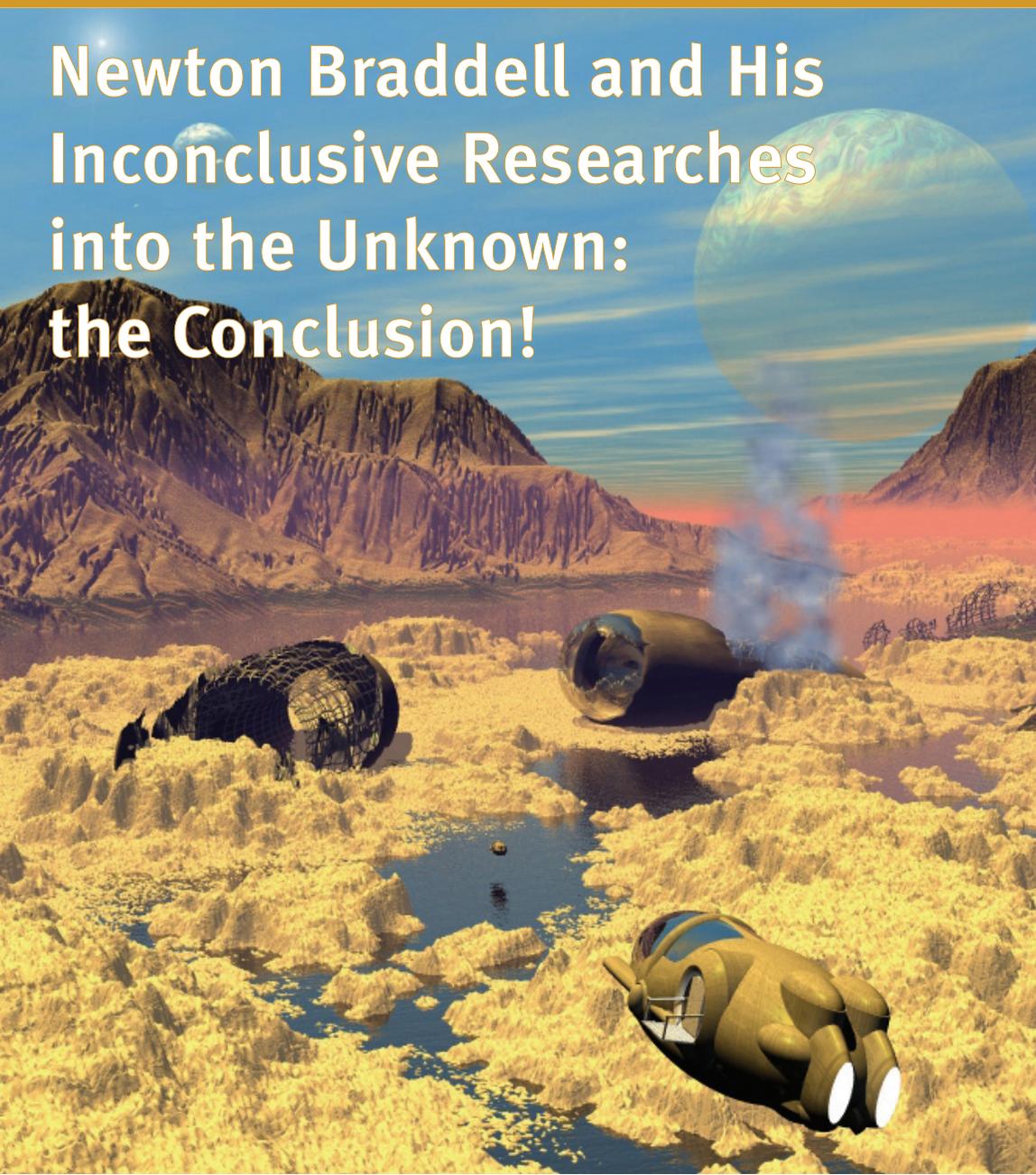


Theaker's Quarterly Fiction #32

Newton Braddell and His
Inconclusive Researches
into the Unknown:
the Conclusion!



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EDITORIAL

New Friends and Old!

Stephen Theaker

This is rather a sad issue for us here at Silver Age Books. For one thing, we'd hoped for many, many years that with issue 32 we would finally catch up with *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* – in terms of issue numbers if nothing else. It was a silly, arbitrary goal, but one that kept us going through the long Sundays of proofreading. But it wasn't to be: we've produced this issue a bit late, and those literary rascals at *McSweeney's* managed to sneak out an issue 33 just as the year turned. We could console ourselves with the thought that Hamish Hamilton have yet to release issue 33 in the UK, but it feels hollow. Blast the erudite, beautiful hide of Dave Eggers and all who work in his dungeons!

The second reason for our sadness affects the reader more directly. In this issue concludes the saga of Newton Braddell, a virtual ever-present in this magazine since his first appearance in issue 8, back in 2005. "The ship drifted like a wind-tossed seed through the long night of space." Thus it began, and Newton never really achieved much more control over his life than was thus established. Yet his endless adventures have endlessly entertained this editor – and sustained the magazine! I have always known that should no other suitable contributions be received, there would always be at the very least a Newton Braddell episode to publish. Herein we have the final four episodes: the magazine will be forever lessened.

But new adventures ever beckon! On one hand, in the style of British comics of old, this issue features on its flipside one of the final issues of *Pantehnicon*, a fellow zine that ran out of steam. Though I am of course always glad to see our rivals tumble to their doom, I was more than happy to help them get their last issues out to the world.

Also, I was recently lucky enough to be appointed the caretaker chair of the British Fantasy Society... It's a huge honour, but it does mean that this year's issues of TQF will probably be a bit shorter than usual, so that I can do my best to stay on top of everything. Our schedule may be a little more erratic than usual. As my favourite typo has it, bare with us!

SCIENCE FICTION

Newton Braddell and His Inconclusive Researches into the Unknown: the Conclusion!

John Greenwood

Miss Lavender Goes It Alone

Only a few weeks after our own exile from the wandering tribe of City Hall, Miss Lavender had absconded in turn, disgusted so she said by the messianic fervour that had gripped her people. According to her account, I had become a hate-figure for the Citihallians, blamed in my absence not only for the continuing shortages of food, but for other thefts and losses too. Broken-down trucks and other technical failures were routinely attributed to sabotage on my part. The demonisation had reached such a pitch that general opinion held I had murdered Yewtree and other absconding Citihallians who had grown tired of the atmosphere of paranoia and religious madness.

Miss Lavender revealed that “wanted” posters had been produced and hung in every communal kitchen and therapy waiting room, depicting me as an immensely fat glutton with a devilish glint in my piggy eyes, my parasitical appendages elaborated with barbed thorns as though they were prehensile limbs ready to lash out at the viewer, and Raffles perched on my shoulder transformed into a rabid fanged predator, rather than the harmless snake-mouse who lived in my pockets and rucksack.

The picture had been so widely distributed that Miss Lavender confessed herself astonished to see me looking so “svelte” (in her words). “Haggard” would have been a more accurate description – both Yewtree and I had lost weight. We were not starving, but not a single morsel of edible matter that crossed our path was passed up.

That I had become the Citihallians’ devil would have been amusing were it not such a tragedy for this once-peerlessly scientific civilisation, and were it not so obviously a source of distress for Miss Lavender and, to a lesser extent, Mr Yewtree. How had Miss Lavender survived alone in the Kadaloorian wilderness? Evidently the preparations she had made for her escape were more considered than our own. Most importantly, she had stolen one of the community’s few hover bikes, nifty little vehicles that, while seating only two, could cope with all but the most unfriendly terrains. In place of a passenger she had been accompanied by, so she explained, a mountain of provisions carefully bound in nets and ropes. Alas, the provisions had long since been exhausted and the precious bike abandoned, broken-down but carefully stowed in a small cave.

“It took all my strength and ingenuity to drag that broken-down, braddellish bike up the hillside to the cave mouth,” she said.

I started at the odd use of my own name. “Braddellish?” I asked. “What is that?”

Miss Lavender blushed deeply and turned her face away from our campfire.

“Oh, Newton forgive me!” she said. “That is one of the words they’ve started using, back in City Hall camp, I mean.”

“But what does it mean?” I enquired with a smile (Miss Lavender’s casual use of my first name, for the first time, had cheered me immensely).

“I suppose it means rotten and dreadful. It just slipped out! Oh, how thoughtless! Do forgive me!”

I assured her with sincerity that I thought no less of her for her slip of the tongue, but I would have had very thick skin indeed, inhumanly so, not to feel this neologism as a slight on my character. Not only was my person depicted in every corner of City Hall camp as a flabby thief, but my very name had become a curse and a by-word for villainy amongst my erstwhile companions.

“So once you had lost the bike, what then?” asked Yewtree, between mouthfuls of supper.

That evening we were dining on the boiled tubers of a certain flowering shrub that Miss Lavender had taught us to recognise. It was one of

several innovations that the ever-resourceful Lavender had introduced to our nomadic lifestyle, including the furs we now sat on, skinned and tanned by her own fair hand. The bright green tubers were rather tasteless, filling, and induced (in me at least) distressing quantities of trapped wind. But it was also plentiful in these parts, and in the absence of readily available game it had become our staple.

"I did not lose the bike," replied Miss Lavender a little haughtily. "I know its exact whereabouts."

"But how did you survive alone, and on foot?"

"Why much the same way that you have, I imagine," was her reply. "A little thrift, a little care, rather more application."

Yewtree interrupted her. "What I don't understand is why you decided to go it alone in the first place. Surely there were others who wanted to get away? Wouldn't you have had less to endure in company?"

"Perhaps," said Miss Lavender, "But there were less malcontents in City Hall than you imagine, and certainly less opportunities to escape. Most of those who had wanted to strike out on their own had already done so, and those who remained were changed."

"Changed? In what way?" I asked.

Miss Lavender frowned. "People began to be afraid to stray very far from the camp, especially alone. A rumour went around that you had gathered together a gang of aliens, Braddellites they were dubbed, who stalked the camp and were ready to hunt down anyone who found themselves out alone after dark."

"Hunt them down?" I laughed. "To what end?"

"To eat them," said Miss Lavender grimly.

There was an unhappy pause in the conversation while we all privately reflected on what we had experienced in that misty forest valley so recently, before Miss Lavender took up the threads of her tale once more.

"Just a few days after your disappearance another group of Citihallians vanished – several households, at least a dozen people in total. Of course they had absconded – their tents and all their equipment had gone with them – but that didn't prevent the authorities from calling it murder. From that point on we were forbidden from leaving the camp in the hours of darkness, and when that did not stop the leak, the prohibition was extended to daylight hours too. So even those who did not succumb to the fear-mongering were cowed by their respect for the communal laws."

"Communal law!" bellowed Yewtree indignantly. "Why, these laws were never the product of any community I was a part of! This is unbri-

dled draconianism! And what authorities have the power to restrict a man's movements if he has done no harm? This is not the City Hall I knew!"

Miss Lavender's eyes seemed for a moment filmed with tears, and she took on a distant look. I wondered whether some untold incident had proved the impetus to her leaving City Hall, something she had chosen not to reveal to us. Though I had privately sworn my undying love for her, I still barely knew the woman. It was as though I had pledged my loyalty to a foreign nation never seen, as Yewtree seemed to have tied his colours to the mast of Romundli, even before we had set eyes on the place.

"Guards were stationed around the camp perimeter," continued Miss Lavender, "and even beyond the camp, armed patrols combed the area for signs of intruders or curfew-breakers. It became close to impossible to conspire with one's fellows. To speak aloud one's wish to leave the camp would have been seen as a sign of insanity or even treachery. There must have been others who wanted to break free, but we had as yet not found one another, nor developed a means of communication. I had to make a decision – either stay with the Citihallians and hope that other dissenters crossed my path, or else strike out alone. For too long I prevaricated, cautiously seeking out like-minded citizens who might join me in an escape attempt."

"What changed your mind?" I asked.

"Something else happened," said Miss Lavender, and we all sat still for a moment while we listened to the mournful barking of some wild animal, miles away in the depths of the night.

"Wolves?" I wondered aloud, and the word brought back disturbing memories of the Bugis.

"Wild dogs," Miss Lavender corrected me. "Not much meat on them, but good thick coats, just like the ones we're sitting on now."

Taken aback I ran my fingers through the coarse fur beneath me, but was aware at the same time that I should not have been surprised. In my mind's eye I pictured Miss Lavender wrestling one of these slavering predators to the ground with her bare hands, then either breaking its neck or putting its eyes out with a sharpened stick. It was not an image that appealed to my romantic inclinations and I decided to probe no further into the means by which these invaluable coats had been parted from their owners. No doubt Miss Lavender, ever resourceful, had devised a hygienic and humane method of trapping the beasts.

Abruptly the barking ceased.

"Sounded like it was in pain," said Yewtree.

“No,” said Miss Lavender. “That’s their mating call. But it amounts to much the same thing.”

“You said that something else had happened to change your mind about City Hall,” I said, changing the subject.

She looked directly at me with an inscrutable expression, which sent a shiver down the nape of my neck.

“Do you remember the day we escaped from the volcano?” she asked.

“How could I forget it?” I said, flushing at the thought of the unfinished letter I had discovered among Miss Lavender’s effects. It was a subject I had never dared broach with her.

“A child was born that day,” continued Miss Lavender, “on the slopes of Mount City Hall.”

“Yes, I do remember hearing the news,” I said, thinking back to that first night in the emergency shelter.

“No casualties, and one new arrival!” said Yewtree with a smile. “The population of City Hall actually grew that day, despite the Punggol bombs! A good omen for the future, eh?”

“That little boy is crawling now,” said Miss Lavender.

“Is he now?” said Yewtree. “How the time rushes by! But what of it?”

“Since you both left, the infant has taken on a larger significance than you could have imagined. Of course, other mothers have given birth since, but he was the first, and the only one born on the volcano itself. They say that a tent was put up on the mountain, and that the doctor and midwives all crowded inside to assist in the delivery while the bombs fell around them. But it was just one of many incredible stories of survival to emerge from that strange day, until very recently. I don’t quite know how the rumour started, but the child had been given a sheet of paper to play with, and had got hold of some coloured chalks. When his mother saw the marks he had made she became convinced that he had drawn a map of the new homeland.”

“What?” cried Yewtree. “Who is this cretinous woman?”

“Her name is Mrs Lakeside. But now she is more frequently known as the Sacred Mother of the Philosopher-in-Chief.” Yewtree and I laughed out loud but our mirth was cut short when we saw that Miss Lavender was entirely serious.

“You would not be suffered to laugh at the Philosopher-in-Chief were you still amongst the Citihallians,” said Miss Lavender. “Nor would you treat it so facetiously if you saw with your own eyes the reverence in which the child is held by the general population.”

“Reverence?” spluttered Mr Yewtree. “Sacred beings? But this is the

language of the brutish mud-dweller, the stone-worshipper, the religion-mired half-reasoning primitive! How could we have sunk so low?"

I did not comment at the time, but in that one outburst Yewtree had laid bare the true depths of his attachment to the culture of his birth despite all his professions to the contrary and assertions of his Romundlian ancestry.

"I can't answer that," said Miss Lavender, "but I can tell you that the situation worsens weekly. As the infant gained greater control of his limbs, his gestures and babblings were judged to have a deeper meaning. When there was uncertainty about the way ahead, the child was brought, with immense pomp, to the head of the caravan, and whichever direction he pointed was interpreted as the shortest route to the homeland.

It was such a decision that led the whole city to the brink of disaster when the child's chubby finger would have sent the advanced scout party over the edge of a precipice. Six did indeed lose their lives, and six more were badly hurt, trying to find a route down the almost sheer cliff, or trying to ford the rapids that rushed by at the base of the cliffs.

"Reason would have insisted they turn back as soon as they came to the precipice!" said Yewtree.

"Reason had already retreated," said Miss Lavender. "They say that one man deliberately gave himself up to the water, rather than fail to carry out the orders of the Philosopher-in-Chief."

"Their first martyr," I commented.

Miss Lavender looked up, "First what?"

The word did not exist in the Citihallian language, at least not yet, and my Dover and Somerset had been unable to translate it.

It was in large part this incident that made up Miss Lavender's mind. If her despair at the accelerating decline of Citihallian ideals was not enough to outweigh the risks attendant on escape, then the threat to her own life tipped the balance.

"I tried to persuade my family to come with me," she said.

I confess that until that moment the notion of Miss Lavender's family had not occurred to me, unlikely as that sounds. Perhaps I had unconsciously assumed that, like Mr Yewtree, an only child whose parents were both dead, all Citihallians were more or less free agents, without family ties, or rather that their family was the larger community of City Hall. Certainly blood ties played a less important role in the life of the Citihallians than it would in that of a citizen of Europe, or any other of the civilised peoples of Earth. Children were, at least until the exodus, raised collectively in large sprawling nurseries staffed by parents and volunteers.

“Your family?” I asked now.

“Yes, you never met them,” she replied. “My parents are rather elderly, and despite all the change-acceptance therapy they had undergone, the loss of their home came as a great shock to them. My mother in particular could never really accept that we would never be going back to City Hall. They had lived apart for years – finding that they no longer had much in common, they separated when I was sixteen – but both quickly became zealots for the Philosopher-in-Chief and his Holy Family. I suppose it was an emotional crutch for them in difficult times. And they had always wanted grandchildren, so the infant leader became a kind of grandson by proxy. He is a remarkably attractive child, if nothing else. They couldn’t understand why anyone would want to leave – they had total faith in him. I have an elder sister too, and while she never said so explicitly, I suspected she had some sympathy with my little conspiracy. But my parents are frail, and she could not bear to leave them to cope on their own.”

“How do you think they would have coped?” I asked.

“No better or worse than anyone else on that mad quest,” said Miss Lavender. “But she – my sister – would not alter. She would not – what is that phrase you use Mr Braddell? – she would not *listen to reason*. I never really understood the meaning of it before. We lived in a world of reason, as fish in water. What need was there for us to listen out for it? Now I see how easily the voice of reason can be drowned out.”

And so, telling nobody of her plan bar her sister, Miss Lavender loaded her stolen hover bike with as many supplies as she dared, and drove out of camp one morning before dawn.

“No doubt my parents will believe them when they say I was murdered by marauding Braddellites. Perhaps it is better that way. At least they will not think my absence a betrayal.”

“Do *you* think it a betrayal?” asked Yewtree, tactlessly I thought.

“I don’t yet know,” said Miss Lavender seriously. “I’m tired, anyway. We should make an early start in the morning.”

“In that case, I’ll get some sleep too,” said Yewtree. “Can I leave you to stoke the fire, Braddell?”

And with that they both withdrew, leaving me to my firewood and my thoughts. Even the wild dogs had apparently retired for the evening. I looked up at a sky clogged with unfamiliar constellations and wondered, not for the first time, whether my own sun was hiding amongst them. It was a sentimental notion, but I would have felt a fraction less lonely had I been able to tell myself that one particular pinprick of light held the Earth in its orbit and was, however incredibly, home.

A Diabolical Persistence in Error

To my surprise, Miss Lavender fell in with our travel plans, vague as they were, without a murmur of dissent. Perhaps she was so glad to be travelling in company again, that the destination hardly mattered, but if she had really been so unfussy she might have easily stayed with the Cithallians and entrusted navigation to a babe-in-arms, and saved herself the trouble.

I was hardly about to point that out. In one respect, Miss Lavender's sudden reappearance, in such dreadful circumstances as I have previously omitted from my narrative, was no less than a dream realised. Indeed some mornings I awoke unable to believe it, until I poked my head outside and could reassure myself with the sight of a third tent by the fire.

On the other hand this reunion could never have been other than a source of disturbance for us. For one it raised the spectre of hope in me, a ghost I had spent the last few months, if not exorcising, then at least mollifying. The coward in me felt a measure of relief that I had not been bolder in my letter writing. Miss Lavender did thank me for my "kind and thoughtful" letter, but if she read anything of my true intentions beyond the superficial blandishments, she gave no hint of it. And so the revelation that would result in either unbounded joy or shame and despair, the long-anticipated and dreaded crisis in our relationship was again postponed.

Mr Yewtree found my reticence incomprehensible and was almost as frustrated by it as I was myself.

"Just ask her, for goodness sake!" he urged me. "Out with it, man! Such feelings cannot be contained. They will fester and corrode your insides."

"Is that your professional opinion?" I whispered crossly. (The conversation took place early one morning as Yewtree and I were washing up after breakfast in a shallow stream, while just a few feet away Miss Lavender began disassembling her tent in readiness for the day's march.)

"It's merely common sense," said Yewtree. "Just say to her, 'I love you, Miss Lavender.' What is so complicated about that? What is the worst that could happen?"

“Will you please keep your voice down!” I replied, looking round, terrified that the object of our conversation might overhear it.

“You presume to know rather a lot about my feelings,” I continued, looking away and scrubbing my pan with renewed vigour, with the aid of a twig.

“Listen, I understand these things better than you imagine,” said Yewtree. “You have been offered a second chance at happiness. It would be churlish not to seize it. If you do not take this opportunity now it might be taken from you.”

“And what is the meaning of that remark?” I demanded, just as Miss Lavender herself appeared behind me on the riverbank.

“Not finished yet?” she said. “What are you two arguing about?”

Before Yewtree had a chance to open his mouth, I said, “The best technique for washing dishes. Mr Yewtree prefers brushwood as a tool. I myself prefer the simple stick to attack more stubborn dried-on stains.”

“It seems a strange subject for such heated debate,” she commented. “Why don’t you simply use a dishcloth as I do? In any case, you should hurry: bad weather is on its way.”

We looked to the brow of the hill behind her, and banks of damp, inky cotton wool, blotting out the sky, confirmed her forecast. Within an hour we were ready to set off, just as the rain began to spatter the tops of our rucksacks. It did not stop raining for the next six weeks.

I do not remember much about the following episode of our journey, and from what little I do recall there was little of interest to the general reader, unless he has a particular interest in sub-tropical climates. The rain: of course I remember that. But it is as if the weather during those miserable weeks has mushed all my memories together. One or two isolated events stand like islands above the flood. I remember that after two weeks of solid downpour, when Mr Yewtree joked, “I think this must be the rainy season,” Miss Yewtree was so far from amused that she pushed him down a short slope, at the bottom of which he barked his shin quite badly on a rock. The incident revealed a tempestuous side to Miss Lavender’s character, which I had not hitherto suspected.

Mr Yewtree’s comment stayed with me, and I distinctly remember the morning when the revelation came to me in a flash: we were travelling south, not north. We were following the wrong stars as blindly as the Cithallians followed the tiny forefinger of their Philosopher-in-Chief. We were heading for the equator, not the poles, moving out of the temperate zone. How else to explain the monsoon?

At first I told myself that the facts were uncertain, and this satisfied me as an adequate reason to put off telling Mr Yewtree and Miss

Lavender of my suspicions. The longer we endured the constant torrents of rain, the further we pushed into the sub-tropical zone, the flimsier this excuse appeared. I was certain in my own mind that we were straying further from our goal with each day's toil. The vegetation and wildlife had, by slow degrees and footsore miles, begun to subtly shift, gradually becoming lusher, denser and more diverse. I had never seen a live monkey back on Earth, but a distant memory of schoolboy natural history lessons told me that the tiny, furred creatures who scampered across our path, who stole the food from our tents and bombarded us with stones and faeces from the branches above, were nothing other than these legendary primates. Lavender and Yewtree were astonished by their human resemblance. It was purely because of their lifelong confinement in the sterile environment of City Hall that neither saw anything suspicious in the gradual shift from a temperate environment in favour of a hotter, wetter one, supporting such species as the aforementioned monkeys, whose staple diet must have consisted mainly of fruits available year-round, along with many thousands of other species. Giant flowering cycads; limbless mammals that resembled my pet snake-mouse Raffles in all particulars, barring their complete lack of fur; several-trunked trees with great, flat buttresses like those of the Peruvian walking fig, but barbed with vicious thorns longer than my thumb; and innumerable, indescribable, tireless insects whom we battled in a perpetual siege of our equipment, clothing, food, hair and bodies. Had we spent much longer than those six weeks fending for ourselves in this tropical wilderness, I have no doubt but that the insects would have eventually claimed their victory. Infestations and the constant slow torture of rain apart, those six weeks took us to the last limit of our food reserves. The deeper we penetrated those jungly valleys, the less confident we felt about our ability to judge the edibility of the local flora. It is by pure, dumb luck that our mistakes in this regard were limited in their consequences to diarrhoea, a constant complaint for all three of us, and a brief but intense period of fever and delirium for Mr Yewtree, which delayed us for four days while Miss Lavender and I nursed him. Thirst was, it hardly needs stating, not an issue. But the task of keeping our dried rations in a state that still warranted the name strained our ingenuity.

Dense canopies of foliage shut out most of the sunlight in this region, so that game was harder to spot, let alone trap. It may have been my imagination, but the wildlife seemed jitterier at these latitudes too –was an increase in predatory pressure to blame, or was my hunger projecting itself onto the objects of its desire?

Despite these hardships I breathed not a word of my unhappy revela-

tion to my companions. Beyond a certain point, I reasoned, it was not worth turning back. Of course I was wholly ignorant of the extent of this sub-tropical realm. We might have been merely dallying on the fringes of a rain-forest continent the size of Amazonia, for all I knew. But the thought of having to retrace our steps back through that rainy hell, and then to recross all the territory we had with so much labour already conquered – well, it was unconscionable, and I was not so ignorant of my own store of inner resolve to believe that I would resist despair on such a return journey. With every day and every mile we hacked deeper into the jungle, this reason for my continued silence grew stronger. Why turn back now? My sanity would not have withstood an about-turn, for that is surely what Mr Yewtree would insist upon, should he learn of the mistake we had persisted in for so long. Yewtree had developed a deep longing for the island of his ancestors and, never one to indulge in self-doubt, he was quite certain that Romundli lay somewhere in the north, based on his own hazy recollections of his father's anecdotes. No, he would be adamant that we turned back, once the inevitable apoplexy at our wasted time and effort had subsided.

Miss Lavender's reaction to this dispiriting news was harder to predict. She had no particular vested interest in reaching Romundli beyond the bare hope that here we might find another outpost of humanity and civilisation somehow overlooked by the Punggol armies. Even this prospect evinced no great enthusiasm in my beloved Lavender. Since entering the rains she had begun to withdraw from our company, speaking only when necessary, and then only about practicalities.

I could hazard a guess as to what was the matter: she was overwhelmed with guilt about the manner of her escape from the Citihallians, and the plight of her elderly parents. She may have brushed aside concerns for their welfare in her explanations to Yewtree and me, and she was probably right that her mother and father would fare no worse, materially speaking, with or without their eldest daughter. City Hall operated an enviable state welfare system in which the needs of vulnerable groups were zealously met by both professionals and volunteers who saw the service as an essential part of their own ego-dissolution therapy. But it was not, I concluded, the image of her parents' empty cutlery-wheels that haunted Miss Lavender through her waking nights, but the idea of herself as traitor, deceiver, and what was possibly worse, Braddellite.

"You're lucky," Yewtree said to her one morning with his typical lack of tact. "At least you have some hope of seeing your parents alive again. They can live in hope of your return one day, slim as that hope might be."

But take me – both my parents are dead. The best I can hope for is a glimpse of their old home before I die.”

“I think it would be better if my parents presumed me dead, for all our sakes,” said Miss Lavender.

I could not see her face while she spoke these baleful words – it was almost entirely hidden by the rainhood she wore. But it seemed a terrible thing to say, and if at all indicative of her inner mental state, deeply troubling.

This was the third reason why I kept the secret of our navigational blunder. My concern for Miss Lavender’s mental health was already acute. Perish the thought of any further blow to her already fractured and failing sense of optimism.

It may strike the reader as contradictory that an émigré from such a confessional, psychoanalytical culture should remain such a closed book on the subject of her emotional well being, but such was the case. The oddity of her behaviour did not escape me at the time, I must add.

No odder than my own behaviour, certainly. It remained the case that, tenuous though it might be, the only hope I had of curing my brain disease lay on the island of Romundli. I could not accuse Eunos of having invented the place to further torment me. Its existence had been independently verified by Mr Yewtree, though its direction was still far from certain. Nevertheless it was my only hope of ridding myself of the infestation that had rendered me temporarily insane, and for all I knew might one day kill me. So why, the astute reader will ask, was I content to persist in error, once that error had been revealed? Why did I allow our footsteps to place an ever-greater distance between me and the only possible source of salvation?

Let me attempt an answer, though I have little hope of it proving an adequate one. First of all, I was far from content in our southerly wanderings. My mind was a constant battleground of intentions and counter-intentions, ravaged by apathy and procrastination. One day I would wake in my flooded tent, determined to come clean about the whole sorry business, but by noon, after we had fought through a few meagre miles of sucking swamps and mangroves, my determination had ebbed away, leaving behind only self-recrimination and guilt like so much flotsam and jetsam washed up on the beach of my consciousness. At times this inner struggle was so intense that I suspected a further episode of delirium was upon me. Undoubtedly I suffered from heightened feelings of persecution: were I to reveal my secret to Yewtree and Lavender, what would be their reaction? Why, they would most likely beat me to death

on the spot, or else drown me in the mire that we waded through up to our waists, such would be their rage at my persistent stupidity.

The weather did not assist rational consideration of our situation. Our weatherproof clothes began to dissolve under the strain of billions of droplets of water, beginning with the very tops of our hoods, most exposed to the downpour. Finally one day Yewtree tore away the ragged remnants of his own hood, and flung the useless shield into the mud in disgust, resolving henceforth to brave the elements bareheaded. But within days he was complaining both of headaches and hair loss, attributing both to unspecified acids in the rainwater.

The drastically altered conditions did nothing to slow the growth of my parasitical passenger. The creeping trailer was now several times the length of my own body, although I kept it carefully coiled and hidden away in my turban, the size of which had steadily grown throughout our journey, so that it now assumed comic proportions. I rarely bothered to unwind the turban to wash it anymore. In the jungle all of our standards of personal hygiene suffered a sharp decline; attempting to keep any part of one's body or clothes clean and dry was a futile endeavour. On the rare occasion that I did, I discovered that the turban device had been a serious error. Suckers from the original stem had begun to implant themselves at other points around my skull, and my strategy of winding the plant around my head had apparently facilitated this new development. Some of the new rhizomes could be detached with a sharp, painful tug. Others, nearer to the original fissure, had already begun to worm their way into my skull, precluding any attempt to remove them, although Yewtree saw no harm in trying. His one attempt left me with an intense headache, lights flashing in front of my eyes, and an inability to comprehend the number 17. The symptoms wore off after a few days, although that number has continued to trouble me ever since. This new development in the growth of the parasite leached away any residual hope I had of finding the Redhill Clementi, from which, according to Eunos's analysis, a cure might be extracted. The plant had by now become so tightly bound to my own neural network that it was difficult to imagine how it might be disentangled. The winding stems and dark, velvet-furred leaves were an extension of my body.

As I neglected my own bodily hygiene in the damp, sticky morass of the Kadaloorian tropics, so I abandoned any attempt to disguise my affliction. New shoots and leaves poked out between the strips of my turban, and flourished in the open air, until I resembled, as Yewtree remarked, a pollarded tree. There was a time when such thoughtless comments would have piqued me, but I no longer cared, or had the

strength to get on my high horse about it. In the jungle there was no pride to be injured. We lived like animals, existing from day to day, driven inexorably south as though by some migratory instinct, but one that had been cruelly deceived.

And then one day, the jungle ended. Our only warning was a subtle alteration in the quality of the light streaming between the tree trunks, and I emerged on the banks of a wide, brown river, in torrent and churned up by the pounding rain. Speechless, I stood in the ankle-deep mud, barely thicker than the river water itself, and stared at the spectacle. On the other side of the river, almost directly opposite us, stood a small log cabin, two stories high and topped by an observation tower. I looked around to see Yewtree and Lavender standing beside me, equally dumb-founded. It was only now, in the unimpeded daylight, that I saw truly how ragged and filthy we all were.

“How are we going to get across?” asked Miss Lavender.

As though in answer, a small moving speck on the opposite shore slowly grew, and resolved itself into the shape of a boat.

A Hard Bargain

“It’s not free, you know,” said the ferryman. He kept his boat a short distance from the shore and eyed us with suspicion. I looked at my own filthy, sodden rags. Yewtree turned to me. “What did he say?”

“He says we have to pay,” I explained, then turned up the volume on my Dover and Somerset so that we could all converse. There was a risk of course that the ferryman adhered to the same strange ethos as our erstwhile hosts the Bugis, but the ferryman did not look like one of the Bugis. Most of him was hidden beneath a voluminous black cape and wide-brimmed sowester-style hat of the same material. From under the brim, blue eyes peered out of a grizzled, lined face. A bushy grey moustache was neatly parted, its length hidden by the collar of his raincoat. I found it hard to imagine that any Bugis male would have taken the trouble to brush his moustache.

“We can pay,” said Yewtree.

“With what?” I asked. I looked about us. Little of value had survived the monsoon.

“We can discuss terms on the journey across,” said Yewtree.

The ferryman shook his head. “Pay first, ferry later.”

Miss Lavender said, “Well, how much is it?”

“Depends on where you want to go. Just to the other side – small cost. All the way to the delta – a little bit more.”

“The delta?” I asked. “You mean the mouth of the river? The sea?”

The ferryman looked surprised. “Where are you people from?”

Yewtree opened his mouth to speak, but Miss Lavender silenced him. “We’ve come a long way,” she said circumspectly.

“What tribe?” asked the ferryman, narrowing his eyes.

“We’re all from different tribes,” said Lavender.

Yewtree interrupted. “I’m from the Island of Romundli! Can you take us there?”

The ferryman said, “I can take you as far as Sembawang, but you’ll have to find your own passage when you get there.”

I could not believe what I was hearing.

“How far is it?” asked Yewtree. “I mean, to Romundli?”

The ferryman shrugged. There’s an overnight ferry,” he said. “I’ve got a friend who works at the docks. He may be able to get you a good price.”

“Would you talk to him?” said Miss Lavender. “We’d be grateful.”

“Of course that’s going to push up the price you pay to me. Not much though.”

All three of us looked at one another, wondering what we still possessed that might be of value.

“We have these,” I said, holding up the tents we had appropriated from the Citihallian camp. Of all our possessions, these alone had proved waterproof, and as our only refuge from the constant downpour, we would probably never have got this far without them.

The ferryman eyed the mud-smearred tent rolls sourly.

“No, I’ve got one of those already,” he said. “What’s that thing around your neck? A talky box?”

“You mean my Dover and Somerset?” I said, holding the box protectively. “I’m sorry, that’s not for sale.”

The ferryman said, “It turns your words into my words?”

“In a manner of speaking, yes. It’s a universal translator. I couldn’t possibly consider parting with it.”

“That’s a shame,” replied the ferryman. “It’s a clever trick.” He began to move towards the back of the boat to retrieve his oars. “Well, good luck getting across. I’d advise you not to try swimming. If the current doesn’t get you, the fish will.”

“What are you doing?” hissed Yewtree to me. “Give him the box! It’s your only hope of a cure!”

I began to explain to him the impossibility of our survival in a foreign

land without even the barest means of communication, but Miss Lavender interrupted me by calling out to the ferryman just as he was about to pull away from the shore.

“Hey wait! You can have the talky box! It’s a deal!”

My face must have been thunder, but it softened when she turned to me and said tenderly, “Newton, it’s your only hope. Yewtree is right. And I can’t allow you to pass up this chance. I know this is going to be difficult for all of us, but it will be worth it if you find what you’re looking for.”

Could any man refute such arguments, expressed so sweetly by the one person on whom he had pinned all his hopes of future happiness? I had one caveat: I would not give up the Dover and Somerset until we were safely aboard the ferry to Romundli. It was a safeguard against the possibility that the ferryman planned to cheat us, as I explained it to my companions, but in truth I lived in dread of losing the Dover and Somerset. I had already panicked when I had thought the device was malfunctioning. How would I cope without the power of speech? My Cithallian was still rudimentary and the language of these Romundlians was a mystery to us all.

“That’s not how it works,” said the ferryman. “You pay before you get in the boat.”

“Then let us give you a down-payment,” I said, rummaging in my backpack. “I have... I have a very unusual creature, a rare specimen of mammal, unknown in these parts, a highly prized curio, a limbless mouse.”

“You cut the legs off a mouse?” asked the ferryman.

“No, no!” I said, but my rummaging failed to produce Raffles, who had either concealed himself among my possessions, or had finally deserted me. I could not recall having seen the snake-mouse for several days, but my mind had been on other things. Instead my hand pulled out an intricately carved spherical nut, a souvenir of the time I had spent as a guest of the Bird People.

The ferryman’s eyes showed a flicker of interest. “You don’t see many of those nowadays,” he said.

“No, they’re very rare,” I agreed. “Made by the Bird People – do you know them? Wonderfully skilled craftsbirds.”

“Let me see that,” said the ferryman.

I handed over the Bedoki nut, leaning across the riverbank. The ferryman turned it over in his hands.

“It’s a child’s puzzle,” I explained. “Well, not just for children.”

“Not a puzzle,” said the ferryman. “It’s an old talisman. To ward off evil.”

“Yes, and a very effective one,” I agreed.

The ferryman laughed. “No need for this sort of thing now. The evil has been banished, many years ago. This is just a relic.”

“You can’t be too careful.”

In the end we reached an agreement. The ferryman took the Bedoki nut as a deposit, and I would hand over the Dover and Somerset device as soon as we disembarked at the port, wherever that was. The ferryman would then arrange our transport to Romundli.

“You going to get your head fixed?” asked the ferryman as I took my place in the little rowing boat and hefted my backpack onto the plank seat beside me.

I looked up at him in blank surprise. “What?”

The ferryman waved vaguely at the tangle of weedy outgrowths that escaped from my headdress.

“Your head,” he said. “That why you want to go to Romundli?”

I nodded eagerly, but before I had the opportunity to ask him a question, he had stalked away to the prow of the boat to see to the oars.

Lavender and Yewtree climbed aboard and the man pushed us off the bank into the swollen current.

“Did you hear that?” I asked Yewtree when he had sat down.

“Hear what?”

“I just... well, I can’t believe we’re actually going to Romundli,” was all I could say at that moment.

“Why ever not?” said my friend. “I never doubted it for a moment. But that’s the difference between us two.”

“What is?”

“You have no faith in yourself,” said Yewtree.

I turned away and stared into the rain-troubled waters as the ferryman’s oars dug into the current. The little boat bucked and lurched in the brown torrent. For a few minutes Yewtree and Lavender talked to one another in low tones but soon fell silent. For the rest of the crossing we all sat with pale knuckles gripping the side of the boat and teeth clenched, as eddies, whirlpools and crosscurrents toyed with the little boat. I was reminded of the *Tanjong Pagar*, the spaceship that had brought me to Kadaloor, spinning helplessly through the void like a seed on the breeze. Of course in contrast to the *Tanjong Pagar*, this vessel was far from rudderless and, unlike my own craft, the captain had not let his hand slip from the tiller through carelessness. Even when it felt as though the little boat was wildly out of control and on the verge of capsizing, the

ferryman merely shifted his grip on the oars and steered another course along invisible pathways through the apparent chaos of forces and counter-forces. It was punishing physical work, and the ferryman grunted and sweated as he leaned and pitched, sometimes with, sometimes against the boat's movement. His face remained impassive until we reached the far bank and he broke into a large grin.

"A good ride, eh? You got your money's worth."

"Wait a moment," said Miss Lavender crossly. "You promised to take us to the ferry port! We had a deal!"

The ferryman leapt into the water, waded to the shore, and began to lash a rope to a gnarled tree stump on the bank.

"Too late to go to the ferry. Go tomorrow instead," he said. "Dark soon."

"Where will we sleep?"

The ferryman looked surprised at the question. "In my home!" he replied.

That night, for the first time in many months, we spent the night under a roof, dry if not exactly warm. The log cabin was also home to the ferryman's wife and an indeterminate number of small children who came at intervals to stare at us or bring us gifts of leaves or decorated river pebbles. The ferryman's wife was as laconic as he, and expressed no surprise at the arrival of guests. She led us to the only available floor space in the building: the observation tower, where we rolled out our bed mats. There was supper: some sort of bitter, mashed root, filling and hot at least, and to our great surprise apparently free, or included in the deal we had struck.

"Where can we wash?" asked Miss Lavender, as the lady of the house came up to our crow's-nest bedroom to retrieve our empty bowls.

"In the river," said the woman. "But not now."

"Why not?"

"At night the big fish come," she said, before climbing back down the ladder that poked up through a trapdoor.

The ferryman's house seemed rickety, but proved surprisingly weatherproof. The rain was channelled directly into the river through a series of long, natural gutters made from hollow plant stems, which began on the roof, itself curled into a pointed shell-like spiral of interwoven branches, then wound down around the observation tower in half pipes of increasing diameter, finally emerging as a gushing spout at ground level. The noise made by such a contraption was considerable, but we were all three so exhausted that Punggol warships would have had difficulty rousing us.

The last thing I recall before my eyes closed was peering out through the vertical slats of the cabin. As darkness fell, dozens of points of light emerged, one by one in quick succession. On our side of the river the forest was dotted with campfires, but when I glanced over at the way we had come, the darkness was complete. Ruminating on this in that strange, meandering state of mind that often precedes sleep I heard, somewhere behind the rain, a great splash, as of some vast object emerging from, and then submerging once more beneath, the surface of the river. My dreams were troubled by the "big fish" alluded to by the ferryman's wife, vast malevolent shadows sunk in the deepest silts of depression.

I woke with a start. "What's that?" I shouted out, confused.

"No rain," replied Yewtree. "It's just the sound of no rain."

Against all probability, the sky was blue. My eyes were drawn up to that blue again and again. When the ferryman's wife appeared in the trap door, carrying bowls of the same bitter orange mash as had formed the basis of yesterday's supper, she said, "The rains stop today."

In appearance she was short, like her husband, but also stooped. Greying, tangled hair scraped back untidily into a bun framed a face that was as lined and careworn as the ferryman's, and her soft, grey eyes were as inscrutable as his. In her general physiognomy she resembled Yewtree and Lavender more than she did Marsiling and Eunos with their almond eyes and sallow complexions.

Yewtree was already up and about, fussing with his pack. Miss Lavender slept; I had spent the last few, brief minutes gazing at her lovely face, the only part of her visible outside the sleeping bag, a rare enough opportunity in itself that was interrupted by the arrival of our hostess.

"Will she wake soon?" asked our hostess.

I shrugged. "She is very tired."

Yewtree nudged my beloved in the ribs with the toe of his hiking boot. "Up you get, you lazy pig," he barked. "Do you want us to miss the ferry?"

Miss Lavender sat up immediately, blinking. "I wasn't asleep," she said. "I was just lying awake, enjoying the sensation of sunlight on my eyelids."

I felt a thrill of mingled joy and fear as I heard those words: had she been aware all along that I was gazing down at her? And if so, why did she not open her eyes before? An idea then leapt into my mind with such suddenness and clarity that I found it irresistible, and formed in that instant a resolution of the most binding and unyielding kind. I *would* find

a cure for my brain disease. Then, and only then, I would ask Miss Lavender to marry me. The sense of a larger purpose to my actions immediately lifted my spirits. It seemed as though, quite unexpectedly, I had risen above the cloud of mental fog, the existence of which I had hitherto barely understood, just as a man who has spent weeks enduring constant rain forgets that he is being rained on, until the skies clear, so too did I now see the depths of depression to which I had sunk. My indecisiveness over the question of our navigational blunder: this was obviously another symptom of the sluggish mindset that had become, until this moment, my *modus operandi*. That we had been travelling south instead of north all this time hardly mattered now: Romundli was almost within our grasp. I vowed that I would break my silence on this subject, at a more convenient time, perhaps once we had actually reached the island.

There was a mood of child-like excitement in the air as we prepared to embark on the next stage of our journey. Some of the older children offered to wash our mud-encrusted clothes. After they had beaten the garments on rocks by the river, and dried them in the branches of trees, they returned them to us threaded with sprays of fragrant tree blossoms. The ferryman spent a long time preparing his boat, loading it with large blocks of the bitter mash we had eaten at every meal, here dried into rough bricks. I guessed he was using the opportunity of a trip into town to do a little trading at market. When he finally returned to the house, I put to him the question that had been troubling me since the previous day.

“Do you really think I’ll be able to get my head fixed once we get to Romundli?”

The ferryman, busy at his breakfast, shrugged. “Maybe,” he said. “Some do. Some don’t.”

“So other people – people like me, I mean – go there for a cure?”

The ferryman nodded, chewing the mashed root with inexplicable relish.

“People from around here?”

“Yes,” he replied. “And other places too. Some near, some far.”

“Are there many people who live in this area?” I asked.

The ferryman chewed thoughtfully for a few moments.

“Not many, but some,” he said decisively.

“We saw fires, last night, in the forest.”

The ferryman looked up from his bowl, his expression a mixture of surprise and annoyance as though he were not used to conversations of such extravagant length.

“Cooking fires,” he said. “People make them.”

“Yes, I understand. But they were only on this side of the river. Nothing on the other bank. Does nobody live on the other side?”

“Apart from you three? No, not many.”

“Why ever not?”

“Too lonely,” was his explanation.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Who would want to go and live over there? Nobody to talk to.”

Naturally we had been conversing through the Dover and Somerset, and our host now pointed to the device still slung around my neck, and said, “You got spare batteries for my talky-box?”

“Actually it’s called a Dover and Somerset Predictive Conversation Simulator. And no, it doesn’t need batteries – it’s solar powered.”

His eyebrows rose. “The sun is the battery. Should last a long time.”

“It was made on my home planet of Earth,” I could not help saying with some pride.

The ferryman chuckled. “You really need to get your head fixed, don’t you?”

“Once we get to Romundli, where can I... I mean, how should I go about...?”

“They’ll come and get you as soon as you step off the boat.”

“Get me? Who will come to get me?”

“The nurserymen.”

That seemed to be the end of the conversation as far as our host was concerned, for he pushed his bowl away, rose, and strode out onto the little jetty that abutted the log cabin.

He beckoned us. “Come on, it’s time to go.”

There were no farewells to his wife or children. As we floated away we saw the lady of the house grimly chopping wood. We waved, but she did not even look up.

Sembawang

This leg of our journey lasted all day. While the rain had stopped and showed no sign of returning, the river was still in spate and in mischievous mood. Several times it tried to steer us into rocks or becalmed pools, but the ferryman sternly plied his oars and avoided disaster. At regular intervals we passed clusters of huts, and at some of these the ferryman instructed us to toss out bricks of the dried mash onto the bank.

This was an unasked-for and nerve-wracking task: the ferryman was visibly enraged when my first throw ended in the water and floated away, though he said nothing. In return small children ran out and threw a variety of barter items into the boat. Their range and accuracy was remarkable, and soon the floor of the boat was littered with mysterious sealed clay bottles, bundles of leaves and even small joints of meat. The trades were made without negotiation or even any exchange of pleasantries. Any conversation at such a distance would have been difficult, but I got the impression that these were people of few words.

The river broadened and slowed until both banks were little more than a hazy line of trees in the distance. There was traffic here: fishing steamers, water taxis, rafts and barges glided silently by. We spotted a pretty stone bridge of three arches spanning a tributary.

“Civilisation!” was the only word I could find. After the months of wilderness inhabited only by the pitiful Bugis, the sights that were now passing us by had the quality of a dream. How had these towns and villages escaped the notice of the Punggol warships? These folk inhabited no subterranean labyrinths like the Citihallians. This string of compact, neat houses of dressed dove-grey stone on the shoreline had an air of age, almost of antiquity. Humans had evidently been taming this land for many centuries. I saw no evidence of bomb damage, no shell-craters blasted out by Punggol raids. It was as if that malevolent purple race had never existed.

Slowly the port hove into view, curling round the arms of a small horseshoe bay. The little blocky houses were stacked in tiers up the steep hillside behind like the steps of a shattered amphitheatre. From this distance the appearance was picturesque, but the closer our ferryman rowed, the more lived-in and grimy the town appeared. The docks swarmed with figures hauling barrels and crates on and off barges, and what looked like wooden horse-drawn carts, although no beasts of burden were in evidence. After a brief altercation with the pilot of a water taxi, we docked and clambered out onto a narrow wooden jetty.

Yewtree, Lavender and I stood there, clutching our backpacks, in a chaos of activity. Dockers and boatmen were yelling at us or at one another, hauling crates onto wagons, pushing past us with trolleys laden with sacks, teetering piles of vegetables and nose-assaulting spices, red powders, black seeds, a cornucopia of alien produce that baffled eye and ear. For many weeks all three of us had become accustomed to the subtle sounds of the forest, its muted light, and to each other's sullen presence. Even before that, Yewtree and Lavender had been used to an orderly, uniform existence in the underground cocoon of City Hall. The

perfectly ordinary scenes unfolding before us on these glittering granite docks, under a cloudless sky, were overwhelming.

The ferryman hustled us out of the main thoroughfare and led us down alleyways between fish-stinking warehouses, impatiently beckoning us every few yards, as though anxious to be rid of us. We stood in a silent huddle in the corner of a bar while he held a whispered conversation with a bearded old soak smoking a double-headed pipe. Apparently on this drunkard's advice we were led through another labyrinth of alleyways littered with the detritus of what must have been a seafood market, now closed, until we crossed a bridge over a deserted wharf and found ourselves at the door of a ramshackle hut. The interior was equipped with the trappings of a makeshift office, along with filing cabinets, what appeared to be sea charts on the walls, and a balding man in a pleated gown of drab, writing in an enormous ledger with pen nibs that fitted over the ends of his fingers like prosthetic fingernails. Another whispered conversation took place between the ferryman and this bureaucrat. I saw no payment change hands, but after we had waited dumbly for the negotiations to conclude, the ferryman beckoned us forward one at a time. In the outstretched hand of the officer was a wafer-thin tablet of white clay, inscribed with a series of undulating lines. My ticket to Romundli: I reached out to take it, but the officer held onto his half and between us we snapped the tablet into two irregular halves. The officer put his half into a lockable cabinet, along with the other ticket stubs from Lavender and Yewtree.

"When do we leave?" asked Yewtree.

"Tonight, on the overnight ferry," replied the ferryman.

It was already late afternoon by the time we reached the dock. The ferry was waiting for us at the dockside. It appeared to be an odd sort of paddle steamer with six paddle wheels on either side of its twin hulls, and several angular awnings stretched above the deck, creating an interior space for the passengers. The latter sat in small huddled groups on the dockside, eating and chatting. I spotted a few isolated figures amongst them, sat apart and obscured from head to toe in windowless grey shrouds. Nobody seemed to pay them any mind, so I tried to concentrate on the task of teaching the ferryman how to operate my Dover and Somerset. It was an arduous task, not primarily because of the complexity of the subject matter, or the stupidity of my student, although both were considerable, but because of a fundamental unwillingness on my part. I was only too aware of how helpless I would find myself as soon as I gave up that invaluable little box. Miss Lavender and Mr Yewtree could converse together in Citihallian, a language still very new

to me. I was about to be marooned on a linguistic desert island. It was quite certain that no one else in the whole of Kadaloor spoke English.

Finally the ferryman said, "Yes, yes, I understand all that! Lesson is over! Give me the talky box. I have to go now. I have an appointment to buy manure. Very high quality manure."

The ferryman scuttled away into the crowd, the Dover and Somerset wrapped in his cloak. Were those to be the last words I ever heard in my native tongue? I banished this melancholy thought as Miss Lavender nudged me and pointed to the ferry, where a jostling crowd was beginning to gather on the jetty.

She spoke, and I caught the words, "boat", "come" and a compound verb that I half-guessed meant "gather up in a bundle". My earlier optimism rather dented and scuffed but undefeated, I hoisted my backpack and the three of us joined the throng of people on the dock, all trying to push towards the gangplank and waving their clay tablet ticket stubs in the air to prove they were legitimate passengers.

Boarding the overnight ferry to Romundli was a bureaucratic and boisterous business. Each ticket stub had to be matched to its other half, and an official wearing similar garb as the man who had provided our passage blocked the top of the gangplank with a large, ceramic board on wheels, designed to hold all the available tickets for this crossing. Each ticket had to be matched, and its authenticity verified by a subordinate officer. Forgery was apparently rife, as several men and women, and sometimes whole families, were refused entry or bundled into the custody of two large, unsmiling men whose uniform and demeanour marked them out as members of the security forces, whether employed by the shipping company or by the city authorities I did not learn.

Such scenes made me nervous about our own tickets. If they were fakes, I hoped they were well made. But I need not have worried: we were waved aboard, albeit last, with little fuss. However, once on deck, another uniformed man approached as we stood at the railings, waiting for the boat to pull away. He grabbed my arm and spoke impatiently, pointing to my tangled, matted turban, leaves poking out at mad angles. This is what I had feared since we arrived at the dock – that I would be prevented from sailing. The ferryman had assured me that others in my condition regularly travelled to Romundli, and yet I had not spotted anyone similarly encumbered with unwanted foliage. Perhaps we were banned from public transport for fear of contamination.

I tried to smile as the ferry official continued to berate me in Romundlian and our one-sided conversation ended with him leading me by the arm through a doorway into the interior of the boat, along a pan-

elled corridor, down a roped stairway into the airless bowels of the ship, and finally into some sort of store cupboard dimly lit by glowing shells pressed into the ceiling and walls. All the time the man continued talking to me, though I had not opened my mouth nor shown any sign that I understood him. Still talking, he rifled through shelves and drawers until he found what he was looking for. He handed it to me with a smile. It was a large, drab sheet of some sackcloth-like material, not too clean and smelling distinctly of mould. I tried to look my thanks and, bemused, turned to the door to leave, but the man grabbed my arm again, spun me around, and deftly draped the sacking blanket over my head. In that fetid darkness I was enlightened: the people I had spotted on the dock in such garb, were my fellow sufferers. Some cultural taboo of the Romundlians forbade us from displaying our mutations in public, and this was the solution. I thanked him again, in English, and this time sincerely. The man slapped me on the back in what I assumed was a good-natured way and pointed me the right way back to my friends. I guessed that he was well used to dealing with feckless foreigners seeking their salvation on Romundli. This was another cause for hope, I told myself.

My makeshift burqa was of a loose enough weave to allow me to see, although dimly, where I was going, and short enough that it did not reach the ground to trip me up as I walked. On my way back I passed several other passengers in the corridor, none of whom paid more than the slightest attention to my disguise. Clearly this was how all victims of the brain parasite had to travel. I was a little apprehensive however, at the prospect of having to hide my affliction under sackcloth for an extended period, once we had reached Romundli itself.

No show of nonchalance on my part could abate the astonishment of Lavender and Yewtree on my return. To my great frustration, I could not even adequately explain to them why I had donned the grubby blanket, but I think they guessed the reason quickly enough. Another phantom had appeared at the railings of the ferry, a lone sufferer who gazed mutely across the harbour. The sense of our shared suffering made me long to reach out to this fellow victim, man or woman. But it would have been a futile gesture: I could do no more than smile and point and nod, and the person beneath the blanket would likely find my attentions more wearisome than comforting.

As I gazed down the sheer drop of the ferry's hull to the oil-streaked channel of seawater below, my mind drifted across the ocean to Romundli, and to speculations of what I might find there. That the island offered the promise of a cure I no longer doubted, but what form would that take?

Apparently my friends were both consumed by similar musings on their respective futures. Miss Lavender, her eyes focused on some distant point, made a remark, the meaning of which seemed to involve the idea of “coming together” or “settling back to a standstill”. Vague as that translation was, as a man still profoundly besotted, I clutched onto her words as reasons for unparalleled hopes. I would cure myself of my parasitic growth, I would learn Citihallian and Romundlian fluently, and then I would ask Miss Lavender to marry me. We would come together and settle back to a standstill. But for now, forward motion was unavoidable. There was a grinding and crashing of gears, the railings began to judder beneath my palms and slowly the channel of seawater between the hull and the jetty widened until it became the ocean.

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AUDIO

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Nicholas Briggs

Big Finish, 2xCD

The greatest strength of this adventure is Nicholas Briggs, providing both the Dalek voices and some terrific dialogue for them, though Michael Maloney runs him close as Fratalin and his 799 familiars. Fratalin is a Jagrafin, who can separate out pieces of himself to act as independent agents, and then conjoin with them once the work is done. It's "one of the remotest periods of space-time the old girl's ever travelled in", as the Doctor notes, and Amethyst Station is being prepared for the arrival of the mysterious Vyrons.

For once the Doctor's not just walking into trouble, he's also bringing it with him. Charley, originally an Eighth Doctor companion, is "fading in and out of existence", and the Doctor doesn't seem to know about her past (his future). After a little while chilling in the Zero Room, Charley rows with Mila, who claims to have been hiding invisibly in the Tardis since the very early days (cue blushes on the part of Jamie and Victoria). When things go sour the Doctor's not there to help: he's already being escorted to the Amethyst's nearest airlock.

This isn't a perfect story. The Sixth Doctor seems to have lost the light touch of some earlier audio adventures, and is back to the blustering and bellowing of his television run. The set-up feels much like the Doctor wandering into the first moments of the BSG mini-series; the Vyrons look very much like Cylons. At the conclusion the Doctor weirdly decides to pop back out of the Tardis for an extra chat with the Daleks. And his characterisation is a bit off: he spends an entire episode yelling at Fratalin to lower his force fields and surrender to the Daleks.

But Briggs continues the process in which he has played such a big part: returning the Daleks to the height of their sixties cool. This story features the Dalek Time Squad, and their leader the Dalek Time

Controller, a slightly less insane version of Dalek Caan. Briggs makes them dangerous adversaries (both physically and intellectually), and delivers their dialogue with the same talent and relish he brings to the TV show. If I didn't enjoy the bits with Charley quite as much, perhaps their pay-off will come in future adventures. **6**

Doctor Who 125: Paper Cuts

Marc Platt

Big Finish, 2xCD

Starring Colin Baker as the Sixth Doctor and India Fisher as Charley, Paper Cuts follows straight on from Patient Zero's cliffhanger. Like the TV story Timelash, this sees the Sixth Doctor returning to the scene of a Third Doctor adventure. With fortuitous timing it's Frontier in Space (recently out on DVD), so we meet once again the reptilian Draconians, Jon Pertwee's favourite aliens.

Fifty or sixty years ago, in the 68th year of the Serpent, the Red Emperor of Draconia isolated the planet to keep out a plague, ending a thousand-year empire. Now, in the 80th year of the Blood, four men, "the highest, the lowest, the bravest and the wisest", are summoned to serve as vigilants in his tomb: a prince, a fisher-catcher, the disgraced captain of the Imperial Guard and the Doctor. One will become the new Emperor, but what terrible secret awaits him?

The script is by Marc Platt, writer of Ghost Light, the last story of the original series to be produced, and it shares with that story a most welcome ambition in its writing, with lines like: "There's something out there... Can you feel it? Filling in the dead spaces, gnawing at the ropes of time." It's full of interesting ideas like origami warriors with paper swords, young Draconians wearing necklaces of their own eggshells, and the extent to which time travellers can get away with letting their email build up. As the Doctor says, "Lateness, like all time, is relative."

Though setting a second story in a row in an isolated location makes for a little repetition, the "cold empty rooms with paper thin walls" make for a novel setting, and paper is a material that lends itself very well to audio drama. Overall, an exciting and entertaining adventure. **7**
