Everyone could walk safely down the stairs except Alan Watkins. When he reached the seventh one he always disappeared—and where he went wasn't particularly pleasant!

THE SEVENTH STAIR

BY FRANK BRANDON

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one

The call came just as I'd finished putting the car away and had crept in to the flat out of a night filthy with snow and slush and with temperatures near freezing. I'd taken off my overcoat, gloves, scarf, jacket and air of ill-humour, with the electric fires going full blast, the radio just warming up for the symphony concert from the Royal Festival Hall—my hand was on the cocktail cabinet door.

Then the phone rang and it was Watkins.

Now Alan Watkins is a fine chap, one of the best and all that; but he was babbling something about my coming round right away.

"Tonight?" I said, outraged. "Now?"

"Yes. Can you come right away, Phil?"

"But what the hell—look here, Alan, I've only just got in and you know what it's like out. What's up?"

For I had heard an odd, queer sort of choking gasp over the receiver.

"Nothing — nothing," Watkins said and there was a catch in his throat. "I can't explain—I've got to see you—either I'm going nuts or the whole world is coming to an end!"

"Well," I said unkindly. "the place for you is Mont Blanc or somewhere, camping out awaiting the crack of doom."

"Phil! You've got to come round! Now!"

"Now look here, Alan," I said in my firm and determined voice. "You just go to bed and sleep it off—"

He called me a variety of names, all highly diverting but, unfortunately, unprintable. "I must see you. It's a matter of life or death."

By this time I was more or less resigned.

"Can't you come round here?"

"No," he said. And something about his voice caught the breath in my throat. Alan Watkins, big and burly and tough and looking quite unlike the top-line mathematician he is, was afraid. Was scared silly. "No, Phil, I can't. I daren't go down the stairs."

Even then, even with that premonitory thrill, I was damned annoyed. It was one hell of a night. And the car heater was not working enough to melt an ice cream. "All right, Alan, you logarithmic calculus, you, I'll come."

I put the phone down quickly. I thought I'd heard Alan Watkins say: "Thank God!" And mean it.

And that was the man who had tried to show by mathematics that we're all mere freakish accidents in the galaxy.

The night drive was not as bad as I'd anticipated, partly because much of the traffic had cleared off the icy roads and I had the wide lamp-shining wastes to myself. And partly, too, I confess, to a tingling feeling of anticipation. Something was happening to Watkins, something very strange, and, being by nature a nosey so-and-so and by profession an extranaophilist, I was intrigued.

An extranophilist? One who is a lover of strange facts and fancies. A profession? I collected these odd happenings and bizarre occurrences and wrote books, TV scripts—any-

thing that would communicate that oddity, that bizarre fact, to the palpitating minds of the great admass. It was past eleven when I pulled up outside Watkins' flat and rang the bell.

Nothing happened for a bit and I stamped my feet about to prevent them freezing to the pavement. Then, in the cold air, I heard a window open. I looked up and stepped back to get a better view.

Something crackled with a metallic ting on the icy porch.

A voice floated down, a hoarse, strained voice: "Let yourself in, Phil, there's a good chap."

Luckily I found the key without a deal of trouble and let myself in. Watkins' flat was a bachelor's delight, full of sporting prints and shooting trophies and tiger-skin rugs, provided by the unerring eye and deadly hand of Watkins himself. He kept a large and wonderfully stocked cellar and he opened the door for me with two glasses of whisky in his left hand. I took one, said: "Thanks, Alan, cheers." And then, shivering in the warmth, inside and out: "What the hell's up?"

He looked at me for a moment, strangely. I might not have recognised him, passing casually in the Strand; now I had to believe that this grey-faced, gaunt, shadowed-eyed creature really was Alan Watkins.

"Phil," he said; and there was agony and shame and a terrible fear in his voice. "I can't go down the stairs."

I said the first thing that came into my head.

"Well, use the confounded lift, then."

"We don't have a lift."

Watkins lived in a tall, narrow-faced old house in one of those secret squares lying between two main thoroughfares that have no right, it seems, to exist in the present century. London is honey-combed with them, lying behind Bloomsbury and Holborn and even the mushroom upsurge of concrete and glass has not yet—thankfully—obliterated them all. If you met Doctor Johnson rolling along the narrow pavement with the tall railings and the semibasement windows at his back, you wouldn't be the slightest surprised.

Watkins lived on the second floor. The stairs were confined, twisty, covered with a decent tufted carpet and the banisters were solid mahogany. There was always a decent smell of floor polish in the air.

"So you can't go down the stairs," I said. "So how do you manage about your work?"

He was a professor at the University and I knew that he was regarded as a very-very top man in his field. Maths, however, and I parted company as soon as school let out.

"I haven't been across for a week," he admitted.

"What! But—"

"I've told them I'm sick. The doc's been a couple of times and I've managed to fob him off. But he's suspicious. I've been waiting for you to get back, Phil—I felt I had to turn to you—"

I'd been in farthest Afghanistan, brushing up my Pushto with Pakhtun friends from before partition and being polite to both Pakistani and Afghan without appearing to be a chicken-heart to the Pakhtuns, who bow down to no one.

Watkins and I had been in Intelligence together, on the staff of the same division. But I was surprised he felt so strongly about whatever was amiss that he had waited for me. I looked about the room, at the leather armchairs, the book-cases, the pots on the mantleshelf over the electric fire and at the locked cupboard where he kept his artillery.

The cupboard was unlocked, the door swinging open. I caught a glimpse of ranked sporting rifles, elephant guns, shotguns. But most of the weapons lay on an oval table, under the window, with cardboard boxes of shell at hand, and the leather armchairs had been drawn up to form a sort of stockade, facing the door.

"You have got it bad," I said. I tried to jolly him along. "D.T.'s?"

He didn't smile. "I don't know whether or not to say I wish it was," he said.

I thought the joke had gone far enough. I helped myself to another whisky, pulled, against his instinctive protestation, an armchair around to the fire, sat down and put my feet up on an ottoman. "Tell me."

He began uneasily. We'd been on safari together in the old days, and I remembered his trick of lifting his head to obtain a clear sight of the quarry. But I'd never known him so nervy, so jumpy, so sheerly washed-out as now.

"It began a week—no eight days—ago. I started out as usual in the morning. I'd been working late on a theorem so wild that I won't bore you with it, and I was in a hurry. Well, I opened the door, took my usual six strides across

the landing—I've counted them, since, I can tell you. My whole Empire—six strides across a landing."

"And—?"

"And I went down four steps. On the fifth I felt hot, and on the sixth I smelt a rotting jungle smell that we—well, you remember. On the seventh I wasn't going down a staircase in London at all. I was going down a steep grass covered slope with a jungle and swamp spread out before me, under a blazing sun, and with the most infernal noise bellowing up out of it."

He put a hand to his face. His fingers shook.

"I bolted back so fast I fell full length on the stairs. I tried it again, thinking I'd been dreaming. But the damn jungle and the heat and the noise and the smell of rotting vegetation was still there. I came back here. Since then I've tried to get down, on and off, four or five times a day. No luck."

"And the artillery?"

"Once a blasted great bird thing swooped on me and took off my hat. And a thing like a Centurion lumbered out of the jungle and started up the slope. I fell down and nearly went crazy trying to find my stairs again—"

"Trying to find—how's that?"

"I thought I'd explore this—this other place. I was pretty well tight at the time. I took down an umbrella and stuck it in the grass. Then I could find my way back. But I got twisted around and chased by what I can only describe as a Tyrannosaurus—"

"So you think you've been back in time to the Jurassic or the Mesozoic, or whatever oics that time was called."

"I don't know, Phil. I just don't know. I had the strongest conviction that I was no longer on Earth—"

"Earth as we know it now."

"No. No, not on Earth at all."

"Venus?"

"Isn't the latest theory that the place is a dusty bowl? Or is that the one before. They keep changing."

"They don't know, Alan," I said sharply. "Anything else?"

"But—Oh God, God! Do you believe me?"

"I've never yet known you lie. Except to that M.P. when we'd stashed the girls in the jeep—but that was different."

Watkins sat in the chair and put his head down. His hands clasped over the back of his neck. I let him stay that way awhile, hoping that he'd pull through without any more guff. And by guff I meant just that—I thought he had been going through a severe emotional strain and once I could find out what had been causing that, the rest would be plain sailing.

It wouldn't be drink. He'd said he'd been tight going down the stairs and that had surprised me. We were a pretty harum-scarum lot, the crowd Watkins and I had mixed with, but drunkenness had been markedly absent. You tended to get killed if you were blotto on a job.

After a few minutes I stood up and opened the door. Yes, just six strides for a six-foot one and a half inch man to cross the landing. One step down. Two. Three. Four—was it hotter? I felt sweat start on my forehead and cursed myself for a credulous fool. Five. Six. Nothing. Just tufted carpet, mahogany banister and porridgey-coloured wall-paper. I went to the landing to make sure and turned, running back up four at a time. Thankfully, too, I might add.

"It doesn't work for me, Alan."

"No. It doesn't work for anyone else. The doc's okay, and so is the waiter from the Italian restaurant who brings my food up. Only me, Phil. Only me. Why?"

"Because you've a gifted imagination and have been over-doing things," I said with cheerfulness. "Now. Hold my arm. We'll go down together."

"No! No. Phil, I couldn't."

"But you've been down exploring the jungle," I said, reasonably but foolishly. "Where's the danger—?"

"I took my umbrella down and stuck it in the ground," he said stubbornly. "Can you see it, down the stairs?"

I shook my head. "No." I said. Perhaps he'd dropped the brolly over the banisters and the landlady had tidied it away. I'd have to ask her.

But already I was having the nasty feeling that she'd know nothing of any umbrella. I was beginning to think that it was stuck in the grass of a knoll in some remote jungle, not of this Earth—and then I pulled my chaotic thoughts together. Alan Watkins was having a brainstorm. It was my duty to see him through.

"When is the doc coming again?"

"Tomorrow. Ten-thirty."

"I'll be here. Now—are we going down together?"

Watkins was no coward. We'd been through some scrapes together and I knew that all right. But I guessed that this thing I was so casually asking him to do—he'd stopped going down the stairs at all recently—was the biggest test of his life. But he tried to give me a smile and the old thumbs up sign and then he gripped my arm—tight.

Together, we went out the door. A single lamp was burning on the landing and the stairs were in darkness, a growing darkness the further you went, until the lower landing and its single bulb brought once again the relief of light into the world. I hadn't noticed that, on my earlier trip down.

We went down the stairs. Watkins gripped my arm with a devilishly tight grasp; but I said nothing. One. Two. He began to tremble. Three. On four again I thought I felt an oven breath but the tufted carpet was still solid beneath my feet. The fifth—and the heat must be there. On the sixth now —was there a foetid odour of untamed jungle?

An then, on the seventh step, I felt a difference in the grip on my arm. Watkins was still holding to me; but it was the grip of a weakening sailor, drowning on his raft in mid-Atlantic. Instinctively I reached across and took his arm.

"Nothing yet," I said reassuringly.

He did not answer. And I had the shocking conviction that he was no longer with me. A strange phenomenon. A similar feeling you have talking to persons whose eyes suddenly lose focus, and who gaze into the far distance—and you know they are not conscious of their surroudings, or you, any longer. Only, this feeling was a hundred times stronger. I was holding Alan Watkins' arm and he was gripping me—yet he wasn't there with me on the stair any more.

Then he began to thrash about, kicking and struggling.

I backtracked fast, and I had to haul him up the stairs after me. He was a dead weight. We could not have been down below the danger mark—the fifth step—for more than a minute. But when we reached the top again Watkins was insensible.

And in his hand was an umbrella.

I stared at the thing. Neatly rolled, black, with yellow mud smears glistening along the folds.

Then I believed.

two

I just didn't give credence to the thought that he'd picked up the brolly from the stairs, hidden in some dark angle of banister and riser. He was still unconscious and his face with a three-day stubble looked like the face of a dead soldier, decomposing in a shell-hole.

I put him into an armchair and poured two drinks, one for my nerves and one for my digestion. I stared at Watkins. His suit, which had been in bad shape, creased, stained, the trousers baggy and with traces of that same yellow mud on the knees, was now in a worse condition than ever. There was a long jagged rip in the jacket I hadn't noticed before. The pocket hung slashed open.

And yet—could I believe? Yellow mud on an umbrella, a wild story, a grey-faced shadow-haunted man in place of a rough and tough comrade—were these things enough to convince me that, along with Watkins, either I was going insane or the world was coming to an end?

When Watkins came around I spent some time making sure he was fully recovered and then he told me what had happened.

On the fourth and fifth — heat. Sixth — smell. On the seventh—he said: "Then you just disappeared, Phil. I went on down the slope into the jungle, alone."

"But I was holding your arm all the time," I protested.

"I could feel that pressure. Strangely enough, that was the most bizarre touch of all. Walking in my jungle—I've come to accept that—but walking with the clasp of an unseen man strong on my arm, well, Phil—"

"Then what?"

He made a vague guesture. "I felt myself to be trapped with this hold on me, preventing me from running back—or of pressing on. Something reared up out of the grass and struck at me. I caught a glimpse only of emerald green eyes and a skin patterned like marble. The thing missed me, luckily, I swung away—"

"Which way?" I said harshly. I remembered his floundering.

"Oh—right, I think."

I pointed to his jacket pocket and the great gash there.

"Whew!" Watkins said. "The blighter was closer than I thought."

Now—now I had to believe. The umbrella had convinced me. Then I had rationalised that. Now this jagged gash in his jacket. But he could have done that himself, in the darkness of the stairway. This was a hell of a mess.

There was, of course, only one way to test this thing finally, once and for all.

"Alan," I said, slowly, "would you go down those stairs again, alone?" As he began an automatic protest I hurried on: "Only so far as it takes you to enter this other world. I could feel your grip on my arm and feel myself holding you. But if I disappeared to you—then you ought to vanish to me."

He nodded. "I don't relish the thought. But, after all, it is my jungle, made by my equations. All right, Phil." He nodded with the briskness of a man opening his mouth to the dentist's drill. "I'll vanish all right."

I shone the torch down the stairs. Alan Watkins walked steadily down—this time holding a shot gun at the ready—and he vanished.

I blinked. He wasn't there. That little rhyme came back and I wanted—insanely—to giggle, there standing at the head of the stairs shining a torch beam down and through where a second before a living man had stood. I went down a couple of steps and Watkins nearly knocked me over rushing back.

"Here," he panted. "Grab this."

Automatically, I grabbed. Then revulsion flowed over me. The thing was a lizard—a lizard a good two feet long, still thrashing about from the tail I gripped in my fist, although most of its right foreleg and chest had been shot away.

"Hell, Alan!" I shouted. "Take the beastly thing."

"You didn't believe me," he answered in a vicious shout. "All right. Just wait a minute." And again, he vanished.

When Alan Watkins flew into a paddy—it was best to stand clear. I'd doubted his word—so he was proving his point. I went back to the lounge, put the lizard down carefully—the poor thing was almost dead—and decided against another drink. This added another number to the little list I intended phoning as soon as the sun was up.

My extranophile enquiries had taken a twist; now I was more interested in accurately tagging this strange place that Watkins visited. He'd said he felt it to be not of this Earth. Maybe the surroundings were so strange that that impression would be the automatic response; I still believed he was in

some way slipping through a rent in the time stream and was taking saunters through dinosaur-land. The lizard would help to put a date and time—within a million years or so—to that theory.

The first words I said to Watkins when he panted in, carrying his shotgun and another unsavoury-looking lizard, were: "And what equations are they that create other worlds?"

He looked uncomfortable and flung the second lizard to lie with its cousin. He crossed to the cabinet and poured a drink. I noticed that he kept the shotgun with him.

"If I tell you that, Phil," he said at last, evidently taking my acceptance of the story as read, "the consequences may be unpleasant. For you, that is."

"How?"

He sat down and propped the shotgun against the armchair.

"Einstein is at the moment undergoing some pretty intensive testing. We now have means whereby we can put his theories to the proof. And I don't just mean mathematically. You've heard of the Doppler Effect, of course—the rising and falling note of an express whistle, for instance. Well, they've now been able experimentally to observe what is called the Transverse Doppler Effect. They do it by using the resonance technique with iron isotope fifty-seven and gamma rays." He saw my expression and went on: "What it amounts to is that time is dilated in a fast-moving system."

He stood up and prowled about, forgetting the gun and his drink, lost in expounding his fanciful theories. But they were not, as he explained, fanciful any more.

"I put together a series of equations and suddenly found I'd stumbled upon a new technique, that I suppose must have a parallel in—forgive me—the ancient incantations for conjurations. By studying the maths your mind is able to conjure the desired object—"

"But you didn't want to let yourself walk through into a jungle world, Alan!"

"No. That must have been a sideband effect. All I know is that those damned equations are at the root of it all."

"Where are they now?"

"In my safe, locked up."

"May I see them?"

"No!" He fairly shouted it. "Of course not! Do you want to enter another world every time you descend the stairs?"

He had a point, at that.

In the end we decided that I should stay the night—his flat possessed a neat little guest-room—and I admit I was glad not to have to drive back. The car would be all right in this little-used byway of London. In the morning I'd see the doctor and contact the numbers on my list. Sleep came up fast—I was devilishly tired; but the dreams which followed concerned men who weren't upon stairs, and flashes of grim butchery among Pakhtuns, with giant pterodactyls flying overhead and Brontosaur and Diplodocus thrashing below. I did not, naturally, sleep well.

Alan Watkins, I believe, didn't sleep at all.

The doctor turned out to be small, perky and very cheerful. He puttered about his Aescuapian labours and then said: "Physically, Alan, you're a hundred per cent except for extreme fatigue and nervous debility. I'm prescribing pills to keep you alive. But—"

He went on. I don't believe he was exaggerating.

He finished by saying: "Why don't you get away for a week or two? Do some shooting somewhere. Get some fresh air into your lungs."

Both Watkins and I laughed. The doc looked from one to the other and his little mouth tightened up.

"Sorry, doctor," I apologised, meaning it. "That's a good idea."

When he had gone Alan Watkins started to tear up the prescription. I took it away from him. "You'll need that."

Most of my telephoned contacts were helpful.

Tony Ufton, who had been the divisional maintenance officer was rather tickled. "With all bells ringing and lights flashing?" he asked in that catchy voice of his.

"You have to practice, don't you, Tony?" I asked.

"Of course, old boy. Be delighted. Middle of the afternoon. Mustn't give the chaps any warning, you know."

"Right. I'm much obliged. I'll explain more when we see you."

"What's all that about?" asked Watkins.

"Seeing a man about a fire," I said shortly, and dialled.

Stephen Marmaduke Searles had been the staff cipher officer, and a very smart one at that. "You don't say," he said when I'd finished. "Can you bring it round?"

"Later this evening, Steve. I suppose it'll keep?"

"Sure to, for that short time. But don't hang about."

"Now what?" grumbled Watkins.

I chuckled. "Seeing a man about a corpse," I said, unkindly.

The Italian waiter brought lunch and we both made a good meal, spaghetti Bolognais and a bottle of wine. Then Watkins disappeared. After a few moments I smelt burning.

I rushed into the toilet, smashing the lock; but I was too late.

"All gone," Watkins said with evil satisfaction. "All burnt to a cinder." Then he flushed the ashes away.

"You idiot!" I said heatedly. "Those equations were the answer to all this—you—you—"

Watkins laughed. It was a hollow, weak, ghoulish laugh. But he sounded relieved and more human than at any time since I'd met him after he'd rung.

"I should have done that long ago. Got rid of them. Now no one else can go down into that—that—hell."

I said, as cuttingly as I could: "And can you?"

An expression of joy rushed across his face. He seized a gun and dived for the door. I watched him clatter down the stairs and I knew that he was hoping against hope that he would reach the bottom landing.

But he disappeared.

He came back, forlorn, wretched, angry.

"Still the same damn jungle." Then he stopped stock still. His head went up in that characteristic gesture. He turned around, thrust the gun forward, and jumped down the stairs again.

He hadn't returned when I heard the bells in the street.

Tony Ufton would be slightly put out.

There was an uproar at the door below. Then a lorry engine revved, high and whining. I went back into the flat in time to stop them smashing the window in.

A very large and very formidable fireman, in black helmet, fire-axe at the ready, crouched on the ladder outside.

"Where is he?" he demanded. "Smoke case, isn't he?"

"Yes," I said weakly. Then, because once the fire brigade was in action they demanded a sacrifice, was about to say: "Me." I was saved by the door and Watkins walking in, tired, whey-faced, dragging his feet which left long smears of yellow mud.

"I forgot to put the umbrella back," he said. "I couldn't find my damned way back."

"Never mind, Alan," I said rapidly. "Just let things happen." Then, to the fireman: "There he is. Treat him gently."

Alan Watkins was seized, hoisted with a brawny arm between his legs, run out the window and down the fire escape before he knew what had hit him. I picked up the gun from the carpet and looked out the window.

He was on the turntable arguing with Tony Ufton, who looked incredibly smart in his fire chief's rig.

I waved and shouted: "Hold on, I'm coming down."

I closed the window—it was very cold—put the gun down and went down the stairs. Again that brief sensation of heat and then I was through, out into the street, shivering.

"What the hell's going on?" demanded Watkins wrathfully.

"You're down, aren't you, Alan?" I asked.

That shut him up.

"Five minutes dead," Ufton said with a glance at his watch. "What held you up there?"

"The smoke case was temporarily absent," I said. "Come on. Thanks, Tony. You did a good job. I'll see you later on and fill you in."

"Well—" he said, and pushed his uniform cap back.

Although I didn't realise it then, I'd been an incredible fool. A gullible fool. I thought that by getting Watkins down safely and through the strata where he entered his jungle, I'd proved the entry existed on the stairs. That was a perfectly reasonable idea, too.

But there was no time now to spend explaining it all to Ufton. On impulse, I said: "Why don't you wander round tonight to my place, Tony? I'll get some beer in."

"Right. I'd love to. And you owe me an explanation." With that he was off, rounding up his men like a sheep dog at trials. I bundled Watkins into my car. He was shivering with cold.

"That damned jungle's hot, Phil," he complained. "And you have me dragged out into the winter—"

"Stop belly-aching," I said, starting the car. "I'm running you over to my place. Then I'll fetch a few things for you and we can discuss the whole mess tonight. Some of the other boys might like to come, too."

"You mean to get the Div staff in on it?"

I laughed. "I hadn't thought—but it might not be a bad idea, at that."

three

I decanted Watkins, gave him my key and a threat not to stir, and went back to his flat. Right in the middle of pulling out the things he had asked for, the phone rang.

Something inside me flopped over. Before I'd lifted the receiver and heard Watkins' voice, I knew.

"Phil," he said, and there was a resigned agony in his voice. "I can't get down your stairs, either."

"Well," I said, trying to force it, to be cheerful, "Well. We have a lift."

He put the receiver down without answering. So I packed the artillery as well.

The two lizards I put into big polyfilm bags. They still looked sound and didn't smell more than a moderately choked sewer, so I figured they'd keep for Steve Searles. The Museum was much closer to Watkins' place, where I now was, than to mine, so, feeling that Watkins wouldn't do anything stupid whilst I was away, I went around, avoiding the main pillared entrance. Searles met me wearing his stained white lab smock, plaster on his hands and a piece of bone a hundred million years old in his fingers.

He went into some sort of daze when he saw the lizards.

"I don't believe this," he said, over and over. He raked out books, illustrations, neatly drawn diagrams of skeletons. "I'll have to dissect, of course, but . . . "

"But remember our old friend the Coelacanth," I said, helpfully.

He brightened. "Yes. But you — me — ! "

"I'm having a small get-to-gether tonight at my place. I particularly want you to come."

"But I'll be busy with these— "

"Do what you can; but come. It's got a lot to do with them. Alan Watkins is in trouble— "

"Not Alan? "

"Bring some kit and tools, whatever it is you use, with you tonight. You might have—have more work to do."

His frenzy grew then against my refusal to say any more and I left him muttering dire threats about murder, and hanging, drawing and quartering. "And I can do the neatest job on quartering," he said, darkly.

Driving back to my flat I tried to envisage what might happen. The biggest problem was in preventing what had happened to Watkins preying on his mind to such an extent that he might lose his sanity. We were, as I've said, a pretty harum-scarum bunch, the old armoured Div staff; but you might almost say by virtue of our survival that we were well-balanced when it came to the things that mattered. I knew Watkins and I faced amused disbelief; but we could soon show that the things happening to Watkins were true.

After that we must figure out a way of cancelling the effect, of somehow stopping those devilish equations from catapulting a man through into another world—or another time.

Really, it didn't matter where or which it was. The fact now staring me in the face was that I had to save old Watkins. After that, then would be the time to find out all we could about the place. I was looking forward to that.

Watkins opened at my ring. He looked miserable, shrunken, resigned.

He helped me in with the gear, placing the guns about in handy positions.

I'd wondered at his zariba at his own place, and when I saw that he'd done the same thing in my own flat, dragging chairs and cupboards around to form a barricade, I felt a tingle of apprehension.

He saw my look.

"Yes, Phil. We don't know what we're meddling with. So I go through into another world—the seventh step, incidentally. But how do I know that something won't come back out of that world?"

"Hunh?" I said. Then: "But, hell's bells, man! You can't have primeval monsters running about all over London!"

"No? I'm a twentieth century Earthman running about all over that other place, am I not?"

I thought. "But then, Alan, those beasties haven't read your equations."

"No," he said. "No, they haven't. Thank God."

Steve Searles rang up, pretty incoherently, to tell us that the lizards we had dumped on him should have died about a hundred and seventy or so million years ago, near the beginning of the Age of Reptiles, the Mesozoic Era. They were very early types, precursors, even, of the thecodonts who ran on their hind legs. Watkins' lizards ran on all fours.

Watkins interrupted to say that he'd seen a thing bigger than a Sherman and faster than a Honey and how did that fit?

I didn't repeat this to Searles, because he was saying, with the perplexed impatience of the scientist temporarily baffled: "The only really odd thing about them, apart from their very existence, was that they were turned about. They had their hearts over on the right, and similar funny arrangements. They were mirror-images of what I'd expected."

Mirror-images.

I told Watkins and he found a scratch pad and began doodling, using the cabalistic language of the mathematician.

"Don't be late tonight, Steve," I said, and rang off.

"Not Earth," I said to Watkins. "Seems you were right."

My next call was to Jock McTaggart. He'd been the Div's signals officer. I told him about the party. "And can you bring some of that two-way walkie-talkie stuff you've lying about?"

He started to ask questions.

"No questions, Jock." I told him what I wanted.

He promised to bring it, mystified.

I think the clincher was the mention of whisky.

Watkins was still sitting in the chair, a shotgun and an elephant gun handy, figuring. I made some tea. It seemed to me dangerous to leave Watkins alone, and I chafed to be out and about the next task. That promised to be a problem.

Ringing Taffy Llewellyn gave no hope.

"Sorry, Phil. That sort of stuff is dead difficult now. Now during the Korean biz, or right after Suez—"

"Know anyone who can?"

He gave me a name and address and a few more telephone calls, plus a lot of quick talking, put me on to a certain Charles Hawtrey. At least, that was the name he was using. I vaguely remembered him—one of the boffins from R.E.M.E. and a little out of my sphere.

"I'll do all I can to help, Phil," he said doubtfully. "Ring you back."

"Okay." I hung up. Well, it was a chance.

Then I tried to contact some more of the boys who were living handily in London. Not many; a lot had emigrated, retired to the country, were abroad on travels. But I collected four more and then it was dark and Steve Searles was ringing the door bell and panting in under a load of equipment.

Only then did I realise that there was no food in the flat and the beer hadn't been laid on. I said to Watkins: "Steve wants another specimen. If you just bowl down and grab him one, that'll save a lot of disbelief."

Searles just gaped. He gaped a sight harder when, wearily, Watkins picked up the elephant gun and went down the stairs—my stairs—and vanished.

He returned with another lizard, a different sort from the first two. He looked tired and ill and the blacks under his eyes made me realise just how hard I had been pushing him.

Searles was raving; but I quietened him sharply, told him to listen to Watkins whilst I went out. Tony Ufton arrived, thought we were pulling his leg; but agreed to stay and listen.

"When everyone else is here, then, and only then, does Alan go down again," I said. Watkins gave me a weak smile.

"But—" said Ufton.

"No buts. If everyone is here before I get back, then let Alan decide. But for Pete's sake, take it easy."

Buying the drink was easy enough and I took Ufton along to drag it back to the flat. Then I set off.

Charles Hawtrey turned out to be a very decent chap, quite different from what I had expected. "Damned difficult stuff," he said. "But the lorry's waiting in North London. We'd better go up together. Chap was doing a deal with—well, you needn't know about that—and when he heard who it was for, pushed it our way at once, without a murmur. Odd."

When we reached the dark and greasy brick warehouse and drove into the dimly lit interior and a man walked towards us, a flash in one hand and the other in his pocket, the mystery, to me at any rate, was solved.

"Punchy!" I exclaimed. "I thought you were in the Middle East—Jordan way."

"Hi, Phil," he said calmly. "I was. But stores have to be replenished, you know."

"Well I'll be damned," I said. "If I'd known you were in town I'd have asked you first—"

Hawtrey laughed and said: "But I still get my cut, this way, eh?"

"Sure." I said. "But I think you'll get an agent's commission. I don't figure I'll need to buy this stuff now. Only borrow it."

"Now wait a minute—"

"What's up, Phil?"

"Alan Watkins is in trouble—"

"Not Alan!"

The same as they all said. I explained as little as possible. Punchy Draycott was the divisional scrounger, the officer who fixed the best billets, best messing and best of anything else you wanted. Now he was still doing his best to fix up needy people, all over the world. We got into the cab of his lorry when I'd said to Punchy: "Is it pukka stuff?" and he'd said: "Top line." Hawtrey drove his own car back and we followed in the lorry. picking up my car at Hawtrey's where I'd left it.

"You know my address, Punchy. Take all this gear there. There's a party. The boys will help you up the stairs. And then they'll fill you in about those stairs."

"Huh?"

"Free beer, Punchy. Don't ask questions."

I gave Hawtrey a cheque, which just about demolished my bank account, got into my car and drove back to Alan Watkins' flat.

The first thing I did inside was to ring my own number. Stan Shaw answered. He'd been the Div anti-aircraft officer. "Put Alan on, will you, Stan?"

Watkins sounded run into the ground.

"Only Steve believes, because he saw me go down. And I'm damned well not going down again. That's flat."

"Listen, Alan, that's what I wanted to ask you about. When you went back because you'd just burned the equations and we thought there might be a chance that you wouldn't be able to any more, remember? Well—when you came back you were grabbed and run down the ladder. I didn't ask you. Why did you come back and then, very suddenly, turn around and rush down the stairs again?"

"Oh, that," he said. He was very exhausted, I could hear the rasp of his breathing over the phone. "I thought I'd heard a voice calling from the jungle. Impossible. So I came back. But only when I walked back into the room did I remember what the voice had sounded like, had been saying."

"And?"

"I thought the voice was human, and it was calling for help. Desperately."

"But you found nothing when you returned?"

"Not a thing. Then I had a hell of a job getting back because the umbrella wasn't there. I walked all around that damned grassy knoll, with the beasties flapping and crawling about. I thought I'd never get back."

"All right, Alan. Thanks. I'll be with you in about half an hour."

"But I'm not going down again."

I rang off without answering. If Watkins didn't go down again the other boys wouldn't believe. They'd crucify us.

I began collecting the rest of Watkins' artillery, all the guns he had. On my last trip down to the car, I stopped for a look around. The brown room was quiet and comfortable, the luxurious and manly room of the confirmed bachelor. Some of the boys had had to explain to their wives. I made a mental note that the married ones would have to be handled differently from the bachelors. This wasn't an affair for women.

Then I remembered, was appalled and made a drunken run across to the phone again. I made a hash of the dialling and had to press the bar and start over. This was going to be a lulu.

She wasn't amused. "You promised to ring as soon as you got back from wherever it was you've been. You didn't. Is this usual for you? Do you treat all your women like this? Or am I special?"

"Of course you're special, Kathryn; but, well, things came up—"

After we'd been wrangling for five minutes the idiocy of this struck me. What the hell! She was only a woman friend and had no hold over me. And I wasn't going to explain about Watkins and his equations and the other world to which they led. I kept it on a friendly level, promised to ring to-morrow, and put the receiver down. She'd given me a number I could reach her if she wasn't home. Knowing her, she wouldn't be.

Thinking that I'd better jot it down I reached for Watkins' scratch pad and my hand, clumsily, knocked it off the phone table into the waste-paper basket. Watkins put his typing there, and he'd evidently been working overtime, the basket was full of angrily crumpled sheets.

I fished the pad out and wrote Kathryn's number down.

Then, very carefully, slowly, not really believing, I reached down, took the top sheet and smoothed it out.

They were there all right. The neatly typed beginnings of equations. Watkins used a special typewriter filled with queer characters; and the times I'd kidded him over that one. Now I went through the papers in the basket, searching for a sheet that contained all the equations. He'd tried a lot, that boy. His typing was of the two fingers variety, and the mistakes were pitiful. Each time he made a typo he ripped the sheet out with a suitable exclamation and started over.

I couldn't find a single sheet with the complete equations.

It was most frustrating. About to give up in disgust, I pulled the carbon paper out of the bottom. Just a series of messy black sheets. Watkins was fussy about carbon, only using a sheet a few times. The last sheet of carbon, the one he'd dropped down on the desk after at last, triumphantly, finishing the equations without a single mistake, was lying neatly in the carbon folder on the desk. It had been there all the time.

I picked it up gingerly by one corner, held it up to the light, and peeked—fast.

There seemed to be just the one set of characters imprinted there, shining silver and soft amid the carbon black. Two clean sheets for a wrapper and the carbon was folded and placed away in my wallet. So much for Alan Watkins and his trick of burning and flushing away the equations.

four

The time had been slipping by and it was pretty late when I turned into my road. The pub on the corner was turning out and people were laughing and talking loudly, making their way to the bus stops and the UndergrounD on the opposite corner. I waited for a rowdy party to cross and then drove on, over crunchy snow from the last fall, and pulled up outside my door.

From the noise racketting from my windows, all of which showed lights, the pub wasn't the only drinking party around here. I winced, thinking of the other tenants and the landlord.

They were a flushed and uproarious crew when I got upstairs. The thing that had excited them was not the drink but the story Watkins and Searles had told. Their happy,

cheery faces and loud voices, their extravagent gestures and speech, made any talk of going through into another world via a set of equations just so much nonsense. The real world personified by them simply brushed aside all such fancies.

As Tony Ufton said, glass in hand: "We'll drink your beer all night, Phil, and pay by listening to tall stories."

"Lizards," jeered Taffy Llewellyn, who'd turned up, anyway, scenting a party. "Phil brought the thing back from Tibet or wherever he's been."

Steve Searles had been working on the lizard. He told me in a quiet voice, hard to hear over the din, that this was another specimen straight from a time a hundred million years ago. "If only I could go through with Alan!" he said, aglow.

"You will," I said grimly. "Along with all of us."

"But why?" Alan Watkins said, joining us. He was looking a little more robust, I thought, and I guessed that came from his decision not to return to the land beyond the stairs. "Anyway, you can't get through without the equations. And I burnt those and flushed them away."

I didn't say anything then about the carbon paper. The stores that Punchy Draycott had unloaded from his lorry were standing crated along the wall. The others eyed them with aroused professional interest. The heavy wooden cases with their rope handles were nostalgically familiar.

"What's all the armament for?" asked Jock McTaggart.

"I'll tell you in a minute, Jock," I said. "Now listen you fellows, I've got something to tell you."

They crowded round. They exuded good fellowship, gaiety, the happy desire to have a good time. They beamed.

"I saw a man upon a stair," sang out Tony Ufton.

Lifting their glasses, they went on: "But when I looked he wasn't there."

They were stamping their feet in time, now.

"He wasn't there again today—I wish that man would go away!"

But the last line was spoiled by their different renditions.

"All right, you idiots," I said, hands on hips. Truth to tell, I was feeling the idiot. Only the sight of the set faces of Watkins and Searles gave me the courage to go on, the reassurance that it was I, and not this frabious crew, who was right.

"Listen, you fatheads!" I yelled over the row. "I'm going to prove it to you—and then we'll see." I stared at them all, one after the other. Then, hitting below the belt, very seriously, I said: "Are you standing there and telling me that you think Alan and Steve and I are a bunch of liars?"

That quietened them. It upset them.

"Now, look here, Phil—!"

"I say, old man!"

"Of course you're not— but—!"

"Very well," I said. "We'll put this to the test. For afterwards we have to do something about someone in trouble—someone apart from Alan." I looked about, ready to try to use all my rotten persuasive technique on Watkins and pressure him into going, once again, down the stairs.

But Watkins had vanished.

"Tally-ho!" they shouted, rushing about my flat. But Watkins was not to be found. Then I noticed that the big elephant gun I'd carried up with me and stuck behind the door with its bag of shells was also missing. I rushed out on to the landing, the pack at my heels. The indicator light above the lift was just sinking to the ground floor.

"After him!" I shouted.

They chorused Tally ho! and clattered down the stairs, hallooing, kicking up an infernal din. It was all a stupendous lark, a priceless joke, a gorgeous gag. The best night on the tiles they'd had in years.

I raced down the stairs, guessing what Alan Watkins was doing—or what he thought he was doing.

The night struck chill. The snow still shone white and glistening save where pedestrians and traffic had cut it into gluey brown streaks. Our breaths steamed out like a British Railways' shunting yard.

Watkins' footprints were plain. By the ferocious kick-up of snow and the length of stride between each print, he had been running hard. We chased after them like wolves on the trail.

"There he is!" someone yelled.

Alan Watkins was racing along the street about fifty yards away, head down, the elephant gun in one hand—he must have snatched it up automatically after his experiences, I suppose—the other clasping his jacket tight about him. Our footfalls were deadened underfoot. But he heard the yell and

turned his head, saw us, and sprinted harder than ever. No one thought to jump into one of the gaggle of cars parked at the kerb; maybe all the keys were in overcoat pockets, maybe we realised they wouldn't be much use. We chased along the ghostly pavement under the street lamps.

Alan Watkins was not running blind. I could guess the way his thoughts were going; anything would be better than to be continually forced to go down the stairs into his own equation-created jungle world. So he was running away.

For one, I couldn't blame him.

But, for the sake of saving his sanity permanently, he had to be brought back and worked on. We couldn't set about winning the struggle against whatever forces had him in their grip if he'd run out on us. So I thought, then.

Ahead the round lighted sign of the UndergrounD showed up and Watkins must have seen this as a sign of salvation. If he could board a train and watch the doors slam in our face, he'd be safe for the night. He might even have missed the last train.

But we were gaining on him. Encumbered by the elephant gun, which he was probably too bemused to throw down, he was no match for the rollicking athletes following his spoor. We saw him for a moment, outlined against the light of the UndergrounD welling up, and then he had started on down. The howling pack, completely disregarding the few late passers-by, raced to the top and started on down after Watkins. I was about fourth or fifth man. We were pouring over the top of the stairs, staggered one above the other and all glaring down on Watkins below.

And the inevitable happened.

He must have struggled to get back. He must have fought to keep his flailing feet and arms from carrying him on and forward and down—and down whatever part of the jungle this UndergrounD stairway led. If it was still jungle. There might have been anything at all at the other side of the stairs.

Everyone tried to stop running. The pile up was fantastic. Taffy Llewellyn's feet slipped and he skidded down, bottoms up. Jock McTaggart's elbow thumped me in the ribs and Tony Ufton's hat—which, impeccably, he was wearing—flew off and rolled down into slushy snow trapped in the corner. He swore about his hat.

No one had much to say about Alan Watkins.

The pile of groaning bodies sorted itself out. Feet were angrily pulled off faces, and snow brushed out of hair. We milled about a little, half-expecting to see Watkins re-appear from a dark corner, laughing at us.

All, that is, except the two who had seen him vanish before.

Then, after some had prowled around all the dark corners of the UndergrounD station without any trace, we wended slowly back to my flat. There wasn't much else we could do.

I had their attention now. I was angry, abysmally angry and ashamed. Poor old Alan! I'd driven him out and he'd run slap into the very horror he'd been trying to avoid.

"Right, you chaps," I said. "This is the drill." And I told them, fully, the story as it had happened. "And none of you can now say that it isn't so. You've seen for yourselves." They had to believe now; but they didn't want to. "So we've got to go through ourselves and rescue Alan, and also, if we can, find out what that human voice shouting for help was all about."

We discussed the affair inside out and backwards. But it all boiled down to the same thing in the end. I said: "We'll take a pretty conspicuous marker and plant it as soon as we hit the other side. The weaponry kindly provided—on loan—by Punchy will be shared out. We'd better also take water and rations—Tony bought those earlier, thinking we were just getting in fodder for the party."

"I did think you were buying a lot of solid stuff," Ufton remarked, still brushing his hat.

"There are a couple of bazookas, a satchel of grenades each and a Sterling or a Tommy-gun. The elephant guns will be useful—I'm thinking that the Sterlings will be of use only for small stuff. The bazookas will be the central fire power."

"Real anti-panzer stuff, eh?" Stan Shaw said.

"Only panzers that don't know they're dead when they are." Searles said gravely. "Two brains—measurable times for messages to reach limbs from brain, fifteen tons dead-weight. We're in for a rough time if—"

"And Alan's already in there," I said sharply. "He didn't come out at once and that means he's probably lost and can't find his way back. That'd be unfamiliar territory for him."

"What are we waiting for, then?" demanded McTaggart.

"This," I said, taking out the sheets wrapped around the carbon paper. "I want each of you to sit down and make a

copy of this, then keep it on you. It might be that that way we'll have a re-entry into this world if we can't find the usual exit. Okay? "

They nodded, and found pens and pencils and began to copy the weird symbols mathematicians use. I couldn't make head or tail or it, but I wrote out my own copy along with the others. " Do you all follow it? " I asked.

Now these men had been staff officers in a pretty high-flown armoured division. They were not elementary-school rejects. After a little time of concentration, they all agreed that whilst they didn't follow the thinking behind the equations, the equation itself was perfectly understandable. I looked at the squiggly marks and the way negatives and positives switched sides, and square-root signs and other ten to the power of umpteen were scattered about, and felt a twinge of misgiving.

Then I shrugged that off. I'd read the equation and I was ready to get in after Alan. We all picked up our gear, sharing the weights and the ammunition evenly, and trooped out and went down in the lift in relays.

Trying to sort out the married men from the bachelors had been impossible—this was just a jaunt, a shikari into a new and strange world. Grab old Alan and leg it back. What a yarn! So everyone went.

Despite what they had seen and the grimness of the weapons with which they were draped, they just couldn't take it seriously. It was a stupendously wonderful continuation of the party. And in that spirit they trooped along the snow-covered pavement, laughing and singing, whooping with the sheer excitement of having something extraordinary to do after too many years of fat and slothful peacetime living.

We must have presented a strange sight. A group of men, all big and tough and self-possessed, acting like a gang of school-children out on a romp, festooned with guns and bazookas and bags of food and bottles of water, carrying wooden ammunition boxes filled with ammunition, walking along a snow-covered London street, this should be enough to make anyone turn a head.

The policeman down beyond the UndergrounD entrance saw us and began to plod stolidly towards us. We broke into

a run, still shouting and laughing, and plunged down the stairs.

Tony Ufton and Steve Searles were leading. They vanished on the seventh step. Jock McTaggart and Taffy Llewellyn, closely followed by Punchy Draycott who carried a broom-handle with a red duster tied to it as a marker, vanished in turn. Stan Shaw went and the others and I, as it were riding herd on them, ducked down last.

They all vanished, one by one, before my eyes as I ran down the stairs. I felt that blast of oven heat and then I was on and through—and was running down the UndergrounD stairs, my tommy-gun slung over my shoulder and my elephant gun at the ready, feeling my shoes crushing dirty snow, seeing the steel treads and the tiled walls and the strip illumination.

I was alone.

Alone, in the entrance to a London UndergrounD station, draped in weapons and ammunition bandoliers, a carving knife at my waist, a floppy safari hat on my head, field glasses around my neck, alone and feeling very stupid and very ineffectual.

"Hullo, hullo! Now then, sir, what's all this?"

The policeman gazed down from the top of the steps. He had his truncheon half drawn and his whistle was to his lips.

He could see at a glance that I was a dangerous lunatic.

"They've gone!" I shouted. "Gone without me!"

"Well," the constable said phlegmatically. "We'll pick them up when they get off at their station. Now come along. sir. If you please."

So, as there was nothing elso to do, I went.

They let me off with a caution; but they took the Tommy-gun away and they still are inclined to be obnoxious about it. Seems Punchy Draycott was not too particular where he found his merchandise.

And none of the men who went down has come back. Not one.

Are they still roaming about in that eerie jungle-world looking for Alan Watkins?

Or have they found him and are now searching desperately for the way back?

Or, perhaps, and knowing them, are they having themselves a whale of a time out there—a dinosaur of a time, perhaps I should say—going on the biggest game hunt that any men have ever known?

I can't say.

I don't like to think that their bones lie mouldering in that foetid jungle, waiting, if the miracle of fossilization occurs, to be dug up and disbelieved by modern men.

And, most bitterly of all, I curse my infantile brain that has never grasped the elusiveness of mathematics. I didn't follow that equation at all. It was quite beyond my comprehension.

Yet they all understood—they all went through.

I'm working hard to get back to G.C.E. standard. The correspondence course is very good. Sometimes my postal tutor shows his exasperation with me in red-inked little notes full of sarcasm; but I bear it all.

I have just to learn maths and get through into that other world and find my friends—or what has happened to them.

Often I stand for hours outside that UndergrounD entrance, waiting. But there is little hope.

Gradually I am regaining contact with other old friends and comrades, building up a little battle group of people who are interested to know what has become of their old buddies. What's happened to old Alan Watkins? they'll ask. Or when was the last time you saw Steve Searles? he isn't around the Museum these days. And fancy dapper Tony Ufton disappearing from his fire chief's job.

Oh yes, they're missed.

As soon as G.C.E. is under my belt I'm going on to degree standard. Only in maths, of course.

In time with my increasing understanding, the nucleus of interested men from the old division is growing. They're all ready to help if they can.

I'm looking forward to the day when I can throw another party, fully provided with another consignment of artillery and safari stores, and show the assembled company what happens when you read a certain set of equations and then descend seven stairs.

I'll let you know the result when I get back.

—Frank Brandon