



Pan Science Fiction

Christopher
Priest

**Fugue For A
Darkening
Island**



Fugue for a Darkening Island

Christopher Priest was born in 1943 in Cheshire, and spent his childhood in the north of England. After leaving school he moved to London, where he spent the next nine years discovering that he and the accountancy profession were not made for each other. He became a full-time writer in 1968, and since then has written five novels, a children's book and a collection of short stories.

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Fugue for a Darkening Island

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to friends

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I have white skin. Light brown hair. Blue eyes. I am tall: five feet, eleven inches. My mode of dress tends to the conservative: sports jackets, corduroy trousers, knitted ties. I wear spectacles for reading, though they are more an affectation than a necessity. I smoke cigarettes to a moderate amount. Sometimes I drink alcohol. I do not believe in God; I do not go to church; I do not have any objections to other people doing so. When I married my wife, I was in love with her. I am very fond of my daughter Sally. I have no political ambitions. My name is Alan Whitman.

★ ★ ★

My skin is smudged with dirt. My hair is dry, salt-encrusted and itchy. I have blue eyes. I am tall: five feet, eleven inches. I am wearing now what I was wearing six months ago, and I smell abominably. I have lost my spectacles, and learned to live without them. I do not smoke at all most of the time, though when cigarettes are available I smoke them continually. I am able to get drunk about once a month. I do not believe in God; I do not go to church. When I last saw my wife, I was cursing her, though I have learned to regret it. I am very fond of my daughter Sally. I do not think I have political ambitions. My name is Alan Whitman.

★ ★ ★

I met Lateef in a village ruined by an artillery bombardment. I disliked him the moment I saw him, and it was evidently reciprocated. After the first moments of caution, we ignored each other. I was looking for food in the village, knowing that as the bombardment had finished only recently it would not yet be in a totally plundered state. There were several houses still intact and I ignored these, knowing from experience that the ground-troops habitually ransacked these first. It was more fruitful to

sift through the rubble of partially destroyed buildings.

Working methodically, I had filled two haversacks with canned food by midday, and had stolen for future barter three road-maps from abandoned cars. I did not see the other man again during the morning.

On the outskirts of the village I found a field which had evidently been cultivated at one time. In one corner I discovered a row of freshly-dug graves, each marked with a simple piece of wood upon which were stapled metal dog-tags bearing the name of the soldier. I looked at each of the names, and deduced that they were African troops.

As that part of the field was the most secluded I sat down near the graves, and opened one of the cans. The food was odious: half-cooked and greasy. I ate it hungrily.

Afterwards, I walked out to the wreck of the helicopter that had crashed near by. It was not likely to contain food, though if any instruments were recoverable they would be suitable for future exchanges. I needed a compass most of all, though it was not likely that the helicopter would have carried one that would be either easily detachable or portable. When I reached the wreck I saw that the man I had seen earlier was inside the smashed cockpit, working at the dashboard with a long-bladed knife in an attempt to remove an altimeter. When he became aware of my presence he straightened slowly, his hand moving towards a pocket. He turned to face me, and for several minutes we regarded each other carefully, each seeing in the other a man who responded to a situation in the same way as himself.

* * *

We decided we would have to abandon our house in Southgate the day the barricade was erected at the end of our road. The decision was not implemented at once; for several days we thought we would be able to adjust to the new mode of life.

I do not know who took the decision to erect the barricade. As we lived at the far end of the road, near to the edge of the playing-fields, we did not hear the noises in the night, but when Isobel took the car down the road to take Sally to school she returned almost at once with the news.

It was the first concrete sign in our lives that irrevocable change was taking place in the country. Ours was not the first of such barricades, but there were few others in our particular neighbourhood.

When Isobel told me about it I walked down to see it for myself. It did not appear to be very strongly constructed—made mostly of wooden supports and barbed-wire loops—but its symbolism was unmistakable. There were a few men standing around, and I nodded cautiously to them.

The following day, we were at home when the noise of the eviction of the Martins disturbed us. The Martins lived almost opposite us. We had not had much to do with them, and since the Afrim landings had allowed them to keep to themselves. Vincent Martin worked as a research technician at an aircraft-components factory in Hatfield. His wife stayed at home, looking after their three children. They were West Indians.

At the time of their eviction I had nothing to do with the Street Patrol which was responsible for it. Within a week, though, all men in the street had been enrolled, and every member of their families was given a pass-ticket which had to be carried at all times as identification. We saw the pass-tickets as potentially the most valuable possessions we had, as by this time we were no longer blind to the developments around us.

Cars were allowed in and out of the street only at certain times, and the barricade-patrols enforced this rule with absolute inflexibility. As the street opened on to a main road which government regulations kept clear of all parked traffic after six in the evening, it meant that if you arrived home after the barricade had closed, you were required to find somewhere else to park the car. As most streets quickly followed our example and closed their entrances, the effect of this was that you were obliged to leave your car at some considerable distance from home, and walking the rest of the way at such a time was hazardous in the extreme.

The normal strength of a street patrol was two men, though on a few occasions this was doubled, and on the night before we finally decided to leave there were fourteen men. I was part of a patrol three times; sharing the duty with a different man each time. Our function was simple. While one man stayed at the barricade with the shotgun, the other walked up and down the street four times. The positions were then reversed, and so on through the night.

While I was at the barricade, I was always most frightened of a police-car coming along. Although I did see their cars on many occasions, none of them ever stopped. During meetings of the Patrol committee, the question of what to do in such an event

was often raised, but no satisfactory answer, at least to my mind, was ever given.

In practice, we and the police would leave each other alone, though one did hear stories of battles between the occupants of barricaded streets and riot-shielded police. No news of these ever appeared in the newspapers or on television, and the absence was more noticeable than the news itself would have been.

The true purpose of the shotgun was to deter illegal squatters from attempting to enter our street, and secondarily to show as a form of protest that if the government and the armed forces were unable or unwilling to protect our homes then we would take the matter into our own hands. Such was the essence of what was printed on the backs of our pass-tickets, and was the unspoken creed of the men on the street patrol.

For my own part, I was uneasy. The burnt-out shell of the Martins' house opposite ours was a constant reminder of the violence inherent in the patrols, and the never-ending parade of homeless shambling through the night past the barricades was disturbing in the extreme.

The night the barricade on the next street fell, I was asleep. I had heard that the patrol was to be enlarged, but it was not my turn of duty.

Our first awareness of the fighting was the firing of a shot near by; while Isobel took Sally downstairs to shelter in the space beneath the staircase, I dressed hurriedly and went to join the patrol at the barricade. Here, the men of the street stared sullenly at the army lorries and police vans parked across the main road. About thirty armed soldiers faced us, evidently nervous and trigger-happy.

Three water-cannons rumbled past, and disappeared through the jumble of parked vehicles towards the next street. From time to time we heard more shots, and the sound of voices raised angrily. Occasionally, the explosions were deeper and more powerful, and slowly a red glow brightened near by. More army lorries and police vans arrived, and the men inside ran towards the street. We at our barricade said nothing, only too aware of the flagrant provocation and absolute inadequacy that our solitary shotgun represented. It was kept fully loaded, but out of sight. At that time, I would not have liked to be the man in possession of it.

We waited at the barricade all night, listening to the sounds of the battle only fifty yards away. As dawn came, the noise gradually lessened. We saw the bodies of several soldiers and

policemen carried away, and many more wounded driven off in ambulances.

As the full light of day came, nearly two hundred white people, some dressed in only their nightclothes, were escorted by the police towards a fleet of ambulances and lorries a mile away. As they passed our barricade, some of them tried to argue with us, but were herded on by the soldiers. While they passed, I looked at the men on our side of the barricade and wondered whether the hard lack of expression was also on my own face.

We waited for the activity outside to die down, but the sound of gunfire continued spasmodically for many hours. We saw no normal traffic on the road, and assumed that it had of necessity been diverted. One of the men at our barricade was carrying a transistor radio, and we listened anxiously to each of the BBC's news-bulletins hoping to hear some word of reassurance.

By ten o'clock it was apparent that events had levelled off. Most of the police vehicles had driven away, but the army was still around us. About once every five minutes there was a gunshot. A few houses in the next street were still burning, but there was no sign of the fires spreading.

As soon as I could manage it I slipped away from the barricade, and walked back to my house.

I found Isobel and Sally still sheltering under the stairs. Isobel had withdrawn almost entirely; she had lost all her colour, the pupils of her eyes were dilated and she slurred her speech when she spoke. Sally was no better. Their story was a garbled and incomplete recounting of a series of events they had experienced at second-hand: explosions, shouting voices, gunfire and the spreading crackle of burning wood . . . all heard as they lay in the dark. While I made them some tea and warmed up some food, I inspected the damage to the house.

A petrol-bomb had exploded in the garden, setting fire to our shed. All the windows at the back had been broken, and lodged in the walls I found several bullets. Even as I stood in the back room a bullet flew through the window and missed me by a few inches.

I crawled on my hands and knees to the window, and peered through.

Our house normally commanded a view across the intervening gardens to the houses in the next street. As I knelt there, I saw that of them only about a half were still intact. Through the windows of some of these I could see several people moving. One man, a short Negro in filthy clothes, stood in the garden

sheltering behind a part of a fence. It was he who had fired his gun at me. As I watched he fired again, this time at the house next to mine.

When Isobel and Sally had dressed, we took the three suitcases we had packed the previous week and I put them in the car. When Isobel went through the house and systematically locked all interconnecting doors and cupboards, I collected our cash.

Shortly afterwards, we drove down to the barricade. Here we were stopped by the other men.

'Where do you think you're going, Whitman?' one of them asked me. It was Johnson, one of the men with whom I had shared a patrol three nights before.

'We're leaving,' I said. 'We're going to Isobel's parents.'

Johnson reached in through the open window, turned off the ignition before I could stop him, and took the key.

'Sorry,' he said. 'No one leaves. If we all ran out, the niggers'd be in like a flash.'

Several of the men had crowded round. By my side, I felt Isobel tense. Sally was in the back. I didn't care to think how this may be affecting her.

'We can't stay here. Our house overlooks those others. It's only a matter of time before they come through the gardens.'

I saw several of the men glance at one another.

Johnson, whose house wasn't on the same side as ours, said stubbornly: 'We've got to stick together. It's our only hope.'

Isobel leaned over me and looked up at Johnson imploringly.

'Please,' she said. 'Have you thought of us? What about your own wife? Does she want to stay?'

'It's only a matter of time,' I said again. 'You've seen the pattern in other places. Once the Afrims have got a street to themselves, they spread through the rest of the district in a few nights.'

'But we've got the law on our side,' one of the other men said, nodding his head in the direction of the soldiers outside the barricade.

'They're not on anyone's side. You might as well pull down the barricade. It's useless now.'

Johnson moved away from the car-window and went to speak to one of the other men. It was Nicholson, one of the leaders of the patrol committee. After a few seconds, Nicholson himself came over.

'You're not leaving,' he said finally. 'No one's leaving. Get

the car away from here and come back on barricade duty. It's all we can do.'

He tossed the ignition-key in, and it fell on Isobel's lap. She picked it up. I wound the window-handle and closed the window tightly.

As I started the engine, I said to Isobel: 'Do you want to chance it?'

She looked at the men in front of us, and at the barbed-wire barricade, and at the armed soldiers beyond it. She said nothing.

Behind us, Sally was crying. 'I want to go home, Daddy,' she said.

I turned the car round and drove back slowly to our house. As we passed one of the other houses on the same side of the street as our own, we heard the sound of a woman screaming inside. I glanced at Isobel, and saw her close her eyes.

I stopped the car by the house. It looked strangely normal. We sat in the car and made no move to get out. I left the engine running. To turn it off would have been too final.

After a while I put the car into forward gear and drove down to the end of the street, towards the recreation-field. When the barricade had been erected at the main-road end, only two strands of wire had been put across here, and it was normally unmanned. So it was now. There was no one around; like the rest of the street it was at once unnervingly normal and abnormal. I stopped the car, jumped out and pulled down the wire. Beyond it was a wooden fence, held in place by a row of stakes. I tried it with my hands, and found that it was firm but not immovable.

I drove the car over the wire and stopped with the bumper-bar touching the wooden fence. In first gear I pushed the fence, until it snapped and fell. In front of us the recreation-field was deserted. I drove across it, feeling the car lurch in and out of the ruts of the previous year's sport.

* * *

I pulled myself out of the water and lay gasping for breath on the bank of the river. The physical shock of the cold water had exhausted me. Every part of my body ached and throbbed. I lay still.

Five minutes later I stood up, then looked back across the water to where Isobel and Sally were waiting for me. I walked upstream, carrying the end of the rope I had towed behind me,

until I was directly opposite them. Isobel was sitting on the soil of the bank, not watching me but staring blankly downstream. By her side, Sally stood attentively.

I shouted instructions to them across the water. I saw Sally saying something to Isobel, and Isobel shaking her head. I stood impatiently, feeling my muscles shivering into the beginnings of cramp. I shouted again and Isobel stood up. Sally and she tied the end of the rope around their waists and across their chests in the manner I had shown them, then walked nervously to the edge of the water. In my impatience I may have pulled the rope too hard. In any event, just as they had reached the edge of the water they fell forward and began floundering in the shallows. Isobel could not swim and was afraid of drowning. I could see Sally struggling with her, trying to prevent her mother from crawling back on to the bank.

Taking the initiative from both of them, I pulled the rope, towing them out into the centre of the river. Whenever Isobel's face came above the surface, she shouted and screamed in a mixture of fear and anger.

In just under a minute I had them on my side. Sally lay on the muddy bank, staring at me wordlessly. I wanted her to criticise me for what I had done, but she said nothing. Isobel lay on her side, doubled over. She retched up water for several minutes, then swore at me. I ignored her.

Although the river was cold from the hills, the air was warm. We took stock of our possession. Nothing had been lost in the crossing, but everything we carried had become soaked. It had been part of the original plan that Isobel should hold our main haversack up out of the water, while Sally supported her. Now, all our clothes and food were wet, and our matches for lighting a fire were unusable. We decided it would be best if we removed all our clothes, and hung them in the bushes and trees in the hope that they would be wearably dry by morning.

We lay together on the ground, shivering miserably, and cuddling each other for warmth. Within half an hour Isobel was asleep, but Sally lay in my arms with her eyes open.

We each knew the other was awake and stayed so for most of the night.

* * *

I was to spend the night with a woman named Louise. She had taken a room for the purpose in an hotel in Goodge Street, and as I had told Isobel that I was taking part in an all-night demon-

stration at the college I was able to get away from home for a whole night.

Louise and I dined at a small Greek restaurant in Charlotte Street, then, not wishing to spend the entire evening in her hotel room, we went to a cinema in Tottenham Court Road. I do not recall the title of the film. All I can remember is that it was foreign, that its dialogue was sub-titled in English and that it concerned a violently-resolved love-affair between a coloured man and a white woman. The film contained several scenes of complete sexual frankness, and although it had not been banned, few cinemas were willing to show films which depicted the various forms of the sex act in detail because of several instances of police action. However, at the time we saw the film it had been showing unmolested for more than a year.

Louise and I had bought seats at the rear of the cinema, and when the police came in by way of the entrances along each side, we were able to see the precision with which it was done, indicating that the raid had been planned carefully. One policeman stood at each door and the others moved in a loose cordon around the audience.

For a minute or two there seemed to be no further action, and we continued to watch the film until the house-lights went up. The film still showed and went on doing so for several more minutes. Finally it stopped abruptly.

We sat in the auditorium for twenty minutes without knowing what was happening. One of the policemen forming part of the cordon was near me and I asked him what was going on. He made no answer.

We were ordered to leave the auditorium row by row and to divulge our names and addresses. By a stroke of good fortune I did not have with me any form of self-identification, and was thus unable to prove who I was. Under the circumstances I gave the police a false name and address, and although my pockets were searched in an attempt to find authentication for my story, I was allowed to go free after Louise vouched for my identity.

We returned to her hotel immediately and went to bed. After the events of the evening I was rendered impotent, and in spite of Louise's best efforts we were unable to have intercourse.

John Tregarth's government had been in power for three months.

* * *

As adversaries we detested the Afrim troops. We continually heard rumours of their cowardice in battle; and of their arrogance in victory, however small or relative it may be.

One day we encountered a member of the Royal Nationalist Air Force who had been captured by an Afrim patrol. This man, who had been a pilot until crippled by the Africans' torture, told us of brutalities and atrocities in their military interrogation centres that made our own experience as civilians appear to be trivial and perfunctory. The pilot had lost one leg below the knee, and had suffered lacerated tendons in the other, and he counted himself as among the more fortunate. He asked us for assistance.

We were reluctant to become involved and Lateef called a meeting to decide what to do. In the end we voted to transport the crippled man to within a mile of the R.N.A.F. station, and to allow him to find his own way from there.

Shortly after this incident, we were rounded up by a large Afrim patrol and taken to one of their civilian interrogation centres.

We said nothing to them about the pilot, nor about their military methods in general. On this occasion we made no attempt to resist arrest. For my own part it was because I felt it might be connected in some way with the recent abduction of the women, but on the part of the group as a whole our lack of resistance was an outcome of the overall lethargy being experienced at the time.

We were taken to a large building on the outskirts of one of the Afrim-held towns, and in a large marquee in the grounds told to strip and pass through a delousing section. This was a part of the tent which had been partitioned off and filled with a dense steam. Coming out a few minutes later, we were told to dress again. Our clothes lay untouched where we had left them.

We were then divided into groups of one, two or three men. I was one of those on my own. We were taken to rooms inside the main building and interrogated briefly. My own interrogator was a tall West African, who, in spite of the central-heating system, wore a brown greatcoat. I had noticed on entering the room that the two uniformed guards in the corridor had been holding Russian rifles.

The interrogation was sketchy. Identification-papers, certificate of state and origin and Afrim-stamped photograph shown and checked.

'Your destination, Whitman?'

'Dorchester,' I said, giving him the answer we had agreed

upon in the event of arrest.

'You have relatives there?'

'Yes.' I gave him the name and address of fictitious parents.

'You have a family?'

'Yes.'

'But they are not with you.'

'No.'

'Who is the leader of your group?'

'We are self-directed.'

There was a long silence while he rescrutinised my papers. After this I was returned to the marquee where I waited with the others as the remainder of the interrogation-sessions were completed. Then two Afrims dressed as civilians went through our possessions. The search was superficial in the extreme, turning up only a fork for eating that one of the men had left near the top of his haversack. The two knives I had secreted in the lining of my own bag went undetected.

After this search there was another long period of waiting, until a lorry bearing a large red cross on a white background was driven up alongside the marquee. The agreed Red Cross hand-out to refugees had been established for some time as being five pounds of protein, but since the Afrims had been handling their own side of the arrangement, provisions had decreased steadily. I received two small cans of processed meat and a packet of forty cigarettes.

Later, we were driven away from the town in three lorries and dumped in the countryside seventeen miles from where we had been arrested. It took us the whole of the next day and part of the day after to find the cache of supplies we had made at the first warning that we were about to be arrested.

At no time during our involuntary visit to Afrim-occupied territory had we seen or heard any sign or hint of the women. That night, I lay awake despairing of seeing Sally and Isobel again.

* * *

It had been announced on the early news that the unidentified ship which had been sailing up the English Channel for the last two days had entered the Thames Estuary.

During the morning I followed the regular bulletins. The ship had neither answered nor made any radio signals since first being sighted. It was not flying any flag. A pilot cutter had gone out to it from Tilbury, but the men had not been able to board

it. From the name on her bows, the ship had been identified as a medium-sized cargo tramp, registered in Liberia and according to Lloyd's was at present chartered to a shipping firm in Lagos.

It happened that from twelve-thirty I was free to leave the college, and not having any appointments or lectures in the afternoon I decided to go down to the river. I caught a bus to Cannon Street and walked out on to London Bridge. Several hundred other people, mainly workers from near-by offices, had had the same notion, and the east side of the bridge was crowded.

As time passed several people moved away, evidently in order to return to their offices, and as a result I was able to move forward to the parapet of the bridge.

At just after two-thirty we were able to make out the ship, coming upriver towards the Tower Bridge. We saw that there were several craft in attendance around it, and that many of them were launches of the river police. A wave of speculation passed through the crowd.

The ship approached the bridge, which kept its road down. A man standing near to me had a small pair of field-glasses, and he told us that the pedestrians on the bridge were being moved off, and the road was being closed to traffic. A few seconds later the bridge opened just in time for the ship to pass through.

I was aware of sirens near by. Turning, I saw that four or five police-cars had driven on to London Bridge. The men remained inside, but left the blue lights flashing on the roofs. The ship came on towards us.

We observed that several men on the small launches around the ship were speaking to those on board through loud-hailers. We could not make out what was said, but the sound came to us across the water in tinny resonances. It became unnaturally quiet on the bridge, as the police sealed off each end to traffic. A mounted policeman rode up and down telling us to leave the bridge. Only a few of us obeyed.

The ship was now less than fifty yards from us, and it was possible to see that its decks were crowded with people, many of whom were lying down. Two of the police-launches had reached London Bridge, and were turned towards the ship. From one of them, a policeman with a loud-hailer shouted to the captain of the ship to stop his engines and to submit to a boarding party.

There was no acknowledgement from the ship, which sailed on slowly towards the bridge, though many of the people on the decks of the ship were shouting back at the police, unable to

make themselves understood.

The bows of the ship passed underneath an arch of the bridge about fifteen yards from where I stood. I looked down at it. The decks were crowded to the rails with people. I had no more time to observe their condition, because the superstructure amidships crashed into the parapet of the bridge. It was a slow, grinding collision, making an ugly scraping noise of metal on stone. I saw that the paintwork of the ship and its superstructure was filthy and rusty, with many panes of broken glass in the ports.

I looked down at the river and saw that the police-launches and two river-authority tugs had gone in against the hull of the old ship, and were trying to push her stern towards the concrete bank of the New Fresh Wharf. I saw from the black smoke still issuing from her funnel and from the white-cream froth at the stern, that the ship's engines were still running. As the tugs made headway in pushing her towards the bank the metal superstructure scraped and crashed repeatedly against the bridge.

I saw movement on the ship, on the decks and inside. The people on board were moving towards the stern. Many of them fell as they ran. As the stern rammed into the concrete quay the first men jumped ashore.

The ship was wedged firmly between the bank and the bridge, her bows still under the arch, her superstructure against the parapet and her stern overhanging the quay. A tug moved round to the bridge, to make sure that until the engines were stopped the ship wouldn't turn somehow and move back into the river. Four police-launches were now against her port side, and ropes and rope-ladders were thrown with grappling-irons on to the decks. The fleeing passengers made no efforts to remove them. When the first ladder was secured the police and customs officials began to climb it.

On the bridge, our interest was directed to the people leaving the ship: the Africans were coming ashore.

We watched them with a mixture of horror and fascination. There were men, women and children. Most if not all were in an advanced state of starvation. Skeletal arms and legs, distended stomachs, skull-like heads holding staring eyes; flat, paper-like breasts on the women, accusing faces on them all. Most were naked or nearly so. Many of the children could not walk. Those whom no one would carry were left on the ship.

A metal door in the side of the ship was opened from within and a gangplank pushed across the strip of water to the quay. From below-decks more Africans came out on to the shore.

Some fell to the concrete as they stepped on the land, others moved towards the wharf-building and disappeared either into it or around its sides. None of them looked up at us on the bridge, or back at their fellows who were in the process of leaving the ship.

We waited and watched. There seemed to be no end to the number of people on board.

In time, the upper decks were cleared, though people still poured ashore from below. I tried to count the number of people lying, dead or unconscious, on the deck. When I had reached one hundred, I stopped counting.

The men who had gone aboard finally managed to stop the engines, and the ship was made fast to the quay. Many ambulances had arrived at the wharf, and those people suffering most were put inside and driven away.

But hundreds more just wandered from the wharf, away from the river, and up into the streets of the City, whose occupants knew nothing as yet of the events on the river.

I learned later that the police and the river authorities had found more than seven hundred corpses on the ship, most of them children. The welfare authorities accounted for another four and a half thousand survivors, who were taken to hospitals or emergency centres. There was no way of counting the remainder, though I heard once an estimate of three thousand people who had wandered away from the ship and tried to survive alone.

Shortly after the ship had been secured, we were moved off the bridge by the police, who told us that its structure was considered to be unsafe. The following day, however, it was open again to traffic.

The event I had witnessed became known in time as the first of the Afrim landings.

* * *

We were signalled down by a prowling police-car and questioned at some length as to our destination, and the circumstances surrounding our departure. Isobel tried to explain about the invasion of the next street and the imminent danger in which our home had been.

While we waited for permission to continue, Sally tried to soothe Isobel, who was taken by a flood of tears. I did not want to be affected by it. While being in full sympathy with her feel-

ings, and realising that it is no small upset to be dispossessed in such a manner, I had experienced Isobel's lack of fortitude for the last few months. It had been understandably awkward while I was working at the cloth factory, but in comparison with some of my other former colleagues at the college, our situation was relatively settled. I had made every attempt to be sympathetic and patient with her, but had succeeded only in reviving old differences.

In a few moments the policeman returned to our car and informed us that we could proceed, on condition we headed for the U.N. camp at Horsenden Hill in Middlesex. Our original destination had been Isobel's parents, who now lived in Bristol.

The policeman told us that civilians were not advised to make long-distance journeys across country after dark. We had spent a large part of the afternoon cruising about the London suburbs in an attempt to find a garage that would sell us enough petrol to fill not only the tank of the car, but also the three five-gallon cans I carried in the boot, and consequently it was now beginning to get dark. All three of us were hungry.

I drove along the Western Avenue towards Alperton, after having made a wide detour through Kensington, Fulham and Hammersmith to avoid the barricaded Afrim enclaves at Notting Hill and North Kensington. The main road itself was clear of obstructions, though we saw that every side-road and one or two of the subsidiary main-roads that crossed it at intervals were barricaded and manned by armed civilians. At Hanger Lane we turned off the Western Avenue and up through Alperton, along the route we had been directed. At several points we saw parked police vehicles, several dozen uniformed police and many U.N. militiamen.

At the gates of the camp we were again detained and interrogated, but this was only to be expected. In particular, we were questioned closely about the reasons we had left our home, and what precautions had been made to protect it while we were away.

I told them that the street in which we lived had been barricaded, that we had closed and locked every door in the house, for which we had keys, and that troops and police were in the neighbourhood. While I spoke, one of the questioners wrote in a small notebook. We were obliged to give our full address and the names of the men at the barricades. We waited in the car while the information was relayed by telephone. In the end, we were told to park the car in a space just inside the gates and to take our belongings on foot to the main reception centre.

The buildings were farther from the gates than we had anticipated, and when we found them we were somewhat surprised to find that they consisted mainly of light prefabricated huts. On the front of one of them was a painted board, written in several different languages, and which was illuminated by a floodlight. It directed us to separate; men to go towards a hut known as D Central, and women and children to enter this one.

I said to Isobel: 'We'll see each other later, I suppose.'

She leaned over and kissed me lightly. I kissed Sally. They went into the hut, leaving me on my own with the suitcase.

I followed the directions and found D Central. Inside, I was told to surrender the suitcase for search, and to take off my clothes. These I did, and my clothes and suitcase were taken away together. I was then instructed to pass through a shower of hot water and to scrub myself clean. Understanding that this was to minimize health risks I complied, even though I had bathed only the night before.

When I came out, I was given a towel and some rough clothing. I asked if I could have my own clothes back. This was refused, but I was told that I could have my night-clothes later.

When I had dressed, I was ushered into a plain hall which was full of men. The ratio of whites to blacks was about one to one. I tried not to show my surprise.

The men were sitting at several benches, eating, smoking and talking. I was instructed to take a bowl of food from the serving-hatch, and although this did not satisfy my hunger, I was told I might have more if I requested it. At the same time, I learned that cigarettes could be obtained at the hatch, and I collected a packet of twenty.

I was wondering about Isobel and Sally, and assumed that they were receiving similar treatment somewhere else. I could only hope that we would be reunited before going to bed.

While I was consuming the second bowl of food, I noticed that several more men came into the hall from time to time and that they were given the same treatment irrespective of race. At my own table there were more Negroes than whites, and although I felt uncomfortable at first, I rationalised that being in the same position as myself, they represented no threat to me.

Two hours later we were ushered to other huts near by, where we were to sleep on narrow beds equipped with only one blanket, and without a pillow. I did not see Isobel and Sally.

In the morning I was allowed an hour with them.

They told me how badly they were treated in the women's

quarters, and that they had not been able to sleep. While discussing this, we heard a report that the government had reached a negotiated settlement with the leaders of the militant Afrims and that everything would be back to normal in a matter of days.

It was this that made us decide to return home, arguing that if our house was still in danger we would return to the refugee camp that night.

After a great deal of difficulty, we contacted a U.N. official in the camp and told him we wished to leave. For some reason he was reluctant to agree to this, saying that far too many people were wanting to leave, and that it would not be wise until the situation had stabilised. We told him that we considered our home to be safe, and he warned us that the camp was nearly full, and that if we left now he would not be able to guarantee us a place should we return.

In spite of this, we left the camp after retrieving our clothes and our car. Although our suitcases had obviously been searched, none of our belongings was missing.

★ ★ ★

At the time of the second Afrim landing I was in a small spa town in the north of England, attending a symposium of academics. I remember little of the proceedings. I can recall, though, that the event was well organised and that the formal programme was adhered to rigidly.

On two consecutive occasions I happened to share my lunch-table with a young woman from Norwich, and in time we became friendly. During the second of our lunches together I was spoken to by an acquaintance from my days at the university. We exchanged greetings and he joined us at the table. I did not wish to see him, but I was polite to him. Shortly after this the young woman left us.

I found my thoughts turning to her during the afternoon, and though I made several attempts to find her I was unsuccessful. She did not appear for dinner and I assumed she had left the conference early.

I spent the evening in the company of my university friend, exchanging reminiscences of our student activities there.

That night, as I was undressing in my hotel room, there was a knock at my door. It was the young woman. She came in and we shared the remainder of a half-bottle of Scotch I had. Our conversation was of little consequence. She told me her name,

though I have since forgotten it. We seemed to make intellectual contact, even as our subject-matter was trivial. It was as if the ponderous content of the day's formal proceedings had exhausted us both of the capacity for thought, though not of the ability to establish a rapport.

Later, we made love together on my bed, and she stayed in my room for the rest of the night.

The following day was the last one of the conference, and apart from a small ceremony in the main hall there were to be no formal events. The young woman and I shared a table for breakfast, aware that this was probably the last time we would spend together. It was during breakfast that the news came through of the second Afrim landing, and we spoke for several minutes about the significance of this.

* * *

Following a confused discussion with Lateef, I found myself working alone in a small town on the south-coast. It had been clear to me that Lateef had not formed any plan, and that my present mission was as ill-defined as his instructions had been. As far as I knew he wanted to have some kind of defensive weapons against future attacks, and we who had been sent foraging were to attempt to provide some.

I had little or no idea where to start, or what would constitute an effective defence.

I felt uneasy because the town was within Afrim-held territory, and although I was not impeded in any way I felt my movements were being observed.

All shops had been looted. The main parade was a desolate line of ruined stores, their racks emptied by repeated pillagings, but in one store I discovered a domestic-sized glass-cutting instrument, and pocketed it in lieu of there being anything else of worth.

I moved on down to the shore.

There was a large group of white refugees here, living in a crude encampment of old beach-huts and tents. Though I approached them, they shouted at me to go away. I walked along what had once been the beach promenade in a westerly direction until out of their sight.

I encountered a long row of bungalows which, judging by their affluent appearance, at one time would have been occupied by the wealthy retired. I wondered if the Africans had any plans

to use them and why the refugees I had seen were not camping there. Most of the bungalows were unlocked and there appeared to be nothing to prevent entry. I walked along the row, glancing into them all. There was no food to be had from any of them, nor anything that could be conceivably used as a weapon. Though most of them were still furnished, removable commodities, such as sheets and blankets, had been taken.

About two-thirds of the way along the line I encountered a bungalow that was empty of all furniture. Its doors were locked securely.

Intrigued, I broke in through a window, and searched it. In one of the back rooms I noticed that some of the floorboards had been removed and replaced. I levered them up with my knife.

In the space below there was a large crate full of empty bottles. Someone had gouged a diagonal line across each of them with a file, thus weakening them. Near by was a neatly folded pile of linen, torn into squares about fifteen inches across. In another room, also under the floorboards, I discovered ten five-gallon drums of petrol.

I considered the use of petrol-bombs to us and whether it would be worth telling Lateef of their presence. It was obviously impossible for me to move them single-handed, and it would be necessary for several men to come here to take them.

In the time I had been with Lateef and the other refugees, there had been some considerable discussion concerning the kinds of weapons which would be of use to us. Rifles and guns were obviously the prime necessity, but they were at a premium. It was unlikely we would ever obtain them except by stealing. Then there was the problem of ammunition. We all carried knives, though they were of assorted qualities. My own had formerly been a carving-knife, which I had honed down to a usable size and sharpness.

The kind of use to which a petrol-bomb is best put is as an anti-personnel device in enclosed spaces. Operating as we were in the countryside, we would have little use for incendiaries.

In the end I returned the bottles, linen and petrol to their hiding-places, reasoning that if Lateef disagreed with me, we could always return for them.

The lavatory was in working condition and I used it. Afterwards I noticed that a bathroom cabinet on the wall still had its mirror intact, and this gave me an idea. I prised it away and, using the glass-cutter, I sliced it up into long triangular strips.

I managed to cut seven such strips from the thick glass. I fashioned the ends to as sharp a tine as possible, twice drawing my blood in the process. With a chamois leather I took from my bag I made handles for the daggers, wrapping it in strips around the thicker ends.

I tried out one of the new daggers, swinging it experimentally in the air. It made a lethal but difficult weapon. I would have to devise some method by which the daggers could be carried conveniently so that their users would not be endangered by them if they fell. I packed the seven new daggers into a heap, and prepared to roll them up into a piece of sacking so that I might carry them back to the others. As I did so, I noticed that one of the shards had a minute fault in the glass, near the handle. I saw that it might shatter easily, perhaps lacerating the hand of whoever used it. I discarded it.

I was ready to return to Lateef and the others. Night was falling, so I waited for the dark to come. The twilight was shorter than normal, because of the atmospheric murk and low clouds. When I felt it would be safe to move, I collected my possessions and started back towards the encampment.

The time I had spent by the shore had had a strangely soothing effect on me, and I felt it might be good future policy to spend more time there. I resolved to suggest it to Lateef.



I was hiding at the top of a barn because my elder brother had told me that the bogey would get me. I was about seven years old. Had I been older I would have been able to rationalise the fears that took me. They were formless, but for the clear image of some monstrous being with black skin that was out to get me.

Instead, I cowered at the top of the barn, lying in my own private hidey-hole which no one knew was there. Where the farmer had stacked the bales of straw, a small cavity had been left between three of them and the roof.

The comforting subjective security of the hide-out restored my confidence, and some time later my fears had receded and I was involved in a juvenile fantasy involving airplanes and guns. When I heard rustling in the straw below, my first panicky thoughts were of the bogey, and I lay in a state of frozen terror while the rustling continued. Finally, I summoned courage to creep as silently as possible to the edge of my hide-out and peer downwards.

In the loose straw on the ground, at the back of the bales, a young man and a girl were lying with their arms around one another. The man was on top of the girl and the girl had her eyes closed. I did not know what they were doing. After a few minutes, the young man moved slightly and helped the girl to take off her clothes. It seemed to me that she did not really want him to take them off, but she resisted only a little. They lay down again and within a very short period of time she helped him remove his own clothes. Not wishing to change my position, I lay very still and quiet. When they were both naked he lay on top of her again and they began to make noises with their throats. The girl's eyes were still closed, though the lids fluttered from time to time. I can recall very little of my impressions during this; I know I was curious to see a girl who could open her legs so wide – all the women with whom I had come into contact (my mother and my aunts) had seemed incapable of opening their knees more than a few inches. After a few more minutes the couple stopped moving around and lay together in silence. It was only then that the girl's eyes opened properly and looked up at me.

Many years later my elder brother was among the first British National soldiers to be killed in action against the Afrims.

★ ★ ★

The words of the official at the U.N. camp came to mind as I drove along the North Circular Road. The radio had confirmed that an amnesty had been offered by Tregarth's emergency cabinet, but had implied also that the leaders of the Afrims were not responding in a wholly favourable way.

One possibility was that they did not trust Tregarth. On several occasions in the past he had initiated social reforms that had acted against the Afrims, and there was no reason that now they had an upper hand in a military sense Tregarth would compromise with them in a way prejudicial to his own administration. With a rift established in the armed forces, and another threatened within the police forces, any policy of appeasement which was at all suspect would not work.

It was estimated that already more than 25 per cent of the army had seceded, and had placed itself at the disposal of the Afrim leaders in Yorkshire, and three ground-attack squadrons of the Royal Air Force had so far similarly changed allegiances.

In a later programme we heard a group of political pundits speculating that public opinion in favour of the Afrims was

diminishing, and that Tregarth and his cabinet would take more militant action.

The only outward sign of the events taking place that we could discern was that traffic was unusually light. We were stopped several times by police patrols, but we had grown accustomed to this in the last few months and thought little of it. We had learned the appropriate responses to make to questioning, and maintained a consistent story.

I was disturbed to notice that many of the police we encountered were from the civilian-reserve special force. Stories describing various atrocities had been circulating continuously; in particular, one heard of coloured people being arrested without warrant, and released only after experiences of personal violence. On the other hand, white people were subjected to harassment if known or suspected to be involved with anti-Afrim activities. The entire situation regarding the police was confused and inconsistent at this time, and I for one felt that it would not be an entirely bad thing if the force were to divide formally.

Just to the west of Finchley, I was obliged to stop the car and refill the tank with petrol. I had intended to use some of the petrol I had put by as a reserve, but discovered that during the night two of the cans had been emptied. Consequently, I was forced to use up the whole of my reserve. I said nothing of this to Isobel or Sally, as I anticipated being able to restock sooner or later, even though none of the garages we had passed that day was open.

While I was pouring the petrol into the tank a man came out of a near-by building carrying a pistol and accused me of being an Afrim sympathiser. I asked him on what evidence he formed this suspicion, and he told me that no one could be driving a car at this time without the support of one political faction or another.

At the next police road-block I reported this incident and was told to ignore it.

As we approached our house all three of us reflected by our behaviour the apprehensions we felt. Sally became restless and asked to go to the toilet. Isobel smoked one cigarette after another and snapped irritably at me. I found myself continually pushing up the speed of the car unconsciously, although I knew that it was generally better to stay at lower speeds.

To relieve the tension between us, I responded to Sally's requests by stopping the car at a public lavatory about a mile and a half from where we lived, and while Isobel took her inside

I took the opportunity to turn on the car radio and listen to a news bulletin.

Isobel said, when they had got back into the car: 'What shall we do if we can't get into the street?'

She had voiced the fear none of us had liked to express.

'I'm sure Nicholson will listen to reason,' I said.

'And if he doesn't?'

I didn't know. I said: 'I just listened to the radio. They said that the Afrims were accepting the terms of the amnesty, but that occupation of empty houses was continuing.'

'What do they mean by empty?'

'I don't like to think.'

Behind us, Sally said: 'Daddy, are we nearly home?'

'Yes, dear,' Isobel said.

I started the engine and moved off. We reached the end of our street a few minutes later. The police and army trucks had moved off, but the barbed-wire barricade was still there. On the other side of the road, mounted on the top of a dark-blue van, was a television camera operated by two men. It was protected in front and at the sides by heavy plates of glass.

I stopped the car five yards from the barricade, but left the engine running. No one appeared to be near the barricade. I blew the horn and regretted the action an instant later. Five men appeared from the house nearest to the barricade and walked towards us carrying rifles. They were Afrims.

'Oh God,' I said under my breath.

'Alan, go and talk to them. Perhaps our house is not being used by them!'

There was an edge of hysteria in her voice. Undecided, I sat in my seat and watched the men. They lined up at the barricade and stared at us without expression.

Isobel urged me again, and I got out of the car and walked over to them.

I said: 'I live at number 47. Can we get through to our house, please?' They said nothing, but continued to stare. 'My daughter is ill. We must get her to bed.'

They stared.

I turned towards the camera-crew and shouted: 'Can you tell me if anyone has been allowed in here today?'

Neither of them responded, though the man pointing the microphone in our direction looked down at his equipment and adjusted the setting of a knob.

I turned back to the Africans.

'Do you speak English?' I said. 'We must get to our house.'

There was a long silence, and then one of the men said in a thick accent: 'Go away!'

He lifted his rifle.

I got back into the car, put it into gear and accelerated away, swinging across the deserted road in a wide U-turn. As we passed the camera the Afrim fired his rifle and our windscreen shattered into opacity. I banged my forearm against it and a shower of glass fragments blew in. Isobel screamed and fell to the side, covering her head with her arms. Sally reached over from the back seat and put her arms around my neck and shouted incoherently into my ear.

When we were about a hundred yards away I slowed a little and leaned forward in my seat, pulling myself from Sally's grip. I looked in the rear-view mirror and saw that the camera-operator had turned the instrument to follow our flight down the road.

* * *

I stood with many others on the beach at Brighton. We were watching the old ship that was drifting in the Channel, listing to port at an angle of what the newspapers told us was twenty degrees. It was about a mile from the shore, riding the rough seas uneasily. The lifeboats from Hove, Brighton and Shoreham stood by, awaiting radio confirmation that they might take it in tow. Meanwhile, we on the shore were watching for it to sink, some of us having come many miles to see the spectacle.

* * *

I reached the main group without meeting any patrols, and as soon as I considered it prudent I approached Lateef and gave him the mirror-daggers.

He said nothing about the other men who had been foraging, nor whether they had been successful.

He looked critically at the daggers, but was unable to conceal his grudging admiration for my initiative. He took one in his right hand, balanced it, held it up, tried holstering it in his belt. His habitual frown deepened. I wanted to make excuses for the crudity of the weapons, explain about the shortage of materials suitable for the manufacture of armaments, but held my silence as I knew he was aware of this.

His criticism of my handiwork was political, not practical.

Later, I saw him throwing away my daggers, and I decided against mentioning the petrol-bombs.

* * *

As I passed through my adolescence I underwent, as is common to most boys, many puzzling stages of development towards full sexuality.

Near where I lived with my parents and brothers was a large area of waste ground which was cluttered with many piles of building materials, and torn into moulds of bare earth by bulldozers. I understood that at one time it had been scheduled for development, but for reasons unknown to me the scheme had been delayed. Consequently, the area provided an ideal playing-ground for myself and my friends. Though officially we were forbidden to play there, the many hundreds of hiding-places made it possible for us to evade the various forms of authority as manifested by parents, neighbours and the local police-constable.

During this period I was undergoing doubts as to whether or not I should be indulging in such childish activities. My elder brother had obtained a place at a good university and was half-way through his first year there. My younger brother was at the same school as I, and by all accounts was more academically successful than I had been at his age. I knew that if I wished to emulate my elder brother's achievement I should apply myself more purposefully to my studies, but my mind and my body were occupied with an uncontrollable restlessness and many times I found myself on the building-site with boys not only a year or two younger than I, but who attended a different school.

It had always appeared to me that the other boys were more advanced in their thinking than I was.

It was always they who made the suggestions about what we should do, and I who followed. Any move to a new activity came from someone else, and I was often amongst the last to take it up. In this way, such pastimes that I had at that time were secondhand to me and did not provide me with any real involvement.

In a limbo between what I was doing and what I should be doing, neither was effected well.

Accordingly, when two or three local girls joined us on occasional evenings, I was slow to appreciate the subtlety of how

their presence was affecting the behaviour of the others.

By chance, I knew one of these girls already. Her parents and mine were on friendly terms, and we had passed several evenings in each other's company. My relationship with her to this point, however, had been platonic and superficial: I had not reacted to her presence in any sexual way. When she and her friends appeared for the first time on the waste ground I did not exploit this small advantage I had over the other boys. On the contrary, I became embarrassed at her presence, imagining in some obscure way that word of my activities would get back to my parents.

The first evening they were with us was awkward and unsettling. The conversation became an aimless and banal banter, with the girls feigning disinterest in us, and myself and the other boys pretending to ignore them. This set the pattern for the next few encounters.

It happened that I went away with my parents for a short holiday, and on my return I discovered that the relationship with the girls had entered a more physical phase. Some of the boys had air-rifles, and they used these to impress the girls with their marksmanship. There was a lot of fake hostility and sometimes we would become involved in wrestling matches with them.

Even through this I failed to observe the sexual aspects of what was happening.

One evening a pack of cards was produced by one of the boys. For a while we played childish games with them, but became bored quickly. Then one of the girls said she knew a variety of the game Consequences which could be played with cards. She took the pack and dealt out cards to us all, explaining as she went. The idea was very simple: everyone was dealt cards from the top of the pack, and the first boy and the first girl to receive a card of the same value – say two Queens or two Sevens – were matched up for Consequences.

I did not fully understand, but took the first card as it was given to me. It was a Three. On the first deal, no two people had similar cards, though one of the other boys also had a Three. This provoked ribald comments, which I laughed at without properly appreciating the humour. On the next deal, the girl I knew through my parents was given a Three.

A short discussion ensued, the outcome of which was that I was adjudged to be the winner as I had drawn the Three before the other boy. I was willing to let him take my turn, as I was

uncertain of what was expected of me.

The girl who had started the game explained that it was usually played strictly to the rules, and that I had to take my turn. I was to go, she said, to the far side of some near-by earthworks with the other girl and that we would be allowed ten minutes.

The girl and I stood up, and amid many catcalls did as directed.

When we reached the other side of the earthworks, I felt I could not admit to her that I did not know what to do. Alone with a girl for the first time in my life I stood in miserable silence.

Then she said: 'Are you going to?'

I said: 'No.'

She sat down on the earth and I stood before her. I kept glancing at my watch.

I asked the girl several questions. I found out how old she was, and what her middle name was. She told me the school she went to and what she was going to do when she left. In answer to my question, she told me that she had lots of boyfriends. When she asked me how many girlfriends I had I told her that there were a few.

As soon as the ten minutes were up we went back to the others.

I was handed the cards, which I shuffled and then dealt for the second round. This time there was no question as to who the winners were, as two Tens came up on the first deal. The boy and the girl left us and went to the other side of the earthworks. While we waited for them to return, several dirty jokes were told. The atmosphere amongst those of us waiting was tense and strained, and though I joined in with the others I found myself wondering what was going on behind the mound of bare earth.

At the end of the ten minutes they had not returned. The girl who had started the game was the one with the boy and we assumed she would play by the rules. One of the boys suggested that we go and get them, and this we did, running towards the earthworks shouting and whistling. Before we reached them they came out and we went back to the cards. I noticed that neither of them looked at each other, nor at any of us.

On the third deal, the girl I had been with drew a number with one of the other boys, and they went off to the mound. I found myself disturbed by this. After a moment or two I declared I was sick of the game and walked off in the direction of my house.

As soon as I was out of sight of the others, I worked round

through the waste ground and approached the earthworks from the side. I was able to get close up to the couple without being observed, as a pile of unpainted window-frames was stacked near by. From this cover I watched them.

They were standing up. The girl was wearing her school blazer and dress. The boy was standing close to her, with his back to me. They were talking quietly.

Suddenly, he threw his arms around her neck and dragged her to the floor. They wrestled together for a moment, in the way we had often done before. At first she fought back, but after a minute or so she rolled away from him and lay passively. He reached over to her and laid his hand very tentatively on her stomach. Her head lolled away from him, facing towards my hiding-place, and I saw that her eyes were tightly closed. The boy pushed aside her blazer and I could see the gentle swell of her breasts by his hand. Because she was lying down, they were not as protuberant as normal. The boy was staring at them rigidly, and I discovered that I was beginning to have an erection. With my hand in my trouser pocket I moved my penis so that it was less uncomfortable, and as I did so the boy's hand slid up and cupped one of her breasts. He slid the hand backwards and forwards with increasing speed. In a while, the girl cried out as if it were hurting her, and she rolled back towards him. Though she then had her back to me, I could see that she had put her hand at the top of his legs and was caressing him.

I was becoming intolerably excited by this, and though I wanted to stay where I was I felt very unsettled by what I was witnessing. I backed away and walked in the direction I had come. As I did so my hand was still in my pocket holding my penis, and in a moment I ejaculated. I mopped myself clean with a handkerchief, then went back to the others, explaining that I had returned home but that my parents were out.

A few minutes later the girl and boy came back. Like the others, they did not meet our eyes.

We were prepared for a fourth hand, but the girls said they were fed up and wanted to go home. We tried to persuade them to stay, but in a few moments they left. As they walked away we could hear them giggling. When he was sure they were gone, the boy who had just come back undid the fly of his trousers and showed us his penis. It was still erect and looked a dark red colour. He masturbated in front of us and we watched enviously.

The girls came back to the waste ground the following evening,

by which time I had devised a method of ensuring I dealt myself the right cards. I rubbed the breasts of each of the three girls, and one of them allowed me to put my hand inside her dress and brassière and feel her nipples. After this the cards were no longer used and we took it in turns. By the end of the following week I had had sexual intercourse with the girl I had known through my parents, and was proud that I was the only one of us she would do it with.

I took my examinations in the weeks following and was not successful. I was obliged to reapply myself to my work and in course of time I lost contact with the group. I entered university two years later.

* * *

If anything, the wind had increased in the time I had been on the beach, and as the waves broke on the shingle about twenty-five yards from where I stood, a fine spray was driven across our faces. I was wearing my spectacles, and within a few minutes the lenses were misted with a thin deposit of salt. I removed them and placed them inside my pocket in their case.

The sea was now very rough, white breakers flickering across its surface as far as the horizon. As yet the sun still shone, though there was a bank of dark cloud in the south-west. I stood in a large crowd of people, and we were watching the drifting ship.

The transistor radio carried by someone near by announced the news that the ship was not to be assisted by rescue craft, and that the lifeboats were being ordered to return to their stations. Not a mile away from us we could see the very boats circling, obviously undecided whether to obey the orders from the shore or their own consciences. Some distance behind the drifting ship we could see the Royal Navy frigate which had been detailed to follow. So far, it had not interfered.

At one point I turned round to make an estimate of the number of people watching from the shore and saw that every available access point was crowded along the side of the King's Road that overlooked the beach, in addition to the hundreds of people that stood on the Central Pier.

At just after four minutes past two o'clock the lifeboats turned away from the ship and headed back to their respective stations. I estimated that in less than a quarter of an hour the ship would have drifted past the end of the pier and be invisible from where I was standing. I debated whether or not to move, but decided to stay.

The ship sank at just before ten past. Its angle of list had increased markedly in the last few minutes, and many of the people on board could be seen jumping over the side. The ship sank quickly and unspectacularly.

Within fifteen minutes of its sinking the majority of the crowd had dispersed. I stayed on, enthralled in some primeval way by the feel of the wind, the sound and the sight of the great surf and by what I had just witnessed. I left the shore an hour or so later, distressed by the appearance of the few Africans who managed to swim to the shore. Less than fifty of them made it to the beach alive, though I understand from my acquaintances in Brighton that in the next few days the sea threw up hundreds of dead with every tide. Human flotsam, made buoyant by its distended, gas-filled belly.

* * *

As night fell I pulled the car into the side of the road and stopped. It was too cold to continue driving with the glass of the wind-screen knocked away, and in any case I was reaching the end of our supply of petrol and did not wish to discuss this with Isobel in front of Sally.

For security we had driven north from London and were in the countryside around Cuffley. I had debated mentally whether to try to reach the U.N. camp again, but after two long and extremely tiring journeys to and from there in the last twenty-four hours, neither I nor the others were anxious to repeat it if an alternative could be found. In addition, the twin factors of a dwindling supply of petrol and the discouragement of the official that morning combined to indicate that we should at least find an alternative.

We took our warmest clothing from the suitcases and put it on. Sally lay down on the back seat of the car and we covered her with as much warm material as we could find. Isobel and I waited in silence, smoking the last of our cigarettes, until we felt reasonably sure she had drifted off into sleep. None of us had eaten a proper meal during the day, the only food we had consumed being some chocolate we found in an automatic machine outside a row of closed shops. While we sat there it began to rain, and in a few minutes a trickle of water came in through the empty rubber frame, and ran over the dashboard on to the floor.

'We'd better make for Bristol,' I said.

'What about the house?'

I shook my head. 'We've no hope of going back.'

'I don't think we should go to Bristol.'

'Where else can we go?'

'Back to the U.N. camp. At least, for the next few days.'

'And after that?'

'I don't know. Things *must* get better. We can't be kicked out of our house just like that. There must be a law . . .'

I said: 'That won't be the answer. Things have gone too far now. The Afrim situation has grown out of the housing shortage. I can't see them agreeing to a compromise where they will have to give up the house they've already taken over.'

Isobel said: 'Why not?'

I didn't answer. In the few weeks preceding the recent events Isobel had shown an increasing disinterest in the progress of the Afrim situation, and this had only widened the distance between us. Whereas I had been continually faced with the breakdown of the society that we knew, Isobel appeared to withdraw from the reality as if she could survive by ignoring events. Even now, with our home inaccessible to us, she was content to allow me to take the decisions.

Before we settled for the night, I walked from the car in the direction of a near-by house, from whose windows showed warm amber light. Less than a hundred yards away, an unaccountable fear came into my mind, and I turned away. The house was of the upper middle-class variety, and there were two expensive cars and a trailer in the drive.

I considered my own appearance: unshaven and in need of a change of clothing. It was difficult to say what would have been the reaction of the occupiers of the house had I knocked at the door. The anarchy of the situation in London bore no relation to this area, which had as yet had no contact with the homeless and militant African people.

I returned to the car.

'We're going to an hotel for the night,' I said.

Isobel made no answer, but stared out of her side-window into the dark.

'Well, don't you care?'

'No.'

'What do you want to do?'

'We'll be all right here.'

The rain still dribbled into the car through the gaping hole that had been our windscreen. In the few minutes I had been

outside, the drizzle had soaked my outer clothes. I wanted Isobel to touch me, share to some measure the experience of my walk . . . yet I shrank mentally from the thought of her hand on my arm.

‘What about Sally?’ I said.

‘She’s asleep. If you want to find an hotel, I won’t object. Can we afford it?’

‘Yes.’

I thought about it for a bit longer. We could stay here, or we could drive on. I glanced at my watch. It was just after eight o’clock. If we slept in the car, in what kind of condition would we be by morning?

I started the engine and drove slowly back to the centre of Cuffley. I knew of no hotels in the neighbourhood, but was confident of finding somewhere. The first place we found was full, and so was the second. We were following directions to a third when the petrol-tank finally ran dry. I coasted the car into the side and stopped.

I was relieved in a way that the decision had been made for us; I’d held out no real hopes of finding accommodation in an hotel. Isobel said nothing, but sat with her eyes closed. Her face and clothes were damp from the rain which had blown in through the screen.

I ran the heater until the water inside the mechanism had cooled to a point where there was no more benefit to be had. Isobel said she was tired.

We agreed to take it in turns to lie across one another; I said she could have the first period. She tucked her knees up and lay across from her seat with her head in my lap. I put my arms around her to keep her warm, then tried to find a comfortable position myself.

Within a few minutes Isobel had passed into a semblance of sleep. I spent the night uneasily, unable to pass into complete sleep because of my uncomfortable position.

Behind us Sally stirred from time to time; of the three of us she was probably the only one rested fully in the night.

* * *

Lateef showed me a leaflet he had found. It was printed by the Royal Secessionist Air Force, and it stated that ten minutes’ warning, in the form of three low traverses, would always be

given to civilian occupants of villages before a raid was to take place.

★ ★ ★

There was a road through the New Forest. I drove along it in the twilight of the evening, knowing that we had stayed away too long. It had not been wise to do what we had done in any event, and with the present police situation it had been foolhardy.

I had a girl in the car with me. Her name was Patti. She and I had been at an hotel in Lymington and we were hurrying to get back to London before nine o'clock. She was asleep next to me, her head resting lightly on my shoulder.

She was awakened by my stopping the car at a road-block on the outskirts of Southampton. There were several men standing by the block, which was a makeshift arrangement of two old cars and an assortment of heavy building materials. Each of the men carried a weapon, though only one had a rifle. It occurred to me that for the last few miles we had not seen any traffic going in the same direction as us, and guessed that most local people would have known about the block and have found an alternative route.

As a result of the road-block we were obliged to turn round and follow a long diversion through the countryside to Winchester, and thence to the main road to London. We had been warned by the people at the hotel to expect similar obstructions at Basingstoke and Camberley, and as it turned out we were required to make lengthy detours around these also.

The road into south-west London was unobstructed by civilian defence groups, but we saw many police vehicles and spot-checks on motorists. We were fortunate in passing through without delay. I had not been out of London for several months and had had no idea that access and movement had been curtailed to this degree.

I dropped Patti near the flat she shared in Barons Court and carried on towards my home in Southgate. Again, none of the major roads was blocked by civilian resistance groups, but I was stopped by the police near King's Cross and my possessions were searched.

It wasn't until nearly one in the morning that I arrived home. Isobel had not waited up for me.

★ ★ ★

The next morning I went to a near-by house and managed to persuade the occupier to let me have a gallon of petrol siphoned from out of his car's tank. I paid him two pounds for it. He informed me that there was a garage less than three miles away which had been selling petrol up until the night before. He gave me directions to find it.

I returned to the car and told Isobel and Sally that with any luck we would be able to make Bristol during the day.

Isobel said nothing, though I knew she did not want to go to her parents. From my point of view it was the only solution. As it was equally obvious that we could no longer return to our house, the prospect of moving to the relatively distant town was one sufficiently familiar to reassure us.

I filled the tank with the gallon of petrol and started the engine. As we drove towards the garage as directed, we listened to a news broadcast on the radio which announced the first break in the police. About a quarter of the force had seceded in favour of the Afrims. There was to be a meeting of chief constables with both the Afrim command and Tregarth's Home Office, and a statement would be issued from Whitehall later in the day.

We found the garage with difficulty and were allowed what the proprietor informed us was the standard quota: three gallons. With what we had, this gave us a maximum potential mileage of around one hundred and thirty miles. This should be just sufficient for us to reach Bristol, provided we were not forced to make too many detours from the shortest route.

I told Isobel and Sally, and they expressed relief. We agreed to set off as soon as we had had something to eat.

At Potters Bar we found a small café which gave us a good breakfast at normal prices. No mention was made of the Afrim situation, and the radio that was playing carried only light music. At Isobel's request we were sold a vacuum-flask which was filled for us with hot coffee, and after we had washed in the toilets of the café we set out.

The day was not warm, but there was no rain. Driving with the windscreen missing was unpleasant, but not impossible. I decided not to listen to the radio, seeing for once some wisdom in Isobel's attitude of not allowing the events around us to affect us. Although it was of course essential to keep abreast of the developing situation, I was won over to her passivity.

A new worry materialised in the form of a continual vibration from the engine. I had been unable to maintain regular servicing on it, and I knew that one of the valves was in need of replace-

ment. I trusted to it lasting at least until we reached Bristol and did not mention it to the others.

As far as I could see, the worst part of the journey would be in avoiding barricaded sections of the suburbs around London. I therefore skirted the north-western edge of the city, driving first to Watford (unbarricaded), then to Rickmansworth (barricaded, but open to through traffic on the by-pass), and then across-country to Amersham, High Wycombe and south towards Henley-on-Thames. As we went farther from London we saw fewer and fewer overt signs of the trouble, and a mood of tranquillity came over us. We were even able to purchase more petrol and fill our reserve cans.

At another small café on the way into Reading we ate a lunch and made our way towards the main road to Bristol, confident of arriving there well before nightfall.

Five miles to the west of Reading the engine-vibrations increased suddenly, and the power faded. I kept the car going as long as possible, but at the first incline it stopped. I did what I could to investigate, but the fuel- and ignition-systems were not faulty, and I could only assume that the valve had finally blown.

I was on the point of discussing this with Isobel and Sally when a police-car pulled up alongside.

* * *

I worked for some months as part-time barman in a public-house in the East End of London. It had become necessary to earn some extra money. I was then studying for my Finals and my grant had been spent.

It came as something of a surprise for me to learn that the East End was a series of loosely connected ghettos, containing Jews, Negroes, Chinese, Greeks, Cypriots, Italians and English. Until this work I had always assumed that this part of London was primarily white. The pub reflected this cosmopolitan aspect to some degree, although it was clear that the publican did not encourage it. Arguments in the bar often arose, and we had been instructed to remove bottles and glasses from the counters if a fracas developed. It was part of my duties as barman to assist in breaking up any fight that started.

When I had been at the pub for three months the publican decided to hire a pop-group for the week-ends, and within a matter of weeks the trouble had passed. The type of customer changed noticeably.

Instead of the older drinker, set in his ways and dogmatically opinionated, the pub began to attract a younger element. Members of the minority groups no longer came, and within a couple of months almost every customer at the pub was aged less than thirty.

The clothing fashions at the time tended to be colourful and casual, but these were not common at the pub. I learned in time that this was an outward manifestation of an innate conservatism that is widespread in this part of London.

The publican's first name was Harry; I never learned his surname. He had once been an all-in wrestler, and on the wall of the bar behind the counter there were several photographs of him in satin dressing-gowns and with a long pigtail. I never heard Harry talk about his experience in the ring, though his wife once told me that he had earned enough money from it to enable him to buy the pub outright.

Towards the end of the evenings several of Harry's friends, who were in general around his own age, would come into the bar. Often after closing-time, Harry would invite them to stay behind and have a few drinks with him. On these occasions he would offer me a few extra shillings to stay later and serve them. As a result of this I overheard many of their conversations and came to learn that their prejudices and information on subjects such as race and politics were as conservative as those attitudes implied by the dress of the other customers.

Several years later, John Tregarth and his party were to gain a substantial electoral backing from areas in which different races were mixed freely.

★ ★ ★

We stayed a few more days at the encampment. Each of us was undecided what should be done. Most of the men had lost a wife or a sleeping-partner in the abduction, and though we knew from what had happened to Willen that it would serve no purpose to approach the Afrims directly, it was instinctive to stay in the place from where they had been taken. I felt restless, and worried continually for the safety of Sally. Isobel I was less concerned for. It was with relief, then, that I heard at the end of the week the rumour that we were to go to Augustin's.

Though I had no personal wish to visit the place, it did at least mean that we were to move and with apparent purpose.

As we loaded our possessions on to the handcarts and prepara-

tions were made for the move, Lateef came over to me and confirmed that we were going to Augustin's. It would, he said, be good for the morale of the men.

He appeared to be right, as within a couple of hours the mood had changed, and in spite of a sharp fall in temperature we walked the first few miles in a spirit of cavalier good humour.

* * *

'You do have a name?' I said.

'Yes.'

'Are you going to tell me?'

'No.'

'Do you have a reason for withholding this information?'

'Yes. That is, no.'

'Well, tell it to me then.'

'No.'

That is the first conversation I had with my wife. Her name was Isobel.

* * *

As the full scale of the forthcoming disaster made itself apparent to the British public, there descended on the country the kind of stalwart resolution and directed confusion that my parents had sometimes told me about when recounting their experience of the early months of the second world war.

In line with a major part of the intellectual element of the country, our college formed a society which professed to be sympathetic to the plight of the Africans. Our motives were principally humanitarian, though there were a few members – mainly those who had earlier reflected a more conservative view, and who joined the society for policy reasons – who adopted a more academic attitude. It was people such as these who first discredited the movement, as they were unable to answer the charges in the press and other media that the pro-Afrim groups were left-wing revolutionaries.

It was undeniably true that the African immigrants were forming themselves into armed groups, that they were being supplied with weapons from abroad and that they were moving into cities on a large scale and occupying houses and displacing the former white inhabitants.

Most people had seen for themselves that these charges were

true, but the belief of our college society was that the fault lay with the government. If a more charitable attitude had been adopted from the outset, the Africans' plight would have been lessened, and political opportunities would not have been able to exploit the situation. But extreme policies induce extreme reactions, and the tight conservatism of Tregarth and his government – approved of by a sizeable percentage of the country – allowed for little liberalism towards the illegal coloured immigrants.

In the remaining weeks of the college term my colleagues and I did what we could to pass our beliefs on to our students. When the end of term arrived, the period of our influence passed. I felt apprehensive as I delivered the last of my own lectures, and even before I left the college grounds I was censuring myself for not having expended more energy in this direction.

In the weeks that followed, as industrial unrest spread and public demonstrations in the streets became an everyday event, I saw that we had been wrong to believe that our attempts to arouse sympathy for the Afrims would do much good. There was a small and vociferous section of the community which adhered to its moral principles, but more and more ordinary people were coming into direct conflict with the Afrims as the armed insurgence went on.

At one of the largest demonstrations in London I saw some of the students from the college carrying a large banner emblazoned with the name of our society. I had not intended to join the march, but I abandoned my intended errand and followed the demonstration to its noisy and violent conclusion.

In the event, the doors of the college were never opened for the following term.

★ ★ ★

We were told by the two police-officers that we were in restricted territory and that we must move at once. There were reports, they said, that there had been a mutiny in a near-by army-camp, and that the entire neighbourhood was being sealed off by government forces.

I told the police that our car had broken down and that though we were not disputing what they told us, we had come into the vicinity without any warning from the authorities.

The policemen appeared to be incapable of listening to reason.

Their instructions were repeated and we were told to leave the area immediately. Sally began to cry at this point, as one of the policemen had opened the door of the car and dragged her out. I protested at once and was hit hard across my face with the back of a hand.

I was pressed up against the side of the car and my pockets were searched. When they looked in my wallet and saw that I had once been a lecturer at the college, my identity-card was confiscated. Again I protested, but was ignored.

Isobel and Sally were similarly searched.

When this was completed our belongings were taken from the car and put in the road. Our reserve petrol cans were taken from the boot and placed inside the police-car. I remembered what I had heard on the radio earlier, and asked to see the warrant-cards of the police. I was again ignored.

We were told that the police-car would be returning along this road in half an hour. We were to be gone by then. Otherwise, they said, we would be responsible for the consequences.

As they turned to get back into their car, I moved forward quickly and kicked the man who had hit me. I got my shoe hard against his coccyx, throwing him forward on to the ground. The other man turned round and dived at me. I swung my fist at his face, but missed. He threw an arm around my neck, pulled me to the ground and held me there with my arm twisted up against my back and my face pressed painfully into the dirt. The man I had attacked had climbed to his feet, and now he came over and placed three hard kicks into my side.

When they had gone Isobel helped me on to the front passenger-seat of the car, and with a paper tissue wiped away some of the blood that was coming out of my mouth.

As soon as I had recovered sufficiently to walk we set off across a field in a direction opposite to the one in which the police had waved vaguely when telling us about the army mutiny.

There was a severe pain in my side, and although I could walk with some difficulty I was unable to carry anything heavy. Isobel was therefore obliged to take our two large suitcases, and Sally had to carry the small one. I held our transistor radio under my arm. As we walked I switched it on, but was able to raise only one channel of the BBC, and that was the one playing continuous light music.

All three of us were at the point of despair. Neither Isobel nor Sally asked me what we should do next . . . for the first time since leaving our house, we were wholly aware how far beyond

our control events had moved. Later, the rain returned and we sat under a tree on the edge of a field, frightened, directionless, and utterly involved in a sequence of events that no one had expected and that no one now seemed capable of stopping.

* * *

I learned from the newspaper I read regularly that the mood of the country had polarised into three general groups.

Firstly, those people who had come into contact with the Afrims and suffered accordingly, or those people who were colour-prejudiced in any case, who followed the government's policy and who felt the Afrims should be deported. According to several polls this feeling was prevalent.

Secondly, those people to whom there was no question but that the Afrims should be allowed to stay in Britain and be afforded as much charity as possible until they were capable of integrating with our society in a normal way.

Thirdly, those people who did not care whether or not the Africans landed, so long as they themselves were not directly affected.

The apparent apathy of this third group displeased me, until I realised that for my general lack of involvement I should probably be counted a member.

I questioned my own moral stand. Although my instinct was to remain uncommitted – at this time I was conducting an affair with a woman and she was occupying a major part of my thoughts – it was this awareness of my insularity which convinced me I should join the pro-Afrim society at the college.

The political and social climates were not responsive to the kind of moral judgements that had to be made.

Soon after the second election Tregarth's government introduced much of the new legislation it had promised in its manifesto. The police had wider powers of entry and detention, and the elements that some of Tregarth's ministers described as subversive were more effectively dealt with. Public demonstrations on any political issue were controlled tightly by the police, and the armed forces were empowered to assist in the keeping of the peace.

As the boats from Africa continued to land on British shores, the problem could no longer be ignored.

After the first wave of landings the government issued the warning that illegal immigrants would be prevented from land-

ing, forcibly if necessary. This led directly to the incident in Dorset, where the army confronted two shiploads of Africans. Thousands of people had come to Dorset from all over the country to witness the landing, and the result was a confrontation between army and public. The Afrims got ashore.

After this, the government's warning was modified to the effect that as illegal immigrants were captured they would be given suitable treatment in hospital, then deported.

In the meantime, polarisation of attitudes was accelerated by the illegal supply of arms to the Afrims. As their presence developed into a military threat, so there grew deeper schisms in the country.

The private life of everyone in the regions directly affected – and of many in areas away from the insurgence – became oriented entirely around the immediate problem. The police force divided, and so did the Army and Air Force. The Navy remained loyal to the government. When a detachment of American Marines was landed to act in an advisory capacity to what had become known as the Nationalist side, and when the United Nations drafted a peace-keeping force, the military aspect of the situation became resolved.

By this time, no one could be said to be uninvolved.

* * *

'I hear we're going to Augustin's.'

The man marching next to me stared straight ahead. 'About bloody time.'

'You been missing it then?'

'Piss off, will you?'

I said nothing, but let them drag out the interplay of ideas to their logical conclusion. I'd heard this or a similar conversation a dozen times in the last week.

'It was Lateef that decided. The others wanted to stay put.'

'I know. Good old Lat.'

'He's missing it, too.'

'They got one of his? He never mentions it.'

'Yeah. They say he was screwing Olderton's wife on the quiet.'

'I don't believe it.'

'It's a fact.'

'What about Olderton, then?'

'Never knew a thing.'

The other man laughed. 'You're right. I have been missing it.'

'Haven't we all.'

They both laughed then, cackling like two old women in the uncanny cold silence of the countryside.

* * *

We slept that night in the open, and in the morning were fortunate in finding a shop still open that sold us, at normal prices, a good deal of camping equipment. At this stage we still had not formulated a serious plan, beyond a recognition of the fact that we must get to Bristol at the earliest opportunity.

We walked all that day, sleeping again in the open, but this time with the equipment. It rained during the course of the night and we were adequately protected. In spite of what at first seemed to be great difficulties, our spirits stayed high, though when I overheard Isobel talking with Sally shortly before the girl fell asleep I thought I detected a considerable strain of false optimism in their tone.

As far as I was concerned, I was passing through what I was to learn later was a temporary phase of genuine high spirits. Paradoxical as this may seem, the comparative freedom we now enjoyed, at a time when the martial law in the cities was imposing impossible restrictions on most of the population, served to compensate for all the other facts such as that we had lost virtually all our possessions, were now homeless and that the possibility of our reaching Bristol was remote.

We encountered a stretch of woodland and for a few days made our encampment there. It was during this time that our mood became depressed.

For food, we visited a near-by village where we were sold all we required without question. But later in the week, when a detachment of the Afrim forces raided the village and as a result the inhabitants erected barricades, this supply was cut off from us.

We decided to move on, and travelled across country in a southerly direction. I became increasingly aware of Isobel's unspoken resentment about what was happening to us, and I found myself competing with her for Sally's approval. In this way, Sally became the instrument of our conflict (as in fact she had always been) and suffered considerably.

The day after the soaking of our equipment and possessions

in the crossing of the river, the conflict came to a head.

By this time we were out of touch with the rest of the world. The batteries of the radio had been growing weaker, and now the water had damaged it beyond our repair. While Isobel and Sally laid out our clothes and equipment to dry in the sun, I went off by myself and tried to condense my knowledge into something from which I could plan our next moves.

We knew only that we were in grave difficulty and that our personal problems were aggravated by the situation around us. Though we knew only too well the extent of our own difficulties, we would have been better placed to cope with them had we been able to know the current state of the political situation.

(Much later, I learned that at this time there was a large-scale welfare scheme being initiated by the Red Cross and the United Nations, which was attempting to rehabilitate all those people like ourselves who had been dispossessed by the fighting. As it turned out, this effort was fated, as with the worsening state of the conflict, both organisations became discredited in the mind of the public, and their work was used by all participating sides as a tactical, political or social weapon against the others. The result of this was a massive distrust of all welfare organisations, and in time their function became the superficial one of maintaining a presence.)

It was difficult to reconcile ourselves to the standards of existence we were now having to accept.

I found myself looking at the situation as being a predetermined one. That my attitude to Isobel, the way in which our marriage had become nothing more than a social convenience, had resolved itself. While we were living at our house we were able to disregard both the fact that our relationship was hypocritical and that the political situation of that period had an effect on us.

But now that the latter had so changed our mode of existence we could no longer pretend about ourselves.

In those few minutes alone, I saw with penetrating clarity that our marriage had reached its conclusion and that the moment had arrived when the pretence must be abandoned. Practical considerations tried to intrude, but I ignored them. Isobel could fend for himself, or surrender herself to the police. Sally could come with me. We would return to London, and from there decide what next to do.

For one of the few times in my life I had reached a positive decision by myself, and it was not one I liked. Memories of

what had gone before – good memories – pulled at me. But I still had the bruises from the policeman's boot in my side and these served to remind me of the true nature of our lives.

The past had moved away from us and so had the present. Those moments with Isobel when I had thought we might once again work out a way to live with each other, presented themselves to me as falsehoods. Regret did not exist.

* * *

We were due to arrive at Augustin's the following day, but of necessity we slept that night in a field. None of us liked sleeping in the open, preferring to find abandoned houses or farm-buildings. I had never found it easy to settle when on hard ground and exposed to the cold. In addition, we discovered around midnight that by chance we had camped less than a mile from an anti-aircraft emplacement. Several times the guns opened fire, and although searchlights were used twice we were unable to see at what it was they were firing.

We moved on at first light, every one of us cold, irritable and tired. Five miles from Augustin's we were stopped by a patrol of U.S. Marines, and searched. It was routine, perfunctory, and it was over in ten minutes.

Sobered from garrulous irritability to our habitual watchful silence, we arrived in the vicinity of Augustin's around midday.

Lateef detailed myself and two others to move on ahead and establish that the camp was still there. All we had by way of directions was an Ordnance Survey grid-reference which had been passed on to us along the refugee network. Although we had no reason to doubt this information – the network was the only reliable form of news-dissemination – it was possible that one or another of the military groups had moved it on. In any case, it was essential to ensure that at the time we were there we would not interrupt anyone or be interrupted.

While Lateef organised the preparation of a meal we moved forward.

The grid-reference turned out to be a field which had carried crop-growth. It had evidently lain fallow for more than a year, as it was overgrown with rank grass and weeds. Although there were several signs of human habitation – a soil latrine in one corner, many bare patches in the grass, a refuse tip, the burnt ulcers where open fires had been – the field was empty.

We searched it in silence for a few minutes, until one of the

other men found a piece of white card inside a polythene bag resting under a tiny cairn of stones. It said: *Augustin's*, and was followed by another grid-reference. We consulted the map and found that it was less than three-quarters of a mile farther on.

The new site was inside a wood and we found it with comparative ease. It consisted of several tents of various sizes, ranging from crude sheets of canvas large enough to shelter only one or two persons, up to a medium-sized marquee of the sort once found at circuses. The whole encampment was roped off, except at one part where a large tent had been erected. Anyone wishing to enter the encampment was thus obliged to pass through this tent.

Over the entrance was tacked a crudely painted sign on what had once been a sheet or tablecloth: AUGUSTIN. Underneath that was written: SCREW A BLACK FOR PIECE. We went inside.

A young boy sat behind a trestle table.

I said to him: 'Is Augustin here?'

'He's busy.'

'Too busy to see us?'

'How many?'

I told the boy the number of men there were in our group. He left the tent and walked through into the encampment. A few minutes later Augustin himself joined us. Few refugees know what nationality Augustin is. He is not British.

He said to me: 'You got men?'

'Yes.'

'When they coming?'

I told him in about an hour. He looked at his watch.

'O.K. But out by six?'

We agreed to this.

He added: 'We got more in evening. O.K.?'

We agreed again, then returned to our own temporary camp where Lateef and the others were waiting for us. It occurred to me that if we told them where Augustin's was the others would not wait for us, and our own choices would be correspondingly restricted. Accordingly, we refused to divulge the exact location, and said that the camp had moved. When it was clear we intended to say no more, we were given food. After we had eaten we led the others to Augustin's.

Lateef went into the tent with myself and the other two men. The remainder crushed in behind us, or waited outside. I observed that in the time we had been away, Augustin had tidied up his own appearance and had placed a wooden barrier across

the inner flap of the tent to prevent us from passing straight through.

He was sitting behind the testle table. At his side was a tall white woman, with long black hair and remarkable blue eyes. She glared at us with what I took to be contempt.

Augustin said: 'How much you offer?'

'How much do you want?' Lateef said.

'No food.'

'Food is the best we can offer you.'

'No food. We want rifles. Or women.'

Lateef said: 'We have fresh meat. And chocolate. And plenty of tinned fruit.'

Augustin tried to look displeased, but I could tell he was unable to resist accepting our offers.

'O.K. Rifles?'

'No.'

'Women?'

Lateef told him, without mentioning the abduction, that we had no women. Augustin spat on to the surface of the table.

'How many nigger-slaves?'

'We haven't got any.'

I had expected Augustin not to believe this. Lateef had once told me that at his last visit, when Augustin was in a more expansive mood, he had confided to him that he 'knew' every refugee-group had several Negroes along as slaves or hostages. Notwithstanding the moral issue, the sheer practical fact of the constant searches and interrogations would have precluded this. In any case, Augustin appeared to take our word for it at the present moment.

'O.K. What food?'

Lateef passed him a sheet of paper, containing a list of provisions with which we would be willing to part. The woman read it out to him.

'No meat. We have enough. It stink too quick. More chocolate.'

Finally, the barter was agreed. Knowing what had had to be paid in the past, I realised that Lateef had struck a fair bargain. I had expected him to be forced to pay much higher. Perhaps for all Augustin's bluff manner, his surplus of food was not as great as he pretended and was experiencing hardship in other respects. It occurred to me to wonder at his insistence on weapons.

We moved outside the tent to where our handcarts were and off-loaded the agreed amounts of food. The business side accomplished, we were conducted through the tent and into a

small clearing. Augustin paraded us proudly past his wares.

There were approximately three times as many men as there were available girls. We agreed to behave in a reasonable fashion, and divided ourselves into three groups. We then drew lots as to the order in which we would go to the girls. I was in the group which selected the lot for the first of the three. While the others waited we walked up to the line of girls, who stood waiting for us as if they were troops on inspection.

All of the girls were Negroes. It appeared they had been chosen by Augustin personally, as they were similar in appearance: tall, full-breasted and wide-hipped. Their ages ranged from youthful middle-aged to one girl who was obviously in her early teens.

I selected a young woman of about twenty-five. As I spoke to her she bared her teeth as if I were to inspect those, too.

After a few words she led me away from the clearing to a small tent at the very edge of the encampment. There was little room inside the tent, so she took off her clothes outside. As she did so, I looked round at the other tents I could see and observed that outside each one the other women were similarly disrobing.

When she was naked she went inside. I took off my trousers and laid them on the ground next to where she had put her clothes. I followed her inside.

She was lying on a rough bed made out of several old blankets thrown on the ground. There were no flaps at either end of the tent, and had she been a few inches taller, both her head and her feet would have protruded.

As I entered the tent, the sight of her naked, outstretched body aroused me. I crawled in between her legs and lay down on top of her. I ran my left hand down between our bodies, caressing first her right breast, and then reaching down and holding tightly the tuft of brittle black hair.

I supported myself with my right arm at first, then as she put her arms around me, allowed it to rest down by her side. As I entered her I felt the cold hardness of metal by her side. Taking pains not to show my awareness of this, I explored as far as I dared with my fingers, and at length decided what I could feel was the trigger and guard of a rifle.

As we copulated, I managed to push the rifle away from us and towards the edge of the tent. I am satisfied that my movements were sufficiently unobtrusive, as she showed no sign of awareness. Finally, the rifle was about twelve inches away from us, yet still covered in part by the blankets.

My preoccupation with the presence of the weapon had lessened my sexual desire and I found that my erection had diminished, even though I had continued to make movements against her. I returned my attention to the girl and her body. Because of what had happened I took much longer than normal to come to a climax, and by the time I finished we were both perspiring freely.

Afterwards we dressed and returned to the clearing. From the ribald comments of the other men I gathered we had been away longer than anyone else. My girl lined up with the others and the second group of men went over and made their selections.

As they moved in pairs towards the outlying tents, I stepped past the others, through the tent with the trestle-table where Augustin and his woman sat in earnest conversation, and out to where we had left the handcarts.

I walked past them into the trees.

Twenty yards away I turned and looked back. Augustin was watching me suspiciously from his tent. I made a lewd gesture towards my crutch, indicating that I was about to urinate, and he waved to me. I walked on.

When I was out of sight of the encampment I turned and walked in a broad circle, keeping the camp on my left. After a while I turned in towards it again, and approached it cautiously. I came to the camp from the side. No one saw me.

Using every available tree and bush as cover, I moved around until I was opposite the tent where I had been. Again making sure that I was not observed, I crawled up to it on my hands and knees. I lay beside it on my stomach, the boundary rope directly above me.

Inside, the man was insulting the girl, cursing and blaspheming and insulting her race, pouring out verbal excrement about the colour of her skin. She replied with groans of passion.

I slid my hand under the flap of the tent, found the rifle, and gripped it. With a slowness that nearly panicked me, I slid it out, then made for the cover of the trees. I secreted the rifle in the wildly growing brambles of a hawthorn bush, then returned to the camp.

As I went past Augustin he made a vulgar comment about urine. He was eating the chocolate and had brown smears on his chin.

* * *

With the closing of the college I found myself in the second major financial crisis of my life. For a while we existed on our savings, but within a month it was clear I would have to find an alternative occupation. Though I telephoned the administrative section of the college on several occasions, I was rarely able even to obtain an answer, let alone a satisfactory resolution to the predicament. In the meantime, I applied myself to the task of obtaining employment.

It should be understood that at this time the country was passing through a phase of extreme economic difficulty. The balance of payments policy on which John Tregarth and his government had first come to power was seen to be working badly, if at all. As a result, prices continued to rise, and an increasing number of men were made to be unemployed. At first confident of myself and my Master's Degree in English History, I toured the offices of publishers intending to pick up some temporary position as an editor or adviser. I was soon disillusioned, finding that the world of books, like virtually everything else, was cutting back on expense and staff at every opportunity. With a similarly universal sequence of sadly shaking heads, I found that the way into some form of clerical work was also barred. Manual labour was, by and large, out of the question: since the middle seventies the industrial labour-pool had been directed by the unions.

At this stage I grew extremely depressed and went to my father for assistance. Though he was now retired he had been managing director of a small chain of companies and still had some influence. Neither of us cared for the brief contact into which this brought us, as we had not communicated except formally and politely for several years. Though he managed to obtain for me an insignificant position in a cloth-cutting factory, I never found a way to express fully my gratitude. When he died a few months later I tried unsuccessfully to feel more than a few minutes of regret.

With the more immediate aspects of the personal financial crisis solved, I turned my attention to developments on the national scene. There was no sign of a halt to the progress of events which were taking away the state of affairs I chose to think of as normal. It was of great significance to me that the government had closed the college. Though at first there had been a public outcry about the seemingly arbitrary way in which the universities were being dealt with, popular interest soon passed to other things.

I shall not attempt to describe the details of my work in the cloth factory. In brief, my labours entailed cutting certain types and colours of cloth to determined lengths, ensuring that they were labelled and packed correctly, and following through each consignment to the despatch point.

Within a week I had memorised all relevant details and from there the work degenerated into a meaningless routine which I acted out for the sole purpose of the money it brought me.

* * *

I said to Isobel: 'I want to talk to you. Come over here for a minute.'

'I want to talk to you too.'

We left Sally by the tents and walked back to where I had been before. We stood facing each other, uncomfortable in each other's presence. I realised that this was the first time I had been really alone with her for several days, if not weeks. That thought led me to remembering that we had not had intercourse for over three months.

I tried not to look at her.

'Alan, we've got to do something,' she said. 'We can't go on like this. I'm terrified of what's going to happen. We ought to go back to London. It isn't fair on Sally.'

'I don't know what to do,' I said. 'We can't go back, we can't reach Bristol. All we can do is wait.'

'But wait for *what*?'

'How do I know? Until things settle down again. You know the position as well as I do.'

'Have you thought what this is doing to Sally? Have you *looked* at her recently? Have you thought about what this is doing to me?'

'I know what it's doing to all of us.'

'And you do damn-all about it!'

'If you've got any positive suggestions . . .'

'Steal a car from someone. Shoot someone. Do *anything*, but get us out of this damned field and back to decent living! There must be somewhere we can go. Things would be all right in Bristol. Or we could go back to that camp. I'm sure they'd have us if they saw Sally.'

'What's wrong with Sally?'

'Nothing you'd ever notice.'

'What do you mean?'

She didn't answer, but I thought I caught her intention. This

was her way of using Sally against me.

I said: 'Be reasonable. You can't expect me to solve everything. There's nothing I or you can do. If there was, we'd do it.'

'There must be *something*. We can't live in a tent in some body's field for ever.'

'Look, the country's in one hell of a state, I don't know what's going on, and I doubt if we would if we were in London. There are police on all the main roads, troops in most of the towns. There're no newspapers and nothing on the radio. All I'm suggesting is that we stay as we are as long as we have to, until things get better. Even if we had a car we probably wouldn't be allowed to drive it. How long is it since we saw one on the road?'

Isobel burst into tears. I tried to comfort her, but she pushed me away. I stood by her, waiting for her to calm down. I was becoming confused. When I had thought about what I was going to say to her, it had seemed to be so simple.

As she wept, Isobel stepped away from me, shouldering me aside as I tried to pull her back. Across the field I could see Sally staring in our direction.

When Isobel had stopped crying, I said to her: 'What do you want most of all?'

'There's no point in telling you.'

'Yes, there is.'

She shrugged hopelessly. 'I think I want us to be as we were before this started.'

'Living in Southgate? With all those rows going on?'

She said: 'And you out till all hours of the night, sleeping with some little whore.'

Isobel had known about my affairs for two or more years. She no longer possessed the ability to sting me with them.

'You'd prefer that to this? Would you really? Think about it, will you?'

'I've thought about it,' she said.

'And about the rest of the marriage. Would you honestly want any of that back again?' I had already considered the question, knew my own answer to it. Our marriage had finished before it began.

'Anything . . . rather than this.'

'That's no answer, Isobel.'

I debated again whether or not to say to her what I had decided. As callous as it seemed to me in the face of her present state of mind, it presented an alternative to a situation we both detested.

Though she wanted to retrogress and I was going to move on. Was there, I wondered, any real significance?

'All right,' she said. 'How about this? We'll split up. You go back to London and try to find somewhere for us to live. I'll take Sally and we'll try to reach Bristol. We'll stay there until we hear from you.'

I said at once: 'No. Absolutely not. I'm not letting you take Sally. I don't trust you with her.'

'What do you mean? I'm her mother, aren't I?'

'That doesn't embrace every capability.'

For a second or two I saw genuine hatred in Isobel's face and I looked away. My unfaithfulness to Isobel in the past had been a negative reaction away from her, rather than some distinct movement to someone else in seeking something that she could not provide. It had come about through my inadequacy to confront the reality of our marriage, instead of out of a constructive awareness of some shortcomings in the relationship. Though I knew that our generally unsuccessful sex-life, which had initiated in some psychological difficulty in Isobel, was one of the first causes, it was no longer the whole reason and it was the complexity of our failure that made me unable to deal with it. My own motives were suspect. Thus, in provoking Isobel's overt hatred, I was rendered discomfited.

She said: 'That's what I want. You're obviously incapable of supplying an alternative.'

'I do have a suggestion.'

'What is it?'

And so I told her. I said I was taking Sally and that she was to go on to Bristol by herself. I offered her most of our remaining cash and as much equipment as she wanted. When she asked me why I wished to do this, I told her without compromising my earlier conception. I said as bluntly as I could that our marriage as such was over, that the social disruption had only resolved the situation into a more recognisable form. I told her that if she persisted in thinking that we could pick up again she was deluding herself and, in the long run, jeopardising Sally's future. The break had been forced on us, but nevertheless it was a natural one. I considered that Sally would be safer with me, and that when things settled down again we could obtain a divorce and Sally would get legal protection.

Isobel just said: 'I don't know,' and walked away.

I examined the rifle at the earliest opportunity and discovered that it was of a sort for which we carried ammunition. Lateef had this, so I was obliged to reveal to him that I had come into possession of a rifle.

Lateef had had the ammunition when I first joined his group, and I had no idea from where it had come.

Speaking to me in private, he told me that he had twelve rounds of ammunition that would suit my rifle, but warned me that it was in the interests of us all to dispose of the weapon at once. When I asked him why, he told me that he had heard that the death-penalty had been invoked for the unlicensed use of firearms.

From what he said, I drew the conclusion that he was envious of my having found the rifle.

I argued the need for protection, that had we been armed earlier we might have been able to protect the women. I made the observation that atrocities against refugees were on the increase, and that there was now no organised force which we could trust.

Lateef countered my arguments by pointing out the increased frequency of interrogations, and that so far we had managed to avoid personal violence against ourselves, whereas other refugee groups had suffered beatings, imprisonment and rape at the hands of military bodies.

His contention was that this was because we were manifestly defenceless.

I told him that I was prepared to accept any and all consequences of my being found in possession of the rifle; that if we were taken for interrogation I would hide it at once, and that if I was caught actually holding or using the rifle I would absolve the rest of the group from any knowledge or complicity.

Lateef seemed satisfied that this undertaking of mine effectively disposed of any disadvantage to him or the others, and in due course gave me the ammunition.

I took the weapon to pieces, cleaned and lubricated it, and learned how to sight it. Unwilling to waste any of the ammunition, or to draw attention to ourselves by the sound of its explosion, I did not fire it. A man in our group who knew something of rifles told me that it was powerful and accurate, and should be used with discretion.

In the days that followed I appreciated that there had been a

subtle shift of emphasis in the way in which the group organised itself.

★ ★ ★

I came to town in the early afternoon, while arrangements for the day's festivities were in their last stages. The square in the centre of the town had been emptied of cars, and people walked across the open space as if unaware that on normal days the town was jammed tight with the traffic passing through towards the coast.

Most of the shops which opened on to the square had laid out wooden stands in front of their windows and laden them with goods. Several men worked on the tops of ladders, attaching coloured bunting across the streets. Nearly every window ledge was decorated with a handful of flowers.

At the wide end of the square, in front of the council offices, there was a small fairground, consisting of a children's round-about, a helter-skelter, a row of swing-boats and several prize-booths.

As I waited outside my hotel, a large coach stopped in a nearby sidestreet and about fifty or sixty passengers climbed out and trooped into a mock-Tudor restaurant on the far side of the square. I waited until the last one was inside, then walked in the opposite direction until I was out of the town centre and in residential sidestreets.

When I returned the festivities were in full swing.

I caught my first sight of the girl as she stood by a display of handbags outside a leather store. It was the fashion at that time for girls to wear clothes made of very light material and with skirts several inches above the knee. She was dressed in pale blue and wore her hair straight and long. To me she was very beautiful. As I crossed the square towards her she moved on and was lost in the crowds. I waited by the leather shop, hoping to catch another glimpse of her, but was not able to. After a few minutes I changed my position and stood in the narrow alley that ran between the shooting-gallery and coconut-shy.

I returned to my hotel after an hour and ordered some coffee. Later, I went back into the square and saw her profile against the side of one of the lorries that transported the fairground equipment. She was walking at right angles to my line of sight, staring thoughtfully at the ground. She reached the steps outside the council offices and walked up them. At the top she turned

and faced me. Across the square we gazed at one another. I walked towards her.

I reached the bottom of the steps and she turned and went into the building. Not liking to follow her, I went up to where she had been standing and stood facing into the building. Behind me, I heard an abrupt explosion and a scream, and the sound of several people shouting. I did not turn. For about two minutes the square was noisy with the sound of shouting and music. Finally, someone thought to turn off the music that was being relayed by tannoy into the square, and silence fell. Somewhere a woman was sobbing.

Only as the ambulance arrived did I turn to face the square and saw that an accident had happened on the roundabout. A small child was trapped by its legs between the platform and the motor in the centre.

I waited for the child to be released. The ambulance men did not appear to know how to go about it. Finally, a fire-appliance drove up and three men using an electric saw cut through the wood of the platform and freed the child's legs. The child was unconscious. As the ambulance drove away, and the music started up again, I realised that the girl stood beside me. I took her hand and led her away from the centre into the streets along which I had walked earlier.

Her beauty took away from me my ability for glib conversation. I wanted to flatter her and impress her, but the appropriate words would not flow.

We returned to my hotel in the evening and I bought her dinner. When we had finished eating she became distracted and told me she had to leave. I saw her to the door of the hotel but she would not allow me to escort her any farther. I went into the hotel lounge and watched television for the rest of the evening.

The following morning I purchased a newspaper and learned that the child had died on the way to hospital. I threw away the newspaper.

I had arranged to meet Isobel in the afternoon and had until then in which to pass the time. For most of the morning I watched the men dismantling the pieces of the fairground and loading them on to the lorries. By midday the square had been emptied of equipment and the police were allowing normal traffic to pass through.

After luncheon in the hotel I borrowed a friend's motor-cycle and took it out on to the main road. Half an hour later in a

buoyant mood, I met Isobel. She was wearing the pale-blue dress again, as I had requested. Again we walked, this time leaving the town and finding several paths through the countryside. I wanted to make love to her, but she would not allow me to.

On our way back to the town we were caught unexpectedly in a summer shower, which soaked us thoroughly. I had planned to entertain her with another dinner at the hotel, but instead we hitched a ride back to her house. She would not let me go inside with her. Instead, I promised to return to the town during the following week. She agreed to see me then.

As I went into the foyer of the hotel one of the porters told me that the mother of the child had committed suicide in the afternoon. It had been she, according to the porter, who had encouraged the child to stand on the roundabout as it was moving. For a while we discussed the tragedy, then I had a meal in the hotel restaurant. Afterwards I went to the local cinema and watched a double-feature horror programme. In the interval I noticed Isobel sitting a few rows in front of me, kissing with a young man approximately her own age. She didn't see me. I left at once and in the morning I returned to London.

* * *

In one village I discovered a transistor radio. Its batteries were flat. I took them out of the back of the radio and warmed them slowly the next time I was near a fire. While they were still warm I put them back into the radio and switched it on.

At that time the BBC was broadcasting on one wavelength only, interspersing long sessions of light music with news-reports. Though I listened until the batteries went flat two hours later, I heard no bulletin about the fighting, nor about the plight of the refugees, nor about any political subject whatsoever. I gathered that there had been a plane-crash in South America.

The next time I had batteries for the radio, the only channel I could find was Radio Peace . . . broadcast from a converted iron-ore ship moored off the Isle of Wight. The output of that was limited to prolonged prayer-sessions, Bible-readings and hymns.

* * *

We were running short of food again and Lateef made the decision to approach a near-by village and arrange a barter. We consulted our maps.

From experience we had learned that it was good general policy to avoid any village or town with more than about a thousand inhabitants, or situated anywhere near a major road. We had found that a high percentage of such places were either occupied by one faction or another and were subject to martial law in practice as well as theory, or else that a small garrison or camp would be maintained. As this effectively took from our sphere of operations most towns and villages, we were obliged to obtain the bulk of our supplies from isolated hamlets and solitary farms and houses. If we were fortunate enough to find somewhere that would provide us readily with what we needed, then we would either make an encampment near by, or keep on the move in the immediate neighbourhood.

Looking at the map, Lateef made a decision to go towards a village about two miles to the west of us. One of the other men dissented, saying that he had heard that in the town three miles beyond this village was a Nationalist Forces headquarters. He said he would be happier if we detoured around the town either through villages to the north or to the south.

For a while we discussed it, but finally Lateef overruled us. He said that our primary concern was food and that because of the number of farms near the village we would stand the best chance there.

As we approached the village we saw two or three farms securely barricaded and defended.

By an unwritten law of the countryside, refugees were allowed to traverse or camp in fields lying fallow, on condition they stole no food nor attempted to enter the farmhouses. In all my time on the road, I was subconsciously aware of this rule, and like everyone else I tried to work within it.

For a short time some refugees from East Anglia had joined Lateef's group, but they clearly adopted the attitude of each man for himself, and Lateef had separated us from them.

We passed the farmhouses, therefore, and headed for the village.

As was our custom, Lateef walked at the head of our column with three other men, immediately behind them came the handcarts containing our possessions, camping equipment and goods for barter, and the rest of the group followed on behind.

Because of my rifle, Lateef told me to walk alongside the leading cart, secreting the weapon in the false bottom in which we normally concealed unacceptable materials during searches or interrogations.

By this I could detect a slight reversal in Lateef's attitude towards the rifle. Whereas before he had maintained that it was better to be unarmed as a form of self-protection, I saw now that he acknowledged the need to defend ourselves even if that defence was not itself apparent to potential aggressors.

We came to the village along a minor road that ran across country from the town on the far side of this village until where it joined a major road some eight miles to the east of us. Again, it was from experience that we knew it was better to come to a strange village along a road rather than across the fields. Though we felt immediately more exposed, we believed we were establishing a better basis for the coming barter by doing so.

According to the map the village had no actual nucleus, but was more a straggling collection of houses along two narrow roads: the one we were on and one that crossed it at right angles. From one end to another it was probably more than a mile long – typical of the villages in this region.

We passed the first house in silence. It had been abandoned and its windows were all broken. The same was true of the next house, and the one after, and of all the houses for the first two hundred yards leading into the centre.

As we rounded the bend, there was an explosion in front of us, and one of the men at Lateef's side was thrown backwards.

We stopped. Those near the handcarts crouched down behind them, the others took what cover they could find at the side of the road. I looked down at the man who had fallen. He was on the ground five yards from where I crouched. The bullet had struck him in the throat, tearing away a large chunk of his neck. Blood spurted fitfully from his jugular vein, and though his eyes stared skywards with the dull glaze of death, he continued to make faint rasping noises from what was left of his throat. In seconds, he quietened.

Ahead of us a barricade had been erected across the road. It wasn't the kind of barricade to which we had grown accustomed – an untidy barrier of paving-stones, old cars or masonry – but had been designed purposively and built with bricks and cement. In the centre was a narrow gate through which pedestrians could pass, and on either side of this were two protective raised sections behind which I could just make out the figures of men. As I watched one of them fired again, and the bullet smashed into the wood of the front of the handcart not two feet from where I was. I crouched down even lower.

'Whitman! You've got the rifle. Shoot back.'

I looked over at Lateef. He was lying on the ground with two other men, trying to shelter behind a low mound of earth.

I said: 'They're too well protected.'

I saw that the houses to each side of the barricade had been similarly defended with a wall of concrete. I wondered whether it would be possible to enter the village by going across the fields and coming to it from the side, but the inhabitants were so obviously hostile that there would be little point.

Reaching into the false bottom of the handcart I slid out the rifle and loaded it. I was aware that every member of our group was watching me. Still attempting to keep as close to the side of the cart as possible, I aimed the rifle towards the barricade, trying to find a target I would be reasonably certain of striking.

I waited for a movement.

In the next few seconds a variety of thoughts passed through my mind. This wasn't the first occasion on which I had been in possession of a lethal weapon, but it was the first time I had ever taken deliberate aim with the knowledge that if I was successful I would kill or injure somebody. It is at times like this that one would try to rationalise all one's actions if it were not for the immediate need for direct participation.

Lateef said quietly: 'What are you waiting for?'

'I can't see anyone to aim at.'

'Put a shot over their heads. No . . . wait. Let me think.'

I let the barrel sink. I had not wanted to fire. As the next few seconds passed I knew I would not be able to fire it in this pre-meditated way. Thus, when Lateef told me to return it to its hiding-place, I was relieved. A direct order from him to shoot would have created a situation almost impossible for me to resolve.

'It's no good,' he said, not just to me, but to everyone in ear-shot. 'We'll never get in there. We'll have to retreat.'

I think I had known that from the moment of the first shot. I realised that to Lateef this decision meant a lot as it was in some ways an abrogation of his authority. The man who had told Lateef about the Nationalist garrison was near him, but he said nothing.

There was a white sheet over the top of the handcart. We had used it on several occasions in the past when wishing to underline our neutrality. Lateef asked me to pass it to him. He stood up, unfolding the cloth as he did so. No one at the barricade fired. I had to admire his bravery; under the same circumstances of leadership I would have risked anyone's life but my own.

When I am in danger I have found that my capacity for self-honesty overrules all my thoughts.

After several seconds Lateef told us to get back in the road and to move away slowly. I stood up myself, crouching down behind the bulk of the handcart. Our little convoy began to move back the way we had come.

Lateef stood between us and the hostile village. He held the white sheet at arm's length, as if to provide cover for the rest of us. Slowly, carefully, he stepped backwards, obviously uncertain what would happen if he turned and walked with the rest of us.

The handcart was half-way round the bend that would take us out of the line of fire, when the last shot sounded. Although some of the men not actually hauling on a handcart scattered to the sides of the road, the rest of us broke into a sprint until we were round the curve in the road. When we were all out of the line of gunfire we stopped.

Lateef rejoined us a few seconds later. He was swearing violently. The bullet had passed through the white sheet and scuffed his sleeve. A piece of cloth about four inches square had been torn away from near his elbow. We judged that had the bullet been even a quarter of an inch higher it would have smashed his bone.

When I was in my sleeping-bag that night it occurred to me that Lateef had come out of the day's events in a stronger position. I was glad that my own thoughts were private, for they revealed me to be a greater coward than I had feared. For the first time since she had been taken by the Afrims I felt a strong sexual urge for Isobel, missing and wanting her, tormented by false memories of happiness together.

* * *

In the afternoon I spent about an hour with Sally, while Isobel walked into a near-by village to try to obtain food. Money was the greatest problem in this respect, as we had only a pound or two left out of all that we had brought with us.

In talking to Sally I found myself treating her as an adult for the first time. She had no way of knowing what Isobel and I had discussed, but her bearing had the manner of a suddenly increased sense of responsibility. This pleased me immensely.

The evening passed in silence for the large part; certainly, Isobel and I exchanged only a couple of sentences. When night

came we laid out in our tents in the manner we had done since the start: Isobel and Sally in one tent and myself in the other.

I found myself regretting that the conversation with Isobel had not come to a more determined conclusion. As it was, I felt we had not achieved anything.

I lay awake for an hour, then drifted into sleep. Almost at once, it seemed, I was awoken by Isobel.

I reached out and touched her; she was naked.

I said: 'What . . . ?'

'Sshh. You'll wake Sally.'

She undid the zip of my sleeping-bag and lay down with her body against me. I put my arms around her and, still half-asleep and unthinking of what had gone between us during the day, I began to caress her sexually.

Our love-making was not well matched. My mind made indistinct by sleep, I was unable to concentrate and achieved orgasm only after a long time, Isobel, though, was voracious in a way I had never known her before, the noise of her gasps almost deafening me. She came to orgasm twice, disconcertingly violently the first time.

We lay together linked for several minutes afterwards, then Isobel murmured something and attempted to wriggle out from under me. I rolled to one side and she pulled away. I tried to restrain her, placing an arm around her shoulders. She said nothing, but got to her feet and went out of the tent. I lay back in the residual warmth of our bodies and fell asleep again.

In the morning Sally and I found we were on our own.

* * *

There was a policy discussion the next day, stemming mainly from our lack of food. After checking our stores carefully we established that there was now sufficient food to last us only another two days. After that, we would be able to manage on biscuits, chocolate and so forth for another week.

This was our first encounter with a real prospect of starvation, and none of us liked it.

Lateef outlined the alternatives open to us.

He said that we could continue as we had been doing so far: moving from village to village, bartering for food as necessary, and pilfering exchangeable goods from abandoned buildings and cars as we came across them. He pointed out that the military activity around us was on the increase, and though we were not

involved in it because of our vagrancy, we could not afford to ignore it. People still living in towns and villages were taking defensive precautions accordingly.

Lateef recounted to us a story he had not previously told us, about a village in the north which had been taken over by a group of Negroes claiming to be a part of the regular Afrim forces. Although the blacks had not established a proper garrison, and appeared to have no military discipline, the suspicions of the villagers had not been aroused. After a week, when units of the Nationalist Army were reported to be in the neighbourhood, the blacks had run amok, killing several hundred civilians before the Nationalist forces had arrived.

This, Lateef said, was not an isolated incident. Similar outrages had been recorded all over the country and had been committed by members of the armed forces on all three sides of the conflict. From the point of view of the private citizens, all outsiders should be treated as enemies. This attitude was spreading, he said, and made more hazardous our attempts to trade with civilians.

Another alternative would be to surrender ourselves formally to one side or another and enrol into the military. The arguments for this were strong: a rationalisation of our existence, the fact we were all reasonably healthy men capable of military duty, a commitment to a situation that had a deep effect on us all.

We could join the Nationalists, the so-called 'legal' army that defended the policies of Tregarth's government, but one that was now committed to an overt policy of genocide. We could join the Royal Secessionists, the white supporters of the Afrim cause who although officially non-legal and under continuous sentence of death, had a great deal of public support. If Tregarth's government were overthrown, either from within by a military victory or by effective diplomatic action from the U.N., it was likely that the Secessionists would take or sponsor office. We could join the United Nations peace-keeping force, which although technically non-participating, in effect had had to intervene on many occasions. Or we could align ourselves with one of the outside participants, such as the U.S. Marines (which had taken over civilian police responsibility) or the theoretically uncommitted Commonwealth forces, who had little effect on the progress of the war beyond further confusing the situation.

A third choice open to us, Lateef said, was to surrender ourselves to a civilian welfare organisation and return eventually to

a quasi-legal situation. Though this was ideally the most attractive alternative, it was doubtful if any of the refugees would be prepared to take it in practice. Until the military situation quietened down, and the social effects of the Afrim uprising were absorbed, such a recourse would be hazardous. In any event, it would mean ultimately that we would have to live under Tregarth's government, which would automatically involve us in the crisis.

Lateef said that it was our present lack of effective involvement which was the best argument for continuing to stay as we were. In any event, the main preoccupation of most of the men was to be reunited with their women and to surrender ourselves to a participating faction would reduce our chances of this.

A vote was taken and we elected to do as Lateef suggested. We moved on towards a village five miles to the north of us.

Again I detected a feeling amongst the other men that Lateef's position had been strengthened both by the shooting at the barricade the day before, and by his reasoned arguing of the alternatives. I myself had no wish to become involved with him in a struggle for power, but nevertheless my possession of the rifle could not be entirely ignored by him.

As we moved northwards I walked at his side.

* * *

By this time I had bought my own motor-cycle and used it those week-ends I went to see Isobel.

My early days of recklessness had passed and though I still enjoyed the sensation of speed, I kept to within the legal limits for much of the time. It was rare for me, when by myself, to open up the cycle and take it to its maximum speed, though when Isobel was on the back she encouraged me to do it often.

Our relationship was developing more slowly than I would have liked.

Before I had met her I had enjoyed several physical affairs with other girls, and though Isobel could present me with no moral, religious or physical reason why we should not sleep together, she had never allowed me to go further than superficial contact. For some reason I persevered.

One afternoon, in particular, we had ridden on the motor-cycle up to a near-by hill where there was a gliding club. We had watched the sailplanes for some time before growing bored.

On our way back to town, Isobel directed me away from the

road and into a copse of trees. This time, she took the initiative in our preliminary kissing and did not stop me when I removed part of her clothing. The moment, though, my hand went inside her brassière and touched her nipple, she pulled away from me. On this occasion I was not willing to stop and persisted. She tried again to prevent me, and in the ensuing struggle I pulled off her brassière and skirt, tearing the latter in the process.

From this point there was no reason to continue, and after she had dressed we returned to her parents' house. I went back to my room at the hall of residence that evening and did not see Isobel again for three weeks.

* * *

As the news reached us, there was much speculation about the implications of the war. The main danger was that it would spread from continental Africa to the rest of the world. Though the bombing was over in a matter of days, no one really knew or cared to reveal how many nuclear devices there had been in Africa.

The two main powers were in the process of formal disarmament at the time, with teams of observers in both continents. The main danger, as far as both powers were concerned, was China, which had been stockpiling devices since the end of the nineteen-sixties. Territorial interests of China in Africa were not known, and it was not possible to predict how much of an influence there had been. Fissionable ores were not, by and large, readily available in Africa, nor was the necessary technology to assemble the weapons. Under these circumstances, it appeared that one or both of the powers had been supplying various countries illegally.

In effect, the source of the weapons was irrelevant; they were present in Africa and they were used.

There was one wave of bombing, then four days later another. The rest of the world waited uneasily, but that was the last of it. Things began to move: welfare organisations launched huge relief-schemes for what survivors there may be, the main powers argued, threatened, but quietened. In Britain, the news was taken calmly: the holocaust in Africa was the embodiment of something awful, but not something that seemed to threaten us directly. And, anyway, we were in the last stages of a General Election; the one declared by John Tregarth six months after he had come to power, and the one in which he consolidated his majority.

Meanwhile, reports came back from Africa describing the horrors of the thermonuclear aftermath. Most major cities had been partially or wholly destroyed, some were still intact. But Africa is large; a majority of the population survived the bombing. Many died later from the results of flash-burns, radiation-sickness and the residual radioactivity . . . but millions survived.

The relief workers were almost entirely incapable of dealing with the survivors. Many died; perhaps five millions, and not all of these as an outcome of the bombing.

But for all the deaths, millions still survived, and as hunger grew so did desperation. And as it seemed that continental Africa was no longer capable of supporting human life, so there developed a drift away from it.

It started slowly, but within three months it had built up into an exodus. Any boat or aircraft that could be found and made to operate was used. The emigrants headed for nowhere in particular . . . only away from Africa.

They landed in due course in countries all over the world: India, France, Turkey, the Middle East, America, Greece. In the period of evacuation, it was estimated that between seven and eight million people left Africa. In the course of about a year, just over two millions of them landed in Britain.

The Africans, the Afrims, were welcome nowhere. But where they landed, they stayed. Everywhere they caused social upheaval; but in Britain, where a neo-racist government had come to power on an economic-reform ticket, they did much more.

* * *

I reported to the recruiting-station at the appointed time of one-thirty in the afternoon.

For several days there had been a saturation of advertisements on television and in the press, stating that entry into the armed forces was still voluntary, but that conscription was to be introduced in the next few weeks. This statement was underlined with an implication that men who volunteered at this time would be given preferential treatment over those who were eventually drafted.

I learned through friends of mine that certain categories of men would be the first to be selected. My job at the cloth factory qualified me for one of these categories.

During this period, my working life at the factory was not happy and the pay in the army would be slightly higher than

what I was then receiving. I therefore had a variety of motives when I reported for the medical examination.

I had applied for officer training, learning from the advertisements that a degree was sufficient to establish suitability. I was directed to a specific room in the building where a sergeant-major in dress uniform told me what to do, adding the word 'sir' to the end of every sentence.

I was given an IQ test, which was marked in my presence. The errors I made were carefully explained to me. Then I was questioned sketchily on my background and political standing, and finally I was instructed to remove my clothes and to go into the next room.

The lighting was very bright. There was a wooden bench along one wall and I was told to sit on it while waiting for the doctor. I was not sure where the doctor was, for apart from myself the room was deserted.

I had been waiting for ten minutes when a young nurse came in and sat at a desk opposite to where I was sitting. I found I was embarrassed to be naked in her presence. My arms were folded across my chest, and not liking to attract her attention I did not move them. I crossed my legs in an attempt to preserve modesty.

I felt myself to be in a position of exceptional sexual vulnerability, and although she paid little attention to me, and I told myself that she was accustomed to seeing men in the nude, I was constantly aware of her presence. In a few moments I felt a tightening in my groin, and to my consternation realised that my penis was beginning to erect.

Awareness of the tumescence did nothing to reduce the condition. I tried to restrain the organ by gripping it tightly between my thighs, but this soon became painful. It was at this point that the nurse glanced up from her work and looked at me. As she did so, the penis swung out of the restraint of my legs and assumed its fully erect position. I covered it at once with my hands. The nurse looked back at her work.

'The doctor will see you in a few moments,' she said.

I sat motionlessly, concealing my penis with my hands. By the clock on the wall opposite I saw that ten minutes passed. I was still in possession of a full erection when a man in a white coat appeared at the far end of the room and asked me to step inside. As it would have appeared unnatural to walk across the room with my hands at my crutch, I reluctantly allowed my arms to swing at my side. I was aware of the girl's gaze on my body as I walked past her desk.

Once inside the main examination room the erection began to dwindle and in less than a minute had gone altogether.

I was given a routine medical examination, had my chest X-rayed and samples of my blood and urine taken. I was presented with a form to sign which stated that subject only to medical suitability I would be commissioned into the British Nationalist Army as a trainee 2nd Lieutenant, and that I would report for duty at the time and place indicated on my mobilisation certificate. I signed it and was given my clothes again.

There followed an interview with a man in civilian clothing, who questioned me at great length on subjects central to my overall character and personality. It was a distasteful interview and I was glad when it was over. I recall that in its course I revealed my former membership in the pro-Afrim society at the college.

A week later I received a duplicated letter which stated that my medical examination had revealed a liver complaint and that my temporary commission was accordingly terminated.

The day before this letter arrived I had seen conscription re-introduced by the Ministry of Internal Security and a corresponding increase in militant Afrim activities. A month later, with the massacre of the Nationalist troops at Colchester barracks and the arrival of the first American aircraft-carrier in the Irish Sea, I saw that the military situation was more serious than I had imagined. Though relieved at my own lack of personal involvement, day-to-day life became less easy and my own experiences as a civilian were not better than anyone else's.

After receiving the letter from the military I visited my own doctor and had the complaint in my liver investigated. After a few days of deliberation I was informed that there was nothing wrong with it.

* * *

We encountered a large band of Negroes and were at once uncertain of what was to happen. We had the choice of three courses of action: run from them, show our defensive ability with the rifle or meet them.

What disconcerted us most was that they were not wearing Afrim uniforms, but were clad in the same sort of clothes as ourselves. It was possible that they were a group of civilian refugees, but we had heard that Nationalist troops treated such people with extreme callousness. The result of this was that

most Negro civilians had surrendered themselves to the welfare organisations, and those few who remained had integrated themselves with white groups.

The men we met were friendly, well-fed and appeared to be unarmed. They did have three large handcarts near to which we were not allowed to approach, and it is possible that these contained weapons.

We spoke for several minutes, exchanging the usual pieces of news which were the only real currency on the refugee network. The blacks showed no signs of nerves, nor any awareness that we had a guarded attitude towards them.

They did however reveal certain signs of excitement, a cause for which we were unable to determine. Our main concern during the encounter was for our own sakes, and as such we were not judging their behaviour as much as we might at another time. But it seemed to me that they behaved as if jubilant, or as if anticipating something.

In the end we moved on, leaving the blacks near a wood. We crossed a field, then passed out of sight. Lateef called me over to him.

'They were Afrim guerrillas,' he said. 'Did you notice their identity-bracelets?'

* * *

Sally and I waited for a few hours to see whether Isobel was going to return. I felt in no need to explain to Sally why she had left us; on the contrary, I deduced from the child's manner that she had anticipated some such act. I think that she regretted that it had had to come, but that she was capable of accepting the new situation.

Isobel had taken with her exactly half of our remaining money, in addition to a suitcase of her own clothes and some of the food. All the camping and sleeping equipment she had left with us.

By midday it was clear that Isobel was not coming back. I began to make preparations for a meal, but Sally said she would do it. I allowed her to take over and meanwhile packed our gear. At this point I had made no decision about what we were to do, but I felt that it was time to leave this particular location.

When we had eaten, I explained to Sally as best I could what we could do.

My predominant feeling at this time was a sense of inadequacy. This extended to my ability to make the right decision

regarding our movements, as well as giving me severe doubts as to the real reasons for the breakdown of my marriage. I felt that Sally was in potential danger as I could, through my inadequacy, make more mistakes. In consulting her on the next move we should take, I felt I was not only giving Sally some participation, but was assisting myself to come to terms with my own weaknesses.

I explained to Sally that her mother and I had agreed that we were to return to London, while she went on to Bristol. We were not going to return to our house, but we were going to find somewhere new to live. Sally told me that she understood.

I then went into some detail about the difficulties confronting us: that we were out of touch with the political situation, that we had very little money, that it would not be possible to go back by car, that we would probably have to hike for the major part of the way.

Sally said: 'But couldn't we go on a train, Daddy?'

Children have a facility for cutting sideways across a problem and seeing possible solutions that have not occurred to their parents. In the time we had been living in the countryside I had completely overlooked the existence of the railway system. I wondered if Isobel had similarly not thought of it, or whether she was intending to reach Bristol that way.

'It's a question of money,' I replied. 'We probably haven't got enough. We'll have to find out. Is that what you'd like to do?'

'Yes. I don't want to live in the tent any more.'

I had learned that it was not possible to plan too far ahead. But I couldn't avoid returning to the question of what we would do if the situation in London was as bad as when we had left. If the occupation by militant Afrims of houses was continuing, and the law-enforcement agencies were divided, then we would not be the only people looking for accommodation. If the situation was as bad as I feared, we might well be obliged to leave London once more. If that happened, then the only place I could think of going to was my younger brother's house in Carlisle. Even if we were able to go there, the practical difficulty of travelling three hundred miles was still to be faced. Unfortunately, I could see no alternative – he was the only remaining member of my family after the death of my parents four years before, and of Clive, my elder brother, in the confrontation at Bradford.

As far as Sally was concerned, though, the matter was settled,

and we collected the remainder of our belongings and packed them. I carried our remaining suitcase and the rucksack, and Sally carried the other bag containing our clothes. We walked eastwards, not knowing the location of the nearest railway station, but moving in that direction as we felt it was the right one.

We came, after about a mile and a half, to a macadamed road. We followed this in a northerly direction until we encountered a telephone-box. As a matter of course, I lifted the receiver to find out whether it was working. In the past we had found that although the receivers had not been damaged in any way, the lines were dead.

On this occasion there was a short series of clicks, and then a woman's voice answered.

'Exchange. Which number do you require?'

I hesitated. I had not expected a reply and was thus unprepared.

'I'd like to make a call . . . to Carlisle, please.'

'I'm sorry, caller. All trunk lines are engaged.'

There was a note of finality to her voice, as if she were about to close the connection.

'Er - could you get me a London number then, please?'

'I'm sorry, caller. All lines to London are engaged.'

'Would you ring me back when they are free?'

'This exchange is open for local calls only.' That final tone again.

I said quickly: 'Look, I wonder if you can help me. I'm trying to get to the railway station. Could you direct me to it, please?'

'Where are you speaking from?'

I gave her the address of the telephone-box as printed on the plaque in front of me.

'Hold the line a moment.' She closed the connection and I waited. After about three minutes she came back on. 'The station nearest to you is in Warnham, about three miles to the south of you. Thank you, caller.'

The line cleared.

Sally was waiting for me outside the box and I related to her the substance of the conversation. As I did so, we both became aware of the sound of heavy diesel-lorries, and a few seconds later seven troop-carriers passed us. An officer was standing in the rear of one of them and he shouted something to us as they passed. We were not able to hear him. I recall a feeling of vague reassurance at that moment, even though it was the first time

I had witnessed actual troop-movements.

When the lorries had passed I was able to identify the state which had caused my earlier disquiet. It was that we were the only people around.

While living in the tent, our only contact with other people had been on those occasions when we had visited shops to purchase food. Even then, we had all observed a slackness which had not been noticeable before the trouble began. But now Sally and I were as if alone.

We began our walk to Warnham, and within a few minutes saw more signs of military activity and civilian inactivity that caused us both alarm.

A mile from the telephone-box we passed through a village. We walked the length of the street without meeting anyone, but in the windows of the last house we saw the shape of a man. I waved and called out to him, but either he did not see me or did not choose to, and he moved out of sight.

Outside the village we encountered an emplacement of heavy artillery manned by several hundred soldiers. There was a rough, but guarded, barbed-wire barrier between them and the road, and as we approached it were warned to move on. I tried to speak with the soldier, and an N.C.O. was called. He repeated the injunction, adding that unless we were out of the neighbourhood by nightfall we would find our lives in danger. I asked him whether they were Nationalist troops and received no reply.

Sally said: 'Daddy, I don't like guns.'

We moved on towards Warnham. Several times jet aircraft flew overhead, sometimes in formation, sometimes alone. I discovered the remains of an old newspaper and tried to read it to learn what I could about what was going on.

It was a privately printed tabloid and one which I felt sure was illegal. We had heard on the radio two weeks before that the operations of the press had been suspended temporarily. I found the tabloid to be virtually unintelligible; badly printed, abominably written, disgustingly slanted towards an overt racist xenophobia. It spoke of knives and leprosy, guns and venereal disease, rape, cannibalism and plague. It contained detailed instructions for the manufacture of such home-made weapons as petrol-bombs, coshes and garrottes. There were items of 'news', such as mass rape by Afrim militants, and raids by loyal military forces on Afrim strongholds. On the back page, at the bottom, I learned that the paper was published weekly for civilian consumption by the British Nationalist Army (Home Division).

I burned it.

The approach to Warnham Station was guarded by more soldiers. As we came into their view Sally's hand took hold of mine and gripped it tightly.

I said to her: 'It's nothing to worry about, Sally. They're just here to make sure no one tries to prevent the trains running.'

She didn't reply, perhaps detecting that I was as alarmed as she at their presence. It meant, in effect, that the trains were still running, but that they were under military control. We walked up to the barricade and I spoke to a lieutenant. He was polite and helpful. I noticed that on his sleeve he had a strip of cloth on which was stitched: *Loyal Secessionists*. I did not refer to it.

'Is it possible to get a train to London from here?' I said.

'It's possible,' he said. 'But they don't run very often. You'll have to inquire, sir.'

'May we pass through?'

'Of course.'

He nodded to the two soldiers with him and they pulled back a section of their barricade. I gave the officer my thanks and we walked up to the booking office.

It was manned by a civilian wearing the normal uniform of British Rail.

'We want to go to London,' I said. 'Could you tell me when the next train's due?'

He leaned forward across the counter, put his face close up to the glass panel and looked through at us.

'You'll have to wait till tomorrow,' he said. 'There's only one way to get a train here and that's to ring through the day before.'

'Are you saying that no trains stop here?'

'That's right. Not unless someone wants 'em to. You have to ring through to the terminal.'

'But suppose it's urgent.'

'You have to ring through to the terminal.'

I said: 'Is it too late to get a train to stop here today?'

He nodded slowly. 'The last one went through an hour ago. But if you'd like to buy your tickets now, I'll ring through to the terminal for you.'

'Just a minute.'

I turned to Sally. 'Listen, love, we'll have to sleep tonight in the tent again. You don't mind, do you? You heard what the man said.'

'O.K., Daddy. But can we definitely go home tomorrow?'

'Yes, of course.'

I said to the clerk: 'How much are the tickets?'

'Ninety pence each, please.'

I pulled out of my pocket what remained of our money and counted it. We had less than a pound.

'Can I pay for them tomorrow?' I asked the clerk.

He shook his head. 'Got to be paid in advance. If you haven't got enough now, though, I'll take a deposit and you can pay the rest tomorrow.'

'Will this be enough?'

'Should be.' He dropped the change into a drawer, reckoned the amount on to a register and passed me a slip of printed paper. 'Bring this and the rest of the money tomorrow. The train'll be here about eleven in the morning.'

I glanced at the slip. It was just a receipt for the money, not a ticket. I thanked the man and we went back outside. It had started to drizzle. I wasn't sure how I was going to obtain the rest of the money by morning, but already a half-formed determination to steal it if necessary had come to mind.

At the barricade, the young lieutenant nodded to us.

'Tomorrow, eh?' he said. 'That's happened to a lot of people here. Are you refugees?'

I told him we were, though I had not previously applied the word to our predicament.

'You should be all right in London,' he said. 'Our lot are getting things organised there.'

He gave me the name and address of a group in London who were trying to find accommodation for the homeless. I wrote it down and thanked him. He expressed concern about what we were to do tonight.

'I could have offered to find you a billet,' he said. 'We've done it before. But there's something on. We might be moving out tonight. What will you do?'

'We've got camping-equipment,' I said.

'Oh, that's all right then. But if I were you, I'd get as far away from here as you can. We're being mobilised. The Nationalists are only a couple of miles away.'

Again I thanked him and we moved on. Both Sally and I had been comforted by his outgoing nature, by his apparent willingness to assist us. But what he had said had given us cause for alarm and I decided to heed his warning. We walked another three or four miles to the south before trying to find somewhere

to camp. In the end, we came across a suitable place on the side of a low hill, screened on three sides by woodland.

That night while we lay in the dark together we heard the sound of artillery, and jet aircraft roared overhead. The night was lit by brilliant flashes from explosions to the north of us. We heard troops marching along the road a quarter of a mile from us, and a stray shell exploded in the woods behind us. Sally clung to me and tried to comfort her. The noise of the artillery itself remained constant, but the explosions from the shells varied considerably between being very close and very distant. We heard small-arms fire from time to time and the sounds of men's voices.

In the morning it drizzled again, and the countryside was still. Reluctant to move, as if the act of doing so would reinstate the violence, Sally and I stayed in our bivouac until the last possible moment. Then at ten o'clock we packed our gear hastily and set off towards the station. We arrived at just before eleven. This time there were no soldiers. The station had been bombed, and the railway track itself had been blown up in several places. We looked at the ruin in desolate horror. Later, I threw away the receipt.

That evening we were captured by a detachment of the Afrim forces and taken in for our first session of interrogation.

* * *

Isobel and I lay together in the dark. We were on the floor. In the room above us her parents were asleep in bed. They did not know I was there. Though they liked me, and encouraged Isobel to see more of me, they would not have been pleased if they were aware of what we had been trying to do in their sitting-room.

It was after three in the morning and therefore essential we made no noise.

I had removed my jacket and shirt.

Isobel had taken off her dress, her slip and her brassière. At this time our relationship had developed to the point where she allowed me to remove most of her clothing while we kissed, and to fondle her breasts. She had never allowed me to touch her in the region of her pubes. In the past, most of the girls I had known had shown a liberal attitude towards sex, and I was puzzled at Isobel's apparent lack of interest. Her reticence had been alluring at first – and continued to be so – but now I was beginning to see that she was genuinely frightened of sex. Although my

interest in her had been initially almost entirely sexual, as we grew to know one another I had developed a deep liking for her and had made my sexual advances to her more and more gently. The combination of her physical beauty and her gaucherie was a continual delight to me.

After a prolonged session of kissing and petting I lay back on the floor and allowed Isobel to run her hand lightly over my chest and stomach. While she did this I found myself willing her to slide her hand into the top of my trousers and caress my penis.

Gradually her hand moved down until it was rubbing lightly against the cloth of the waistband. When her fingers did eventually explore the cloth, they came into contact with the end of my penis almost at once. Evidently unaware to that moment of my tumescence, she snatched her hand away at once and lay at my side, facing away from me, trembling.

'What's the matter?' I whispered to her after a minute or two, knowing both that I would get no reply and that I already knew what had happened. 'What's the matter?'

She said nothing. After a while I put my hand on her shoulder and found her skin to be cold.

'What's the matter?' I whispered again.

She still made no reply. In spite of what had happened, I remained erect, unaffected by the trauma she experienced.

In a while she rolled back towards me and, laying on her back, took my hand and placed it on her breast. Like her shoulder, it was cold. The nipple was shrunken and lumpy.

She said: 'Go on. Do it.'

'Do what?'

'You know. What you want.'

I didn't move, but lay there with my hand on her breast, not wishing to create a positive movement by either doing as she said or taking my hand away altogether.

When I made no response, she took my hand again and thrust it down roughly to her crutch. With her other hand she dragged down her pants and laid my hand on her pubes. I felt warm, soft down. She started shaking.

I made love to her at once. It was painful for both of us. Pleasureless. We made a lot of noise; so much so that I was scared her parents would hear us and come to investigate. As I climaxed, my penis slipped from its place and my semen went half inside her, half on to the floor.

I pulled away from her as soon as I could and lay away from her. Part of me remained detached, seeing wryly my experienced

sexual artistry reduced to fumbling adolescence by the encounter with frigid innocence; part of me lay curled up on the floor, unwilling to move. . . .

In the end it was Isobel who moved first. She stood up and switched on the low-powered table-lamp. I looked up at her, seeing her slim young body nude for the first time, denuded for the first time of sexual mystery. She pulled on her clothes, kicked mine across to me. I put them on. Our eyes didn't meet.

On the carpet where we had laid there was a small patch of damp. We tried to remove it with paper tissues, but a faint stain remained.

I was ready to leave. Isobel came over to me, whispered in my ear that I was to push my motor-cycle to the end of the road before starting it up. Then she kissed me. We agreed to see each other again the following week-end. As we walked out into the hall we were holding hands.

Her father was sitting on the bottom step of the stairs dressed in his pyjamas. He looked tired. As I walked past him he said nothing to me, but stood up and held Isobel tightly by her wrist. I left, starting the engine outside the house.

We had not used any form of contraceptive. Though Isobel did not become pregnant from that intercourse she did conceive a few weeks before we were married. From that time we had sex together very occasionally, and to my knowledge she attained orgasm only rarely. After Sally was born, what sexual dependence on one another that we had ever had grew less, and in due course I found myself turning to other women who were able to give me what Isobel couldn't.

In the good times, I would gaze at Isobel across a distance, seeing again the pale blue dress and the youthful beauty of her face, and a bitter regret would well inside me.

* * *

As the days passed since the abduction of the women by the Afrim soldiers, it seemed to me that while my own quest grew stronger that of the other men diminished. I found myself questioning whether we were moving on in the eternal search for a safe place to camp and somewhere that we may obtain food, or whether we were still pursuing our search for the women.

They were mentioned less and less frequently, and since the visit to Augustin's brothel it was sometimes as if they had never been with us. But we were reminded forcibly of what might have

happened to them on the day after we met the African guerrillas.

We came to a group of houses that were marked on the map as being a hamlet called Stowefield. At first sight it appeared to be no different from any one of a hundred others we had come across in the past.

We approached it with our customary caution, determined that if the hamlet were barricaded we would retreat immediately.

That there had at one time been barricades became apparent at once. Across the road at the side of the first house there was a pile of rubble, which had been pushed aside to make a gap wide enough for a lorry to pass through.

With Lateef, I inspected the ground behind where the barricade had been and we discovered several dozen empty shotgun cartridges.

We investigated every house in the hamlet and within half an hour had established that it had been evacuated. We were fortunate in finding canned food in several of the houses and were thus able to replenish our supplies.

We speculated as to the identity of the men who had raided the village. It was probably prejudice which prompted the majority of us to assume it was the Afrims, but it had been our experience that this was the kind of action they would take against small settlements that they found barricaded.

What had become of the inhabitants we had no way of telling. Later, as we searched the houses for suitable billets, one of the men discovered something and shouted for the rest of us to come.

I arrived with Lateef. As soon as we saw what was there, he shouted at everyone, telling them to wait downstairs. He indicated that I was to stay.

There were the bodies of four young white women in the upstairs room. Each was naked and each had been assaulted sexually. My heart had begun to beat faster at my first sight of them, as the fates that could have befallen Sally and Isobel had been prominent in my imagination for some time. It took only two or three seconds to establish that these women were unknown to me, but even so my heart continued at an accelerated pace for some minutes afterwards.

My early alarm soon turned to shock and then to anger. Each of the women was young and had been physically attractive. Their deaths had come after a long period of helpless agony: the torment was embedded in their expressions. Each one was tied hand and foot, and had evidently struggled to escape from the bonds in her last few minutes of life.

The men who assaulted them had disfigured their bodies with either bayonets or knives, slashing them many times in the region of their genitals. There was blood all over the floor.

Lateef and I discussed what we should do. I suggested that we bury them, but neither of us relished the task of carrying the bodies downstairs. The alternative that Lateef suggested was to burn the house. It was set apart from the ones nearest to it, and it did not seem likely that the blaze would spread to others.

We went downstairs and spoke with the others. Two of the men had been sick, the rest of us felt nauseated in the extreme. Lateef's suggestion was adopted, and a few minutes later the house was fired.

We moved away to the other end of the village and set up a camp for the night.

* * *

For a variety of reasons I was one of the few men who worked in the cutting-shop of the factory. In spite of the equal-pay legislation that had gone through in the last months of the government immediately prior to Tregarth taking office, there were still many different kinds of work which were exclusively or nearly exclusively the domain of women. In the bulk-cloth industry cutting is one of these.

My own colleagues of my own sex were old Dave Harman, a pensioner who came in mornings to sweep the floor and make tea, and a youngster named Tony who tried to flirt with the younger women but who was treated by them all as a cheeky young urchin. I never discovered his true age, but he couldn't have been less than twenty. How he came to be working at the factory I never asked, and there built up between us a kind of male understanding that unified us against the vulgarity of the women.

My own relationship with the women was acceptable once we had overcome the initial problems.

It was thought, for instance, by a sizeable number of the women that I had been brought in as some form of supervisor or inspector, and whenever I attempted to speak to them I was treated with cold politeness. In this, my college-rounded vowels did little to help. Once I had established in my mind what was the probable cause of the friction, I went to great pains to let them know my position in the cutting-shop. When this was clear the atmosphere lightened considerably, though there were still one or two women who could not but retain a slightly dis-

tant air. Within a few weeks things had relaxed to the point where I felt as if my presence was taken for granted.

With this relaxation came a growing vulgarity of behaviour.

In my relatively sheltered life to this point – sheltered in the sense that I had not mixed with large numbers of working people – I had lived by the assumption that women were the more socially restrained sex. It may of course have been the developing national situation which encouraged a slackening of morality as a reaction against the new repressive laws, or simply that this group of women had known each other for years and were of a similar background. In any event, a typical working day was punctuated with obscenities, disgusting jokes and various direct and indirect references to either my or Tony's sexual organs. Tony told me once that shortly before I had come to the cutting-shop, one of the women, in a mock-serious kind of way, had unzipped the front of his trousers and tried to grab him. He told me this off-handedly, though I could tell he had been upset by the incident.

There were several coloured women in the cutting-shop, and as the Afrim situation intensified I watched them when I could to see how they reacted. There were five Indians or Pakistanis, and seven of Negro stock. On the face of it, their behaviour showed no change, though during some of the more offensive sessions of banter, I noticed how they would remain silent.

It was my custom during this period to eat for lunch the sandwiches that Isobel made for me. This was partly in order to save a little of our money, and partly because the quality of food available in public restaurants deteriorated considerably.

I understood that the company was not receiving as many orders as it had once done, and consequently the work-load upon us was light. Following government restrictions it was not possible to make staff redundant, except at the cost of high financial penalty, and our labour-force was not reduced in any way. Shortly after I joined the firm the length of our break for lunch was increased from one and a half to two hours, and at the time of the first secessions in the armed forces it was increased by a further half-hour. Sick-leave was encouraged by our employers, though after the government's temporary withdrawal of National Health benefits absenteeism was rare.

It became necessary to find ways of passing the surplus time in the social company of each other.

Board games were brought in from home, and packs of playing-cards. Several women brought in such things as needlework

or knitting, and others wrote letters. For my own part I used the free time for reading, but found that if I did too much of it in the dimly lit room, my eyes would begin to hurt. Very few of us ventured out during the lunch-break. Once or twice, some of the women went out shopping together, but on the whole it was considered too hazardous to be done habitually.

I don't know how it began, but several of the women used the time to get together around the top of a bench and play on an improvised ouija board. The first I was aware of it was one day when I was walking through the adjoining warehouse with the intention of stretching my muscles. The women were in a corner of the warehouse. Seven of them actually sat at the table and another ten or twenty stood around watching. The pointer they were using was an inverted plastic tumbler, and the letters of the alphabet were scribbled on scraps of paper around the edge.

One of the older women was asking questions into the air, while the tumbler spelled out the answers from under the fingertips of the seven participants. I watched fascinated for a while, unable to determine whether the women were actually moving the tumbler voluntarily or not. Annoyed that I was unable to understand it, I walked away.

At the far side of the warehouse, behind a stacked pile of rolls of cloth, I came across Tony and one of the girls who worked with him. Although they were both fully clothed, they were lying in the normal position for intercourse, and he had his hand inside the top of her dress, holding one of her breasts. Neither of them saw me.

As I turned away there was the sound of several voices from the ouija table. One of the women, a Negress, broke away from the group and ran into the cutting-room. A few seconds later I heard her talking loudly to her friends, and then the sound of someone crying.

By the end of the following week all the coloured women had left the firm.

* * *

As night fell the house was still burning; a glow of orange a hundred yards away.

The mood of the group had altered subtly. For me, and I presumed for the other men, the assault on the four young women represented a physical manifestation of our fears about our own abducted women. It is one thing to imagine an atrocity; it is

something else again to witness it.

Individually, I think we were all horrified and numbed . . . but working as a group our reaction was one of more directed determination not to become further involved in the civil war. The search for the abducted women was not mentioned; for my own part what I had seen in the house had only hardened my resolution in this respect. It was Sally I was worried about, for she was innocent. My daughter, not my wife, was uppermost in my mind.

As darkness came on, I moved away from the main group of men and went into a house about twenty yards from the one we had fired. Behind me there was a glow of smouldering wood. The blaze had finished now, but it would go on smouldering for hours. There was a sweet smell of smoke in the air, obstinately pleasant.

I sat by myself in an old armchair in a downstairs room of the house I had occupied and brooded about what I would do in the morning.

Time passed. I became aware of the sound of engines, but I ignored them. They grew louder, drowning my thoughts. I leaped out of my chair and ran through the house and into the small garden at the rear.

The sky was clear of clouds and a quarter-moon threw enough light to mark the ground. I had been sitting in the dark in the house (as was our custom when temporarily occupying evacuated property) and my eyes adapted at once.

It took me only a couple of seconds to locate the source of the sound: it was a formation of helicopters travelling at a low height and speed from the south in a direction that would carry them over the village. As they approached, I dropped to the ground, my hand tightening over the rifle. I counted them as they passed overhead: there were twelve. They slowed even more in the next few seconds, and landed in one of the fields beyond the village.

From where I was lying I was not able to see them. I climbed to my feet and peered over the hedge. I heard the engines ticking over together in a low, muted grumbling sound.

I waited.

For another ten minutes I stood still, debating whether to rejoin the others. There was no way of telling why the helicopters were here, or whether they knew of our presence. It was unlikely that they had not seen the smouldering remains of the house.

With an abruptness that startled me, there was a burst of gunfire in the near distance, and two or three loud explosions. From

the direction of the flashes I guessed that they were coming from the far side of a large wood that I had seen earlier, running alongside the main road about a mile from the hamlet. There was more gunfire, more explosions. I saw one spout of white flame then a red verrey-light shot up into the sky from the direction of the wood.

Almost immediately the helicopters took off again still holding their formation. They swooped into the air and swung away towards the wood. They became lost to sight though the sound of their engines remained clear.

I heard a movement behind me: the house door opening, closing.

‘Is that you, Whitman?’

I made out the dim shape of another man. As he came up to me I saw that it was Olderton, a man with whom I had had only superficial contact so far.

‘Yes. What’s going on?’

‘No one knows. Lateef sent me to find you. What the devil are you doing?’

I told him I had been looking for food and that I was going back to the main camp in a few minutes.

‘You’d better come back now,’ Olderton said. ‘Lateef’s talking of moving on. He thinks we’re too close to the main road.’

‘I think we ought to know what’s happening before we move.’

‘That’s up to Lateef.’

‘Is it?’ For no reason I could determine at that moment I felt a taint of rebellion in being told what to do. In any event, I didn’t want to discuss it with Olderton.

The sound of the helicopters in the distance took on a new note, and we went back to where I had been standing before, looking across the fields in the direction of the wood.

‘Where are they?’ Olderton said.

‘I can’t see.’

There was a renewed burst of gunfire, then a shrill, high-pitched whistling sound followed immediately by four explosions coming almost together. A brilliant ball of flame rose up inside the wood, then dwindled. I heard more gunfire, then a helicopter roared over the village. There was another whistling sound, and four more explosions. As the second helicopter passed overhead the sequence was repeated again.

‘Rockets,’ Olderton muttered. ‘They’re after something on the main road.’

‘Who are they?’

'Lateef thought they were Afrims. He said the helicopters looked as if they were Russian.'

Over at the main road the barrage went on. The helicopters were timed exactly right. As the explosion from one set of rockets died down, another gunship came in and followed up. Meanwhile, small-arms fire rattled from the ground.

'I think it's those guerrillas,' I said suddenly. 'The ones we met yesterday They've ambushed something on the main road.'

Olderton said nothing. As I thought about it, the more likely it became. The Negroes had been concealing something, on that we had all agreed. If, as Lateef had guessed, the helicopter gunships were Russina-supplied and manned by Afrims, then everything made sense.

For a few more minutes the battle went on. Olderton and I watched as well as we could, seeing only the flame of the explosions and the gunships as they came by overhead after their pass. I found myself counting the number of attacks made. After the twelfth, there was a slight pause, and we could hear the helicopters re-grouping in the distance. Then one of the machines flew over the wood again, this time without firing any of its rockets. It zoomed overhead, then went to join the others. We waited again. From the direction of the wood there was now a steady glow of orange and the occasional sound of a small explosion. There did not appear to be any more gunfire.

'I think it's over,' I said.

Olderton said: 'There's still one of them around.'

To my ears it seemed as if the formation of gunships was moving away, but there was no uniformity in the sound of the engines. I kept looking around, but could see no sign of any of the helicopters.

'There it is!' Olderton said. He pointed over to our right.

I could just make out its shape. It was moving slowly and near the ground. It had no navigation lights. It came towards us steadily, and irrationally I felt it was looking for us. My heart began to beat rapidly.

The aircraft moved across the field in front of us, then turned, and climbing slightly flew directly over us. When it reached the smouldering remains of the house on the other side of the road it hovered.

Olderton and I went back into our house, climbed the stairs and watched the helicopter. It was about twenty feet above the burnt-out ruin, and the draught from its vanes sent cinders scudding over the ground. Flames took again in some of the

timbers, and smoke swirled up and across to us.

In the glow from the ground I could see the helicopter's cabin clearly. I lifted my rifle, took careful aim and fired.

Olderton leaped over to me and knocked the barrel aside.

'You stupid bastard!' he said. 'They'll know we're here.'

'I don't care,' I said. I was watching the helicopter.

For a moment I thought my shot had had no effect. Then the engine of the machine accelerated abruptly and it lifted away. Its tail spun round, stopped, then spun again. The helicopter continued to climb, but it was moving to one side, away from us. The engine was screaming. I saw the helicopter check its sideways motion, but then it flipped again. It skidded down over the burnt-out house, disappeared from sight. Two seconds later there was a loud crash.

'You cunt, you stupid bastard,' Olderton said again. 'The others will be back to find out what happened.'

I said nothing. We waited.



During the period in which Isobel left us, Sally and I were in a state of continual fear and disorientation. I think it was because this was the first manifestation in personal terms of the real crisis: the breakdown of all aspects of life we had known before the start of the fighting. I knew Sally would not see it in this way; like all children her grief stemmed mainly from personal considerations.

Isobel's absence induced in me some unexpected reactions. In the first place, I experienced quite distinct pangs of sexual jealousy. In the time we had been married, I knew that Isobel had had both the opportunity and the motivation to take a lover. Yet at no time had I suspected her of doing so. With the present uncertainty, however, I found my thoughts turning to her often.

Secondly, for all the conflict we had endured, I found I missed her company, negative though I had often felt it to be.

Both Isobel and I had been aware of the future, of what would have happened to us when Sally grew up and left us. In practice, our marriage would have ended at that time, though in fact it had never started.

Alone with Sally in the countryside it felt as if the predictable course of our life had ended abruptly, that from this point

nothing more could be planned, that life had ended, that the future was the past.

* * *

An hour passed, during which Lateef and the others joined us. The night was quiet, with only the faint flicker of light from the wood to show that for a few minutes the war had been conducted around us.

I found myself in an ambivalent position. Though I detected an aura of grudging respect over the shooting down of the helicopter, Lateef and one or two others stated unequivocally that it had been an unintelligent action. Fear of reprisals was always great, and had the other gunships learned of my action at the time, it was likely that they would have attacked the village.

Now that the moment of action, and the subsequent period of greatest danger, had passed, I was able to think objectively about what I had done.

In the first place, I was convinced that the pilots of the gunships had been either Afrims or their sympathisers. And while it was generally conceded that, regardless of racial or nationalistic prejudices, participating Afrims were the one common enemy, in my particular case the firing of the rifle had represented to me a gesture of my individual reaction to the abduction of the women. In this I still felt I differed from the other men, though it was arguable that as I possessed the only rifle I was the only one placed to make such a gesture. In any event, I had derived a curious pleasure from the incident, as it had signalled my first positive participation in the war. From here I had committed myself.

There was some discussion over our next move. I was tired and would have been pleased to get some sleep. But the others were debating whether to visit the wrecked helicopter or to trek across to the wood and examine whatever it was that had been attacked by the Afrims.

I said: 'I'm against either. Let's get some sleep, then move before dawn.'

'No, we can't risk sleeping here,' said Lateef. 'It's too dangerous. We've got to move, but we need barter for food. We'll have to take what we can from the helicopter, then get as far away as possible.'

It was suggested by a man called Collins that there might be more of value in the wood, and several of the men agreed with

him. Anything that was considered a worthy target by the military forces represented to us a potential source of exchangeable commodities. In the end it was agreed that we would break with our normal policy, and separate. Lateef, myself and two others would approach the wrecked helicopter; Collins and Olderton would take the rest of the men over to the wood. Whichever group finished first was to join the other.

We returned to the camp at the other end of the village, re-packed our gear, and separated as planned.

The helicopter had crashed in a field behind the burnt-out house. There had been no explosion when it hit the ground, nor had it caught fire. In that respect at least it would be safe to approach it. The condition of whatever crew there had been aboard was the main hazard. If they had been killed in the crash, from our point of view all would be well. On the other hand, if any of them were still alive we could be in an extremely precarious position.

We said nothing as we moved towards it. When we reached the edge of the field we could see the shape of the wreck, like a huge smashed insect. There appeared to be no movement, but we watched for several minutes in case.

Then Lateef muttered: 'Come on,' and we crept forward. I had my rifle ready, but still doubted privately whether I would have the guts to fire it again. Lateef's use of me as an armed assistant reminded me uncomfortably of the incident at the barricade.

The last thirty or forty yards we moved on our stomachs, crawling forward slowly, prepared for anything. As we neared the wreck we realised that if anybody were still inside he would not be in a condition to present a threat to us. The main structure had collapsed and one of the vanes had bitten into the cockpit.

We reached the wreck unchallenged, and stood up.

We walked round it cautiously, trying to see if there were anything that we could liberate from the wreckage. It was difficult to tell in the dark.

I said to Lateef: 'There's nothing here for us. If it were daylight -'

As soon as I spoke we heard a movement inside and we backed away at once, crouching warily in the grass. A man's voice came from inside, speaking breathlessly and haltingly.

'What's he saying?' one of the other men said.

We listened again, but could not understand. Then I recognised the language as Swahili - though I had no knowledge of

the language, the sound of it was familiar to me as most radio broadcasts that I had heard in the last few months had been duplicated in Swahili. It is an indistinct language, not easy on European ears.

None of us needed to speak the language to know instinctively what the man was saying. He was trapped and in pain.

Lateef took out his torch and shone it on the wreckage, keeping the beam low in an attempt to prevent from seeing it anyone else who may be in the vicinity.

For a moment we were unable to make out coherent shapes, though on one patch of relatively undamaged metal we made out an instruction printed in the Cyrillic alphabet. We moved in closer and Lateef shone the torch inside. After a moment we saw a Negro lying in the broken metal. His face, which was towards us, was wet with blood. He said something again and Lateef shut off the beam.

'We'll have to leave it,' he said. 'We can't get inside.'

'But what about the man?' I said.

'I don't know. There's not much we can do.'

'Can't we try to get him out?'

Lateef switched on his torch again and flashed it over the wreck. Where the man was lying was almost totally surrounded by large pieces of broken cockpit and fuselage. It would take heavy lifting-gear to move.

'Not a hope,' said Lateef.

'We can't just leave him.'

'I'm afraid we'll have to,' Lateef returned the torch to his pocket. 'Come on, we can't stay here. We're too exposed.'

I said: 'Lateef, we've got to do something for that man!'

He turned to me and came and stood very close.

'Listen, Whitman,' he said. 'You can see there's nothing we can do. If you don't like blood, you shouldn't have shot the fucking thing down. O.K.?'

To foreshorten the exchange, as I did not like the new tone in his voice, I said: 'O.K.'

'You've got the rifle,' he went on. 'Use it, if that's what you want.'

He and the other two men started back across the field in the direction of the houses.

'I'll catch you up,' I said. 'I'm going to see what I can do.'

No one replied.

It took only a matter of seconds to establish that what Lateef had said was substantially true. There was no way of freeing the

Afrim. Inside, his voice kept lifting and dropping, interrupted by sudden intakes of breath. If I'd had a torch I would have been tempted to shine it inside and look again at him. As it was, I was relieved not to be in the position to do so. Instead, I ran the barrel of the rifle into the space, and aimed it in the approximate direction the man's face had been.

And paused. . . .

I had no wish to shoot him, any emotion in me having been expended by the act of shooting at the helicopter in the first place. The fact that I was confronted with an Afrim – and that it was barely conceivable that this man may be connected indirectly with those men who had abducted Sally and Isobel – was irrelevant. Practical considerations, such as that I might attract the attention of other troops in the area with the sound of the shot, were similarly unconsidered. The fact was that the physical act of pulling the trigger and killing the man was too positive an act . . . one in which my commitment would be affirmed.

And yet the humane instinct in me, which had kept me here originally, argued that to kill the man quickly would be marginally better than to leave him here to die.

A final thought was that I had no way of knowing how badly he may be injured. He would be discovered in the morning, and if still alive then would perhaps have his life saved. If this were a possibility, any arbitrary act I made here would be inappropriate.

I pulled the rifle out, stood up, and stepped back two paces. Then I lifted the barrel and fired two shots into the air.

The voice inside the wreckage stopped.

* * *

Within two years of Sally's birth my relationship with Isobel had virtually disintegrated. We learned to suffer one another; growing to dislike the sound of each other's voice, the sight of each other's face, the touch of our backs against each other as we lay in bed.

* * *

My friend explained that the purpose of the new laws was not to persecute the African immigrants but to protect them. He said that the government took the view that they were essentially at our mercy, and that we should treat them as temporary de-

pendants rather than as unwelcome intruders. The population of the country should not be panicked into unconsidered actions by the sight of one or two aliens who may be armed. As illegal immigrants they could only act outside the law for as long as it took the law to apprehend them. This was the whole purpose of the new Order Act.

I argued that I had heard many stories of persecution, of rape, murder and abduction. There was the well-publicised Gorton torture case, in which ten African women had been systematically degraded, raped, mutilated and finally murdered.

My friend agreed with me and said that this was precisely the kind of atrocity which the new Act was intended to prevent. By restricting the rights and movements of the aliens, they would be afforded a greater degree of official protection provided they themselves submitted to the various regulations. The fact that so far the majority of the Afrims had rejected this protection was only a further indication of their essential alienness.

My friend went on to remind me of John Tregarth's early political career, when, even as an Independent back-bencher, he had made a name for himself by his commendable policies of patriotism, nationalism and racial purity. It was a measure of his sincerity that he had held to his views even during the temporary phase of neo-liberal xenophilia before the beginning of the emergency. Now he had risen to high office, the nation would see that its far-sightedness in electing his party into government would be rewarded.

I said that I was under the impression that Tregarth had come to power through the sponsorship of various business interests which had undertaken the expense of the campaign.

Again my friend agreed with me, pointing out that it is an expensive business to create an entirely new political party. The fact that they had been defeated at only one general election before taking office was further evidence of their immense popularity.

I argued that it was only through creating a rift in the existing Opposition that Tregarth had acquired any following at all.

We lapsed into silence for a while, knowing that political differences can damage friendship if not discussed amicably. I did not care for the way in which the present situation was affecting my own life. I had thought my days of political participation ended when I finished my studies, but now I was able to see with my own eyes the human effects of political extremism.

My friend reminded me that Tregarth had come to power several months before the Afrim situation began, and that there

was no question of racial discrimination in the way the emergency was now being handled. A difficult set of circumstances must be dealt with firmly, and for all the declared humanitarian motives expressed from some quarters, the fact remained that the Afrims were hostile and dangerous aliens and must be treated as such.

* * *

I caught up with Lateef and the other two in the village, and we moved on in the direction of the wood. Lateef said nothing about the man inside the helicopter. I had evidently overrated the importance of the incident.

As we came out of the village and joined the main road that ran through the wood, one of the older men who had gone with Collins came up to us excitedly.

‘In the wood! Collins says it’s there!’

‘What is?’ said Lateef.

‘He sent me to get you. We’ve found them.’

Lateef pushed past him and walked quickly in the direction of the flames. As I followed, I glanced at my wristwatch, holding up the face to catch what little light I could from the moon. It was barely possible to make out the time: it was half past three. I was getting more tired with every minute and could not see us setting up another camp within the next hour. We had found that it was hazardous to try to sleep during the day, unless we were able to find somewhere well concealed.

As we came to the edge of the wood I found my lungs filling with smoke. The flavour of it was not one I was familiar with and appeared to be a composite of many fires. Overriding it all, though, was the stench of cordite; the flavour of war, the stink of a spent cartridge.

We approached the scene of the ambush. A heavy agricultural lorry had been parked broadside across the road. Twenty yards from it was the wreck of the leading truck of the convoy. It had received at least one direct hit from the rockets of the gunships, and it was scarcely recognisable as having once been a vehicle. Behind it were the wrecks of several more: I counted only seven, though afterwards I heard Lateef say that there had been twelve. How he had access to this information, I do not know. At any rate, there were four trucks still burning. To each side of the road, shrubbery had been ignited by the explosions and the smoke from this joined with that of the vehicles. There was

not much wind, and in the region of the trucks the air was virtually unbreathable.

I stood with Lateef. We were trying to discern on which side the trucks had been; in this undeclared civil war, the opposing forces rarely displayed colours and it was unusual to see any kind of vehicle bearing identification-marks. Logically, the trucks had been driven by Nationalist or Looyalist troops, as the helicopters had been shown to be piloted by the Afrims, but there was no way of telling for certain. I thought the trucks looked as if they had been American, but neither of us was sure.

A man came out of the smoke and stood before us. In the orange light from the blaze we could see that it was Collins. He had tied a piece of cloth over his nose and mouth, and was breathing heavily.

'I think it was a Nationalist supplies-convoy, Lat,' he shouted to us.

'Is there anything for us?' Lateef said.

'No food. Not much else. But come and see what we've found.'

Lateef took a rag from his pocket and tied it around his face. I followed suit. When we were ready, Collins led us past the remains of the first two trucks and up to the third. This one was not alight.

A rocket had evidently landed directly in front of it, wrecking the driver's cab, but not setting fire to the main part of it. The truck had then collided with the one in front of it, which had burned earlier but without affecting the other. The truck immediately behind it had been victim of a direct hit and its remains were smouldering. Eight or nine of our men stood around, looking expectantly at Lateef.

Collins gestured towards a crate lying on the ground. 'We found that on the truck.'

Lateef knelt before it, reached inside, and pulled out a rifle. He laid it on the ground.

'Are there any more of these?'

'It's full of them.'

Just then, a truck about fifty yards away from us exploded, and we all crouched defensively. I was holding my own rifle and instinctively I backed away towards the nearest trees. I watched Lateef.

He looked round. I heard him say: 'Is there any ammunition?' 'Yes.'

‘Get it off quickly. As much as we can carry. Kelk!’ One of the men ran forward. ‘Get a handcart. Empty everything off it. We’ll carry the rifles on that.’

I stepped back into the trees, suddenly an observer.

It occurred to me that if the ammunition truck were to explode, then all of the men around it would probably be killed. I noticed how much of the grass and shrubbery around the truck was blackened with heat, and how sparks from other trucks drifted near by. I wondered if there was much diesel-oil on the truck, or if there were any unexploded rocket-shells in the vicinity. It was possible that rifles and the ammunition for them were not the only explosives on the truck, and that some of it might explode simply by being manhandled. Though my fears were based on logical grounds, there was an element of irrationality too . . . a feeling, superstitious perhaps, that if I moved to assist the others I would somehow provoke disaster.

I stood amongst the trees, the rifle redundant in my hand.

Once, Lateef left the others and stood with his back to the truck, staring towards me in the trees. He called my name.

I waited until the loading was finished to Lateef’s satisfaction. Then as they pushed the handcart away, I followed at a discreet distance until a camp-site was selected at a distance of about half a mile from the ambushed convoy. I made an excuse to Lateef that I had thought I saw a figure lurking in the woods, and had investigated. Lateef was displeased, and to appease him I offered to stand first guard on the liberated weapons. Another man, Pardoe, was told to share the watch with me, which lasted for two hours.

In the morning each man was issued with a rifle and ammunition. The remainder were stowed on the handcart.

* * *

In the weeks following, Sally and I were on our own. For some time we continued to live in our tent, but were fortunate finally in finding a farm where we were allowed to live in one of the labourers’ cottages. The couple who lived in the farm itself were elderly and took little interest in us. We paid no rent, and in return for assisting with work around the property we were given food.

In this period we had a semblance of security, though we were never allowed to forget the growing military activity in the countryside.

The area was under the control of the Nationalist forces and the farm itself was considered to be strategic. Men from the army came in occasionally to help with the work, and an anti-aircraft battery was built in one of the outer fields, though it was never, to my knowledge, used.

At first, I had an overwhelming interest in the progress of the civil war but soon learned to curb this. I spoke only once with the farmer about the political situation and learned that he was either unwilling or unable to discuss it. He told me that he had once had a television and radio, but that they had been removed by the army. His telephone did not work. His only access to information about the outside world was through the army tabloid that was distributed free to all civilians. His occasional meetings with other farmers were uninformative, since they were all in a similar position.

I spoke several times with the men from the army who worked on the farm. Here, too, I was not able to learn much. They had evidently been ordered not to speak with civilians about the progress of the war, and though this was not strictly adhered to it was plain that the major part of their knowledge consisted of the propaganda put out by their superiors.

One night, in early October, the farm was the target of a raid by enemy forces. At the first pass of the reconnaissance plane, I took Sally to the best available cover – a disused pigsty, which had the advantage of being constructed with stout brick walls – and we laid there until the attack was over.

Our cottage was not damaged, but the farmer's house had been destroyed. The couple were missing.

In the morning the commander of the Nationalist troops visited the farm and took away what remained of the equipment that had been dumped there. The anti-aircraft battery was abandoned.

For no better reason than an unwillingness to uproot ourselves, Sally and I remained in the cottage. Though we felt we were in a precarious situation, the prospect of living once more under canvas was not attractive. Later in the day, the farm was occupied by a detachment of integrated Afrim and Secessionist soldiers, and we were questioned closely by the African lieutenant in charge.

We observed the soldiers with great interest, as the sight of white men actually fighting alongside the Africans was new to us.

There were forty men in all. Of these, about fifteen were white. Both officers were Africans, but one of the N.C.O.s was

white. The discipline appeared to be good, and we were treated well. We were allowed to stay temporarily in the cottage.

During the next day the farm was visited by a high-ranking Secessionist officer. As soon as I saw him I recognised him from the photographs which had been published regularly in the Nationalist tabloid. His name was Lionel Coulsden, and before the war he had been a prominent campaigner for civil rights. During the period of Afrim infiltration of private property in the towns, he had renewed the commission he held earlier in the army and at the outbreak of overt military hostilities had been one of the leaders of the secession to the African cause. He was now a colonel in the rebel army, and was currently under sentence of death.

He spoke personally to Sally and me, and explained that we would have to leave. A Nationalist counter-attack was anticipated shortly and our lives would be in danger. He offered me an immediate commission into the Secessionist forces, but I turned it down, explaining that I had to consider Sally.

Before we left, he handed me a sheet of paper which explained in simple language the long-term aims of the Secessionist cause.

These were a restoration of law and order; an immediate amnesty for all Nationalist participants; a return to the parliamentary monarchy that had existed before the civil war; the restitution of the judiciary; an emergency housing-programme for displaced civilians; and full British citizenship for all contemporary African immigrants.

We were transported by lorry to a village eight miles from the farm. This, we were told, was in liberated territory. We noticed that there was a small Afrim army-camp situated near by, and we approached them for assistance in finding somewhere to stay temporarily. We were not greeted with the affability displayed by the Secessionist colonel, and were threatened with imprisonment. We left at once.

The village was a singularly unfriendly place and we experienced distrust and hostility from the few people we encountered. That night we slept under canvas in a field on the side of a hill three miles to the west of the village. I heard Sally crying.

A week later we found a house standing in small grounds of its own. It was near a main road, but screened from it by a wood. We approached it warily, but though we were met with some initial caution we were not turned away. The house was occupied by a young married couple, who offered to allow us to shelter

with them until we could find alternative accommodation. We stayed for three weeks.

★ ★ ★

It was the first time I had seen Lateef frightened.

We were all tired after the events of the night and our nerves were stretched accordingly. Lateef, in particular, betrayed the stress he was feeling; unable to decide whether or not we should move on, he prowled to and fro clutching his new rifle, as if by releasing it he would have his authority undermined. The rest of us watched him uneasily, not liking the personality that had been revealed by this latest development.

I was occupied with my own doubts, for I found growing in me a feeling of alarm generated by our acquisition of the weapons. Already I had overheard one remark about forming an effective guerrilla organisation against the Afrims. I had heard the phrase 'black bastards' used on more occasions recently than at any other time, including the vengeful hours after the women had been abducted.

Lateef was at the focus of my fears, as well as the mood of the rest of the men. Now, as never before, there was a sense that our actions would be determined solely by him.

What it was in Lateef that occasioned my apprehension was the man's apparent indecision. He was frightened himself: frightened to stay here in the camp we had made less than half a mile from the ambushed convoy, and yet not able to summon the courage to move on.

Both fears were understandable. To stay so close to the scene of the attack was to court discovery by any party sent out to investigate. But to move, laden down as we were with so many rifles, would be disastrous if we were seen by any of the participating military forces. It was the nature of Lateef's position to direct us, and though we were at this moment looking to him for instructions, it was tacit that if he failed in his leadership we would replace him.

For the moment we stayed where we were, as by non-action we did at least have the semblance of decision.

With three of the other men I made an inventory of the rifles we now possessed. In addition to the ones carried by each of us, we had twelve crates. In each crate there were six rifles. There were also several boxes of ammunition. In all, the pile of weaponry was almost more than we could handle. We had loaded most of

it on to our handcarts, but it was apparent that this could not be a permanent arrangement.

I glanced at the other men sitting in a ragged group among the trees, their new-found rifles close at their sides. I looked beyond them to where Lateef stood, lost in his own thoughts.

* * *

I felt that of all the men, I had come nearest to Lateef in recent weeks. In a while, I went over to him. He was not pleased to be interrupted, especially by me. I saw at once I had made a basic error of judgement, and realised I should have stayed with the other men.

He said: 'Where the hell were you last night?'

'I told you what happened. I thought I saw someone.'

'You should have told me. If it had been the Afrims they'd have shot you.'

I said: 'I thought we were in danger. I had my rifle and I was the only one able to defend us.' I did not wish to tell him the truth.

'We've all got rifles now. You don't have to undertake hazardous missions for our benefit. We can look after ourselves, thanks very much, Whitman.'

The tone of his voice was not only bitter. It was impatient, irritated, distracted. His mind was on something else; my crossing to speak to him had only reminded him of the night before, it was not uppermost in his mind.

'You've got all the rifles you need,' I said. 'What are you going to do with them?'

'What would *you* like to do with them?'

'I think we should throw them away. They'll bring us more problems than they'll solve.'

'No . . . I'm not throwing them away. I have other ideas.'

I said: 'What are they?'

He shook his head slowly, grinning at me. 'You tell me something. What would you use them for, assuming you could get away with it?'

'I've already told you.'

'Wouldn't you barter them to other refugees? Or try to shoot down more helicopters?'

I saw what he was getting at. I said: 'It's not just the fact of having weapons. It's that if everyone has them, instead of one or two people, the effectiveness is lost.'

'So while you were number one with the rifle, it was all right. Now that distinction no longer exists, it isn't.'

I said: 'I gave you my arguments for having a rifle when I first discovered it. One rifle represents a form of defence; complete arming constitutes aggression.'

Lateef looked at me thoughtfully. 'Perhaps we agree more than I had thought. But you still haven't told me what practical use you would put them to.'

I considered for a moment. I still had only one real motivation, however impracticable it might appear to be.

'I would try to do something about finding my daughter,' I said.

'I thought that's what you'd say. It wouldn't do any good, you know.'

'As far as I'm concerned, anything would be better than what we've done so far.'

'Don't you understand?' Lateef said. 'There's nothing we can do about that. The best you can hope for is that they're in an internment camp. More likely they've been raped or murdered, probably both. You saw yesterday what they do to white women.'

'And you can just accept that?' I said. 'It isn't the same for you, Lateef. That was my wife and my daughter that they took. My daughter!'

'It didn't only happen to you. There were seventeen women taken.'

'But none of them were yours.'

Lateef said: 'Why can't you accept it like the other men have, Alan? There is nothing we can do to find them. We're outside the law. Approach any of the authorities and we'll be imprisoned immediately. We can't go to the Afrims because first of all we don't know where they are, and anyway we couldn't expect them to admit that they've abducted our women. We'll get no sympathy from the U.N. people. All we can do is continue to survive.'

I looked round angrily. 'You call this survival? We're living like animals.'

'You want to give yourself up?' Lateef's tone had changed; he was trying to be persuasive now. 'Listen, do you know how many refugees there are like us?'

'No one knows.'

'That's because there are so many. Thousands of them . . . perhaps millions. We're just operating in a small stretch of the country. All over England there are homeless people like ourselves. You said we shouldn't be aggressive. But why not?'

Every single one of those refugees has an excellent reason for wanting to participate. But circumstances are against him. He's weak. He has little food, no resources. He has no legal position. Err to one side and he is a potential danger to the military forces because he is mobile, because he sees the war being conducted; too far the other way and he becomes politically involved. You know how the government treats refugees? As secessionist fraternisers. Do you want to see the inside of a concentration camp? So the refugee does just what we've been doing: he lives and sleeps rough, he congregates in small groups, he barter, steals and keeps out of the way of everyone else.'

'And has his women taken from him,' I said.

'If that's the way it has to be, yes. It's not an attractive state, but there's no ready alternative.'

I said nothing to him, aware that he was probably right. I had long felt that had there been an alternative to the wretched vagrant life we had been leading we would have discovered it. But what we saw of the various organised bodies during the brief periods of interrogation to which we had been subjected, made clear to us that there was no place for the displaced civilian. The major towns and cities were under martial law, smaller towns and villages were either under military control or had defended themselves with civilian militia. The countryside was ours.

After a minute or two I said: 'But it can't stay this way for ever. It's not a stable situation.'

Lateef grinned. 'Not now it isn't.'

'Now?'

'We're armed. That's what the difference is. The refugees can unite, defend themselves. With rifles we can take back what is ours . . . freedom!'

I said: 'That's insane. You've only got to leave this wood and the first detachment of regular troops will slay you.'

'A guerrilla army. Thousands of us, all over the country. We can occupy villages, ambush supplies-convoys. But we'll have to be careful, have to stay hidden.'

'Then what would be the difference?'

'We'll be organised, armed, *participating*.'

'No,' I said. 'We mustn't become involved in the war. There's too much already.'

'Come on,' he said. 'We'll put it to the others. It'll be democratic, it can only work if we're all in favour.'

We walked back through the trees to where the others were

waiting for us. I sat on the ground a little distance from Lateef, and looked at the handcarts laden with crates. I was only half listening to Lateef; my mind was preoccupied with the image of a disorganised band of men, thousands of them in every rural area of the country, hungering for revenge against the impersonal military forces and civilian organisations on every side.

I saw that where once the refugees had represented a desperate but ineffectual neutral presence in the fighting, their organisation into a fighting guerrilla force – if such a task could be accomplished – would only add to the chaos which tore at the country.

I stood up and backed away from the others. As I stumbled through the trees, with an ever-growing desperation to be away from them, I heard the men shout their approval in unison. I headed south.

* * *

I noticed the girl on a table a few feet away from mine. As soon as I recognised her I stood up and walked over to her.

‘Laura!’ I said.

The girl stared at me in surprise. Then she recognised me, too. ‘Alan!’

I am not generally motivated by nostalgia, but for some reason I had come back to the restaurant in the park, automatically associating it with the times I had spent with Laura Mackin. Even though I was dwelling on the memory of her, it took me by surprise to see her; I had not known she still came here.

She moved to my table.

‘Why are you here?’

‘Isn’t that obvious?’

We stared at each other across the table. ‘Yes.’

We ordered some wine to celebrate with, but it was over-sweet. Neither of us wanted to drink it, but we could not be bothered to complain to the waiter. We toasted each other, and the rest didn’t matter. While we ate I was trying to work out why I had come here. It could not have been only a seeking for the past. What had I been thinking during the morning? I tried to remember, but memory was inconveniently blank.

‘How is your wife?’

The question that had been so far unspoken. I had not expected her to ask it.

'Isobel? The same.'

'And you are still the same.'

'No one changes much in two years.'

'I don't know.'

'What about you? Are you still sharing a flat?'

'No. I've moved.'

We finished our meal, drank coffee. The silences between our conversations were an embarrassment. I began to regret meeting her.

'Why don't you leave her?'

'You know why not. Because of Sally.'

'That's what you said before.'

'It's true.'

Another silence.

'You haven't changed, have you? I know damn well that Sally's just an excuse. This is what went wrong before. You're too weak to disentangle yourself from her.'

'You don't understand.'

We ordered more coffee. I wanted to end the conversation, leave her here. Instead, it was easier to carry on. I had to acknowledge that what she said about me was true.

'Anyway, I can't say anything that will change you.'

'No.'

'I've tried too often in the past. You realise that this is why I wouldn't see you any more?'

'Yes.'

'And nothing's changed.'

I said, as plainly as I could: 'I am in love with you still, Laura.'

'I know. That is what is so difficult. And I love you for your weakness.'

'I don't like you saying that.'

'It doesn't matter. I only mean it.'

She was hurting me in the way she had done before. I had forgotten this about Laura: her capacity to give pain. Yet what I said to her was true, in spite of everything I continued to love her even though I had not been able to admit this to myself until I met her here. Of the women I had known outside my marriage, Laura was the only one for whom I had deeper feelings than those of physical desire. And the reason for this was because she saw me and understood me for what I was. Though it pained me, Laura's appraisal of my inability to confront my relationship with Isobel was for me an attractive quality. I don't know why she was in love with me, though she said she was. I

had never been able to come to understand her fully. She existed in a kind of personal vacuum . . . living in but not belonging to our society. Her mother had been an Irish immigrant, had died giving birth. Her father had been a coloured seaman, and she had never met him. Her skin was pale, but her features were negroid. She was one of the first victims of the Afrim situation, killed in the second London riot. That day in the park restaurant was the last time I saw her.

* * *

I recognised the leader of the group as the man I had met in the ruined village when we were plundering the remains of the helicopter. At that time he had told me his name was Lateef, but it had given me no clue as to his origin. Because of the events of the time, I had grown to distrust anyone with coloured skin, however faint it may be.

The group he was leading consisted of about forty individuals, including several children. They were not well organised.

I watched them from the upper floor of the old house, hoping they would not make enough noise to awaken Sally. We had had a long and distressing day and were both hungry. The house was a temporary refuge only; as the winter approached we knew we ought to find more permanent quarters.

The problem I faced was whether or not we should make our presence known.

I considered that Sally and I had not been wholly unsuccessful on our own. We had only moved from the couple's house when we heard that unregistered civilians, and those sheltering them, would be sent to internment camps if captured. Though this ruling was withdrawn soon after, we judged it best that we should move on. That is how we came to this house.

I watched the group indecisively.

If we continued to operate on our own there would be less danger of being captured, but to join an established group would mean that food supplies would be more regular. Neither prospect appealed, but in the time we had been with the young couple we had listened to the bulletins from continental radio-stations, and learned of the true nature and extent of the civil war. Sally and I were among the main casualties so far: the two million displaced civilians who were forced to live as vagrants.

Most of the refugees were in the Midlands and the North, and up there conditions were supposed to be worse. There were

fewer in the south, and it was supposed to be easier, but nevertheless there were estimated to be around one hundred and fifty thousand civilians living off the countryside.

In a while the group of refugees below me started to organise themselves better, and I saw two or three tents being pitched. A man came into the ground floor of the house and filled two buckets with water. A fire was lit in the garden and food was laid out.

Then I noticed one of the women who was looking after two young boys. She was trying to get them to wash themselves, though without much success. She looked dirty and tired, her hair tied untidily into a rough bun behind her head. It was Isobel.

If anything this should have made my indecisiveness greater, but instead I went downstairs and asked Lateef if Sally and I could join his group.

* * *

I was heading south. Alone, I felt more secure than I had done with Lateef and the others. I had no rifle, nor any other form of weapon. I carried only my bag containing a few personal possessions, a sleeping-bag and a little food. I was able to avoid unwanted encounters with military forces, and found that my treatment at barricaded villages or defended houses was easier than if I had been with a group. The first night I slept under a hedge, the second in a barn, the third I was given a room in a house.

On the fourth day I came into contact with another group of refugees. Once initial reservations about each other had been overcome, I spoke for some time with their leader.

He asked me why I had left Lateef and the others. I told him about the rifles and what Lateef intended to do with them. I gave him my reasons for fearing the outcome of participation by refugees. I also told him about my search for my wife and daughter.

We were speaking to each other in what had once been a car-park for a pub. The rest of his group were preparing a meal and taking it in turns to wash in the kitchen of the abandoned building.

‘Was your group as large as ours?’

‘It was larger originally,’ I said. ‘Before the raid there were twenty-nine men and seventeen women.’

‘Who were the women? Were they your wives?’

‘Mostly. I had my daughter with me, and there were three single girls.’

‘There are thirty-five of us. And we’ve got more women than men.’

He told me about an incident when they had been rounded up by some Nationalist forces. Those men of suitable age had been given two alternatives: internment in concentration-camps, or mobilisation into the army. Though the remainder of the group had been freed when a United Nations inspection team had arrived at the camp, many of the men had stayed behind to fight with the Nationalists.

I made a wry remark to the effect that one side wanted the men, and the other wanted the women.

The man said: ‘Are you sure it was the Afrims who took your women?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then I think I know where they might be.’ He glanced at me, as if to judge what my reaction might be. ‘I’ve heard – though it is only a rumour – that the Afrim command has authorised several brothels of white women for its troops.’

I said: ‘Rumours are reliable.’

He nodded.

I started at him, shocked and silenced. After a moment I said: ‘She’s only a child.’

‘My wife is here,’ he said. ‘It’s something we all have to be guarded against. All we can do is hide until the war is finished.’

I was given some food and we exchanged as much information about troop movements as we knew. They wanted to know details about Lateef’s group, and I gave them directions to where I had last seen them. I was told that the reason for this interest was that a consolidation of the two groups would strengthen their defence of the women, but in my own mind I felt that it was because I had told the leader about the rifles.

I regretted this, and saw that perhaps I had inadvertently helped sponsor a move to which I did not subscribe.

I found out as much as I could about the rumoured brothels. I knew instinctively that this was the fate that had befallen Sally and Isobel. It disgusted and frightened me, but in one sense it was reassuring since there was a chance that if the brothels were at the direction of the command there would be at least a chance of appeal, either to the command itself or to one of the welfare organisations.

I said: 'Where are these brothels?'

'The nearest, I've heard, is to the east of Bognor.' He named a seaside town, the one in which I had discovered the bungalow with the petrol-bombs.

We consulted our maps. The town was ten miles to the south-west of us, and Lateef's last position was a similar distance to the north. I thanked the group for their food and information, and left them. They were breaking camp and preparing to move.

The part of the coast to which I was going was not one I knew well. The towns run into one another and sprawl back into the countryside. In my childhood I had spent a holiday in the neighbourhood, but I could recall little about it.

In a few miles I encountered the edges of urban development. I crossed several major roads and saw more and more houses. Most of them appeared to be deserted, but I did not investigate further.

When I estimated I was about five miles from the coast I came across a well-made barricade built in the road. There appeared to be no defenders, and I walked up to it as openly as possible, prepared always to take evasive action should there be any trouble.

The shot, when it came, caught me by surprise. Either the cartridge was blank, or the shot was intended to miss, but the bullet came nowhere near me.

I crouched and moved quickly to the side. A second shot came, this time missing me narrowly. I dived gracelessly to the ground, falling awkwardly on to my ankle. I felt it twist under me and an agonising pain ran through my leg. I lay still.

* * *

Later, my friend told me some amusing stories. He is a large man, and although he is only in his early thirties he looks a lot older. When he tells jokes, he laughs at them himself with his eyes closed and his mouth wide open. I had known him only a few months, since falling into the habit of drinking in the evenings. He was a regular at the pub I went to, and although I did not particularly like him, he had often sought me out for company.

He told me about a white man who was walking along a road one day when he encounters this big buck nigger carrying a duck. The man goes up to the nigger and says: 'That's an ugly-looking monkey you've got there.' Whereupon the nigger

says: 'That's not a monkey, man, that's a duck.' The white man stares up at the nigger and says: 'Who the hell's talking to you?'

My friend started laughing and I joined in, amused in spite of myself at the absurdity of it. Before I had finished he began to tell me another one. This was about a white man who wanted to shoot gorillas in Africa. As gorillas were very rare in that part of the jungle, everyone considered it very doubtful that he would find any. After only ten minutes he comes back saying he's already shot thirty, and can he have some more ammunition? Of course, no one believes him, so to prove it he shows them the bicycles the gorillas had been riding.

I had seen the end of that one coming, and anyway did not consider it to be very funny, so I didn't join with my friend in his laughter. Instead, I smiled politely and bought some more drinks.

On my way home that evening, I saw with the clarity that alcohol can sometimes bring how our modes of behaviour had already adapted subtly to allow for the presence of the Afrims and their sympathisers. To tell me the stories, my friend had taken me to a quiet corner of the bar, as if about to divulge something of the order of a state secret.

Had he told the stories in the main part of the bar it was probable that trouble would have been started. There was an Afrim settlement less than a mile from the pub, and its presence had already caused apprehension amongst local residents.

My walk home took me within a few hundred yards of the settlement and I disliked what I was forced to see. Groups of men and youths stood about on street corners, waiting for an excuse to provoke an incident. In the last few weeks there had been several cases of attacks on Afrim sympathisers.

A police-car was parked just inside the entrance to one of the houses in my road. Its lights were off. There were six men inside.

I felt distinctly that events were picking up a self-destructive momentum, and that no longer was a humane resolution possible.

* * *

Sally was happy to be reunited with her mother, though Isobel and I greeted each other coolly. For a moment I was reminded of a period in the early years of our marriage, when it had seemed that the presence of the child would adequately compensate for

the disquieting lack of rapport between us. I talked now with Isobel about practical things, telling her of our attempt to return to London, and the events subsequently. She told me how she had joined Lateef and his group, and we remarked again and again on the good fortune that had brought us together again.

We slept together that night, the three of us, and though I felt we should make some effort to re-establish a sexual relationship, I was incapable of making the first move. I do not know whether it was Sally's presence that caused this.

Fortunately for us, and for all the refugees like us, the winter of that year was a mild one. There was a lot of rain and wind, but only a short period of severe frosting. We had established a semi-permanent camp in an old church. We were visited several times by Red Cross workers, and both military sides knew of our presence. The winter passed uneventfully, the only severe handicap being the continuing absence of news of the progress of the civil disorder.

This period, too, was the one in which I first saw Lateef as some kind of social visionary. He would talk of enlarging our group, and establishing a recognisable unit which would be self-sufficient until the resolution of the troubles. By this time, all of us had abandoned any hope of ever returning to our homes, and we realised that we would be ultimately in the hands of whichever side succeeded in creating a working government. Until that time, Lateef convinced us we should sit tight and await developments.

I think I grew complacent in this period. I was directly under Lateef's influence and spent many hours in conversation with him. Though I grew to respect him, I think he despised me, perhaps because I was so evidently incapable of committing myself to a firm political viewpoint.

Several other groups of refugees came to the church during the winter, staying for varying periods of time before moving on. We came to see our establishment there as being a kind of nucleus of the situation. In our own way we were prospering. We were rarely short of food, and our semi-permanent status enabled us to take time to organise proper foraging parties. We had a good supply of spare clothing, and many items which would be useful as barter.

With the coming of the spring, we soon saw that we were not the only faction which had used the lull in the hostilities to consolidate a position. In late March and April we saw many

aircraft in the sky which, by their unfamiliar appearance, were presumably of foreign origin. Troop-activity renewed, and during the nights long columns of lorries would pass. We heard heavy artillery in the distance.

We had acquired a radio and it had been made to work. To our frustration, however, we were unable to learn much of use from it.

The operations of the BBC had been suspended, and replaced with a one-channel station called 'National Voice'. The content of this was similar to the tabloids I had seen: political rhetoric and social propaganda, interspersed with hours of continuous music. All continental and foreign stations were jammed.

We learned at the end of April that a major attack had been launched against rebel and alien groups in the south, and that a major offensive was under way. The forces loyal to the crown were reported to be sweeping through the very area in which we were established. Though our own observations of military movements lent disbelief to this, we were concerned to a large degree as if there were any truth in the reports there could well be a further increase in activity in the near future.

One day we were visited by a large delegation of United Nations welfare organisers. They showed us several government directives which listed the groups of participants in the hostilities which were to be treated as dissident factions. White civilian refugees were included.

The organisers explained that these directives had been issued some weeks before and, as had happened on several occasions previously, been withdrawn soon after. This lent a great uncertainty to our status, and we were advised either to surrender ourselves to U.N. rehabilitation centres or to move on. The advice came at this time, they said, because large numbers of Nationalists troops were in the area.

The question was debated at some length. In the end, Lateef's wish that we should continue to live outside the law was carried. We felt that while large numbers of refugees remained in this state we retained a large but passive pressure on the government to resolve the conflict and rehouse us. To surrender to U.N. rehabilitation would be to deprive ourselves of this small level of participation. In any event, the conditions in overcrowded and understaffed camps were by all accounts worse than we were presently experiencing.

Several of us, though, did go to the camps . . . mostly those people with children. But the majority stayed with Lateef, and

in due course we moved on.

Before doing so, we had agreed on our daily tactics. We would move in a broad circle, returning to the vicinity of the church every six weeks. We would go only to those places which, either from our own experience or from what we had heard from other refugees, we knew were relatively safe for the overnight encampment. We were equipped with as much camping-equipment as we would need, and had several handcarts.

For four and a half weeks, we travelled as planned. Then we came to an area of flat farmland which was reported to be under Afrim control. This had no effect on our policy, as we had often passed through Afrim territory before.

The first night we were not molested in any way.

* * *

I spent the afternoon at the college in a mood of withdrawn depression. I conducted three tutorials, but found myself unable to concentrate fully. Isobel was uppermost in my mind, and it was not pleasant to associate what I felt with a sense of guilt.

I had finished an affair two weeks before. It had not been complicated by emotional overtones, but had been a negative expression of the sexual frustration induced in me by Isobel's attitude. I had spent several evenings at the woman's flat and one whole night. I had not particularly liked the woman, but she was proficient in bed.

At this period I was still lying to Isobel about my activities and was not certain whether she knew the truth.

By four in the afternoon I had reached a decision, and telephoned a friend named Helen who had sat for Sally on the various occasions when Isobel and I wanted to spend an evening out together. I asked her if she would be free that evening and arranged for her to call at seven.

I left college at five and went straight home. Isobel was ironing some clothes, and Sally – who at this time was four years old – was having her tea.

'Get rid of that as quickly as you can,' I said to Isobel. 'We're going out.'

She was wearing a shapeless blouse and a worn skirt. She had no stockings on, and was wearing her slippers. Her hair was tied back with an elastic band, though stray wisps fell about her face.

'Going out?' she said. 'But I can't. I've all the ironing to do, and we can't leave Sally.'

'Helen's coming round. And you can do the rest of that tomorrow.'

'Why are we going out? What's to celebrate?'

'No reason. I just feel like it.'

She gave me an ambiguous look, and turned back to her ironing. 'Very amusing.'

'No, I mean it.' I bent down, and pulled the socket of the electric iron from the wall. 'Finish that off, and get ready. I'll put Sally to bed.'

'Are we having a meal? I've got all the food in.'

'We can have it tomorrow.'

'But it's already half-cooked.'

'Put it in the fridge. It'll keep.'

She said quietly: 'Like your mood?'

'What?'

'Nothing.' She bent over her ironing again.

I said: 'Look, Isobel, don't be awkward. I'd like to spend the evening out. If you don't want to go, just say so. I thought you'd appreciate the idea.'

She looked up. 'I . . . do. I'm sorry, Alan. It's just that I wasn't expecting it.'

'You'd like to go then?'

'Of course.'

'How long will it take you to get ready?'

'Not long. I'll have to have a bath and I want to wash my hair.'

'O.K.'

She finished what she was doing, then put away the iron and the ironing-board. For a few minutes she moved about the kitchen, dealing with the food she had been cooking.

I switched on the television and watched the news. At this time there was speculation about the date of the coming General Election, and a right-wing Independent M.P. named John Tregarth had caused a controversy by claiming that the Treasury accounts were being falsified.

I saw to Sally and washed up the dirty dishes in the sink. I told Sally that Helen was coming over to look after her and that she was to behave. The child promised solemnly that she would, and then became very placid and happy. She liked Helen. I went into the bathroom to get my electric razor and Isobel was already in the water. I leaned over and kissed her as she sat in the bath. She responded for a second or two, then pulled away and smiled up at me. It was a curious smile; one whose meaning

I could not easily identify. I helped Sally undress, then sat with her downstairs reading to her until Isobel had finished in the bathroom.

I telephone a restaurant in the West End and asked them to reserve a table for us at eight o'clock. Isobel came down in her dressing-gown while I was speaking to them, looking for her hair-dryer. Helen arrived on time at seven, and a few minutes later we took Sally up to her room.

Isobel had brushed her hair down straight and was wearing a pale-coloured dress that fitted and emphasised her figure. She had put on eye make-up and was wearing the necklace I had given her on our first anniversary. She looked beautiful in a way I had not seen for years. As we drove off I told her this.

She said: 'Why are we going out, Alan?'

'I told you. I just felt like it.'

'And suppose I hadn't?'

'You obviously do.'

I detected that she was not at ease, and I realised that to this point I had judged her mood by her behaviour. The cool, beautiful appearance betrayed an inner tautness. As we stopped at a set of traffic-lights I looked at her. The drab, almost sexless woman I saw every day was not here . . . instead I saw the Isobel I thought I had married. She took a cigarette from her handbag and lit it.

'You like me dressed up like this, don't you?'

'Yes, of course,' I said.

'And at other times?'

I shrugged. 'You don't always have the opportunity.'

'No. Nor do you often give it to me.'

I noticed that the fingers of the hand that was not holding her cigarette were picking at each other's nails. She inhaled smoke.

'I wash my hair and put on a clean dress. You wear a different tie. We go to an expensive restaurant.'

'We've done it before. Several times.'

'And how long have we been married? Suddenly it's an event. How long to the next time?'

I said: 'We can do this more often if you like.'

'All right. Let's make it every week. Build it into our routine.'

'You know that's not practical. What would we do about Sally?'

She put her hands to her neck, scooped up her long hair, and held it tightly behind her head. I glanced from the traffic to her. She held the cigarette between her lips, her mouth turned down.

‘You could employ another drudge.’

For a while we drove on in silence. Isobel finished her cigarette and threw it out of the window.

I said: ‘You don’t have to wait for me to take you out before you can make yourself look attractive.’

‘You’ve never noticed it at any other times.’

‘I have.’

It was true. For a long period after we were first married she had made a conscious effort to retain her attractiveness, even during the pregnancy. I had admired her for that, even as the barriers were forming between us.

‘I despair of ever pleasing you.’

‘You’re pleasing me now,’ I said. ‘You’ve a child to look after. I don’t expect you to dress like this all the time.’

‘But you do, Alan. You do. That’s the whole trouble.’

I acknowledged that we were talking in superficialities. Both of us knew that the subject of Isobel’s manner of dressing was only peripheral to the real problem. I fostered an image of Isobel as I had first seen her and I was reluctant to let it go. That much I accepted, and felt that within certain limits it was common to many married men. The real reason for my disinterest in Isobel was something we had never been able to discuss.

We arrived at the restaurant and ate our meal. Neither of us enjoyed it, and our conversation was inhibited. On the way home afterwards, Isobel sat in silence until I stopped the car outside the house.

Then she turned and looked at me, wearing the expression she had had before, but had then concealed with a smile.

She said: ‘I was just another of your women tonight.’

* * *

I was carried to the barricade by two men. I had one arm around each of their shoulders, and though I tried to put weight on my sprained ankle I found the pain was too great.

A moveable section of the barricade had been opened and I was carried through.

I was confronted by several men. Each carried a rifle. I explained who I was and why I wanted to enter the town. I did not mention the Afrims, nor that I feared Sally and Isobel were in their hands. I said that I had been separated from my wife and daughter, that I had reason to believe they were here and wished to be reunited with them.

My possessions were searched.

'You're a scruffy sod, aren't you?' one of the younger men said. The other men glanced at him quickly and I thought I detected disapproval in the way they did this.

I said, as calmly as I could: 'I've lost my home and all my property. I've been forced to live off the land for several months. If I could find a bath and clean clothes I'd gladly use them.'

'That's all right,' one of the others said. He jerked his head to the side and the younger man moved away, glaring at me. 'What did you do before you were displaced?'

'My profession? I was a lecturer at a college, but I was obliged to do other work for a time.'

'You lived in London?'

'Yes.'

'It could have been worse. You heard what happened up north?'

'I heard. Look, are you going to let me in?'

'We might. But we want to know more about you first.'

I was asked several questions. I did not answer them entirely honestly, but more in a way that I felt would provoke a favourable response. The questions concerned my involvement with the war, whether I had been attacked by any troops, whether I had initiated sabotage, where my loyalties lay.

I said: 'This is Nationalist territory, isn't it?'

'We're loyal to the crown, if that's what you mean.'

'Isn't it the same thing?'

'Not entirely. There are no troops here. We've been able to handle our own affairs.'

'What about the Afrims?'

'There aren't any.' The direct flatness of his tone startled me. 'There were, but they left. It was only carelessness that allowed the situation to get out of control elsewhere.'

Another man came forward. 'You haven't said what your stand is.'

'Can't you imagine?' I said. 'The Africans occupied my home and I've lived like an animal for nearly a year. The bastards have taken my child and my wife. I'm with you. All right?'

'O.K. But you said you've come here looking for them. There aren't any Africans here.'

'Which town is this?'

He named it. It was not the same one as the other refugee leader had mentioned. I told him where I had thought I was going.

'That's not here. There aren't any blacks here.'

'I know. You told me.'

'This is a decent town. I don't know about the Africans. There's been none since we kicked the last lot out. If you're looking for them, you won't find them here. Understood?'

'You've told me. I've made a mistake. I'm sorry.'

They moved away from me and conferred in private for a minute or two. I took the opportunity to examine a large-scale map which was attached to the side of one of the concrete slabs forming the barricade. This region of the coast was heavily populated, and though each of the towns had a separate name and identity, in fact their suburbs ran into one another. The town I had been heading for was three miles to the east of here.

I noticed that the map was marked with a zone outlined in bright green ink. Its northernmost point was about four miles from the sea, and it ran down to the east and west until it reached the coast. My objective, I observed, was outside the green perimeter.

I tested my ankle and found that it was almost impossible to stand on it. It had swollen, and I knew that if I removed my shoe I would be unable to get it on again. I suspected I had not broken any bones, but felt that if possible I should see a doctor.

The men returned to me. 'Can you walk?' one of them said.

'I don't think so. Is there a doctor here?'

'Yes. You'll find one in the town.'

'Then you're letting me in?'

'We are. But a few words of warning. Get some clean clothes and tidy yourself up. This is a respectable town. Don't stay on the streets after dark . . . find somewhere to live. If you don't, you'll be out. And don't go around talking about the blacks. All right?'

I nodded. 'Will I be able to leave if I want?'

'Where would you want to go?'

I reminded him that I wanted to find Sally and Isobel. This would necessitate passing through the eastern border into the next town. He told me that I would be able to leave along the coast road.

He indicated that I was to move on. I got to my feet with some difficulty. One of the men went into a near-by house and returned with a walking-stick. I was told that I must return it when my ankle had healed. I promised I would.

Slowly, and in great pain, I limped down the road in the direction of the centre of the town.

* * *

At the first sound I was awake and moved across the tent to where Sally was lying asleep. Behind me, Isobel stirred.

A few moments later there was a noise outside our tent and the flap was thrust aside. Two men stood there. One held a flashlight whose beam was directed into my eyes, and the other held a heavy rifle. The man with the flashlight came into the tent, seized Isobel by her arm and dragged her out of the tent. She was wearing only her bra and pants. She shouted to me for assistance, but the rifle was between me and her. The man with the flashlight moved away, and around the other tents I could hear shouting voices and screams. I lay still, my arm around the now-awakened Sally, trying to soothe her. The man with the rifle was still there, pointing the weapon at me without any movement. Outside, I heard three shots, and I became truly frightened. There was a short silence, then came more screams and more shouted orders in Swahili. Sally was trembling. The barrel of the rifle was less than six inches from my head. Though we were in almost complete darkness, I could make out the shape of the man silhouetted against the faint glow of the sky. Seconds later, another man came into the tent. He was carrying a flashlight. He pushed past the man with the rifle, and outside, only a few feet from me, another rifle fired. My muscles stiffened. The man with the flashlight kicked me twice, trying to push me away from Sally. I clung to her tightly. She screamed. I was struck across the head by a hand, then again. The other man had hold of Sally and tugged her violently. We clung to each other desperately. She was shouting at me to help her. I was incapable of doing more. The man kicked me again, this time in the face. My right arm came free and Sally was pulled from me. I shouted to the man to leave. I said again and again that she was only a child. She screamed. The men stayed silent. I tried to grab the end of the rifle, but it was thrust violently into my neck. I backed away and Sally was dragged struggling through the flap. The man with the rifle came into the tent and squatted over me, the barrel pressing against my skin. I heard its mechanism click, and I braced myself. Nothing happened.

The man with the rifle stayed with me for ten minutes and I lay listening to the movements outside. There was still a lot of

shouting, but no more shots. I heard women screaming and the sound of a lorry engine starting up and driving away. The man with the rifle didn't move. An uneasy silence fell around our encampment.

There was more movement outside and a voice made an order. The man with the rifle withdrew from the tent. I heard the soldiers drive away.

I cried.

* * *

In addition to the pain from my ankle, I was experiencing a growing feeling of nausea. My head ached. I was able to take only one step at a time, pausing to recover my strength. In spite of my discomfort I was able to observe my environment, and registered surprise at what I saw.

Within a few hundred yards of the barricade I found myself in suburban streets which, because of their façade of normality, appeared strange to me. Several cars drove along the streets, and the houses were occupied and in good repair. I saw a couple sitting in easy-chairs in a garden, and they looked at me curiously. The man was reading a newspaper which I recognised as being the *Daily Mail*. It was as if I had been transported somehow to a period two years before.

At an intersection with a larger road I saw more traffic, and a corporation bus. I waited for a lull in the traffic before attempting to cross the road. I managed it with great difficulty, having to pause half-way across to rest. When I reached the far side the nausea grew to a point where I was forced to vomit. A small group of children regarded me from a near-by garden, and one of them ran into a house.

As soon as I was able I limped on.

I had no idea where I was heading. Perspiration was running down my body, and soon I retched again. I came across a wooden seat on the side of the road and rested there for a few minutes. I felt utterly weakened.

I passed through a shopping precinct where there were many people drifting from one store to another. I was disoriented again by the outward normality of the streets. For many months I had not known any place where there were shops, where it was possible to find goods available for purchase. Most shopping areas I had seen had been looted or under strict military control.

At the end of the row of shops I halted once again, suddenly aware how unusual I must look to these people. Already I had

earned several curious stares. I estimated that I had left the barricade an hour and a half before, and that the time now would be around five or six in the evening. I realised how tired I was, in addition to the other symptoms I was experiencing.

Because of my dirty clothes, my unkempt hair, my unshaven face, my two months' odour of dried perspiration and urine, my limp and the flecks of vomit on my shirt, I felt unable to approach any of these people.

The pain from my leg was now almost beyond bearing. I became obsessed with the thought that I was an offensive spectacle to the people, and turned off into a side-road at the first opportunity. I carried on as long as I could, but my weakness was overwhelming. A hundred yards from the turning I fell to the ground for the second time that day, and lay helplessly. I closed my eyes.

In a while, I became aware of voices around me and I was lifted gently to my feet.

* * *

A soft bed. Cool sheets. A body cleaned with a bathful of hot water. A painful leg and foot. A picture on a wall; photographs of smiling people on a dresser. Discomfort in my stomach. Someone else's pyjamas. A doctor winding a bandage around my ankle. A glass of water at my side. Comforting words. Sleep.

* * *

I learned that their names were Mr and Mrs Jeffery. His first name was Charles; hers was Enid. He had been a bank manager, but was now retired. I estimated their ages as being in the middle or late sixties. They were remarkably incurious about me, though I told them I had come from outside the town. I said nothing of Sally or Isobel.

They told me I could stay as long as I wished, but at least until my leg had healed.

Mrs Jeffery brought me all the food I could eat. Fresh meat, eggs, vegetables, bread, fruit. At first I registered surprise, saying that I thought they were impossible to obtain. She told me that the local shops had regular supplies of groceries, and could not understand why I had thought this.

'Food is so expensive though, dear,' she said to me. 'I can hardly keep up with the price-rises.'

I asked her why she thought prices had increased.

'It's the times changing. Not like they were when I was younger. My mother used to be able to get bread at a penny a loaf. But there's nothing I can do about it, so I just pay up and try not to think about it.'

She was marvellous to me. There was nothing that was too much to ask of her. She brought me newspapers and magazines, and Mr Jeffery gave me cigarettes and some Scotch whisky. I read the journals eagerly, hoping they would be able to give me some information on the present social and political scene. The newspaper was the *Daily Mail* and was, as Mrs Jeffery told me without any apparent surprise, the only one available at the moment. Its editorial content was mainly foreign news and photographs. There was no mention anywhere of the civil war. There were very few advertisements, and those were in the main for consumer-goods. I noticed that the price was thirty pence, that there were only four pages, that it was printed twice a week and that it was published from an address in Northern France. I passed on none of these observations to the Jefferys.

The rest and comfort allowed me time to think more objectively of the situation. I realised that I had been concerned mainly with my personal life, and had given no thoughts to what our long-term prospects would be. Though I fretted mentally at my inactivity, I recognised that it would serve no useful purpose to move until my ankle had healed.

The questions were the same whether or not I was able to find Isobel and Sally. In my unwitting role as refugee I had of necessity played a neutral role. But it seemed to me that it would be impossible for this to continue in the future. I could not stay uncommitted for ever.

In what I had seen of the activities and outlook of the Secessionist forces, it had always appeared to me that they adopted a more humanitarian attitude to the situation. It was not morally right to deny the African immigrants an identity or a voice. The war must be resolved one way or another in time, and it was now inevitable that the Africans would stay in Britain permanently.

On the other hand, the extreme actions of the Nationalist side, which stemmed initially from the conservative and repressive policies of Tregarth's government (an administration I had distrusted and disliked) appealed to me on an instinctive level. It had been the Africans who had directly deprived me of everything I had once owned.

Ultimately, I knew the question depended on my finding Isobel. If she and Sally had not been harmed my instincts would be quieted.

I could not directly contemplate the consequences of the alternative.

I felt the dilemma was largely of my own sponsorship . . . had I been able to come to grips with it earlier, I would not now be in this position. On a personal, practical level I could see that whatever future there was for us, it would not be one in which we could settle until the larger issues around us were resolved.

* * *

On the third day at the Jefferys' I was able to get up and move around the house. I had trimmed my beard, and Enid had washed and repaired my clothes. As soon as I was mobile I wanted to pursue my search for Isobel and Sally, but my ankle still pained me when I walked.

I helped Charles with light tasks in the garden and spent several hours in conversation with him.

I was continually surprised by the lack of awareness displayed by both him and his wife. When I spoke of the civil war, he referred to it as if it were a thousand miles away. Remembering the injunction given to me by the man at the barricade not to speak of the Afrims, I was cautious about discussing the politics involved. But Charles Jeffery was not interested in them. As far as he was aware, the government was dealing with a difficult social problem but that the solution would be found in the end.

Several jet aircraft flew over the house during the day, and in the evenings we would hear distant explosions. None of us mentioned them.

The Jefferys had a television set which I watched with them on the evening of the third day, fascinated to learn that the service had been restored.

The style of presentation was similar to that which had once been adopted by the BBC, and in fact the station identification was given as that. The content of the programmes was largely American. There was one short news-bulletin in the middle of the evening, which touched on issues local to the south-coast towns, making no mention of the civil war. All the programmes were pre-recorded, and consisted in the main of light entertainment.

I asked the Jefferys from where the programme were trans-

mitted, and they told me that they were part of a closed-circuit wire system, broadcast from Worthing.

On the fourth day I felt that my ankle had healed sufficiently to allow me to move on. I had a growing restlessness in me, emphasised by a feeling that I was being seduced by the friendly comfort of the Jefferys' house. I could not believe it to be real, but thought of it as an artificial restoration of normal life in an abnormal state. The Jefferys would be incapable of appreciating this, and I said nothing of it to them. I was genuinely grateful for what they had done for me, and while they were able to maintain their illusion of normality I wanted to have no part in breaking it.

I left them in the late morning, knowing that I could never fully express either to myself or to them what the short stay had done for me. I headed for the coast road.

* * *

I encountered no difficulty at the barricade. The men who guarded it were unable to understand why I wished to leave the town, but once I had made it clear to them that I genuinely wished to leave, they allowed me through. I told them that I may be returning later in the day, but they warned me it would not be as easy to re-enter as it had been to leave.

* * *

I walked for two miles through what had been suburban streets. All the houses were empty and several had been damaged or destroyed. I saw no civilians.

On several occasions I met small groups of Afrim soldiers, but I was not accosted.

At midday I entered an empty house to eat the beef sandwiches and salad which Mrs Jeffery had given me. I drank the flask of tea, and washed it out afterwards, realising that it might be useful in the future.

I went down to the beach and walked along it until I came to the place where I had found the bungalow with the makings for petrol-bombs. Out of curiosity I entered the bungalow and looked for the bombs, but they had been taken.

I moved on down to the beach. I sat on the pebbles.

Half an hour later, a youth walked along the shore and approached me. We engaged in conversation. He told me of a

large group of refugees about eight miles to the east who had commandeered a ship and who were planning to sail to France. He invited me to join him. I asked him if the group were armed, and he told me they were.

We spoke for a while of the Afrims, and the youth told me that this had once been a garrison town but that their organisation was not good. Though there were still many hundreds of black troops here, they were ill-controlled and undisciplined. I asked him if he knew anything of the reputed Afrim brothel, and he confirmed its existence. He said there was a large turnover of women, and that the Afrims had no compunction about murdering those who would not co-operate.

He told me that the brothel was less than half a mile from where we were, and that he would take me to it if I wished.

I thanked him, but turned down his offer. In a while he left me, giving me detailed instructions on how to find the group who had the vessel. I told him that if I was going to join them I would be there by the next evening.

I waited until he had disappeared from my sight before I moved off in the same direction.

I walked slowly towards where the youth had said the brothel was situated. This necessitated leaving the shore and walking up into the streets of the town. There were many more Africans in this neighbourhood and I discovered that I was not going to be able to get near the building. I tried approaching it from several directions, but each time I was stopped and told to move away.

Tiredness was growing in me, and I returned to the shore. I sat down on the pebbles and looked at the sea.

There was much crude oil on the water, and in many places the beach was covered in thick black sludge.

The silence appalled me. There were no sea-birds, and the oily waves that broke on the shore were sluggish and without foam. The tide was receding. Far out to sea there was a large warship, but I was unable to determine what type or nationality it was.

My attention was first drawn to the bodies by the presence of a squad of Afrim soldiers, who moved down to the beach about a quarter of a mile from me, then returned to the town. I stood up.

As I walked, my feet were continually sucked by the thick layer of oil on the pebbles. The bodies were not easy to see, and had I not known they were there, from a distance I would have mistaken them for large pieces of congealed oil. They were all

black and there were seventeen of them. They were naked, and all but one of them were female. The blackness of the skin was not that of natural pigmentation or of oil, but of paint or pitch. I moved amongst them, soon finding Isobel and Sally.

I noticed no reaction in me. Later, I felt a sadness, and later than that a disturbing combination of terror and hatred.

I slept that night on the beach. In the morning I murdered a young African and stole his rifle, and by the afternoon I was again in the countryside.

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