# **Random Quest**

John Wyndham

The sound of a car coming to a stop on the gravel caused Dr Harshom to look at his watch. He closed the book in which he had been writing, put it away in one of his desk drawers, and waited. Presently Stephens opened the door to announce: ‘Mr Trafford, sir.’

The doctor got up from his chair, and regarded the young man who entered, with some care. Mr Colin Trafford turned out to be presentable, just in his thirties, with brown hair curling slightly, clean-shaven, a suit of good tweed well cut, and shoes to accord. He looked pleasant enough though not distinguished. It would not be difficult to meet thirty or forty very similar young men in a day. But when he looked more closely, as the doctor now did, there were signs of fatigue to be seen, indications of anxiety in the expression and around the eyes, a strained doggedness in the set of the mouth.

They shook hands.

‘You’ll have had a long drive,’ said the doctor. ‘I expect you’d like a drink. Dinner won’t be for half an hour yet.’

The younger man accepted, and sat down. Presently, he said:

‘It was kind of you to invite me here, Dr Harshom.’

‘Not really altruistic,’ the doctor told him. ‘It is more satisfactory to talk than to correspond by letter. Moreover, I am an inquisitive man recently retired from a very humdrum country practice, Mr Trafford, and on the rare occasions that I do catch the scent of a mystery my curiosity urges me to follow it up.’ He, too, sat down.

‘Mystery?’ repeated the young man.

‘Mystery,’ said the doctor.

The young man took a sip of his whisky.

‘My inquiry was such as one might receive from — well, from any solicitor,’ he said.

‘But you are not a solicitor, Mr Trafford.’

‘No,’ Colin Trafford admitted, ‘I am not.’

‘But you do have a very pressing reason for your inquiry. So there is the mystery. What pressing, or indeed leisurely, reason could you have for inquiries about a person whose existence you yourself appear to be uncertain — and of whom Somerset House has no record?’

The young man regarded him more carefully, as he went on:

‘How do I know that? Because an inquiry there would be your natural first step. Had you found a birth-certificate, you would not have pursued the course you have. In fact, only a curiously determined person would have persisted in a quest for someone who had no official existence. So, I said to myself: When this persistence in the face of reason addresses itself to me I will try to resolve the mystery.’

The young man frowned.

‘You imply that you said that before you had my letter?’

‘My dear fellow, Harshom is not a common name — an unusual corruption of Harvesthome, if you are interested in such things — and, indeed, I never yet heard of a Harshom who was not traceably connected with the rest of us. And we do, to some extent, keep in touch. So, quite naturally, I think, the incursion of a young man entirely unknown to any of us, but persistently tackling us one after another with his inquiries regarding an unidentifiable Harshom, aroused our interest. Since it seemed that I myself came low on your priority list I decided to make a few inquiries of my own. I —’

‘But why should you judge yourself low on a list,’ Colin Trafford interrupted.

‘Because you are clearly a man of method. In this case, geographical method. You began your inquiries with Harshoms in the Central London area, and worked outwards, until you are now in Herefordshire. There are only two further-flung Harshoms now on your list, Peter, down in the toe of Cornwall, and Harold, a few miles from Durham — am I right?’

Colin Trafford nodded, with a trace of reluctance.

‘You are,’ he admitted.

Dr Harshom smiled, a trifle smugly.

‘I thought so. There is —’ he began, but the young man interrupted him again.

‘When you answered my letter, you invited me here, but you evaded my question,’ he remarked.

‘That is true. But I have answered it now by insisting that the person you seek not only does not exist, but never did exist.’

‘But if you’re quite satisfied on that, why ask me here at all?’

‘Because —’ The doctor broke off at the sound of a gong. ‘Dear me, Phillips allows one just ten minutes to wash. Let me show you your room, and we can continue over dinner.’

A little later when the soup was before them, he resumed:

‘You were asking me why I invited you here. I think the answer is that since you feel entitled to be curious about a hypothetical relative of mine, I feel no less entitled to be curious about the motives that impel your curiosity. Fair enough? — as they say.’

‘Dubious,’ replied Mr Trafford after consideration. ‘To inquire into my motives would, I admit, be not unreasonable if you knew this person to exist — but, since you assure me she does not exist, the question of my motives surely becomes academic.’

‘My interest is academic, my dear fellow, but none the less real. Perhaps we might progress a little if I might put the problem as it appears from my point of view?’

Trafford nodded. The doctor went on:

‘Well, now, this is the situation: Some seven or eight months ago a young man, unknown to any of us, begins a series of approaches to my relatives. His concern, he says, is to learn the whereabouts, or to gain any clues which may help him to trace the whereabouts of a lady called Ottilie Harshom. She was born, he believes, in 1928, though it could be a few years to either side of that — and she may, of course, have adopted another surname through marriage.

‘In his earlier letters there is an air of confidence suggesting his feeling that the matter will easily be dealt with, but as one Harshom after another fails to identify the subject of his inquiries his tone becomes less confident though not less determined. In one or two directions he does learn of young Harshom ladies — none of them called Ottilie, by the way, but he nevertheless investigates them with care. Can it be, perhaps, that he is as uncertain about the first name as about everything else concerning her? But apparently none of these ladies fulfils his requirements, for he presses on. In the face of unqualified unsuccess, his persistence in leaving no Harshom stone unturned begins to verge upon the unreasonable. Is he an eccentric, with a curious obsession?

‘Yet by all the evidence he was — until the spring of 1953, at any rate, a perfectly normal young man. His full name is Colin Wayland Trafford. He was born in 1921, in Solihull, the son of a solicitor. He went to Chartowe School 1934. Enlisted in the Army 1939. Left it, with the rank of Captain 1945. Went up to Cambridge. Took a good degree in Physics 1949. Joined Electro-Physical Industries on the managerial side that same year. Married Della Stevens 1950. Became a widower 1951. Received injuries in a laboratory demonstration accident early in 1953. Spent the following five weeks in St Merryn’s Hospital. Began his first approaches to members of the Harshom family for information regarding Ottilie Harshom about a month after his discharge from hospital.’

Colin Trafford said coldly:

‘You are very fully informed, Dr Harshom.’

The doctor shrugged slightly.

‘Your own information about the Harshoms must by now be almost exhaustive. Why should you resent some of us knowing something of you?’

Colin did not reply to that. He dropped his gaze, and appeared to study the tablecloth. The doctor resumed:

‘I said just now — has he an obsession? The answer has appeared to be yes — since some time last March. Prior to that, there seems to have been no inquiry whatever regarding Miss Ottilie Harshom.

‘Now when I had reached this point I began to feel that I was on the edge of a more curious mystery than I had expected.’ He paused. ‘I’d like to ask you, Mr Trafford, had you ever been aware of the name Ottilie Harshom before January last?’

The young man hesitated. Then he said, uneasily:

‘How can one possibly answer that? One encounters a myriad names on all sides. Some are remembered, some seem to get filed in the subconscious, some apparently fail to register at all. It’s unanswerable.’

‘Perhaps so. But we have the curious situation that before January Ottilie Harshom was apparently not on your mental map, but since March she has, without any objective existence, dominated it. So I ask myself, what happened between January and March ...?

‘Well, I practise medicine. I have certain connexions, I am able to learn the external facts. One day late in January you were invited, along with several other people, to witness a demonstration in one of your Company’s laboratories. I was not told the details, I doubt if I would understand them if I were: the atmosphere around the higher flights of modern physics is so rarefied — but I gather that during this demonstration something went amiss. There was an explosion, or an implosion, or perhaps a matter of a few atoms driven berserk by provocation, in any case, the place was wrecked. One man was killed out-right, another died later, several were injured. You yourself were not badly hurt. You did get a few cuts, and bruises — nothing serious, but you were knocked out — right out ...

‘You were, indeed, so thoroughly knocked out that you lay unconscious for twenty-four days ...

‘And when at last you did come round you displayed symptoms of considerable confusion — more strongly, perhaps, than would be expected in a patient of your age and type, and you were given sedatives. The following night you slept restlessly, and showed signs of mental distress. In particular you called again and again for someone named Ottilie.

‘The hospital made what inquiries they could, but none of your friends or relatives knew of anyone called Ottilie associated with you.

‘You began to recover, but it was clear you had something heavily on your mind. You refused to reveal what it was, but you did ask one of the doctors whether he could have his secretary try to find the name Ottilie Harshom in any directory. When it could not be found, you became depressed. However, you did not raise the matter again — at least, I am told you did not — until after your discharge when you set out on this quest for Ottilie Harshom, in which, in spite of completely negative results, you continue.

‘Now, what must one deduce from that?’ He paused to look across the table at his guest, left eyebrow raised.

‘That you are even better informed than I thought,’ Colin said, without encouragement. ‘If I were your patient your inquiries might be justified, but as I am not, and have not the least intention of consulting you professionally, I regard them as intrusive, and possibly unethical.’

If he had expected his host to be put out he was disappointed. The doctor continued to regard him with interested detachment.

‘I’m not yet entirely convinced that you ought not to be someone’s patient,’ he remarked. ‘However, let me tell you why it was I, rather than another Harshom, who was led to make these inquiries. Perhaps you may then think them less impertinent. But I am going to preface that with a warning against false hopes. You must understand that the Ottilie Harshom you are seeking does not exist and has not existed. That is quite definite.

‘Nevertheless, there is one aspect of this matter which puzzled me greatly, and that I cannot bring myself to dismiss as coincidence. You see, the name Ottilie Harshom was not entirely unknown to me. No —’ He raised his hand. ‘— I repeat, no false hopes. There is no Ottilie Harshom, but there has been — or, rather, there have in the past been, two Ottilie Harshoms.’

Colin Trafford’s resentful manner had entirely dropped away. He sat, leaning a little forward, watching his host intently.

‘But,’ the doctor emphasized, ‘it was all long ago. The first was my grandmother. She was born in 1832, married Grandfather Harshom in 1861, and died in 1866. The other was my sister: she, poor little thing, was born in 1884 and died in 1890 ...’

He paused again. Colin made no comment. He went on:

‘I am the only survivor of this branch so it is not altogether surprising that the others have forgotten there was ever such a name in the family, but when I heard of your inquiries I said to myself: There is something out of order here. Ottilie is not the rarest of names, but on any scale of popularity it would come a very long way down indeed; and Harshom is a rare name. The odds against these two being coupled by mere chance must be some quite astronomical figure. Something so large that I cannot believe it is chance. Somewhere there must be a link, some cause ...

‘So, I set out to discover if I could find out why this young man Trafford should have hit upon this improbable conjunction of names — and, seemingly, become obsessed by it. — You would not care to help me at this point?’

Colin continued to look at him, but said nothing.

‘No? Very well. When I had all the available data assembled the conclusion I had to draw was this: that as a result of your accident you underwent some kind of traumatic experience, an experience of considerable intensity as well as unusual quality. Its intensity one deduces from your subsequent fixation of purpose; the unusual quality partly from the pronounced state of confusion in which you regained consciousness, and partly from the consistency with which you deny recollecting anything from the moment of the accident until you awoke.

‘Now, if that were indeed a blank, why did you awake in such a confused condition? There must have been some recollection to cause it. And if there was something akin to ordinary dream images, why this refusal to speak of them? There must have been, therefore, some experience of great personal significance wherein the name Ottilie Harshom was a very potent element indeed.

‘Well, Mr Trafford. Is the reasoning good, the conclusion valid? Let me suggest, as a physician, that such things are a burden that should be shared.’

Colin considered for some little time, but when he still did not speak the doctor added:

‘You are almost at the end of the road, you know. Only two more Harshoms on the list, and I assure you they won’t be able to help — so what then?’

Colin said, in a flat voice:

‘I expect you are right. You should know. All the same, I must see them. There might be something, some clue ... I can’t neglect the least possibility ... I had just a little hope when you invited me here. I knew that you had a family ...’

‘I had,’ the doctor said, quietly. ‘My son Malcolm was killed racing at Brooklands in 1927. He was unmarried. My daughter married, but she had no children. She was killed in a raid on London in 1941 ... So there it ends ...’ He shook his head slowly.

‘I am sorry,’ said Colin. Then: ‘Have you a picture of your daughter that I may see?’

‘She wasn’t of the generation you are looking for.’

‘I realize that, but nevertheless ...’

‘Very well — when we return to the study. Meanwhile, you’ve not yet said what you think of my reasoning.’

‘Oh, it was good.’

‘But you are still disinclined to talk about it? Well, I am not. And I can still go a little further. Now, this experience of yours cannot have been of a kind to cause a feeling of shame or disgust, or you would be trying to sublimate it in some way, which manifestly you are not. Therefore it is highly probable that the cause of your silence is fear. Something makes you afraid to discuss the experience. You are not, I am satisfied, afraid of facing it; therefore your fear must be of the consequences of communicating it. Consequences possibly to someone else, but much more probably to yourself ...’

Colin went on regarding him expressionlessly for a moment. Then he relaxed a little and leaned back in his chair. For the first time he smiled faintly.

‘You do get there, in the end, don’t you, Doctor? But do you mind if I say that you make quite Germanically heavy-going of it? And the whole thing is so simple, really. It boils down to this. If a man, any man, claims to have had an experience which is outside all normal experience, it will be inferred, will it not, that he is in some way not quite a normal man? In that case, he cannot be entirely relied upon to react to a particular situation as a normal man should — and if his reactions may be non-normal, how can he be really dependable? He may be, of course — but would it not be sounder policy to put authority into the hands of a man about whom there is no doubt? Better to be on the safe side. So he is passed over. His failure to make the expected step is not unnoticed. A small cloud, a mere wrack, of doubt and risk begins to gather above him. It is tenuous, too insubstantial for him to disperse, yet it casts a faint, persistent shadow.

‘There is, I imagine, no such thing as a normal human being, but there is a widespread feeling that there ought to be. Any organization has a conception of “the type of man we want here” which is regarded as the normal for its purposes. So every man there attempts more or less to accord to it — organizational man, in fact — and anyone who diverges more than slightly from the type in either his public, or in his private life does so to the peril of his career. There is, as you said, fear of the results to myself: it is, as I said, so simple.’

‘True enough,’ the doctor agreed. ‘But you have not taken any care to disguise the consequence of the experience — the hunt for Ottilie Harshom.’

‘I don’t need to. Could anything be more reassuringly normal than “man seeks girl”? I have invented a background which has quite satisfied any interested friends — and even several Harshoms.’

‘I dare say. — None of them being aware of the “coincidence” in the conjunction of “Ottilie” with “Harshom”. But I am.’

He waited for Colin Trafford to make some comment on that. When none came, he went on:

‘Look, my boy. You have this business very heavily on your mind. There are only the two of us here. I have no links whatever with your firm. My profession should be enough safeguard for your confidence, but I will undertake a special guarantee if you like. It will do you good to unburden — and I should like to get to the bottom of this ...’

But Colin shook his head.

‘You won’t, you know. Even if I were to tell you, you’d only be the more mystified — as I am.’

‘Two heads are better than one. We could try,’ said the doctor, and waited.

Colin considered again, for some moments. Then he lifted his gaze, and met the doctor’s steadily.

‘Very well then. I’ve tried. You shall try. But first I would like to see a picture of your daughter. Have you one taken when she was about twenty-five?’

They left the table and went back to the study. The doctor waved Colin to a chair, and crossed to a corner cupboard. He took out a small pile of cardboard mounts and looked through them. He selected three, gazed at them thoughtfully for a few seconds, and then handed them over. While Colin studied them he busied himself with pouring brandy from a decanter.

Presently Colin looked up.

‘No,’ he said. ‘And yet there is something ...’ He tried covering parts of the full-face portrait with his hand. ‘Something about the setting and shape of the eyes — but not quite. The brow, perhaps, but it’s difficult to tell with the hair done like that ...’ He pondered the photographs a little longer, and then handed them back. ‘Thank you for letting me see them.’

The doctor picked up one of the others and passed it over.

‘This was Malcolm, my son.’

It showed a laughing young man standing by the forepart of a car which bristled with exhaust manifold and had its bonnet held down by straps.

‘He loved that car,’ said the doctor, ‘but it was too fast for the old track there. It went over the banking, and hit a tree.’

He took the picture back, and handed Colin a glass of brandy.

Colin swirled it. Neither of them spoke for some little time. Then he tasted the brandy, and, presently, lit a cigarette.

‘Very well,’ he said again. ‘I’ll try to tell you. But first I’ll tell you what happened — whether it was subjective, or not, it happened for me. The implications and so on we can look at later — if you want to.’

‘Good,’ agreed the doctor. ‘But tell me first, do we start from the moment of the accident — or was there anything at all relevant before that?’

‘No,’ Colin Trafford said, ‘that’s where it does start.’

It was just another day. Everything and everybody perfectly ordinary — except that this demonstration was something a bit special. What it concerned is not my secret, and not, as far as I know, relevant. We all gathered round the apparatus. Deakin who was in charge, pulled down a switch. Something began to hum, and then to whine, like a motor running faster and faster. The whine became a shriek as it went up the scale. There was a quite piercingly painful moment or two near the threshold of audibility, then a sense of relief because it was over and gone, with everything seeming quiet again. I was looking across at Deakin watching his dials, with his fingers held ready over the switches, and then, just as I was in the act of turning my head towards the demonstration again, there was a flash ... I didn’t hear anything, or feel anything: there was just this dazzling white flash ... Then nothing but black ... I heard people crying out, and a woman’s voice screaming ... screaming ... screaming ...

I felt crushed by a great weight. I opened my eyes. A sharp pain jabbed through them into my head, but I struggled against the weight, and found it was due to two or three people being on top of me; so I managed to shove a couple of them off, and sit up. There were several other people lying about on the ground, and a few more picking themselves up. A couple of feet to my left was a large wheel. I looked farther up and found that it was attached to a bus — a bus that from my position seemed to tower like a scarlet skyscraper, and appeared, moreover, to be tilted and about to fall on me. It caused me to get up very quickly, and as I did I grabbed a young woman who had been lying across my legs, and dragged her to a safer place. Her face was dead white, and she was unconscious.

I looked around. It wasn’t difficult to see what had happened. The bus, which must have been travelling at a fair speed, had, for some reason got out of control, run across the crowded pavement, and through the plate-glass window of a shop. The forepart of the top deck had been telescoped against the front of the building, and it was up there that the screaming was going on. Several people were still lying on the ground, a woman moving feebly, a man groaning, two or three more quite still. Three streams of blood were meandering slowly across the pavement among the crystals of broken glass. All the traffic had stopped, and I could see a couple of policemen’s helmets bobbing through the crowd towards us.

I moved my arms and legs experimentally. They worked perfectly well, and painlessly. But I felt dazed, and my head throbbed. I put my hand up to it and discovered a quite tender spot where I must have taken a blow on the left occiput.

The policemen got through. One of them started pushing back the gaping bystanders, the other took a look at the casualties on the ground. A third appeared and went up to the top deck of the bus to investigate the screaming there.

I tried to conquer my daze, and looked round further. The place was Regent Street, a little up from Piccadilly Circus; the wrecked window was one of Austin Reed’s. I looked up again at the bus. It was certainly tilted, but not in danger of toppling, for it was firmly wedged into the window opening to within a yard of the word ‘General’, gleaming in gold letters on its scarlet side.

At this point it occurred to me that I was supernumerary, and that if I were to hang around much longer I should find myself roped in as a witness — not, mind you, that I would grudge being a witness in the ordinary way, if it would do anyone any good, but I was suddenly and acutely aware that this was not at all in the ordinary way. For one thing I had no knowledge of anything whatever but the aftermath — and, for another, what was I doing here anyway ...? One moment I had been watching a demonstration out at Watford; the next, there was this. How the devil did I come to be in Regent Street at all ...?

I quietly edged my way into the crowd, then out of it again, zigzagged across the road amid the held-up traffic, and headed for the Café Royal, a bit further down.

They seemed to have done things to the old place since I was there last, a couple of years before, but the important thing was to find the bar, and that I did, without difficulty.

‘A double brandy, and some soda,’ I told the barman.

He gave it me, and slid along the siphon. I pulled some money out of my pocket, coppers and a little small silver. So I made to reach for my notecase.

‘Half a crown, sir,’ the barman told me, as if fending off a note.

I blinked at him. Still, he had said it. I slid over three shillings. He seemed gratified.

I added soda to the brandy, and took a welcome drink. It was as I was putting the glass down that I caught sight of myself in the mirror behind the bar ...

I used to have a moustache. I came out of the Army with it, but decided to jettison it when I went up to Cambridge. But there it was — a little less luxuriant, perhaps, but resurrected. I put up my hand and felt it. There was no illusion, and it was genuine, too. At almost the same moment I noticed my suit. Now, I used to have a suit pretty much like that, years ago. Not at all a bad suit either, but still, not quite the thing we organization men wear in E.P.I ...

I had a swimming sensation, took another drink of the brandy, and felt, a little unsteadily, for a cigarette. The packet I pulled out of my pocket was unfamiliar — have you ever heard of Player’s ‘Mariner’ cigarettes — No? Neither had I, but I got one out, and lit it with a very unsteady match. The dazed feeling was not subsiding; it was growing, rapidly ...

I felt for my inside pocket. No wallet. It should have been there — perhaps some opportunist in the crowd round the bus had got it ... I sought through the other pockets — a fountain-pen, a bunch of keys, a couple of cash receipts from Harrods, a cheque book — containing cheques addressed to the Knightsbridge branch of the Westminster Bank. Well, the bank was all right, but why Knightsbridge? — I live in Hampstead ...

To try to get some kind of grip on things I began to recapitulate from the moment I had opened my eyes and found the bus towering over me. It was quite vivid. I had a sharp recollection of staring up at that scarlet menace, with the gilded word ‘General’ shining brightly ... yes, in gleaming gold — only, as you know, the word ‘General’ hasn’t been seen on London buses since it was replaced by ‘London Transport’ in 1933 ...

I was getting a little rattled by now, and looked round the bar for something to steady my wits. On one table I noticed a newspaper that someone had discarded. I went across to fetch it, and got carefully back on to my stool before I looked at it. Then I took a deep breath and regarded the front page. My first response was dismay for the whole thing was given up to a single display advertisement. Yet there was some reassurance, of a kind, at the top, for it read: ‘Daily Mail, London, Wednesday 27 January 1954.’ So it was at least the right day — the one we had fixed for the demonstration at the labs.

I turned to the middle page, and read: ‘Disorders in Delhi. One of the greatest exhibitions of civil disobedience so far staged in India took place here today demanding the immediate release of Nehru from prison. For nearly all the hours of daylight the city has been at a standstill —’ Then an item in an adjoining column caught my eye: ‘In answer to a question from the Opposition front bench Mr Butler, the Prime Minister, assured the House that the Government was giving serious consideration —’ In a dizzy way I glanced at the top of the page: the date there agreed with that on the front, 27 January 1954, but just below it there was a picture with the caption: ‘A scene from last night’s production of The Lady Loves, at the Laughton Theatre, in which Miss Amanda Coward plays the lead in the last of her father’s many musical plays. The Lady Loves was completed only a few days before Noel Coward’s death last August, and a moving tribute to his memory was paid at the end of the performance by Mr Ivor Novello who directed the production.’

I read that again, with care. Then I looked up and about, for reassurance, at my fellow drinkers, at the furniture, at the barman, at the bottles: it was all convincingly real.

I dropped the paper, and finished the rest of my brandy. I could have done with another, but it would have been awkward if, with my wallet gone, the barman should change his mind about his modest price. I glanced at my watch — and there was a thing, too! It was a very nice watch, gold, with a crocodile strap, and hands that stood at twelve-thirty, but I had never seen it before. I took it off and looked at the back. There was a pretty bit of engraving there; it said: ‘C. for ever O. 10.X.50.’ And it jolted me quite a little, for 1950 was the year I was married — though not in October, and not to anyone called O. My wife’s name was Della. Mechanically I restrapped the watch on my wrist, and left.

The interlude and the brandy had done me some good. When I stepped out into Regent Street again I was feeling less dazed (though, if it is not too fine a distinction, more bewildered) and my head had almost ceased to ache, so that I was able to pay more attention to the world about me.

At first sight Piccadilly Circus gave an impression of being much as usual, and yet a suggestion that there was something a bit wrong with it. After a few moments I perceived that it was the people and the cars. Surprising numbers of the men and women, too, wore clothing that looked shabby, and the flower-girls below Eros seemed like bundles of rags. The look of the women who were not shabby took me completely aback. Almost without exception their hats were twelve-inch platter-like things balanced on the top of their heads. The skirts were long, almost to their ankles, and, worn under fur coats, gave an impression that they were dressed for the evening, at midday. Their shoes were pointed, over-ornamented, pin-heeled and quite hideous. I suppose all high-fashion would look ludicrous if one were to come upon it unprepared, but then one never does — at least one never had until now ... I might have felt like Rip van Winkle newly awakened, but for the date line on that newspaper ... The cars were odd, too. They seemed curiously high-built, small, and lacking in the flashy effects one had grown accustomed to, and when I paid more attention I did not see one make I could readily identify — except a couple of unmistakable Rolls.

While I stood staring curiously a plate-hatted lady in a well-worn fur-coat posted herself beside me and addressed me as ‘dearie’ in a somewhat grim way. I decided to move on, and headed for Piccadilly. On the way, I looked across at St James’s Church. The last time I had seen it it was clothed in scaffolding, with a hoarding in the garden to help to raise funds for the rebuilding — that would have been about a fortnight before — but now all that had gone, and it looked as if it had never been bombed at all. I crossed the road to inspect it more closely, and was still more impressed with the wonderful job they had made of the restoration.

Presently I found myself in front of Hatchard’s window, and paused to examine their contents. Some of the books had authors whose names I knew; I saw works by Priestley, C. S. Lewis, Bertrand Russell, T. S. Eliot, and others, but scarcely a title that I recognized. And then, down in the front, my eye was caught by a book in a predominantly pink jacket: Life’s Young Day, a novel by Colin Trafford.

I went on goggling at it, probably with my mouth open. I once had ambitions in that direction, you know. If it had not been for the war I’d probably have taken an Arts degree, and tried my hand at it, but as things happened I made a friend in the regiment who turned me to science, and could put me in the way of a job with E.P.I. later. Therefore it took me a minute or two to recover from the coincidence of seeing my name on the cover, and, when I did, my curiosity was still strong enough to take me into the shop.

There I discovered a pile of half a dozen copies lying on a table. I picked up the top one, and opened it. The name was plain enough on the title-page — and opposite was a list of seven other titles under ‘author of’. I did not recognize the publisher’s name, but overleaf there was the announcement: ‘First published January 1954.’

I turned it over in my hand, and then all but dropped it. On the back was a picture of the author; undoubtedly me — and with the moustache ... The floor seemed to tilt slightly beneath my feet.

Then, somewhere over my shoulder, there was a voice; one that I seemed to recognize. It said:

‘Well met, Narcissus! Doing a bit of sales-promotion, eh? How’s it going?’

‘Martin!’ I exclaimed. I had never been so glad to see anyone in all my life. ‘Martin. Why we’ve not met since — when was it?’

‘Oh, for at least three days, old boy,’ he said, looking a little surprised.

Three days! I’d seen a lot of Martin Falls at Cambridge, but only run across him twice since we came down, and the last of those was two years ago. But he went on:

‘What about a spot of lunch, if you’re not booked?’ he suggested.

And that wasn’t quite right either. I’d not heard anyone speak of a spot of lunch for years. However, I did my best to feel as if things were becoming more normal.

‘Fine,’ I said, ‘but you’ll have to pay. I’ve had my wallet pinched.’

He clicked his tongue.

‘Hope there wasn’t much in it. Anyway, what about the club? They’ll cash you a cheque there.’

I put the book I was still holding back on the pile, and we left.

‘Funny thing,’ Martin said. ‘Just run into Tommy — Tommy Westhouse. Sort of blowing sulphur — hopping mad with his American agent. You remember that god-awful thing of Tommy’s — The Thornèd Rose — kind of Ben Hur meets Cleopatra, with the Marquis de Sade intervening? Well, it seems this agent —’ He rambled on with a shoppy, anecdotal recital full of names that meant nothing to me, but lasted through several streets and brought us almost to Pall Mall. At the end of it he said: ‘You didn’t tell me how Life’s Young Day’s doing. Somebody said it was over-subscribed. Saw the Lit. Sup. wagged a bit of a finger at you. Not had time to read it myself yet. Too much on hand.’

I chose the easier — the non-committal way. It seemed easier than trying to understand, so I told him it was doing just about as expected.

The Club, when in due course we reached it, turned out to be the Savage. I am not a member, but the porter greeted me by name, as though I were in the habit of dropping in every day.

‘Just a quick one,’ Martin suggested. ‘Then we’ll look in and see George about your cheque.’

I had misgivings over that, but it went off all right, and during lunch I did my best to keep my end up. I had the same troubles that I have now — true it was from the other end, but the principle still holds: if things are too queer people will find it easier to think you are potty than to help you; so keep up a front.

I am afraid I did not do very well. Several times I caught Martin glancing at me with a perplexed expression. Once he asked: ‘Quite sure you’re feeling all right, old man?’

But the climax did not come until, with cheese on his plate, he reached out his left hand for a stick of celery. And as he did so I noticed the gold signet ring on his little finger, and that jolted me right out of my caution — for, you see, Martin doesn’t have a little finger on his left hand, or a third finger, either. He left both of them somewhere near the Rhine in 1945 ...

‘Good God!’ I exclaimed. For some reason that pierced me more sharply than anything yet. He turned his face towards me.

‘What on earth’s the matter, man? You’re as white as a sheet.’

‘Your hand —’ I said.

He glanced at it curiously, and then back at me, even more curiously.

‘Looks all right to me,’ he said, eyes a little narrowed.

‘But — but you lost the two last fingers — in the war,’ I exclaimed. His eyebrows rose, and then came down in an anxious frown. He said, with kind intention:

‘Got it a bit mixed, haven’t you, old man? Why, the war was over before I was born.’

Well, it goes a bit hazy just after that, and when it got coherent again I was lying back in a big chair, with Martin sitting close beside, saying:

‘So take my advice, old man. Just you trot along to the quack this afternoon. Must’ve taken a bit more of a knock than you thought, you know. Funny thing, the brain — can’t be too careful. Well, I’ll have to go now I’m afraid. Appointment. But don’t you put it off. Risky. Let me know how it goes.’ And then he was gone.

I lay back in the chair. Curiously enough I was feeling far more myself than I had since I came to on the pavement in Regent Street. It was as if the biggest jolt yet had shaken me out of the daze, and got the gears of my wits into mesh again ... I was glad to be rid of Martin, and able to think ...

I looked round the lounge. As I said, I am not a member, and did not know the place well enough to be sure of details, but I rather thought the arrangement was a little different, and the carpet, and some of the light fittings, from when I saw it last ...

There were few people around. Two talking in a corner, three napping, two more reading papers; none taking any notice of me. I went over to the periodicals table, and brought back the New Statesman, dated 22 January 1954. The front page leader was advocating the nationalization of transport as a first step towards putting the means of production into the hands of the people and so ending unemployment. There was a wave of nostalgia about that. I turned on, glancing at articles which baffled me for lack of context. I was glad to find Critic present, and I noticed that among the things that were currently causing him concern was some experimental work going on in Germany. His misgivings were, it seemed, shared by several eminent scientists, for, while there was little doubt now that nuclear fission was a theoretical possibility, the proposed methods of control were inadequate. There could well be a chain reaction resulting in a disaster of cosmic proportions. A consortium which included names famous in the Arts as well as many illustrious in the sciences was being formed to call upon the League of Nations to protest to the German government in the name of humanity against reckless research ...

Well, well ... !

With returning confidence in myself I sat and pondered.

Gradually, and faintly at first, something began to glimmer ... Not anything about the how, or the why — I still have no useful theories about those — but about what could conceivably have happened.

It was vague — set off, perhaps, by the thought of that random neutron which I knew in one set of circumstances to have been captured by a uranium atom, but which, in another set of circumstances, apparently had not ...

And there, of course, one was brought up against Einstein and relativity which, as you know, denies the possibility of determining motion absolutely and consequently leads into the idea of the four-dimensional space-time continuum. Well, then, since you cannot determine the motions of the factors in the continuum, any pattern of motion must be illusory, and there cannot be any determinable consequences. Nevertheless, where the factors are closely similar — are composed of similar atoms in roughly the same relation to the continuum, so to speak — you may quite well get similar consequences. They can never be identical, of course, or determination of motion would be possible. But they could be very similar, and capable of consideration in terms of Einstein’s Special Theory, and they could be determined further by a set of closely similar factors. In other words although the infinite point which we may call a moment in 1954 must occur throughout the continuum, it exists only in relation to each observer, and appears to have similar existence in relation to certain close groups of observers. However, since no two observers can be identical — that is, the same observer — each must perceive a different past, present, and future from that perceived by any other; consequently, what he perceives arises only from the factors of his relationship to the continuum, and exists only for him.

Therefore I began to understand that what had happened must be this: in some way — which I cannot begin to grasp — I had somehow been translated to the position of a different observer — one whose angle of view was in some respects very close to my own, and yet different enough to have relationships, and therefore realities, unperceived by me. In other words, he must have lived in a world real only to him, just as I had lived in a world real only to me — until this very peculiar transposition had occurred to put me in the position of observing his world, with, of course, its relevant past and future, instead of the one I was accustomed to.

Mind you, simple as it is when you consider it, I certainly did not grasp the form of it all at once, but I did argue my way close enough to the observer-existence relationship to decide that whatever might have gone amiss, my own mind was more or less all right. The trouble really seemed to be that it was in the wrong place, and getting messages not intended for me; a receiver somehow hooked into the wrong circuit.

Well, that’s not good, in fact, it’s bad; but it’s still a lot better than a faulty receiver. And it braced me a bit to realize that.

I sat there quite a time trying to get it clear, and wondering what I should do, until I came to the end of my packet of ‘Mariner’ cigarettes. Then I went to the telephone.

First I dialled Electro-Physical Industries. Nothing happened. I looked them up in the book. It was quite a different number, on a different exchange. So I dialled that.

‘Extension one three three,’ I told the girl on the desk, and then, on second thoughts, named my own department.

‘Oh. You want Extension five nine,’ she told me.

Somebody answered. I said:

‘I’d like to speak to Mr Colin Trafford.’

‘I’m sorry. We’ve no one of that name in this department,’ the voice told me.

Back to the desk. Then a longish pause.

‘I’m sorry,’ said the girl. ‘I can’t find that name on our staff list.’

I hung up. So, evidently, I was not employed by E.P.I. I thought a moment, and then dialled my Hampstead number. It answered promptly. ‘Transcendental Belts and Corsets,’ it announced brightly. I put down the receiver.

It occurred to me to look myself up in the book. I was there, all right: ‘Trafford, Colin W., 54 Hogarth Court, Duchess Gardens, SW7. SLOane 67021.’ So I tried that. The phone at the other end rang ... and went on ringing ...

I came out of the box wondering what to do next. It was an extremely odd feeling to be bereft of orientation, rather as if one had been dropped abruptly into a foreign city without even a hotel room for a base — and somehow made worse by the city being foreign only in minor and personal details.

After further reflection I decided that the best protective colouration would come from doing what this Colin Trafford might reasonably be expected to do. If he had no work to do at E.P.I., he did at least have a home to go to ...

A nice block of flats, Hogarth Court, springy carpet and illuminated floral arrangement in the hall, that sort of thing, but, at the moment no porter in view, so I went straight to the lift. The place did not look big enough to contain fifty-four flats, so I took a chance on the five meaning the fifth floor, and sure enough I stepped out to find 54 on the door facing me. I took out my bunch of keys, tried the most likely one, and it fitted.

Inside was a small hall. Nothing distinctive — white paint, lightly patterned paper, close maroon carpet, occasional table with telephone and a few flowers in a vase, with a nice gilt-framed mirror above, the hard occasional chair, a passage off, lots of doors. I paused.

‘Hullo,’ I said, experimentally. Then a little louder: ‘Hullo! Anyone at home?’

Neither voice nor sound responded. I closed the door behind me. What now? Well — well, hang it, I was — am — Colin Trafford! I took off my overcoat. Nowhere to put it. Second try revealed the coat closet ... Several other coats already in there. Male and female, a woman’s overshoes, too ... I added mine.

I decided to get the geography of the place, and see what home was really like ...

Well, you won’t want an inventory, but it was a nice flat. Larger than I had thought at first. Well furnished and arranged; not with extravagance, but not with stint, either. It showed taste, too; though not my taste — but what is taste? Either feeling for period, or refined selection from a fashion. I could feel that this was the latter, but the fashion was strange to me, and therefore lacked attraction ...

The kitchen was interesting. A fridge, no washer, single-sink, no plate racks, no laminated tops, old-fashioned-looking electric cooker, packet of soap powder, no synthetic detergents, curious lighting panel about three feet square in the ceiling, no mixer ...

The sitting-room was airy, chairs comfortable. Nothing spindly. A large radiogram, rather ornate, no F.M. on its scale. Lighting again by ceiling panels, and square things like glass cake-boxes on stands. No television.

I prowled round the whole place. Bedroom feminine, but not fussy. Twin beds. Bathroom tiled, white. Spare bedroom, small double-bed. And so on. But it was a room at the end of the passage that interested me most. A sort of study. One wall all bookshelves, some of the books familiar — the older ones — others not. An easy-chair, a lighter chair. In front of the window a broad, leather-topped desk, with a view across the bare-branched trees in the Gardens, roofs beyond, plenty of sky. On the desk a covered typewriter, adjustable lamp, several folders with sheets of paper untidily projecting, cigarette box, metal ash-tray, clean and empty, and a photograph in a leather frame.

I looked at the photograph carefully. A charming study. She’d be perhaps twenty-four — twenty-five? Intelligent, happy-looking, somebody one would like to know — but not anyone I did know ...

There was a cupboard on the left of the desk, and, on it, a glass-fronted case with eight books in it; the rest was empty. The books were all in bright paper jackets, looking as new. The one on the right-hand end was the same that I had seen in Hatchard’s that morning — Life’s Young Day; all the rest, too, bore the name Colin Trafford. I sat down in the swivel chair at the desk and pondered them for some moments. Then, with a curious, schizoid feeling I pulled out Life’s Young Day, and opened it.

It was, perhaps, half an hour, or more, later that I caught the sound of a key in the outer door. I laid down the book, and thought rapidly. I decided that, on the whole, it would be better to disclose myself than wait to be discovered. So I opened the door. Along at the end of the passage a figure in a three-quarter length grey suède coat which showed a tweed skirt beneath was dumping parcels on to the hall table. At the sound of my door she turned her head. It was the original of the photograph, all right; but not in the mood of the photograph. As I approached, she looked at me with an expression of surprise, mixed with other feelings that I could not identify; but certainly it was not an adoring-wife-greets-devoted-husband look.

‘Oh,’ she said. ‘You’re in. What happened?’

‘Happened?’ I repeated, feeling for a lead.

‘Well, I understood you had one of those so-important meetings with Dickie at the B.B.C. fixed for this afternoon,’ she said, a little curtly I thought.

‘Oh. Oh, that, yes. Yes, he had to put it off,’ I replied, clumsily.

She stopped still, and inspected me carefully. A little oddly, too, I thought. I stood looking at her, wondering what to do, and wishing I had had the sense to think up some kind of plan for this inevitable meeting instead of wasting my time over Life’s Young Day. I hadn’t even had the sense to find out her name. It was clear that I’d got away wrong somehow the moment I opened my mouth. Besides, there was a quality about her that upset my balance altogether ... It hit me in a way I’d not known for years, and more shrewdly than it had then ... Somehow, when you are thirty-three you don’t expect these things to happen — well, not to happen quite like that, any more ... Not with a great surge in your heart, and everything coming suddenly bright and alive as if she had just switched it all into existence ...

So we stood looking at one another; she with a half-frown, I trying to cope with a turmoil of elation and confusion, unable to say a word.

She glanced down, and began to unbutton her coat. She, too, seemed uncertain.

‘If —’ she began. But at that moment the telephone rang.

With an air of welcoming the interruption, she picked up the receiver. In the quiet of the hall I could hear a woman’s voice ask for Colin.

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘he’s here.’ And she held the receiver out to me, with a very curious look.

‘Hullo,’ I said. ‘Colin here.’

‘Oh, indeed,’ replied the voice, ‘and why, may I ask?’

‘Er — I don’t quite —’ I began, but she cut me short.

‘Now, look here, Colin, I’ve already wasted an hour waiting for you, thinking that if you couldn’t come you might at least have had the decency to ring me up and tell me. Now I find you’re just sitting at home. Not quite good enough, Colin.’

‘I — um — Who is it? Who’s speaking?’ was the only temporizing move I could think of. I was acutely conscious that the young woman beside me was frozen stock-still in the act of taking off her coat.

‘Oh, for God’s sake,’ said the voice, exasperated. ‘What silly game is this? Who do you think it is?’

‘That’s what I’m asking,’ I said.

‘Oh, don’t be such a clown, Colin. If it’s because Ottilie’s still there — and I bet she is — you’re just being stupid. She answered the phone herself, so she knows it’s me.’

‘Then perhaps I’d better ask her who you are,’ I suggested.

‘Oh — you must be tight as an owl. Go and sleep it off,’ she snapped, and the phone went dead.

I put the receiver back in the rest. The young woman was looking at me with an expression of genuine bewilderment. In the quietness of the hall she must have been able to hear the other voice almost as clearly as I had. She turned away, and busied herself with taking her coat off and putting it on a hanger in the closet. When she’d carefully done that she turned back.

‘I don’t understand,’ she said. ‘You aren’t tight, are you? What’s it all about? What has dear Dickie done?’

‘Dickie?’ I inquired. The slight furrow between her brows deepened.

‘Oh, really, Colin. If you think I don’t know Dickie’s voice on the telephone by this time ...’

‘Oh,’ I said. A bloomer of a peculiarly cardinal kind, that. In fact, it is hard to think of a more unlikely mistake than that a man should confuse the gender of his friends. Unless I wanted to be thought quite potty, I must take steps to clarify the situation.

‘Look, can’t we go into the sitting-room. There’s something I want to tell you,’ I suggested.

She watched me thoughtfully.

‘I think perhaps I’d rather not hear it, Colin.’

‘Please,’ I said. ‘It’s important. It really is ...’

She hesitated, and then consented, reluctantly.

‘Oh, very well, if you must ...’

We went in. She switched on the heater, and sat down. ‘Well?’ she asked.

I took the chair opposite, and wondered how to begin. Even if I had been clear in my own mind about what had happened, it would have been difficult enough. But how to convey that though the physical form was Colin Trafford’s, and I myself was Colin Trafford, yet I was not that Colin Trafford; not the one who writes books and was married to her, but a kind of alternative Colin Trafford astray from an alternative world? What seemed to be wanted was some kind of approach which would not immediately suggest a call for an alienist — and it wasn’t easy to perceive.

‘Well?’ she repeated.

‘It’s difficult to explain,’ I temporized, but truthfully enough.

‘I’m sure it is,’ she replied, without encouragement, and added: ‘Would it perhaps be easier if you didn’t look at me like that? I’d prefer it, too.’

‘Something very odd has happened to me,’ I told her.

‘Oh dear, again?’ she said. ‘Do you want my sympathy, or something?’

I was taken aback, and a little confused.

‘Do you mean it’s happened to him before?’ I asked.

She looked at me hard.

‘Him? Who’s him? I thought you were talking about you. And what I mean is last time it happened it was Dickie, and the time before that it was Frances, and before that it was Lucy ... And now you’ve given Dickie a most peculiar kind of brush-off ... Am I supposed to be surprised ...?’

I was learning about my alter ego quite fast, but we were off the track. I tried:

‘No, you don’t understand. This is something quite different.’

‘Of course not. Wives never do, do they? And it’s always different. Well, if that’s all that’s so important ...’ She began to get up.

‘No, please ...’ I said anxiously.

She checked herself, looking very carefully at me again. The half-frown came back.

‘No,’ she said. ‘No, I don’t think I do understand. At least, I — I hope not ...’ And she went on examining me, with something like growing uncertainty, I thought.

When you plead for understanding you can scarcely keep it on an impersonal basis, but when you don’t know whether the best address would be ‘my dear,’ or ‘darling,’ or some more intimate variant, nor whether it should be prefaced by first name, nickname, or pet name, the way ahead becomes thorny indeed. Besides, there was this persistent misunderstanding on the wrong level.

‘Ottilie, darling,’ I tried — and that was clearly no usual form, for, momentarily, her eyes almost goggled, but I ploughed on: ‘It isn’t at all what you’re thinking — nothing a bit like that. It’s — well, it’s that in a way I’m not the same person ...’

She was back in charge of herself.

‘Oddly enough, I’ve been aware of that for some time,’ she said. ‘And I could remind you that you’ve said something like that before, more than once. All right then, let me go on for you; so you’re not the same person I married, so you’d like a divorce — or is it that you’re afraid Dickie’s husband is going to cite you this time? Oh, God! How sick I am of all this ...’

‘No, no,’ I protested desperately. ‘It’s not that sort of thing at all. Do please be patient. It’s a thing that’s terribly difficult to explain ...’ I paused, looking at her. That did not make it any easier. Indeed, it was far from helping the rational processes. She sat looking back at me, still with that half-frown, but now it was a little more uneasy than displeased.

‘Something has happened to you ...’ she said.

‘That’s what I’m trying to tell you about,’ I told her, but I doubt whether she heard it. Her eyes grew wider as she looked. Suddenly they avoided mine.

‘No!’ she said. ‘Oh, no!’ She looked as if she were about to cry, and wound her fingers tightly together in her lap. She half-whispered: ‘Oh, no! ... Oh, please God, no! ... Not again ... Haven’t I been hurt enough? ... I won’t ... I won’t ... !’

Then she jumped up, and, before I was half-way out of my chair, she was out of the room ...

Colin Trafford paused to light a fresh cigarette, and took his time before going on. At length he pulled his thoughts back.

‘Well,’ he went on, ‘obviously you will have realized by now that that Mrs Trafford was born Ottilie Harshom. It happened in 1928, and she married that Colin Trafford in 1949. Her father was killed in a plane crash in 1938 — I don’t remember her ever mentioning his first name. That’s unfortunate — there are a lot of things that are unfortunate: had I had any idea that I might be jerked back here I’d have taken more notice of a lot of things. But I hadn’t ... Something exceedingly odd had happened, but that was no reason to suppose that an equally odd thing would happen, in reverse ...

‘I did do my best, out of my own curiosity, to discover when the schism had taken place. There must, as I saw it, have been some point where, perhaps by chance, some pivotal thing had happened, or failed to happen, and finding it could bring one closer to knowing the moment, the atom of time, that had been split by some random neutron to give two atoms of time diverging into different futures. Once that had taken place, consequences gradually accumulating would make the conditions on one plane progressively different from those on the other.

‘Perhaps that is always happening. Perhaps chance is continually causing two different outcomes so that in a dimension we cannot perceive there are infinite numbers of planes, some so close to our own and so recently split off that they vary only in minor details, others vastly different. Planes on which some misadventure caused Alexander to be beaten by the Persians, Scipio to fall before Hannibal, Caesar to stay beyond the Rubicon; infinite, infinite planes of the random split and re-split by the random. Who can tell? But, now that we know the Universe for a random place, why not?

‘But I couldn’t come near fixing the moment. It was, I think, somewhere in late 1926, or early 1927. Further than that one seemed unable to go without the impossible data of quantities of records from both planes for comparison. Something happening, or not happening, about then had brought about results which prevented, among other things, the rise of Hitler, and thus the Second World War — and consequently postponed the achievement of nuclear fission on this plane of our dichotomy — if that is a good word for it.

‘Anyway, it was for me, and as I said, simply a matter of incidental curiosity. My active concerns were more immediate. And the really important one was Ottilie ...

‘I have, as you know, been married — and I was fond of my wife. It was, as people say, a successful marriage, and it never occurred to me to doubt that — until this thing happened to me. I don’t want to be disloyal to Della now, and I don’t think she was unhappy — but I am immensely thankful for one thing: that this did not happen while she was alive; she never knew, because I didn’t know then, that I had married the wrong woman — and I hope she never thought it ...

‘And Ottilie had married the wrong man ... We found that out. Or perhaps one should put it that she had not married the man she thought she had. She had fallen in love with him; and, no doubt, he had loved her, to begin with — but in less than a year she became torn between the part she loved, and the side she detested ...

‘Her Colin Trafford looked like me — right down to the left thumb which had got mixed up in an electric fan and never quite matched the other side — indeed, up to a point, that point somewhere in 1926﻿—7 he was me. We had, I gathered, some mannerisms in common, and voices that were similar — though we differed in our emphases, and in our vocabularies, as I learnt from a tape, and in details: the moustache, the way we wore our hair, the scar on the left side of the forehead which was exclusively his, yet, in a sense, I was him and he was me. We had the same parents, the same genes, the same beginning, and — if I was right about the time of the dichotomy — we must have had the same memory of our life, for the first five years or so.

‘But, later on, things on our different planes must have run differently for us. Environment, or experiences, had developed qualities in him which, I have to think, lie latent in me — and, I suppose, vice versa.

‘I think that’s a reasonable assumption, don’t you? After all, one begins life with a kind of armature which has individual differences and tendencies, though a common general plan, but whatever is modelled on that armature later consists almost entirely of stuff from contacts and influences. What these had been for the other Colin Trafford I don’t know, but I found the results somewhat painful — rather like continually glimpsing oneself in unexpected distorting mirrors.

‘There were certain cautions, restraints, and expectations in Ottilie that taught me a number of things about him, too. Moreover, in the next day or two I read his novels attentively. The earliest was not displeasing, but as the dates grew later, and the touch surer I cared less and less for the flavour; no doubt the widening streaks of brutality showed the calculated development of a selling-point, but there was something a little more than that — besides, one has a choice of selling-points ... With each book I resented seeing my name on the title-page a little more.

‘I discovered the current “work in progress” too. With the help of his notes I could, I believe, have produced a passable forgery, but I knew I would not. If I had to continue his literary career, it would be with my kind of books, not his. But, in any case, I had no need to worry over making a living: what with the war and one thing and another, physics on my own plane was a generation ahead of theirs. Even if they had got as far as radar it was still someone’s military secret. I had enough knowledge to pass for a genius, and make my fortune if I cared to use it ...’

He smiled, and shook his head. He went on:

‘You see, once the first shock was over and I had begun to perceive what must have happened, there was no cause for alarm, and, once I had met Ottilie, none for regret. The only problem was adjustment. It helped in general, I found, to try to get back to as much as I could remember of the pre-war world. But details were more difficult: unrecognized friends, lapsed friends, all with unknown histories, some of them with wives, or husbands, I knew (though not necessarily the same ones); some with quite unexpected partners. There were queer moments, too — an encounter with a burly cheerful man in the the bar of the Hyde Park Hotel. He didn’t know me, but I knew him; the last time I had seen him he was lying by a road with a sniper’s bullet through his head. I saw Della, my wife, leaving a restaurant looking happy, with her arm through that of a tall legal-looking type; it was uncanny to have her glance at me as at a complete stranger — I felt as if both of us were ghosts — but I was glad she had got past 1951 all right on that plane. The most awkward part was frequently running into people that it appeared I should know; the other Colin’s acquaintanceship was evidently vast and curious. I began to favour the idea of proclaiming a breakdown from overwork, to tide me over for a bit.

‘One thing that did not cross my mind was the possibility of what I took to be a unique shift of plane occurring again, this time in reverse ...

‘— I am thankful it did not. It would have blighted the three most wonderful weeks in my life. I thought it was, as the engraving on the back of the watch said: “C. for ever O.”

‘I made a tentative attempt to explain to her what I thought had happened, but it wasn’t meaning anything to her, so I gave it up. I think she had it worked out for herself that somewhere about a year after we were married I had begun to suffer from overstrain, and that now I had got better and become again the kind of man she had thought I was ... something like that ... but theories about it did not interest her much — it was the consequence that mattered ...

‘And how right she was — for me, too. After all, what else did matter? As far as I was concerned, nothing. I was in love. What did it matter how I had found the one unknown woman I had sought all my life. I was happy, as I had never expected to be ... Oh, all the phrases are trite, but “on top of the world” was suddenly, half-ridiculously vivid. I was full of a confidence rather like that of the slightly drunk. I could take anything on. With her beside me I could keep on top of that, or any, world ... I think she felt like that, too. I’m sure she did. She’d wiped out the bad years. Her faith was re-growing, stronger every day ... If I’d only known — but how could I know? What could I do ...?’

Again he stopped talking, and stared into the fire, this time for so long that at last the doctor fidgeted in his chair to recall him, and then added:

‘What happened?’

Colin Trafford still had a faraway look.

‘Happened?’ he repeated. ‘If I knew that I could perhaps — but I don’t know ... There’s nothing to know ... It’s random, too ... One night I went to sleep with Ottilie beside me — in the morning I woke up in a hospital bed — back here again ... That’s all there was to it. All there is ... Just random ...’

In the long interval that followed, Dr Harshom unhurriedly refilled his pipe, lit it with careful attention, assured himself it was burning evenly and drawing well, settled himself back comfortably, and then said, with intentional matter-of-factness:

‘It’s a pity you don’t believe that. If you did, you’d never have begun this search; if you’d come to believe it, you’d have dropped the search before now. No, you believe that there is a pattern or rather, that there were two patterns, closely similar to begin with, but gradually, perhaps logically, becoming more variant — and that you, your psyche, or whatever you like to call it, was the aberrant, the random factor.

‘However, let’s not go into the philosophical, or metaphysical consideration of what you call the dichotomy now — all that stuff will keep. Let us say that I accept the validity of your experience, for you, but reserve judgement on its nature. I accept it on account of several features — not the least being, as I have said, the astronomical odds against the conjunction of names, Ottilie and Harshom, occurring fortuitously. Of course, you could have seen the name somewhere and lodged it in your subconscious, but that, too, I find so immensely improbable that I put it aside.

‘Very well, then, let us go on from there. Now, you appear to me to have made a number of quite unwarrantable assumptions. You have assumed, for instance, that because an Ottilie Harshom exists on what you call that plane, she must have come into existence on this plane also. I cannot see that that is justified by anything you have told me. That she might have existed here, I admit, for the name Ottilie is in my branch of the family; but the chances of her having no existence at all are considerably greater — did not you yourself mention that you recognized friends who in different circumstances were married to different wives? — is it not, therefore, highly probable that the circumstances which produced an Ottilie Harshom there failed to occur here, with the result that she could not come into existence at all? And, indeed, that must be so.

‘Believe me, I am not unsympathetic. I do understand what your feelings must be, but are you not, in effect, in the state we all have known — searching for an ideal young woman who has never been born? We must face the facts: if she exists, or did exist, I should have heard of her, Somerset House would have a record of her, your own extensive researches would have revealed something positive. I do urge you for your own good to accept it, my boy. With all this against you, you simply have no case.’

‘Only my own positive conviction,’ Colin put in. ‘It’s against reason, I know — but I still have it.’

‘You must try to rid yourself of it. Don’t you see there are layers of assumptions? If she did exist she might be already married.’

‘But to the wrong man,’ Colin said promptly.

‘Even that does not follow. Your counterpart varied from you, you say. Well, her counterpart if she existed would have had an entirely different upbringing in different circumstances from the other; the probability is that there would only be the most superficial resemblance. You must see that the whole thing goes into holes wherever you touch it with reason.’ He regarded Colin for a moment, and shook his head. ‘Somewhere at the back of your mind you are giving house-room to the proposition that unlike causes can produce like results. Throw it out.’

Colin smiled.

‘How Newtonian, Doctor. No, a random factor is random. Chance therefore exists.’

‘Young man, you’re incorrigible,’ the doctor told him. ‘If there weren’t little point in wishing success with the impossible I’d say your tenacity deserves it. As things are, I advise you to apply it to the almost attainable.’

His pipe had gone out, and he lit it again.

‘That,’ he went on, ‘was a professional recommendation. But now, if it isn’t too late for you, I’d like to hear more. I don’t pretend to guess at the true nature of your experience, but the speculations your plane of might-have-been arouses are fascinating. Not unnaturally one feels a curiosity to know how one’s own counterpart made out there — and failing that, how other people’s did. Our present Prime Minister, for instance — did both of him get the job? And Sir Winston — or is he not Sir Winston over there? — how on earth did he get along with no Second World War to make his talents burgeon? And what about the poor old Labour Party ...? The thing provokes endless questions ...’

After a late breakfast the next morning Dr Harshom helped Colin into his coat in the hall, but held him there for a final word.

‘I spent what was left of the night thinking about this,’ he said earnestly. ‘Whatever the explanation may be, you must write it down, every detail you can remember. Do it anonymously if you like, but do it. It may not be unique, some day it may give valuable confirmation of someone else’s experience, or become evidence in support of some theory. So put it on record — but then leave it at that ... Do your best to forget the assumptions you jumped at — they’re unwarranted in a dozen ways. She does not exist. The only Ottilie Harshoms there have been in this world died long ago. Let the mirage fade. But thank you for your confidence. Though I am inquisitive, I am discreet. If there should be any way I can help you ...’

Presently he was watching the car down the drive. Colin waved a hand just before it disappeared round the corner. Dr Harshom shook his head. He knew he might as well have saved his breath, but he felt in duty bound to make one last appeal. Then he turned back into the house, frowning. Whether the obsession was a fantasy, or something more than a fantasy, was almost irrelevant to the fact that sooner or later the young man was going to drive himself into a breakdown ...

During the next few weeks Dr Harshom learnt no more, except that Colin Trafford had not taken his advice, for word filtered through that both Peter Harshom in Cornwall and Harold in Durham had received requests for information regarding a Miss Ottilie Harshom who, as far as they knew, was non-existent.

After that there was nothing more for some months. Then a picture-postcard from Canada. On one side was a picture of the Parliament Buildings, Ottawa. The message on the other was brief. It said simply:

‘Found her. Congratulate me. C. T.’

Dr Harshom studied it for a moment, and then smiled slightly. He was pleased. He had thought Colin Trafford a likeable young man; too good to run himself to pieces over such a futile quest. One did not believe it for a moment, of course, but if some sensible young woman had managed to convince him that she was the reincarnation, so to speak, of his beloved, good luck to her — and good luck for him ... The obsession could now fade quietly away. He would have liked to respond with the requested congratulations, but the card bore no address.

Several weeks later there was another card, with a picture of St Mark’s Square, Venice. The message was again laconic, but headed this time by an hotel address. It read:

‘Honeymoon. May I bring her to see you after?’

Dr Harshom hesitated. His professional inclination was against it; a feeling that anything likely to recall the young man to the mood in which he had last seen him was best avoided. On the other hand, a refusal would seem odd as well as rude. In the end he replied, on the back of a picture of Hereford Cathedral:

‘Do. When?’

Half August had already gone before Colin Trafford did make his reappearance. He drove up looking sunburnt and in better shape all round than he had on his previous visit. Dr Harshom was glad to see it, but surprised to find that he was alone in the car.

‘But I understood the whole intention was that I should meet the bride,’ he protested.

‘It was — it is,’ Colin assured him. ‘She’s at the hotel. I — well, I’d like to have a few words with you first.’

The doctor’s gaze became a little keener, his manner more thoughtful.

‘Very well. Let’s go indoors. If there’s anything I’m not to mention, you could have warned me by letter, you know.’

‘Oh, it’s not that. She knows about that. Quite what she makes of it, I’m not sure, but she knows, and she’s anxious to meet you. No, it’s — well, it won’t take more than ten minutes.’

The doctor led the way to his study. He waved Colin to an easy-chair, and himself took the swivel-chair at the desk.

‘Unburden yourself,’ he invited.

Colin sat forward, forearms on knees, hands dangling between them.

‘The most important thing, Doctor, is for me to thank you. I can never be grateful enough to you — never. If you had not invited me here as you did, I think it is unlikely I would ever have found her.’

Dr Harshom frowned. He was not convinced that the thanks were justified. Clearly, whoever Colin had found was possessed of a strong therapeutic quality, nevertheless:

‘As I recollect, all I did was listen, and offer you unwelcome advice for your own good — which you did not take,’ he remarked.

‘So it seemed to me at the time,’ Colin agreed. ‘It looked as if you had closed all the doors. But then, when I thought it over, I saw one, just one, that hadn’t quite latched.’

‘I don’t recall giving you any encouragement,’ Dr Harshom asserted.

‘I am sure you don’t but you did. You indicated to me the last, faintly possible line — and I followed it up — No, you’ll see what it was later, if you’ll just bear with me a little.

‘When I did see the possibility, I realized it meant a lot of ground-work that I couldn’t cover on my own, so I had to call in the professionals. They were pretty good, I thought, and they certainly removed any doubt about the line being the right one, but what they could tell me ended on board a ship bound for Canada. So then I had to call in some inquiry agents over there. It’s a large country. A lot of people go to it. There was a great deal of routine searching to do, and I began to get discouraged, but then they got a lead, and in another week they came across with the information that she was a secretary working in a lawyer’s office in Ottawa.

‘Then I put it to E.P.I. that I’d be more valuable after a bit of unpaid recuperative leave —’

‘Just a minute,’ put in the doctor. ‘If you’d asked me I could have told you there are no Harshoms in Canada. I happen to know that because —’

‘Oh, I’d given up expecting that. Her name wasn’t Harshom — it was Gale,’ Colin interrupted, with the air of one explaining.

‘Indeed. And I suppose it wasn’t Ottilie, either?’ Dr Harshom said heavily.

‘No. It was Belinda,’ Colin told him.

The doctor blinked slightly, opened his mouth, and then thought better of it. Colin went on:

‘So then I flew over, to make sure. It was the most agonizing journey I’ve ever made. But it was all right. Just one distant sight of her was enough. I couldn’t have mistaken her for Ottilie, but she was so very, very nearly Ottilie that I would have known her among ten thousand. Perhaps if her hair and her dress had been —’ He paused speculatively, unaware of the expression on the doctor’s face. ‘Anyway,’ he went on. ‘I knew. And it was damned difficult to stop myself rushing up to her there and then, but I did just have enough sense to hold back.

‘Then it was a matter of managing an introduction. After that it was as if there were — well, an inevitability, a sort of predestination about it.’

Curiosity impelled the doctor to say:

‘Comprehensible, but sketchy. What, for instance, about her husband?’

‘Husband?’ Colin looked momentarily startled.

‘Well, you did say her name was Gale,’ the doctor pointed out.

‘So it was, Miss Belinda Gale — I thought I said that. She was engaged once, but she didn’t marry. I tell you there was a kind of — well, fate, in the Greek sense, about it.’

‘But if —’ Dr Harshom began, and then checked himself again. He endeavoured, too, to suppress any sign of scepticism.

‘But it would have been just the same if she had had a husband,’ Colin asserted, with ruthless conviction. ‘He’d have been the wrong man.’

The doctor offered no comment, and he went on:

‘There were no complications, or involvements — well, nothing serious. She was living in a flat with her mother, and getting quite a good salary. Her mother looked after the place, and had a widow’s pension — her husband was in the R.C.A.F.; shot down over Berlin — so between them they managed to be reasonably comfortable.

‘Well, you can imagine how it was. Considered as a phenomenon I wasn’t any too welcome to her mother, but she’s a fair-minded woman, and we found that, as persons, we liked one another quite well. So that part of it, too, went off more easily than it might have done.’

He paused there. Dr Harshom put in:

‘I’m glad to hear it, of course. But I must confess I don’t quite see what it has to do with your not bringing your wife along with you.’

Colin frowned.

‘Well, I thought — I mean she thought — well, I haven’t quite got to the point yet. It’s rather delicate.’

‘Take your time. After all, I’ve retired,’ said the doctor, amiably.

Colin hesitated.

‘All right. I think it’ll be fairer to Mrs Gale if I tell it the way it fell out.

‘You see, I didn’t intend to say anything about what’s at the back of all this — about Ottilie, I mean, and why I came to be over in Ottawa — not until later, anyway. You were the only one I had told, and it seemed better that way ... I didn’t want them wondering if I was a bit off my rocker, naturally. But I went and slipped up.

‘It was on the day before our wedding. Belinda was out getting some last-minute things, and I was at the flat doing my best to be reassuring to my future mother-in-law. As nearly as I can recall it, what I said was:

‘ “My job with E.P.I. is quite a good one, and the prospects are good, but they do have a Canadian end, too, and I dare say that if Ottilie finds she really doesn’t like living in England —”

‘And then I stopped because Mrs Gale had suddenly sat upright with a jerk, and was staring at me open-mouthed. Then in a shaky sort of voice she asked:

‘ “What did you say?”

‘I’d noticed the slip myself, just too late to catch it. So I corrected: “I was just saying that if Belinda finds she doesn’t like —”

‘She cut in on that.

‘ “You didn’t say Belinda. You said Ottilie.”

‘ “Er — perhaps I did,” I admitted, “but, as I say, if she doesn’t —”

‘ “Why?” she demanded. “Why did you call her Ottilie?”

‘She was intense about that. There was no way out of it.

‘ “It’s, well, it’s the way I think of her,” I said.

‘ “But why? Why should you think of Belinda as Ottilie?” she insisted.

‘I looked at her more carefully. She had gone quite pale, and the hand that was visible was trembling. She was afraid, as well as distressed. I was sorry about that, and I gave up bluffing.

‘ “I didn’t mean this to happen,” I told her.

‘She looked at me steadily, a little calmer.

‘ “But now it has, you must tell me. What do you know about us?” she asked.

‘ “Simply that if things had been — different she wouldn’t be Belinda Gale. She would be Ottilie Harshom,” I told her.

‘She kept on watching my face, long and steadily, her own face still pale.

‘ “I don’t understand,” she said, more than half to herself. “You couldn’t know. Harshom — yes, you might have found that out somehow, or guessed it — or did she tell you?” I shook my head. “Never mind, you could find out,” she went on. “But Ottilie ... You couldn’t know that — just that one name out of all the thousands of names in the world ... Nobody knew that — nobody but me ...” She shook her head.

‘ “I didn’t even tell Reggie ... When he asked me if we could call her Belinda, I said yes; he’d been so very good to me ... He had no idea that I had meant to call her Ottilie — nobody had. I’ve never told anyone, before or since ... So how can you know?”

‘I took her hand between mine, and pressed it, trying to comfort her and calm her.

‘ “There’s nothing to be alarmed about,” I told her. “It was a — a dream, a kind of vision — I just knew ...”

‘She shook her head. After a minute she said quietly:

‘ “Nobody knew but me ... It was in the summer, in 1927. We were on the river, in a punt, pulled under a willow. A white launch swished by us, we watched it go, and saw the name on its stern. Malcolm said” ’ — if Colin noticed Dr Harshom’s sudden start, his only acknowledgement of it was a repetition of the last two words — ‘ “Malcolm said: ‘Ottilie — pretty name, isn’t it? It’s in our family. My father had a sister Ottilie who died when she was a little girl. If ever I have a daughter I’d like to call her Ottilie.’ ” ’

Colin Trafford broke off, and regarded the doctor for a moment. Then he went on:

‘After that she said nothing for a long time, until she added:

‘ “He never knew, you know. Poor Malcolm, he was killed before even I knew she was coming ... I did so want to call her Ottilie for him ... He’d have liked that ... I wish I had ...” And then she began quietly crying ...’

Dr Harshom had one elbow on his desk, one hand over his eyes. He did not move for some little time. At last he pulled out a handkerchief, and blew his nose decisively.

‘I did hear there was a girl,’ he said. ‘I even made inquiries, but they told me she had married soon afterwards. I thought she — But why didn’t she come to me? I would have looked after her.’

‘She couldn’t know that. She was fond of Reggie Gale. He was in love with her, and willing to give the baby his name,’ Colin said.

After a glance towards the desk, he got up and walked over to the window. He stood there for several minutes with his back to the room until he heard a movement behind him. Dr Harshom had got up and was crossing to the cupboard.

‘I could do with a drink,’ he said. ‘The toast will be the restoration of order, and the rout of the random element.’

‘I’ll support that,’ Colin told him, ‘but I’d like to couple it with the confirmation of your contention, Doctor — after all, you are right at last, you know; Ottilie Harshom does not exist — not any more. — And then, I think, it will be high time you were introduced to your granddaughter, Mrs Colin Trafford.’