to another instinctively. The speaker from the statue in the Square, went down first. Two more - ex-workers, men laid off only the other day, when only a small highly-skilled labour force had been retained on Section Eight. A woman, stupid bitch. Four more, yobbos.

There was screaming, chaos - the marchers tripping over each other as they fell back in total disarray.

The brief pause Loader needed. Again his hands moved fast, efficiently. The spare clip. The .45 aligned. This time he was going to fire from the hip, show those watching from behind him that all that marksmanship training, two-handed pistol shooting, the left used as a support, was a load of nonsense. Loader just needed a gun, nothing else.

A single shot rang out, the report heavier this time. Loader straightened up, swaying uncertainly, the M1 Carbine bullet entering his body between the shoulder-blades, passing out through the chest, and then smashing the skull of one of the fleeing mob - a young girl, no more than fifteen, bowling her over and over until she came to a stop in a bloody heap of pulped flesh and bone.

The .45 slipped from Loader's fingers as he fell. He dropped to his knees, slumped forward. Somehow he managed to roll over on to his back, a mammoth effort. Numbness rather than pain. He could not understand it. He'd beaten them. They were running, scattering, yelling their curses back as they fled. And yet ...

Loader tried to raise his head; it was impossible. He could not move. He did not need to. He could see it all from where he lay. A rifle barrel still protruded through the slit in the box on the upper platform, the barrel smoking. It was where Barraclough was stationed.

You fucker! Loader couldn't speak. He was choking, drowning in his own blood. And nobody came out to him.

Tyler and his colleagues laboured tirelessly inside Section Eight. The labourers sweated beneath their heavy protective clothing, in a scene like the bizarre setting for some science-fiction film.

Tyler glanced continually from his watch to the pressure gauge. Both seemed to stand still. It was mental torture. It would be several hours before they knew, one way or the other. The solidifiers needed a full twelve hours' trial to prove or disprove their worth. Any impatient attempt to open them up to ascertain their current efficiency might result in a total breakdown, which could not be rectified in time.

All they could do was wait.

Chapter 17

Canverdale's broadcast from Scotland - on radio only - was a bit of a non-event. By now the British people were resigned to their fate. The threat of a third world war, horrific in all its aspects, did not cause undue sensation. By then the holocaust would have exploded with full force. As for the Russian airliners, supposedly attempting to carry out a rescue operation on the morrow - most of the population would be hiding in every conceivable place of shelter. The airports would be deserted.

Canverdale did not mention the current attempts to solidify the escaping radioactivity. This was no time to raise a nation's hopes, and then possibly dash them a few hours later.

The worst of the rioting had subsided. No longer did crowds surge through city streets bent on blind destruction. There was still some fighting, of course, but mostly amongst groups competing for places which might conceivably offer some protection. All official nuclear shelters were already filled - the living awaiting the end in their mass graves.

London's Undergrounds were crowded. All trains had ceased to run, and the electric currents had been switched off. The ventilation shafts had not yet been closed; the authorities would leave that until the very last moment. To do so now would certainly condemn many to death by suffocation.

And in the valley itself there was an uneasy calm. Those who had attempted to demonstrate outside the nuclear station had now retreated dejectedly to their homes to await the end. The sudden burst of gunfire had shocked them into reality again. Fourteen dead: nine killed by the gunfire, five trampled in the stampede to get away from it all. Many others injured.

Chief Superintendent Rollason sat at his desk, an ashtray heaped with cigarette ends in front of him, another of his favourite brand smouldering between his lips. Occasionally he was forced to remove it during a bout of coughing. He had had that cough for years; lately it had become much worse. He wondered why he had never given so much as a passing thought to cancer before, but did so now. Perhaps because he realised that now millions would probably die from the disease. Ironic! He wished somebody would phone him. Anybody. It was the quietest night he had known for years. He wished to God that one of his men would bring in a drunk, just to relieve the monotony. Every officer was out in the town on some duty or other. But there were no reports. Nothing. Fear had turned into boredom, and that in turn brought a new kind of terror - just waiting for the end.

Dyne's headache did not lessen any, in spite of the darkness and the tranquillity of his private quarters. Rather it increased to alarming proportions, the pounding seemed to reverberate right down to his chest. This

frightened him; his father had died from a sudden angina attack. Experts said that heart trouble was hereditary. Alone here in the dark he experienced a trapped feeling, a need for the company of the others - something he had never felt before. Maybe he should go down to the compound below, and get some fresh air.

He had difficulty in walking, staggering from side to side to the deserted corridor. He could barely see, his vision tunnelled, everywhere dark as though with the approach of dusk. But that was ridiculous - the centre was always fully lit, night and day.

He finally located the elevator and experienced dizziness as it plunged downwards, coming to a gentle halt which threw him from one wall to the other. Christ, his eyes hurt. Nobody about, either, not even a guard on the main doors. Probably everybody was congregated around Section Eight, the focal point of the whole world at this very moment.

The wind met him with an icy gust as he pushed his way out through the swing-doors. He shivered; he should have brought a top coat, but he wasn't going back inside. Jesus, no. Out here he felt a kind of freedom, an urge to run blindly, to put as much distance between himself and Craighlowrie as possible. But no, he had to remain - go up with the rest of them if the reactor exploded. Maybe ten minutes out here would do the trick. Already his headache seemed to have lessened, but there was definitely something wrong with his vision.

He glanced back and felt a mounting terror. He couldn't even see the Reprocessing Centre, not so much as a glimmer of light to denote its presence. It was as though Winston Dyne stood on a barren hillside, the ground beneath him bereft even of sprouting weeds, whilst all around him the moorland wind moaned its loneliness across miles of gorse and heather.

He stared hard, but could see nothing in the blackness. He rubbed his eyes. Oh God, had he gone blind? Then he sensed a presence, the wind seeming to whisper words in his ears, like strange angry incantations. He fell to his knees, and flung up his arms instinctively to protect his head. Words again - and this time he could make them out.

The time is nigh, Balzur. Destroy with the power I have given you. Pluto commands you. Now!

'Where the hell is he?' Coyle followed on Kent's heels out into the open compound, unhindered by a security guard who glanced in their direction but relaxed as he recognised them. 'He's not in his quarters. They're searching the building for him, without result so far, so he's got to be out here. But for Christ's sake why?'

Kent broke into a run without answering, almost as though he'd seen something, the soft springy grass beneath his feet suddenly petering out into rock and shale that crunched under the soles of his shoes. And that was when they hit the blackness, as though they had suddenly stepped into a void. Kent pulled up abruptly and Coyle cannoned into him.

'What the hell . . . ' Coyle stared all around - and could not believe that he saw nothing except the blackness of night. His skin prickled, and he clutched at Kent's arm.

'What's going on, Kent? Where's everything gone?'

'Listen!' - a whispered command. They both strained their ears.

A soft soughing of the mountain breezes, bearing on them angry voices, unintelligible as though they were centuries-old echoes suddenly released from some secret cleft - escalating to a tearing gale that had the two men fighting to keep their balance.

'My God!' Kent pointed ahead of him. 'Bob, do you see it? Jesus, man. Do you see what I see?'

Coyle saw, but he could not understand why it was now possible to see in what only seconds earlier had been total darkness. Now the scene was lit up by an inexplicable radiance that seemed to come from the mountains above, as though some hidden fire burned somewhere and its glow radiated the sky; a mountainside thick with gorse and heather except for one bare and blackened patch that appeared to have been ravaged by fire. Kent's nostrils twitched; he smelled charred ashes, something else . . . the odour of decaying flesh!

And in the midst of the ashes stood a man, his upturned features clearly lit up by the strange light, a ragged, cloaked figure with an oversize puppet-like head, thick festering lips moving as he spoke to the sky above, arms held aloft.

'It's him!' Coyle breathed. 'The one in my dreams. Balzur . . . Dyne . . . whoever . . . Now d'you believe me? Or is this another nightmare . . . '

'It's . . . real.' There was awe in the London journalist's voice. 'Bob, what you see now is a combination of the past and the present, some kind of astral projection that's both dangerous and evil. And, unless I'm wrong, it's also the fuse that will fire Section Eight, and blast civilisation into oblivion!'

'What can we do?'

'Do you believe in God, Bob?'

'Yes . . . yes, I do. I thought I didn't, but now . . . '

'Then your power will be stronger than mine. I just know the words . . . words I've learned from reporting exorcisms in this country and abroad. I'll whisper them to you and you shout them out aloud. And try to believe in them. It's the only way.'

'Deliver . . . this place . . . ' Coyle found himself yelling, pausing only to catch the words whispered in his ear by his companion, 'from . . . all evil spirits; all vain imaginations, projections and phantasms . . . and all deceits of the evil one . . . and bid them harm no one but depart to the place appointed them . . . there to remain for ever. Lord . . . beat down Satan . . . God, Incarnate God, who came to give peace, bring peace.' And he added of his own volition, 'Amen.'

The gale came rushing with hurricane force now, the tatters streaming like fairground bunting from the clothing of that terrible figure in front of them. For a second, the strange light seemed to grow brighter. Time enough for the two watchers to see the terror and agony on Balzur's face, the animal grimace of one suddenly thwarted from a four-centuries-old ambition. Despair and pain, the body stiffening, jerking as though from the impact of a sniper's bullet. The shadows surged back, and now everything was seen only in silhouette, a pathetic figure sinking until lost from view in the ashes all around it.

One last rush of wind and then all was silent in the pitch darkness. A tranquillity that dispelled fear, a period that was timeless, as though the

evil forces had been vanquished. A moment of sheer peace.

The light came back with a dazzling brightness that had Coyle and Kent covering their eyes. Stark artificial light from the Reprocessing Centre, shadowless as it illuminated the barbed-wire enclosure, shining on the grass and weeds, outlining that strange area called 'Pluto's Patch' in which nothing grew - and the crumpled body which lay in the middle; a figure whose tattered garments had changed to a thick tweed suit. It was Winston Dyne. And there was little doubt that he was dead!

'Christ Almighty!' The two men whipped round at the sound of voices, and saw a dishevelled Stafford and two AEA policemen coming towards them at a run. 'That's Dyne! We'd better get the MO.'

'I believe he's dead,' Kent forced the words from his confused brain. 'Heart attack probably . . . '

Bob Coyle shook his head. Once again it all seemed yet another of those terrible nightmares - only this time the proof of what had happened lay before them.

They turned and walked slowly back towards the Centre.

The gauge in Section Eight was still the criterion.

Canverdale's hand rested close to the internal telephone, his fingers drumming noiselessly on the surface of the table. Nobody spoke; all ears were awaiting the promised buzz. It would only buzz once; then would be snatched up before it had a chance to ring a second time. A group of men silently awaited the fate of their nation - the whole world.

5.30 a.m. The phone remained silent. Looks were exchanged, but no words. The allotted time was up. Surely Tyler must know by now whether his experiment had succeeded or failed. Perhaps it had failed, and he had decided to persevere a little longer, clinging vainly to a vanishing hope, afraid to admit defeat.

5.40 a.m. Still nothing. Canverdale lit a cigarette in his long holder. Kent followed suit with his pipe. Minor regulations were being waived.

5.45 a.m. A whirring noise that became louder with every second - then stopped abruptly. The elevator . . . footsteps outside in the corridor. Measured steps, neither slow nor fast. The door opened.

It was Tyler - with Stafford just behind him.

'I'm sorry for the delay, gentlemen,' the Hazardous Materials Group man said, his voice scarcely louder than a whisper. 'But you'll appreciate that we had to undergo decontamination procedure before coming up here.'

'You could have phoned!' Canverdale almost shouted, and added, 'Well?'

A moment's silence, possibly for effect.

'Gentlemen' - Tyler moved towards his vacant chair, but did not sit down - 'I am pleased to announce that the Radioactive Solidifier, technically known as SLR92, is an undoubted success. Not only has it already solidified some of the escaped vapour, but the pressure gauge has dropped by four degrees!

A moment in history to be savoured. That, of course, was why Tyler had come up in person. For once in his life he had not discarded credit that was due to

him. He had seized his moment of glory, even at the expense of keeping a Prime Minister waiting. A normally retiring personality had surfaced from the very ocean depths to quell the tidal wave.

Handshakes all round. Canverdale debated how soon he could broadcast the news to the nation. First, though, the USSR and the United States must be told. The former would need some convincing. He feared lest they might come, anyway, and there was no time to lose. He moved towards the telephone to call to his deputy in Hertfordshire. From the small village of Stanstead Abbots, messages were soon relayed to the governments of the world at large, whose nations breathed a loud sigh of relief.

With some reluctance, Soviet aircraft were recalled. The White House ordered their planes to ascertain that there would be no Russian intervention, and then return immediately. The President was taking no chances.

Canverdale regarded the whole business as a personal triumph, beginning with his 7.30 a. m. announcement to the British people - and the rest of the world - that the danger was now past. Doomsday had been averted, by a matter of hours. He would, of course, endeavour to impose a permanent ban on any further reprocessing of nuclear waste . . .

Eventually only Tyler and Stafford remained in that elevated room overlooking Section Eight. Together they watched the first faint streaks of light in the eastern sky, then the golden glow of a morning sunrise on the surrounding mountain peaks. Neither spoke. The time for congratulations was over. Yet there was still one unsolved problem, which everybody else appeared to have forgotten. That first escape of radioactivity! It was somewhere in the environment. It would remain there for the next quarter of a million years. They wondered where and when it would show up again. Perhaps not in their lifetime, or even during that of the next generation. It was a very disturbing thought.

Wearily they rose to their feet. A few hours' sleep, and then back to work on the Solidifiers. SLR92 - there were one or two modifications to be carried out on the instruments before they could be classed as one hundred-percent effective. But basically the idea had worked - and, as a result, the world lived on.

Kent dropped Coyle off at the offices of the Herald. The Londoner kept the engine running. There were several reasons why he did not want to go inside. 'See you tomorrow,' he said. 'I take it you won't be coming in today.' 'No. We've both plenty of sleep to catch up on.' They shook hands, a gesture that said more than any amount of words.

Coyle stood watching the Mercedes until it was out of sight, then slowly turned and went inside. The world lived on, and that still meant one or two problems. Right now, though, he had to get to work on next week's Herald. It just had to be a special edition, a kind of celebration issue.