

# Passport to Eternity

by James Graham Ballard, 1930-2009

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It was half past love on New Day in Zenith and the clocks were striking heaven. All over the city the sounds of revelry echoed upwards into the dazzling Martian night, but high on Sunset Ridge, among the mansions of the rich, Margot and Clifford Gorrell faced each other in glum silence.

Frowning, Margot flipped impatiently through the vacation brochure on her lap, then tossed it away with an elaborate gesture of despair.

„But Clifford, why do we have to go to the same place every summer? I'd like to do something interesting for a change. This year the Lovatts are going to the Venus Fashion Festival, and Bobo and Peter Anders have just booked into the fire beaches at Saturn. They'll all have a wonderful time, while we're quietly taking the last boat to nowhere.“

Clifford Gorrell nodded impassively, one hand cupped over the sound control in the arm of his chair. They had been arguing all evening, and Margot's voice threw

vivid sparks of irritation across the walls and ceiling. Grey and mottled, they would take days to drain.

„I’m sorry you feel like that, Margot. Where would you like to go?“

Margot shrugged scornfully, staring out at the corona of a million neon signs that illuminated the city below. „Does it matter?“

„Of course. You arrange the vacation this time.“

Margot hesitated, one eye keenly on her husband. Then she sat forward happily, turning up her fluorescent violet dress until she glowed like an Algolian rayfish.

„Clifford, I’ve got a wonderful idea! Yesterday I was down in the Colonial Bazaar, thinking about our holiday, when I found a small dream bureau that’s just been opened. Something like the Dream Dromes in Neptune City everyone was crazy about two or three years ago, but instead of having to plug into whatever programme happens to be going you have your own dream plays specially designed for you.“

Clifford continued to nod, carefully increasing the volume of the sound-sweeper.

„They have their own studios and send along a team of analysts and writers to interview us and afterwards book a sanatorium anywhere we like for the convalescence. Eve Corbusier and I decided a small party of five or six would be best.“

„Eve Corbusier,“ Clifford repeated. He smiled thinly to himself and switched on the book he had been reading. „I wondered when that Gorgon was going to appear.“

„Eve isn’t too bad when you get to know her, darling,“ Margot told him. „Don’t start reading yet. She’ll think up all sorts of weird ideas for the play.“ Her voice trailed off. „What’s the matter?“

„Nothing,“ Clifford said wearily. „It’s just that I sometimes wonder if you have any sense of responsibility at all.“ As Margot’s eyes darkened he went on. „Do you really think that I, a supreme court justice, could take that sort of vacation, even if I wanted to? Those dream plays are packed with advertising commercials and all sorts of corrupt material.“ He shook his head sadly. „And I told you not to go into the Colonial Bazaar.“

„What are we going to do then?“ Margot asked coldly. „Another honeyMoon?“

„I’ll reserve a couple of singles tomorrow. Don’t worry, you’ll enjoy it.“ He clipped the hand microphone into his book and began to scan the pages with it, listening to the small metallic voice.

Margot stood up, the vanes in her hat quivering furiously. „Clifford!“ she snapped, her voice dead and menacing. „I warn you, I’m not going on another honeyMoon!“

Absently, Clifford said: „Of course, dear,“ his fingers racing over the volume control.

„Clifford!“

Her shout sank to an angry squeak. She stepped over to him, her dress blazing like a dragon, jabbering at him noiselessly, the sounds sucked away through the vents over her head and pumped out across the echoing rooftops of the midnight city.

As he sat back quietly in his private vacuum, the ceiling shaking occasionally when Margot slammed a door upstairs, Clifford looked out over the brilliant

diadem of down-town Zenith. In the distance, by the space-port, the ascending arcs of hyperliners flared across the sky while below the countless phosphorescent trajectories of hop-cabs enclosed the bowl of rooflight in a dome of glistening hoops.

Of all the cities of the galaxy, few offered such a wealth of pleasures as Zenith, but to Clifford Gorrell it was as distant and unknown as the first Gomorrah. At 35 he was a thin-faced, prematurely ageing man with receding hair and a remote abstracted expression, and in the dark sombre suit and stiff white dog-collar which were the traditional uniform of the Probate Department's senior administrators he looked like a man who had never taken a holiday in his life.

At that moment Clifford wished he hadn't. He and Margot had never been able to agree about their vacations. Clifford's associates and superiors at the Department, all of them ten or twenty years older than himself, took their pleasures conservatively and expected a young but responsible justice to do the same. Margot grudgingly acknowledged this, but her friends who frequented the chic playtime clinics along the beach at Mira.

Mira considered the so-called honeymoon trips back to Earth derisively old-fashioned, a last desperate resort of the aged and infirm.

And to tell the truth, Clifford realized, they were right. He had never dared to admit to Margot that he too was bored because it would have been more than his peace of mind was worth, but a change might do them good.

He resolved—next year.

Margot lay back among the cushions on the terrace divan, listening to the flamingo trees singing to each other in the morning sunlight. Twenty feet below, in the high-walled garden, a tall muscular young man was playing with a jet-ball. He had a dark olive complexion and swarthy good looks, and oil gleamed across his bare chest and arms. Margot watched with malicious amusement his efforts to entertain her. This was Trantino, Margot's play-boy, who chaperoned her during Clifford's long absences at the Probate Department.

„Hey, Margot! Catch!“ He gestured with the jet-ball but Margot turned away, feeling her swim-suit slide pleasantly across her smooth tanned skin. The suit was made of one of the newer bioplastic materials, and its living tissues were still growing, softly adapting themselves to the contours of her body, repairing themselves as the fibres became worn or grimy. Upstairs in her wardrobes the gowns and dresses purred on their hangers like the drowsing inmates of some exquisite arboreal zoo. Sometimes she thought of commissioning her little Mercurian tailor to run up a bioplastic suit for Clifford—a specially designed suit that would begin to constrict one night as he stood on the terrace, the lapels growing tighter and tighter around his neck, the sleeves pinning his arms to his sides, the waist contracting to pitch him over—„Margot!“ Trantino interrupted her reverie, sailed the jet-ball expertly through the air towards her. Annoyed, Margot caught it with one hand and pointed it away, watched it sail over the wall and the roofs beyond.

Trantino came up to her. „What's the matter?“ he asked anxiously. For his part he felt his inability to soothe Margot a reflection on his professional skill. The privileges of his caste had to be guarded jealously. For several centuries now the managerial and technocratic elite had been so preoccupied with the work of

government that they relied on the Templars of Aphrodite not merely to guard their wives from any marauding suitors but also to keep them amused and contented. By definition, of course, their relationship was platonic, a pleasant revival of the old chivalrous ideals, but sometimes Trantino regretted that the only tools in his armoury were a handful of poems and empty romantic gestures. The Guild of which he was a novitiate member was an ancient and honoured one, and it wouldn't do if Margot began to pine and Mr Gorrell reported him to the Masters of the Guild.

„Why are you always arguing with Mr Gorrell?“ Trantino asked her.

One of the Guild's axioms was „The husband is always right.“ Any discord between him and his wife was the responsibility of the play-boy.

Margot ignored Trantino's question. „Those trees are getting on my nerves,“ she complained fractiously. „Why can't they keep quiet?“

„They're mating,“ Trantino told her. He added thoughtfully: „You should sing to Mr Gorrell.“

Margot stirred lazily as the shoulder straps of the sun-suit unclasped themselves behind her back. „Tino,“ she asked, „what's the most unpleasant thing I could do to Mr Gorrell?“

„Margot!“ Trantino gasped, utterly shocked. He decided that an appeal to sentiment, a method of reconciliation despised by the more proficient members of the Guild, was his only hope. „Remember, Margot, you will always have me.“

He was about to permit himself a melancholy smile when Margot sat up abruptly.

„Don't look so frightened, you fool! I've just got an idea that should make Mr Gorrell sing to me.“

She straightened the vanes in her hat, waited for the sun-suit to clasp itself discreetly around her, then pushed Trantino aside and stalked off the terrace.

Clifford was browsing among the spools in the library, quietly listening to an old 22<sup>nd</sup> Century abstract on systems of land tenure in the Trianguli.

„Hello, Margot, feel better now?“

Margot smiled at him coyly. „Clifford, I'm ashamed of myself. Do forgive me.“ She bent down and nuzzled his ear. „Sometimes I'm very selfish. Have you booked our tickets yet?“

Clifford disengaged her arm and straightened his collar. „I called the agency, but their bookings have been pretty heavy. They've got a double but no singles. We'll have to wait a few days.“

„No, we won't,“ Margot exclaimed brightly. „Clifford, why don't you and I take the double? Then we can really be together, forget all that ship-board nonsense about never having met before.“

Puzzled, Clifford switched off the player. „What do you mean?“

Margot explained. „Look, Clifford, I've been thinking that I ought to spend more time with you than I do at present, really share your work and hobbies. I'm tired of all these play-boys.“ She drooped languidly against Clifford, her voice silky and reassuring. „I want to be with you, Clifford. Always.“

Clifford pushed her away. „Don't be silly, Margot,“ he said with an anxious laugh. „You're being absurd.“

„No, I'm not. After all, Harold Kharkov and his wife haven't got a play-boy and she's very happy.“

Maybe she is, Clifford thought, beginning to panic. Kharkov had once been the powerful and ruthless director of the Department of Justice, now was a third-rate attorney hopelessly trying to eke out a meagre living on the open market, dominated by his wife and forced to spend virtually 24 hours a day with her. For a moment Clifford thought of the days when he had courted Margot, of the long dreadful hours listening to her inane chatter. Trantino's real role was not to chaperone Margot while Clifford was away but while he was at home.

„Margot, be sensible,“ he started to say, but she cut him short. „I've made up my mind, I'm going to tell Trantino to pack his suitcase and go back to the Guild.“ She switched on the spool player, selecting the wrong speed, smiling ecstatically as the reading head grated loudly and stripped the coding off the record. „It's going to be wonderful to share everything with you. Why don't we forget about the vacation this year?“

A facial tic from which Clifford had last suffered at the age often began to twitch ominously.

Tony Harcourt, Clifford's personal assistant, came over to the Gorrells' villa immediately after lunch. He was a brisk, polished young man, barely controlling his annoyance at being called back to work on the first day of his vacation. He had carefully booked a sleeper next to Dolores Costane, the most beautiful of the Jovian Heresiarch's vestals, on board a leisure-liner leaving that afternoon for Venus, but instead of enjoying the fruits of weeks of blackmail and intrigue he was having to take part in what seemed a quite uncharacteristic piece of Gorrell whimsy.

He listened in growing bewilderment as Clifford explained.

„We were going to one of our usual resorts on Luna, Tony, but we've decided we need a change. Margot wants a vacation that's different. Something new, exciting, original. So go round all the agencies and bring me their suggestions.“

„All the agencies?“ Tony queried. „Don't you mean just the registered ones?“

„All of them,“ Margot told him smugly, relishing every moment of her triumph.

Clifford nodded, and smiled at Margot benignly.

„But there must be 50 or 60 agencies organizing vacations,“ Tony protested. „Only about a dozen of them are accredited. Outside Emphyrean Tours and Union-Galactic there'll be absolutely nothing suitable for you.“

„Never mind,“ Clifford said blandly. „We only want an idea of the field. I'm sorry, Tony, but I don't want this all over the Department and I know you'll be discreet.“

Tony groaned. „It'll take me weeks.“

„Three days,“ Clifford told him. „Margot and I want to leave here by the end of the week.“ He looked longingly over his shoulder for the absent Trantino. „Believe me, Tony, we really need a holiday.“

Fifty-six travel and vacation agencies were listed in the Commercial Directory, Tony discovered when he returned to his office in the top floor of the Justice building in downtown Zenith, all but eight of them alien. The Department had initiated legal proceedings against five, three had closed down, and eight more were fronts for other enterprises.

That left him with forty to visit, spread all over the Upper and Lower Cities and in the Colonial Bazaar, attached to various mercantile, religious and paramilitary organizations, some of them huge concerns with their own police and ecclesiastical forces, others sharing a one-room office and transceiver with a couple of other shoestring firms.

Tony mapped out an itinerary, slipped a flask of Five-Anchor Neptunian Rum into his hip pocket and dialed a helicab.

The first was ARCO PRODUCTIONS INC., a large establishment occupying three levels and a bunker on the fashionable west side of the Upper City. According to the Directory they specialized in hunting and shooting expeditions.

The helicab put him down on the apron outside the entrance. Massive steel columns reached up to a reinforced concrete portico, and the whole place looked less like a travel agency than the last redoubt of some interstellar Seigfreid. As he went in a smart jackbooted guard of janissaries in black and silver uniforms snapped to attention and presented arms.

Everyone inside the building was wearing a uniform, moving about busily at standby alert. A huge broad-shouldered woman with sergeant's stripes handed Tony over to a hard-faced Martian colonel.

„I'm making some inquiries on behalf of a wealthy Terran and his wife,“ Tony explained. „They thought they'd do a little big-game hunting on their vacation this year. I believe you organize expeditions.“

The colonel nodded curtly and led Tony over to a broad map-table. „Certainly. What exactly have they in mind?“

„Well, nothing really. They hoped you'd make some suggestions.“

„Of course.“ The colonel pulled out a memo-tape. „Have they their own air and land forces?“

Tony shook his head. „I'm afraid not.“

„I see. Can you tell me whether they will require a single army corps, a combined task force or—“

„No,“ Tony said. „Nothing as big as that.“

„An assault party of brigade strength? I understand. Quieter and less elaborate. All the fashion today.“ He switched on the star-map and spread his hands across the glimmering screen of stars and nebulae. „Now the question of the particular theatre. At present only three of the game reserves have open seasons. Firstly the Procyon system; this includes about 20 different races, some of them still with only atomic technologies. Unfortunately there's been a good deal of dispute recently about declaring Procyon a game reserve, and the Resident of Alschain is trying to have it admitted to the Pan-Galactic Conference. A pity, I feel,“ the colonel added, reflectively stroking his steel-grey moustache. „Procyon always put up a great fight against us and an expedition there was invariably lively.“

Tony nodded sympathetically. „I hadn't realized they objected.“

The colonel glanced at him sharply. „Naturally,“ he said. He cleared his throat. „That leaves only the Ketab tribes of Ursa Major, who are having their Millennial Wars, and the Sudor Martines of Orion. They are an entirely new reserve, and your best choice without doubt. The ruling dynasty died out recently, and a war of succession could be conveniently arranged.“

Tony was no longer following the colonel, but he smiled intelligently.

„Now,“ the colonel asked, „what political or spiritual creeds do your friends wish to have invoked?“

Tony frowned. „I don't think they want any. Are they absolutely necessary?“

The colonel regarded Tony carefully. „No,“ he said slowly. „It's a question of taste. A purely military operation is perfectly feasible. However, we always advise our clients to invoke some doctrine as a *casus belli*, not only to avoid adverse publicity and any feelings of guilt or remorse, but to lend colour and purpose to the campaign. Each of our field commanders specializes in a particular ideological pogrom, with the exception of General Westerling. Perhaps your friends would prefer him?“

Tony's mind started to work again. „Schapiro Westerling? The former Director-General of Graves Commission?“

The colonel nodded. „You know him?“

Tony laughed. „Know him? I thought I was prosecuting him at the current Nova Trials. I can see that we're well behind with the times.“ He pushed back his chair. „To tell the truth I don't think you've anything suitable for my friends. Thanks all the same.“

The colonel stiffened. One of his hands moved below the desk and a buzzer sounded along the wall.

„However,“ Tony added, „I'd be grateful if you'd send them further details.“

The colonel sat impassively in his chair. Three enormous guards appeared at Tony's elbow, idly swinging energy truncheons.

„Clifford Gorrell, Stellar Probate Division, Department of Justice,“ Tony said quickly.

He gave the colonel a brief smile and made his way out, cursing Clifford and walking warily across the thickly piled carpet in case it had been mined.

The next one on his list was the A-Z JOLLY JUBILEE COMPANY, alien and unregistered, head office somewhere out of Betelgeuse. According to the Directory they specialized in „all-in cultural parties and guaranteed somatic weekends“. Their premises occupied the top two tiers of a hanging garden in the Colonial Bazaar. They sounded harmless enough but Tony was ready for them.

„No,“ he said firmly to a lovely Antarean wraith-fern who shyly raised a frond to him as he crossed the terrace. „Not today.“

Behind the bar a fat man in an asbestos suit was feeding sand to a siliconic fire-fish swimming round in a pressure brazier.

„Damn things,“ he grumbled, wiping the sweat off his chin and fiddling aimlessly with the thermostat. „They gave me a booklet when I got it, but it doesn't say anything about it eating a whole beach every day.“ He spaded in another couple of shovels from a low dune of sand heaped on the floor behind him. „You have to keep them at exactly 5750-K. or they start getting nervous. Can I help you?“

„I thought there was a vacation agency here,“ Tony said.

„Sure. I'll call the girls for you.“ He pressed a bell.

„Wait a minute,“ Tony cut in. „You advertise something about cultural parties. What exactly are they?“

The fat man chuckled. „That must be my partner. He's a professor at Vega Tech. Likes to keep the tone up.“ He winked at Tony.

Tony sat on one of the stools, looking out over the crazy spiral roof-tops of the Bazaar. A mile away the police patrols circled over the big apartment batteries which marked the perimeter of the Bazaar, keeping their distance.

A tall slim woman appeared from behind the foliage and sauntered across the terrace to him. She was a Canopan slave, hot-housed out of imported germ, a slender green-skinned beauty with moth-like fluttering gills.

The fat man introduced Tony. „Lucille, take him up to the harbour and give him a run through.“

Tony tried to protest but the pressure brazier was hissing fiercely. The fat man started feeding sand in furiously, the exhaust flames flaring across the terrace.

Quickly, Tony turned and backed up the stairway to the harbour. „Lucille,“ he reminded her firmly, „this is strictly cultural, remember.“

Half an hour later a dull boom reverberated up from the terrace.

„Poor Jumbo,“ Lucille said sadly as a fine rain of sand came down over them.

„Poor Jumbo,“ Tony agreed, sitting back and playing with a coil of her hair. Like a soft sinuous snake, it circled around his arm, sleek with blue oil. He drained the flask of Five-Anchor and tossed it lightly over the balustrade. „Now tell me more about these Canopan prayerbeds...“

When, after two days, Tony reported back to the Gorrells he looked hollow-eyed and exhausted, like a man who had been brain-washed by the Wardens.

„What happened to you?“ Margot asked anxiously, „we thought you'd been going round the agencies.“

„Exactly,“ Tony said. He slumped down in a sofa and tossed a thick folder across to Clifford. „Take your pick. You've got about 250 schemes there in complete detail, but I've written out a synopsis which gives one or two principal suggestions from each agency. Most of them are out of the question.“

Clifford unclipped the synopsis and started to read through it.

(1) ARGO PRODUCTIONS INC. Unregistered. Private subsidiary of Sagittarius Security Police.

Hunting and shooting. Your own war to order. Raiding parties, revolutions, religious crusades. In anything from a small commando squad to a 3,000-ship armada. ARGO provide publicity, mock War Crimes Tribunal, etc. Samples:

(a) Operation Torquemada .23-day expedition to Bellatrix IV .20 ship assault corps under Admiral Storm Wengen. Mission: liberation of (imaginary) Terran hostages. Cost: 300,000 credits.

(b) Operation Klingsor. 15-year crusade against Ursa Major. Combined task force of 2,500 ships. Mission: recovery of runic memory dials stolen from client's shrine.

Cost: 500 billion credits (ARGO will arrange lend-lease but this is dabbling in realpolitik).

(2) ARENA FEATURES INC. Unregistered. Organizers of the Pan-Galactic Tournament held trimillennially at the Sun Bowl 2-Heliopolis, NGC 3599.

Every conceivable game in the Cosmos is played at the tournament and so formidable is the opposition that a winning contestant can virtually choose



his own apotheosis. The challenge round of the Solar Megathlon Group 3 (that is, for any being whose function can be described, however loosely, as living) involves Quantum Jumping, 7-dimensional Maze Ball and Psychokinetic Bridge (pretty tricky against a telepathic Ketos D'Oma). The only Terran ever to win an event was the redoubtable Chippy Yerkes of Altair 5 The Clowns, who introduced the unplayable blank Round Dice. Being a spectator is as exhausting as being a contestant, and you're well advised to substitute.

Cost: 100,000 credits/day.

(3) AGENCE GENERALE DE TOURISME. Registered. Venus.

Concessionaires for the Colony Beatific on Lake Virgo, the Mandrake Casino Circuit and the Miramar-Trauma Senso-channels. Dream-baths, vudromes, endocrine-galas. Darleen Costello is the current Aphrodite and Laurence Mandell makes a versatile Lothario. Plug into these two from 30:30 V5T.Room and non-denominational bath at the Gomorrah-Plaza on Mount Venus comes to 1,000 credits a day, but remember to keep out of the Zone. It's just too erotogenous for a Terran.

(4) TERMINAL TOURS LTD. Unregistered. Earth.

For those who want to get away from it all the Dream of Osiris, an astral-rigged, 1,000-foot leisure-liner is now fitting out for the Grand Tour. Round-cosmos cruise, visiting every known race and galaxy.

Cost: Doubles at a flat billion, but it's cheap when you realize that the cruise lasts for ever and you'll never be back.

(5) SLEEP TRADERS. Unregistered.

A somewhat shadowy group who handle all dealings on the Blue Market, acting as a general clearing house and buying and selling dreams all through the Galaxy.

Sample: Like to try a really new sort of dream? The Set Corrani Priests of Theta Piscium will link you up with the sacred electronic thought-pools in the Desert of Kish. These mercury lakes are their ancestral memory banks. Surgery is necessary but be careful. Too much cortical damage and the archetypes may get restive. In return one of the Set Corrani (polysexual delta-humanoids about the size of a walking dragline) will take over your cerebral functions for a long weekend. All these transactions are done on an exchange basis and SLEEP TRADERS charge nothing for the service. But they obviously get a rake-off, and may pump advertising into the lower medullary centres. Whatever they're selling I wouldn't advise anybody to buy.

(6) THE AGENCY. Registered. M33 in Andromeda.

The executive authority of the consortium of banking trusts floating Schedule D, the fourth draw of the gigantic PK pyramid lottery sweeping all through the continuum from Sol III out to the island universes. Trancecells everywhere are now recruiting dream-readers and ESPerceptionists, and there's still time to buy a ticket. There's only one number on all the tickets—the winning one—but don't think that means you'll get away with the kitty. THE AGENCY has just launched UNILIV, the emergency relief fund for victims

of Schedule C who lost their deposits and are now committed to paying off impossible debts, some monetary, some moral (if you're unlucky in the draw you may find yourself landed with a guilt complex that would make even a Colonus Rex look sad).

Cost: 1 credit—but with an evaluation in the billions if you have to forfeit.

(7) ARCTURIAN EXPRESS. Unregistered.

Controls all important track events. The racing calendar this year is a causal and not a temporal one and seems a little obscure, but most of the established classics are taking place.

(a) The Rhinosauro Derby. Held this year at Betelgeuse Springs under the rules of the Federation of Amorphs. First to the light horizon. There's always quite a line-up for this one and any form of vehicle is allowed rockets, beams, racial migrations, ES thought patterns—but frankly it's a waste of effort. It's not just that by the time you're out of your own sight you're usually out of your mind as well, but the Nils of Rigel, who always enter a strong team, are capable of instantaneous transmission.

(b) The Paraplegic Handicap. Recently instituted by the Protists of Lambda Scorpio. The course measures only 0.00015 mm, but that's a long way to urge an Aldebaran Torpid. They are giant viruses embedded in bauxite mountains, and by varying their pressure differentials it's sometimes possible to tickle them into a little life. K 2 on Regulus IX is holding the big bets, but even so the race is estimated to take about 50,000 years to run.

(8) NEW FUTURES INC. Unregistered.

Tired of the same dull round? NEW FUTURES will take you right out of this world. In the island universes the continuum is extra-dimensional, and the time channels are controlled by rival cartels. The element of chance apparently plays the time role, and it's all even more confused by the fact that you may be moving around in someone else's extrapolation.

In the tourist translation manual 185 basic tenses are given, and of these 125 are future conditional. No verb conjugates in the present tense, and you can invent and copyright your own irregulars. This may explain why I got the impression at the bureau that they were only half there.

Cost: simultaneously 3,270 and 2,000,000 credits. They refuse to quibble.

(9) SEVEN SIRENS. Registered. Venus.

A subsidiary of the fashion trust controlling senso-channel Astral Eve.

Ladies, like to win your own beauty contest? Twenty-five of the most beautiful creatures in the Galaxy are waiting to pit their charms against yours, but however divine they may be—and two or three of them, such as the Flamen Zilla Quel-Queen (75-9-25) and the Orthodox Virgin of Altair (76-953-?) certainly will be—they'll stand no chance against you. Your specifications will be defined as the ideal ones.

(10) GENERAL ENTERPRISES. Registered.

Specialists in culture cycles, world struggles, ethnic trends. Organize vacations as a sideline. A vast undertaking for whom ultimately we all work. Their next venture, epoch-making by all accounts, is starting now, and

everybody will be coming along. I was politely but firmly informed that it was no use worrying about the cost. When I asked—

Before Clifford could finish one of the houseboys came up to him.

„Priority Call for you, sir.“

Clifford handed the synopsis to Margot. „Tell me if you find anything. It looks to me as if we’ve been wasting Tony’s time.“

He left them and went through to his study.

„Ah, Gorrell, there you are.“ It was Thornwall Harrison, the attorney who had taken over Clifford’s office. „Who the hell are all these people trailing in to see you night and day? The place looks like Colonial Night at the Arena Circus. I can’t get rid of them.“

„Which people?“ Clifford asked. „What do they want?“

„You apparently,“ Thornwall told him. „Most of them thought I was you. They’ve been trying to sell me all sorts of crazy vacation schemes. I said you’d already gone on your vacation and I myself never took one. Then one of them pulled a hypodermic on me. There’s even an Anti-Cartel agent sleuthing around, wants to see you about block bookings. Thinks you’re a racketeer.“

Back in the lounge Margot and Tony were looking out through the terrace windows into the boulevard which ran from the Gorrells’ villa to the level below.

A long column of vehicles had pulled up under the trees: trucks, half-tracks, huge Telesenso studio location vans and several sleek white ambulances. The drivers and crew-men were standing about in little groups in the shadows, quietly watching the villa. Two or three radar scanners on the vans were rotating, and as Clifford looked down a convoy of trucks drove up and joined the tail of the column.

„Looks like there’s going to be quite a party,“ Tony said. „What are they waiting for?“

„Perhaps they’ve come for us?“ Margot suggested excitedly.

„They’re wasting their time if they have,“ Clifford told her. He swung round on Tony. „Did you give our names to any of the agencies?“

Tony hesitated, then nodded. „I couldn’t help it. Some of those outfits wouldn’t take no for an answer.“

Clifford clamped his lips and picked the synopsis off the floor. „Well, Margot, have you decided where you want to go?“

Margot fiddled with the synopsis. „There are so many to choose from.“

Tony started for the door. „Well, I’ll leave you to it.“ He waved a hand at them. „Have fun.“

„Hold on,“ Clifford told him. „Margot hasn’t made up her mind yet.“

„What’s the hurry?“ Tony asked. He indicated the line of vehicles outside, their crews now climbing into their driving cabs and turrets. „Take your time. You may bite off more than you can chew.“

„Exactly. So as soon as Margot decides where we’re going you can make the final arrangements for us and get rid of that menagerie.“

„But Clifford, give me a chance.“

„Sorry. Now Margot, hurry up.“

Margot flipped through the synopsis, screwing up her mouth. „It’s so difficult, Clifford, I don’t really like any of these. I still think the best agency was the little one I found in the Bazaar.“

„No,“ Tony groaned, sinking down on a sofa. „Margot, please, after all the trouble I’ve gone to.“

„Yes, definitely that one. The dream bureau. What was it called—“

Before she could finish there was a roar of engines starting up in the boulevard. Startled, Clifford saw the column of cars and trucks churn across the gravel towards the villa. Music, throbbing heavily, came down from the room above, and a sick musky odour seeped through the air.

Tony pulled himself off the sofa. „They must have had this place wired,“ he said quickly. „You’d better call the police. Believe me, some of these people don’t waste time arguing.“

Outside three helmeted men in brown uniforms ran past the terrace, unwinding a coil of fuse wire. The sharp hissing sound of para-rays sucked through the air from the drive.

Margot hid back in her slumber seat. „Trantino!“ she wailed.

Clifford went back into his study. He switched the transceiver to the emergency channel.

Instead of the police signal a thin automatic voice beeped through. „Remain seated, remain seated. Take-off in zero two minutes, Purser’s office on G Deck now—“

Clifford switched to another channel. There was a blare of studio applause and a loud unctuous voice called out: „And now over to brilliant young Clifford Gorrell and his charming wife Margot about to enter their dream-pool at the fabulous Riviera-Neptune. Are you there, Cliff?“

Angrily, Clifford turned to a third. Static and morse chattered, and then someone rapped out in a hard iron tone: „Colonel Sapt is dug in behind the swimming pool. Enfilade along the garage roof—“

Clifford gave up. He went back to the lounge. The music was deafening. Margot was prostrate in her slumber-seat, Tony down on the floor by the window, watching a pitched battle raging in the drive. Heavy black palls of smoke drifted across the terrace, and two tanks with stylized archers emblazoned on their turrets were moving up past the burning wrecks of the studio location vans.

„They must be Arco’s!“ Tony shouted. „The police will look after them, but wait until the extra-sensory gang take over!“

Crouching behind a low stone parapet running off the terrace was a group of waiters in dishevelled evening dress, lab technicians in scorched white overalls and musicians clutching their instrument cases. A bolt of flame from one of the tanks flickered over their heads and crashed into the grove of flamingo trees, sending up a shower of sparks and broken notes.

Clifford pulled Tony to his feet. „Come on, we’ve got to get out of here. We’ll try the library windows into the garden. You’d better take Margot.“

Her yellow beach robe had apparently died of shock, and was beginning to blacken like a dried-out banana skin. Discreetly averting his eyes, Tony picked her up and followed Clifford out into the hall.

Three croupiers in gold uniforms were arguing hotly with two men in white surgeons' coats. Behind them a couple of mechanics were struggling a huge vibrobath up the stairs.

The foreman came over to Clifford. „Gorrell?“ he asked, consulting an invoice. „Trans-Ocean.“ He jerked a thumb at the bath. „Where do you want it?“

A surgeon elbowed him aside. „Mr Gorrell?“ he asked suavely. „We are from Cerebro-Tonic Travel. Please allow me to give you a sedative. All this noise—“

Clifford pushed past him and started to walk down the corridor to the library, but the floor began to slide and weave.

He stopped and looked around unsteadily.

Tony was down on his knees, Margot flopped out of his arms across the floor.

Someone swayed up to Clifford and held out a tray.

On it were three tickets.

Around him the walls whirled.

He woke in his bedroom, lying comfortably on his back, gently breathing a cool amber air. The noise had died away, but he could still hear a vortex of sound spinning violently in the back of his mind. It spiralled away, vanished, and he moved his head and looked around.

Margot was lying asleep beside him, and for a moment he thought that the attack on the house had been a dream. Then he noticed the skull-plate clamped over his head, and the cables leading off from a boom to a large console at the foot of the bed. Massive spools loaded with magnetic tape waited in the projector ready to be played.

The real nightmare was still to come! He struggled to get up, found himself clamped in a twilight sleep, unable to move more than a few centimetres.

He lay there powerlessly for ten minutes, tongue clogging his mouth like a wad of cotton-wool when he tried to shout. Eventually a small neatly featured alien in a pink silk suit opened the door and padded quietly over to them. He peered down at their faces and then turned a couple of knobs on the console.

Clifford's consciousness began to clear. Beside him Margot stirred and woke.

The alien beamed down pleasantly. „Good evening,“ he greeted them in a smooth creamy voice. „Please allow me to apologize for any discomfort you have suffered. However, the first day of a vacation is often a little confused.“

Margot sat up. „I remember you. You're from the little bureau in the Bazaar.“ She jumped round happily. „Clifford!“

The alien bowed. „Of course, Mrs Gorrell. I am Dr Terence Sotal-2 Burlington, Professor—Emeritus,“ he added to himself as an afterthought, „—of Applied Drama at the University of Alpha Leporis, and the director of the play you and your husband are to perform during your vacation.“

Clifford cut in: „Would you release me from this machine immediately? And then get out of my house! I've had—“

„Clifford!“ Margot snapped. „What's the matter with you?“

Clifford dragged at the skull plate and Dr Burlington quietly moved a control on the console. Part of Clifford's brain clouded and he sank back helplessly.

„Everything is all right, Mr Gorrell,“ Dr Burlington said.

„Clifford,“ Margot warned him. „Remember your promise.“ She smiled at Dr Burlington. „Don't pay any attention to him, Doctor. Please go on.“

„Thank you, Mrs Gorrell.“ Dr Burlington bowed again, as Clifford lay half-asleep, groaning impotently.

„The play we have designed for you,“ Dr Burlington explained, „is an adaptation of a classic masterpiece in the Diphenyl 2-4-6 Cyclopropane canon, and though based on the oldest of human situations, is nonetheless fascinating. It was recently declared the outright winner at the Mira Nuptial Contest, and will always have a proud place in the private repertoires. To you, I believe, it is known as *The Taming of the Shrew*.“

Margot giggled and then looked surprised. Dr Burlington smiled urbanely. „However, allow me to show you the script.“ He excused himself and slipped out.

Margot fretted anxiously, while Clifford pulled weakly at the skullplate.

„Clifford, I'm not sure that I like this altogether. And Dr Burlington does seem rather strange. But I suppose it's only for three weeks.“

Just then the door opened and a stout bearded figure, erect in a stiff blue uniform, white yachting cap jauntily on his head, stepped in.

„Good evening, Mrs Gorrell.“ He saluted Margot smartly, „Captain Linstrom.“ He looked down at Clifford. „Good to have you aboard, sir.“

„Aboard?“ Clifford repeated weakly. He looked around at the familiar furniture in the room, the curtains drawn neatly over the windows. „What are you raving about? Get out of my house!“

The Captain chuckled. „Your husband has a sense of humour, Mrs Gorrell. A useful asset on these long trips. Your friend Mr Harcourt in the next cabin seems sadly lacking in one.“

„Tony?“ Margot exclaimed. „Is he still here?“

Captain Linstrom laughed. „I quite understand you. He seems very worried, quite over-eager to return to Mars. We shall be passing there one day, of course, though not I fear for some time. However, time is no longer a consideration to you. I believe you are to spend the entire voyage in sleep. But a very pleasantly coloured sleep nonetheless.“ He smiled roguishly at Margot.

As he reached the door Clifford managed to gasp out: „Where are we? For heaven's sake, call the police!“

Captain Linstrom paused in surprise. „But surely you know, Mr Gorrell?“ He strode to the window and flung back the curtains. In place of the large square casement were three small portholes. Outside a blaze of incandescent light flashed by, a rush of stars and nebulae.

Captain Linstrom gestured theatrically. „This is the DREAM OF OSIRIS, under charter to Terminal Tours, three hours out from Zenith City on the non-stop run. May I wish you sweet dreams!“

