

ERLE COX

**THE COLLECTED
NOVELS**

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Prologue

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There was a man seated at a table in what appeared to be a vast physical laboratory. On the table, which was littered with instruments and apparatus, stood a large glass tank in which a fish could be seen swimming. The silence was broken only by occasional movements of the man utterly absorbed in the work he was doing.

Of the many striking features of the room, the man himself was the most remarkable. Even seated, his unusual height was apparent. It was the face however that marked him as one apart. His hair was sparse, and beneath the high wide forehead were set cold grey penetrating eyes from which human emotion seemed absent. Beneath the thin straight nose was a mouth that formed a straight lipless line. Every feature down to the strong chin was clear cut and regular. It was a face that inspired a feeling of awe. Even in repose he seemed to radiate power.

Behind him, the further wall of the room was formed of one great window, set in a wall so thick that its low sill formed a seat. Through it could be seen a broad valley through which a river flowed. Beyond in the distant background stood a vast structure in the shape of a sphere, set on a cubical base.

Intent on his work, with his long slender fingers moving with delicate precision among the instruments before him, the man seemed oblivious to the entrance of a woman, who paused with an expression of surprise on her face when she

saw him. For a moment she seemed about to speak, but with a faint smile and shrug of her shoulders she crossed the room and took her place at another table.

Any other but the man with the fish might well have been aroused by the presence of the newcomer. She was as exquisitely lovely and feminine as he was forbidding and masculine. Her long simple gown, caught at the waist by a pliant metal band made her appear taller than she was. As she crossed the room the grace of her movement seemed floating rather than walking. She was a figure of radiant youth and glorious beauty that could hold mankind spellbound.

For a few moments after she seated herself she looked speculatively at the man with the fish, then turning to her work, her hands moved among some mechanism before her. As she did so a large dark disc standing in front of the table glowed with a yellow light across which strange characters in rows began to move. Occasionally with a touch of her hand, she halted them to make a note, but for an hour she sat, with her eyes intent on the disc-until suddenly the silence was broken by the clear note of a bell. In response to a swift movement of her hand, the colour of the disc changed from yellow to blue, and was again covered with moving characters. Eagerly she watched until, on the second sound of the bell, she shut off the light.

Leaning back in her chair, a slow smile of amusement crossed her face as she looked over at the other table.

"How long will it take you to discover the utmost capabilities of that fish's brain, Andax?" she asked.

If the man heard, he gave no sign. The smile broke into a light laugh, and the woman turned slightly to a large screen beside her, beneath which, on its frame were several rows of light bulbs. Then she pulled over a small switch on the table.

Then her clear voice rang through the room with a note of command.

"General Call! By order of the High Council."

As she spoke the bulbs along the frame began to glow until all responded but one. She watched the dull bulb impatiently and repeated more emphatically.

"General Call! By order of the High Council." As she spoke the last bulb responded.

As it did so her voice rang out again, "General Call, Earani, director of the central geophysical station reports on behalf of the Council. Polar observation stations announce steady and progressive deflection from terrestrial stability. Last observation, 2.33 a.m., shows variation of 2,000 feet. Vast fissures are growing over both polar ice caps. Estimated duration of life on the planet, 43 days. First audible indications of disruption detected at general Station No. 7 at midnight last night. Council orders that until further instructions all work on the planet will go forward as usual. No exceptions will be granted."

"High Council Order No. 2. Volunteers are called to fill mortality wastage at polar stations at the probable rate of 100 per day. Volunteers will report at station No. 16 with full polar equipment. Order and report closes."

As the lights on the frame faded the woman pulled over another switch and spoke sharply—"Special call Station 11."

As she spoke the screen glowed and on it appeared the figure of a young man.

"Name?" she demanded.

"Bardon," came the answer.

"Bardon the poet?"

"Yes."

"Explain 30 seconds' delay in answering a general call."

"I was writing a poem."

"You know the regulations, you are in charge of a station. You know the penalty?"

"Yes!"

"Report to your district executive committee at midday tomorrow. They will deal with you. I will send a relief."

She switched off the light as she spoke and the figure vanished.

From across the room came a cold ironical voice—"Flat dereliction of duty, Earani. You should have turned the ray on him."

Earant laughed lightly. "If anyone deserves the ray it is the man or woman who put a poet in charge of a general call station. Besides, since we will all be dead in 43 days I see no object in official executions."

"Still," Andax persisted, "the council's order said all work must go forward as usual."

There was a touch of hauteur in her voice as she replied. "I exercise my official right of discretion. Anyone but one of your breed would know that one of Bardon's poems is worth the 43 days of life left to the planet."

There was a contemptuous "Humph!" from the fish table.

Earani laughed and imitated the "Humph!" perfectly. "If it comes to dereliction of duty, Andax, how is it that I find you in my department and not in your own?"

"Those audible indications of disruption. Your department is insulated—mine is not."

Earani left her table and walked quietly to the window where she sat looking over the landscape. "If I used my authority of the ray, does it occur to you, that you too, have made yourself liable to its application?"

"As always, you are right," Andax answered without looking around. "Don't allow my feelings to violate your strict sense of duty."

"Get back to your fish, Andax," she retorted. "You and it make a fine cold blooded pair."

The grating voice came back. "I hold a theory that all of the ills that have beset humanity arise from a feminine influence that distracted the Creator when He was making the Universe."

"Judging by what women have suffered from men ever since, I should not be surprised if you were right."

"My fish has one charm, at any rate, that is denied your suffering sex."

"Flatterer!" she laughed, "Don't be shy and spoil the compliment by leaving it incomplete."

"The fish, dear lady, has the virtue of being inarticulate."

Earant looked at the bent figure and said slowly and with conviction. "Somewhere in the world, my dear Andax, there must be a woman who does not realise the happiness she enjoys through your being a bachelor. You can see our world

end with the comforting thought that you have made at least one woman happy."

"Stars in heaven! How can a man work?" He stood up and walked over to her. Earani gazed out over the landscape disregarding his approach.

Andax towered over her. "Listen Earani," he spoke abruptly and emphatically. "There are 43 days left. More than time for the operation and recovery."

Without turning her head, Earani uttered a decisive "No."

As she spoke Marnia entered the laboratory, without speaking to the others she seated herself at Earani's table and read through the notes that Earani had made.

Andax took up the tale. "But the whole thing is so simple. It could be done tonight."

She turned and looked up at him defiantly. "When you first asked me two years ago to allow you to graft one lobe of your precious brother's brain onto mine, I refused, I have refused twenty times since. Do you imagine with but 43 days left I would submit to such an infliction. I don't wish to end life with a mind like yours or your brother's."

"You women!" he sniffed impatiently, "can't you see that what before was merely an experiment is now an imperative necessity."

"I can see no imperative necessity to gratify your wish to convert me into a feminine semi-Andax," she said derisively.

"Can't you realise that you will be chosen to occupy the third sphere?" he demanded.

"I?" Earani stood abruptly, facing him with amazement.

"Yes! You!" he retorted impatiently. "Since one of the three must be a woman, the Council is left with no option."

"But," she exclaimed. "The selectors recommended Marnia to the High Council."

Andax shrugged his shoulders. "True! but the fool is in love. Do you imagine the council will allow one of the three to carry a sentimental complication into the new world?"

"But Marnia-" began Earani.

Marnia rose from the table, and walking towards them interrupted- "What about Marnia?"

Earani took her hand-"Andax says that you are not to be one of the three."

The girl smiled and said gently. "He is right, Earani. I could not bear to stay behind and leave Davos. I petitioned the Council. It is not officially announced, but I know they have agreed. Do you mind very much?"

"But I have heard nothing," protested Earani.

"I have only just heard myself," explained Marnia. "I came to warn you, but Andax has forestalled me. How he knew, I don't know. The decision was made less than an hour ago."

There was a thin smile on Andax's lips as he said, "I knew nothing officially. But the fact was obvious."

"Pure Andaxian speculative philosophy," laughed Marnia.

"Well," sneered Andax, "seeing that you and Davos have done everything but announce your insensate infatuation by a general call, the deduction did not impose a great strain on my pure Andaxian speculative philosophy."

"But why me?" asked Earani helplessly.

"Because," Andax threw his arms wide, "the Creator and the Council in its wisdom only know why, they have insisted on choosing a woman to be one of the three."

"To clip your wings in the bright new world if there ever be one," taunted Marnia.

"But there are others!" exclaimed Earani. "There must be others!"

There was a scarcely veiled sneer in the voice of Andax. "A becoming modesty Earani. However, since you have done biology, geophysics, law, engineering and domestic science, you will do as well as another. Besides the selectors placed your name second on the list-drew them by lot I suppose."

Marnia put her arm fondly round Earani's waist. "What a delightful companion he will be for you in the new world," she laughed merrily.

"You poor, gland-ridden automaton," his thin smile took the sting from the words. Then he turned abruptly to Earani. "Well what about the operation now?"

"Now less than ever," she answered in a tone that closed the discussion. As she spoke she resumed her seat on the window ledge.

There was blistering contempt in Andax's voice. "A woman and a fool, a useful fool I admit, but never anything else than a woman."

He turned and walked towards her table, as he did so Davos entered.

Marnia uttered a joyful "Davos!" and ran to meet him. "You have heard? I am reprieved."

"Yes, I know, I know." Davos put his arm across her shoulder. "We go together." Then turning to Andax he went on. "I would not settle down to work, Andax, you and your fish will be parted almost immediately."

Earani who had been watching them from the window, broke in. "What dreadful partings this calamity will cause. You had better kiss it, Andax."

Disregarding the taunt, Andax turned to Davos. "You mean?"

Davos nodded his head. "The High Council is in session. You and Earani are bound to be summoned almost at once. Your partner in the spheres, Mardon, has already been notified. His speed ship is due almost at any moment."

Davos, his arm still about Marnia's shoulders, walked with her towards Earani's table where they stood whispering together; Earani turned away gazing through the window at the distant sphere. Andax looked from one to the other with an expression between boredom and amusement.

Then with a gesture of impatience he barked at Davos. "Perhaps, Davos, you can spare me a moment from the contemplation of the delights of an impending violent death with Marnia to supply me with some official information."

The three broke into laughter.

"One thing I admire in your breed," said Earani, "is its unflinching tact and consideration for the feelings of others."

Davos bowed to him ironically. "Surely there is no information that a Davos can give an Andax?"

"Spare my humility," snapped Andax. "Perhaps you can tell me if the allocation of the spheres has been decided."

Davos waved his hand in the direction of the sphere in the window. "Yes, Earani goes to number one, you take number two, and Mardon will have number three."

"Hump!" Andax turned to Earani. "This means that we will be sealed up almost immediately. The council will take

no risks now that the time is so short." Then to Davos, "Have you heard anything?"

Davos paused before replying and looked speculatively at Earani.

She understood his hesitation. "Don't worry about my feelings, Davos," she smiled. "I am very interested and not very anxious."

"Well," replied Davos, "number one will be sealed tomorrow at midday. You go north tomorrow night, and Mardon leaves for number three this evening."

"Not losing any time now, are they?" commented Andax. Then abruptly to Davos. "What is the estimate of you and your committee of geniuses. Have you finished wrangling and guessing yet?"

Davos shrugged his shoulders. "The only wrangling in the committee was done by that delightful brother of yours, Andax. I sometimes feel convinced that his manners are worse than yours."

Andax snorted—"I'm not asking for fulsome flattery, but for information."

"Well, since you ask so nicely," replied Davos, "the committee is of the opinion after weighing every factor, that at least twenty seven million years must elapse before the planet is fit for intelligent human civilisation again."

Andax smiled across to the window. "It seems, Earani, that we are about to enjoy quite a long rest."

"Yes," said the girl quietly, "but if we come through it will be worth it."

"Yes," Andax murmured. "If!" For the moment he shed his arrogance. "Scientifically, mathematically and theoretically,

the plan is perfect."

"Well," broke in Marnia, "I don't envy either of you even if it does succeed."

"The only flaw is that the spheres may not stand the strain of the final smash," put in Davos.

"Stars in heaven," Andax exclaimed, his grey eyes flashing enthusiasm. "It is worth a thousand times the risk. Think of the glory of having a new world to play with, and to mould how we wish."

Davos laughed as he replied. "Anyway we have one advantage you two will not enjoy. It will be a unique experience to witness the final smash."

"A pity to miss it," Andax agreed grudgingly. "But we cannot have both."

From the window Earani spoke. "A flying courier has just landed at the door. The summons, I expect."

A moment later a courier in tight-fitting flying kit entered. He included the four in a general salute. "By command of the High Council. Andax and Earani will wait on the Council without delay."

He bowed and retired.

Earani arose from her seat. "Come with us, Marnia—to the door of the chamber, at least," and the four followed the courier.

It was a vast majestic hall in which the High Council sat on a raised dais at its further end. Down its centre from the entrance ran a wide carpeted passage. From this passage on either side rose galleries crowded with silent spectators. The President who occupied the central seat on the platform was a tall stately man with a calm and benevolent

appearance. The four councillors who sat on either side of him were all advanced in years. Two of them were women.

There was an atmosphere of strained expectancy over the whole assemblage as the wide doors of the great chamber slowly unfolded. All eyes were turned on the little group they revealed that waited on the threshold.

The voice of the official rang through the Hall. "Surrendering to the command of the High Council. I have the honour to present Andax, Earani and Mardon."

From an official at the foot of the dais came the command. "Enter, Andax, Earani and Mardon and learn the will of the most honourable High Council."

As the three walked slowly down the long passage all of the spectators rose and remained standing until they paused, bowing before the dais. Not until the murmur and rustle of the great gathering ceased after they had resumed their seats, did the President stand and come to the edge of the dais.

Looking down on the three, he spoke slowly and with profound earnestness. "My children, it has pleased the creator of our planet to permit the destruction of all who dwell upon its surface. That moment, long foretold, is upon us. But in the hope that all of the achievements of our race for the happiness of humanity may not vanish utterly with them, we have resolved on an expedient whereby they may hand down the wisdom of our race to that, which, in the fullness of time, may follow us."

"On you three, my children, has fallen that grave and terrible trust. It may be, for our eyes are blinded to the outcome, that you face events beside which the death that

shadows the planet will be a very small thing. We know none among us fears death. But, what the future holds for you, none may say. Therefore I charge you, if your hearts be not firm in their purpose, you may now retire from it in peace and honour, and with the goodwill of your fellows—none hindering or none blaming.

"Speak now, each one of you."

The voice of Andax echoed through the chamber. "I take the trust upon me for the honour of the race."

Earani's clear sweet voice followed. "And I for the love of humanity."

From Mardon came. "I gladly and willingly accept the trust with which I am honoured."

A low whispering murmur that swept over the assembled throng was stilled by a motion of the President's hand.

Again he spoke. "In the name of our race the High Council commends you and accepts the sacrifice.

"My children, from this moment you surrender yourselves to the will of the High Council. I charge you in the knowledge that any deviation from the way of honour will call down upon you its own penalty of atonement, that you will carry out in all things the plans of our race in which you have been instructed. In the discharge of the trust you have assumed there must be no thought of self, and should the time come, there will be no swerving from the course laid down, nor any shrinking from the tasks, however terrible, to bring peace, wisdom and happiness to those who may follow us."

He paused. "Kneel, my children!"

Quietly the three sank to their knees.

Looking down on them the President went on. "Raise your hands and repeat after me my words.-I swear on the faith of my creator-upon the honour of my name-and by my loyalty to my fellowship of the race that is about to die-that I will never, by word or deed-betray the trust that is imposed upon me. I swear unwavering loyalty to my ideals, and to the two partners who share my trust-and for them, if need be, I will lay down my life."

So still was the hushed hall as the three voices followed that of the President, that it might have been empty.

The old man raised his hands in benediction over them. "The blessing and love and the hopes of the dying race be upon you; may they make strong your hearts and purposes; and may you be guided in wisdom justice and honour in the days of your trust."

As he returned to his seat the three stood up, still facing the Council.

A woman councillor on the right of the President stood and addressed them, her voice trembling a little as she began.

"Earani, it is the will of the High Council that at noon tomorrow you surrender yourself at the sphere known as number one, and there you will be given oblivion.

"Andax, by sunset tomorrow night you will leave for your post at number two sphere, and there surrender yourself to the district council.

"Mardon, within the hour you will depart for number three sphere where the Western Council awaits you-and may grace and strength go with you all," she added solemnly.

The three bowed to the Council, and turning passed down the passage between the silent throng that rose in their honour.

Outside the hall as the doors closed behind them Davos and Marnia hurried to meet the three in the hope that they would pass the evening with them. Mardon excused himself, pleading the order for his immediate departure.

"But you will come with us, Andax," begged Marnia.

He shook his head and came as near to laughter as Andax ever came. "No, Marnia, No. You three go and indulge in an orgy of sentiment. I would spoil it.

"But what will you do?" she asked anxiously. "Go back to my fish, dear lady," and he went.

Chapter I

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Bryce brought his car to a stop in front of the deep verandah of the homestead, and, before getting out, let his eyes search the vivid green of the vines for the owner. The day was savagely hot, and the sun, striking down from the cloudless blue-white sky, seemed to have brought all life and motion to a standstill. There was no sign of Dundas amongst the green sea of foliage. Now and then a dust devil whirled up a handful of dried grass and leaves, but seemed too tired to do more.

Bryce strolled to the end of the verandah and peered through the leaves of the trellised vine that shaded it. Some 200 yards away, in a slight hollow, he noticed a large pile of dusty red clay that added a new note to the yellow colour scheme. Even as he watched he caught a momentary flash of steel above the clay, and at the same instant there was a fleeting glimpse of the crown of a Panama hat. "Great Scott!" he murmured. "Mad-mad as a hatter." He turned rapidly off the verandah, and approached the spot unheard and unseen, and watched for a few moments without a word. The man in the trench had his back turned to Bryce. He was stripped to singlet and blue dungaree trousers, which clung to the figure dripping with perspiration.

"Alan, old chap, what is it? Gentle exercise on an empty stomach, eh?" The pick came down with an extra thump, and the worker turned with a smile. "Bryce! By the powers!" Then with a laugh: "I'll own up to the empty stomach," and,

holding out a strong brown hand, he said: "You'll stop to lunch, old man?" Bryce nodded. "Might take the cheek out of you if I say that was partly my reason for calling in." Dundas only grinned; he knew just how much of the remark was in earnest. "I am very sorry, Hector, but I am 'batching' it again, so it's only a scratch feed."

"You unfortunate young beggar; what's become of the last housekeeper? Thought she was a fixture. Not eloped, I hope?" They had turned towards the house. "Wish to glory she had," was Alan's heartfelt comment. "Upon my word, Bryce, I'm sick of women. I mean the housekeeping ones. When they are cold enough to be suitable for young unattached bachelors, and have settled characters, those characters are devilish bad. The last beauty went on a gorgeous jamboree for four days. I don't even know now where she got the joy-producer."

"Well?" queried Bryce, with some interest, as Dundas paused.

"Oh, nothing much. I just waited until she was pretty sober. Loaded her and her outfit into the dogcart, and by Jove," with a reminiscent chuckle, "she was properly sober when I got to the township and consigned her to Melbourne. Billy B.B. was in topping good form, and tried to climb trees on the way in."

"But, Dun, this is all very well," said Bryce, laughing. "You can't go on 'baching.' You must get another."

"No, I'm hanged if I do. The old 'uns are rotters, and, save me, Hector, what meat for the cats in the district if I took a young one."

"I'm afraid it would take more than me to save you if you did," said Bryce, laughing at the idea.

They had reached the house. Dundas ushered his friend in. "You make yourself comfy here while I straighten myself, and look after the tucker."

Bryce stretched himself on the cane lounge, and glanced round the room. It was a room he knew well. The largest of four that had formed the homestead that had originally been built as an out-station, when the township of Glen Cairn had got its name from the original holding, long since cut up. It was essentially a man's room, without a single feminine touch. Over the high wooden mantel were racked a fine double-barrelled breechloader and a light sporting rifle, and the care with which they were kept showed that they were not there as ornaments.

The walls held only three pictures. Over the cupboard that acted as a sideboard hung a fine photogravure of Delaroche's "Napoleon," meditating on his abdication, and the other two were landscapes that had come from Alan's old home. From the same source, too, had come the curious array of Oriental knives that filled the space between the door and the window. What, however, attracted most attention was the collection of books that filled the greater part of two sides of the room, their shelves reaching almost to the low ceiling.

The furniture was simplicity itself. Besides the sideboard, there were a table and three chairs, with an armchair on each side of the fireplace. The cane lounge on which Bryce was seated completed the inventory. Above the lounge on a special shelf by itself was a violin in its case. To a woman,

the uncurtained windows and bare floor would have been intolerable, but the housekeeping man had discovered that bare essentials meant the least work.

Presently a voice came from the kitchen. "Hector, old man, there's a domestic calamity. Flies have established a protectorate over the mutton, so it's got to be bacon and eggs, and fried potatoes. How many eggs can you manage?"

"Make it two, Dun; I'm hungry," answered Bryce.

"Man, you don't know the meaning of the word if two will be enough." Five minutes later he appeared with a cloth over his shoulder and his arms full of crockery.

A thought of his wife's horror at such simplicity flashed through Bryce's mind. "You're a luxurious animal, Alan, using a table cloth. Why, I don't know any of the other fellows who indulge in such elegance. Or am I to feel specially honoured?"

"No, Bryce; the fact is that I know that a man is apt to become slack living bachelor fashion," returned Dundas seriously, "so I make it a rule always to use a table cloth, and, moreover," he went on, as if recounting the magnificent ceremonial of a regal menage, "I never sit down to a meal in my shirt sleeves. Oh, Lord! the potatoes!"

With two dishes nicely balanced, Dundas arrived back again, and after another journey for a mighty teapot, he called Bryce up to the table. To an epicure, bacon and eggs backed by fried potatoes, for a midday meal with the thermometer at 112 deg. in the shade, may sound a little startling, but then, epicures rarely work, and the matter is beyond their comprehension. Bryce stared at the large dish

with upraised hands. "Man, what have you done? I asked for two."

"Dinna fash yersel', laddie," answered Dundas mildly. "I've been heaving the pick in that hole since 7 o'clock this morning, and it makes one peckish. The other six are for my noble self. Does it occur to you, Bryce, that had I not scrapped an unpromising career at the bar, I might also have regarded this meal as a carefully studied attempt at suicide?"

"Humph! perhaps—I believe you did the best thing though, and I own up that I thought you demented then."

"Lord! How the heathen did rage."

"True. But don't you ever regret or feel lonely?"

"Nary a regret, and as far as for the loneliness, I rather like it. That reminds me. I had George MacArthur out here for a week lately. He said he wanted the simple life, so I put him hoeing vines. More tea? No? Then, gentlemen, you may smoke." Dundas reached for a pipe from beneath the mantel, and then swung himself into an armchair, while Bryce returned to the comfort of the creaking lounge.

"By the way, Alan," said Bryce, pricking his cigar with scientific care, "you haven't told me the object of your insane energy in that condemned clayhole." Dundas was eyeing the cigar with disfavour. "I can't understand a man smoking those things when he can get a good honest pipe. Oh, all right, I don't want to start a wrangle. About the condemned clayhole. Well, the fool who built this mansion of mine built it half a mile from the river, and that means that in summer I must either take the water to the horses or the horses to the water, and both operations are a dashed

nuisance. Now observe. That condemned clayhole is to be ultimately an excellent waterhole that will save me a deuce of a lot of trouble. Therefore, as Miss Carilona Wilhelmina Amelia Skeggs so elegantly puts it, you found me 'all a muck of sweat.'"

"Yes, but my dear chap, you can afford to get it done for you."

"In a way you are right, Hec, but then I can't afford to pay a man to do work that I can do myself."

"Don't blame you, Alan." Then, after a pause, and watching him keenly: "Why don't you get married?"

Dundas jerked himself straight in his chair, the lighted match still in his fingers. "Great Scott, Bryce! What's that got to do with waterholes?" The utter irrelevance of the question made Bryce laugh. "Nothing, old chap—nothing. Only it just came to my mind as I was lying here." Lying was a good word, had Dundas only known. "You know," he went on, "there are plenty of nice girls in the district."

"You are not suggesting polygamy, by any chance?" countered Alan serenely from his chair, having recovered from the shock of the unexpected question.

"Don't be an ass, Alan. I only suggested a good thing for yourself."

"Can't you see the force of your argument, Hector, that because there are plenty of nice girls in the district (I'll admit that) I should marry one of them."

"You might do a dashed sight worse."

"You mean I mightn't marry her?"

"You Rabelaisian young devil! I'll shy something at you in a minute if you don't talk sense."

"Well, look. If you want reasons I'll give you some. First, for the same reason that I cannot afford a pumping plant. Now do shut up and let me speak. I know the gag about what will keep one keeping two. It's all tosh. Secondly, I wouldn't ask any nice girl to live in this solitude, even if she were willing. Third-do you want any more? Well, if I got married I would have to extend and rebuild this place." Then he quietened down, and said seriously, "I know what you mean, Hector; but those," pointing to the books, "are all the wife I want just now."

Bryce smiled. "By jove, Alan, who's talking polygamy now? There are about six hundred of them."

"Oh!" answered Alan serenely. "I'm only really married to about six of them. All the rest are merely 'porcupines,' as the Sunday school kid said."

"Alan, my son, I'll really have to consult the Reverend John Harvey Pook about your morals, and get him to come and discourse with you."

"Lord forbid!" said Dundas piously. "That reminds me. I told you I had George MacArthur here for a week, living the simple life. Well, he was never out of his pyjamas from the day he arrived till the day he left. However, one afternoon while I was taking the horses to water, who should arrive but the Reverend John Harvey and Mamma and Bella Pook, hunting for a subscription for a tea-fight of some sort. Anyhow when I got back the noble George was giving them afternoon tea on the verandah. Just apologised for being found in evening dress in the day time."

"Humph!" commented Bryce, "did Pook get anything?"

"Well, I paid a guinea just to get rid of them. George was making the pace too hot," replied Dundas. "Pook nearly fell over himself when George came to light with a tenner."

Bryce smoked a few minutes, watching Alan through the cloud. "Why did you get MacArthur down here?" Dundas, who had been gazing off through the window, spoke without turning his head. "Oh, various reasons. You know I like him immensely in spite of his idiosyncrasies. He's no end of a good sort. It's not his fault that he has more thousands a year than most men have fifties. He lived a godly, upright, and sober life the week he was here. Pity he doesn't take up a hobby of some sort- books or art collecting or something of the kind."

"I'm afraid an old master is less in his line than a young mistress," said Bryce sourly.

Dundas looked around, wide-eyed. "Jove, Hector, that remark sounds almost feminine."

Bryce chuckled. "You must have a queer set of lady friends if that's the way they talk."

"Oh, you owl! I meant the spirit and not the letter. Anyhow, what's MacArthur been doing to get on your nerves? You are not usually nasty for nothing."

"You've not seen him since he left?"

"No, I've not been near Glen Cairn or the delights of the club. Been too busy. Anyhow, you don't usually take notice of the district scandal either."

Bryce stared thoughtfully at the ash of the cigar he turned in his fingers. "Well, if you will have it. Here are the facts, the alleged facts, club gossip, tennis-court gossip, also information collected by Doris. The night after he left you,

George MacArthur filled himself with assorted liquors. Went down with a few friends to the Star and Garter (why the deuce he didn't stay at the club I don't know). He made a throne in one of the sitting-rooms, by placing a chair on the table. On the throne he seated a barmaid—I'm told it was the fat one (Perhaps you can recognise her from the description). Then he removed a leg from another chair and gave it to her as a sceptre. I believe, although statements differ, he made them hail her as the chaste goddess Diana. Rickardson tells me that, as a temporary revival of paganism, it was a huge success."

Alan's frown deepened as the recital went on. "Bryce, how much of the yarn is true? You know the value of the confounded gossip of the town."

"I've given you the accepted version," said Bryce slowly.

Alan, still staring through the window, said, a little bitterly, "I suppose the verdict is Guilty? No trial, as usual."

"The evidence is fairly conclusive in this case," answered Bryce. He was watching Dundas keenly. Then he went on, in a slow, even voice, "I saw Marian Seymour cut him dead yesterday." Then only he turned his eyes away as Alan swung round. For a moment he made as if to speak, but thought better of it.

Bryce heaved himself out of his lounge. "Well, Alan, we won't mend the morals of the community by talking about them. You'll come over to dinner on Sunday, of course?"

Alan stood up. "Jove, Hector, that will be something to look forward to. Tell Mistress Doris I'll bring along my best appetite."

Bryce laughed. "If I tell of your performance on the eggs to-day I'd better forget that part of the message. You had better break the news of the calamity yourself. Phew! What a devil of a day! Surely you won't go back to that infernal work?"

"You bet I do! I've taken twice my usual lunch time in your honour. Aren't you afraid some of the gilded youths on your staff will do a bunk with the bank's reserve cash if you are not there to sit on it?"

"Not one of 'em has as the bowels to do a bunk, as you so prettily put it, with a stale bun. You can thank your neighbour, Denis McCarthy, for this infliction. I had to pay him a visit."

"Humph! It's about the only thing I've ever had occasion to feel genuinely thankful to him for. You found him beastly sober, as usual?"

"Well," said Bryce grimly, "I found him beastly and I left him sober. Yes, very sober. Thank goodness that finishes the last of my predecessor's errors in judgment." He stooped to crank up his car. "Goodbye, Alan; don't overdo it." He backed and turned in the narrow drive before the verandah, while Dundas stood and made caustic comments on the steering in particular and motor cars in general. The last he heard was a wild threat of "having the law agin' him" if he broke so much as a single vine-cane.