

# **The Watch-Towers**

**by James Graham Ballard, 1930-2009**

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The next day, for some reason, there was a sudden increase of activity in the watch-towers. This began during the latter half of the morning, and by noon, when Renthall left the hotel on his way to see Mrs Osmond, seemed to have reached its peak. People were standing at their windows and balconies along both sides of the street, whispering agitatedly to each other behind the curtains and pointing up into the sky.

Renthall usually tried to ignore the watch-towers, resenting even the smallest concession to the fact of their existence, but at the bottom of the street, where he was hidden in the shadow thrown by one of the houses, he stopped and craned his head up at the nearest tower.

A hundred feet away from him, it hung over the Public Library, its tip poised no more than twenty feet above the roof. The glass-enclosed cabin in the lowest tier appeared to be full of observers, opening and shutting the windows and shifting about what Renthall assumed were huge pieces of optical equipment. He looked

around at the further towers, suspended from the sky at three hundred foot intervals in every direction, noticing an occasional flash of light as a window turned and caught the sun.

An elderly man wearing a shabby black suit and wing collar, who usually loitered outside the library, came across the street to Renthall and backed into the shadows beside him.

'They're up to something all right.' He cupped his hands over his eyes and peered up anxiously at the watch-towers. 'I've never seen them like this as long as I can remember.'

Renthall studied his face. However alarmed, he was obviously relieved by the signs of activity. 'I shouldn't worry unduly,' Renthall told him. 'It's a change to see something going on at all.'

Before the other could reply he turned on his heel and strode away along the pavement. It took him ten minutes to reach the street in which Mrs Osmond lived, and he fixed his eyes firmly on the ground, ignoring the few passers-by. Although dominated by the watch-towers—four of them hung in a line exactly down its centre—the street was almost deserted. Half the houses were untenanted and falling into what would soon be an irreversible state of disrepair. Usually Renthall assessed each property carefully, trying to decide whether to leave his hotel and take one of them, but the movement in the watch-towers had caused him more anxiety than he was prepared to admit, and the terrace of houses passed unnoticed.

Mrs Osmond's house stood halfway down the street, its gate swinging loosely on its rusty hinges. Renthall hesitated under the plane tree growing by the edge of the pavement, and then crossed the narrow garden and quickly let himself through the door.

Mrs Osmond invariably spent the afternoon sitting out on the veranda in the sun, gazing at the weeds in the back garden, but today she had retreated to a corner of the sitting room. She was sorting a suitcase full of old papers when Renthall came in.

Renthall made no attempt to embrace her and wandered over to the window. Mrs Osmond had half drawn the curtains and he pulled them back. There was a watch-tower ninety feet away, almost directly ahead, hanging over the parallel terrace of empty houses. The lines of towers receded diagonally from left to right towards the horizon, partly obscured by the bright haze.

'Do you think you should have come today?' Mrs Osmond asked, shifting her plump hips nervously in the chair.

'Why not?' Renthall said, scanning the towers, hands loosely in his pockets.

'But if they're going to keep a closer watch on us now they'll notice you coming here.'

'I shouldn't believe all the rumours you hear,' Renthall told her calmly.

'What do you think it means then?'

'I've absolutely no idea. Their movements may be as random and meaningless as our own.' Renthall shrugged. 'Perhaps they are going to keep a closer watch on us. What does it matter if all they do is stare?'

'Then you mustn't come here any more!' Mrs Osmond protested.

'Why? I hardly believe they can see through walls.'

‘They’re not that stupid,’ Mrs Osmond said irritably. ‘They’ll soon put two and two together, if they haven’t already.’

Renthall took his eyes off the tower and looked down at Mrs Osmond patiently. ‘My dear, this house isn’t tapped. For all they know we may be darning our prayer rugs or discussing the endocrine system of the tapeworm.’

‘Not you, Charles,’ Mrs Osmond said with a short laugh. ‘Not if they know you.’ Evidently pleased by this sally, she relaxed and took a cigarette out of the box on the table.

‘Perhaps they don’t know me,’ Renthall said dryly. ‘In fact, I’m quite sure they don’t. If they did I can’t believe I should still be here.’

He noticed himself stooping, a reliable sign that he was worrying, and went over to the sofa.

‘Is the school going to start tomorrow?’ Mrs Osmond asked when he had disposed his long, thin legs around the table.

‘It should do,’ Renthall said. ‘Hanson went down to the Town Hall this morning, but as usual they had little idea of what was going on.’

He opened his jacket and pulled out of the inner pocket an old but neatly folded copy of a woman’s magazine.

‘Charles!’ Mrs Osmond exclaimed. ‘Where did you get this?’

She took it from Renthall and started leafing through the soiled pages.

‘One of my sources,’ Renthall said. From the sofa he could still see the watch-tower over the houses opposite. ‘Georgina Simons. She has a library of them.’

He rose, went over to the window and drew the curtains across.

‘Charles, don’t. I can’t see.’

‘Read it later,’ Renthall told her. He lay back on the sofa again. ‘Are you coming to the recital this afternoon?’

‘Hasn’t it been cancelled?’ Mrs Osmond asked, putting the magazine down reluctantly.

‘No, of course not.’

‘Charles, I don’t think I want to go.’ Mrs Osmond frowned. ‘What records is Hanson going to play?’

‘Some Tchaikovsky. And Grieg.’ He tried to make it sound interesting. ‘You must come. We can’t just sit about subsiding into this state of boredom and uselessness.’

‘I know,’ Mrs Osmqnd said fractiously. ‘But I don’t feel like it. Not today. All those records bore me. I’ve heard them so often.’

‘They bore me too. But at least it’s something to do.’ He put an arm around Mrs Osmond’s shoulders and began to play with the darker unbleached hair behind her ears, tapping the large nickel ear-rings she wore and listening to them tinkle.

When he put his hand on to her knee Mrs Osmond stood up and prowled aimlessly around the room, straightening her skirt.

‘Julia, what is the matter with you?’ Renthall asked irritably. ‘Have you got a headache?’

Mrs Osmond was by the window, gazing up at the watch-towers. ‘Do you think they’re going to come down?’

‘Of course not!’ Renthall snapped. ‘Where on earth did you get that idea?’

Suddenly he felt unbearably exasperated. The confined dimensions of the dusty sitting-room seemed to suffocate reason. He stood up and buttoned his jacket. 'I'll see you this afternoon at the Institute, Julia. The recital starts at three.'

Mrs Osmond nodded vaguely, unfastened the french windows and ambled forwards across the veranda into full view of the watch-towers, the glassy expression on her face like a supplicant nun's.

As Renthall had expected, the school did not open the next day. When they tired of hanging around the hotel after breakfast he and Hanson went down to the Town Hall. The building was almost empty and the only official they were able to find was unhelpful.

'We have no instructions at present,' he told them, 'but as soon as the term starts you will be notified. Though from what I hear the postponement is to be indefinite.'

'Is that the committee's decision?' Renthall asked. 'Or just another of the town clerk's brilliant extemporizings?'

'The school committee is no longer meeting,' the official said. 'I'm afraid the town clerk isn't here today.' Before Renthall could speak he added: 'You will, of course, continue to draw your salaries. Perhaps you would care to call in at the treasurer's department on your way out?'

Renthall and Hanson left and looked about for a caf. Finally they found one that was open and sat under the awning, staring vacantly at the watch-towers hanging over the roof-tops around them. Their activity had lessened considerably since the previous day. The nearest tower was only fifty feet away, immediately above a disused office building on the other side of the street. The windows in the observation tier remained shut, but every few minutes Renthall noticed a shadow moving behind the panes.

Eventually a waitress came out to them, and Renthall ordered coffee.

'I think I shall have to give a few lessons,' Hanson remarked. 'All this leisure is becoming too much of a good thing.'

'It's an idea,' Renthall agreed. 'If you can find anyone interested. I'm sorry the recital yesterday was such a flop.'

Hanson shrugged. 'I'll see if I can get hold of some new records. By the way, I thought Julia looked very handsome yesterday.'

Renthall acknowledged the compliment with a slight bow of his head. 'I'd like to take her out more often.'

'Do you think that's wise?'

'Why on earth not?'

'Well, just at present, you know.' Hanson inclined a finger at the watch-towers.

'I don't see that it matters particularly,' Renthall said. He disliked personal confidences and was about to change the subject when Hanson leaned forward across the table.

'Perhaps not, but I gather there was some mention of you at the last Council meeting. One or two members were rather critical of your little *ménage a deux*.' He smiled thinly at Renthall, who was frowning into his coffee. 'Sheer spite, no doubt, but your behaviour is a little idiosyncratic.'

Controlling himself, Renthall pushed away the coffee cup. 'Do you mind telling me what damned business it is of theirs?'

Hanson laughed. 'None, really, except that they are the executive authority, and I suppose we should take our cue from them.' Renthall snorted at this, and Hanson went on: 'As a matter of interest, you may receive an official directive over the next few days.'

'A what?' Renthall exploded. He sat back, shaking his head incredulously. 'Are you serious?' When Hanson nodded he began to laugh harshly.

'Those idiots! I don't know why we put up with them. Sometimes their stupidity positively staggers me.'

'Steady on,' Hanson demurred. 'I do see their point. Bearing in mind the big commotion in the watch-towers yesterday the Council probably feel we shouldn't do anything that might antagonize them. You never know, they may even be acting on official instructions.'

Renthall glanced contemptuously at Hanson. 'Do you really believe that nonsense about the Council being in touch with the watch-towers? It may give a few simpletons a sense of security, but for heaven's sake don't try it on me. My patience is just about exhausted.' He watched Hanson carefully, wondering which of the Council members had provided him with his information. The lack of subtlety depressed him painfully. 'However, thanks for warning me. I suppose it means there'll be an overpowering air of embarrassment when Julia and I go to the cinema tomorrow.'

Hanson shook his head. 'No. Actually the performance has been cancelled. In view of yesterday's disturbances.'

'But why—?' Renthall slumped back. 'Haven't they got the intelligence to realize that it's just at this sort of time that we need every social get-together we can organize? People are hiding away in their back bedrooms like a lot of frightened ghosts. We've got to bring them out, give them something that will pull them together.'

He gazed up thoughtfully at the watch-tower across the street. Shadows circulated behind the frosted panes of the observation windows. 'Some sort of gala, say, or a garden fete. Who could organize it, though?'

Hanson pushed back his chair. 'Careful, Charles. I don't know whether the Council would altogether approve.'

'I'm sure they wouldn't.' After Hanson had left he remained at the table and returned to his solitary contemplation of the watch-towers.

For half an hour Renthall sat at the table, playing absently with his empty coffee cup and watching the few people who passed along the street. No one else visited the caf, and he was glad to be able to pursue his thoughts alone, in this miniature urban vacuum, with nothing to intervene between himself and the lines of watch-towers stretching into the haze beyond the roof-tops.

With the exception of Mrs Osmond, Renthall had virtually no close friends in whom to confide. With his sharp intelligence and impatience with trivialities, Renthall was one of those men with whom others find it difficult to relax. A certain innate condescension, a reserved but unmistakable attitude of superiority held them away from him, though few people regarded him as anything but a shabby pedagogue. At the hotel he kept to himself. There was little social contact between the guests; in the lounge and dining room they sat immersed in their old newspapers and magazines, occasionally murmuring quietly to each other. The

only thing which could mobilize the simultaneous communion of the guests was some untoward activity in the watch-towers, and at such times Renthall always maintained an absolute silence.

Just before he stood up a square thick-set figure approached down the street. Renthall recognized the man and was about to turn his seat to avoid having to greet him, but something about his expression made him lean forward. Fleshy and dark-jowled, the man walked with an easy, rolling gait, his double-breasted check overcoat open to reveal a well-tended midriff. This was Victor Boardman, owner of the local flea-pit cinema, sometime bootlegger and procurer at large.

Renthall had never spoken to him, but he was aware that Boardman shared with him the distinction of bearing the stigma of the Council's disapproval. Hanson claimed that the Council had successfully stamped out Boardman's illicit activities, but the latter's permanent expression of smug contempt for the rest of the world seemed to belie this.

As he passed they exchanged glances, and Boardman's face broke momentarily into a knowing smirk. It was obviously directed at Renthall, and implied a pre-judgement of some event about which Renthall as yet knew nothing, presumably his coming collision with the Council. Obviously Boardman expected him to capitulate to the Council without a murmur.

Annoyed, Renthall turned his back on Boardman, then watched him over his shoulder as he padded off down the street, his easy relaxed shoulders swaying from side to side.

The following day the activity in the watch-towers had subsided entirely. The blue haze from which they extended was brighter than it had been for several months, and the air in the streets seemed to sparkle with the light reflected off the observation windows. There was no sign of movement among them, and the sky had a rigid, uniform appearance that indicated an indefinite lull.

For some reason, however, Renthall found himself more nervous than he had been for some time. The school had not yet opened, but he felt strangely reluctant to visit Mrs Osmond and remained indoors all morning, shunning the streets as if avoiding some invisible shadow of guilt.

The long lines of watch-towers stretching endlessly from one horizon to the other reminded him that he could soon expect to receive the Council's 'directive'—Hanson would not have mentioned it by accident—and it was always during the lulls that the Council was most active in consolidating its position, issuing a stream of petty regulations and amendments.

Renthall would have liked to challenge the Council's authority on some formal matter unconnected with himself the validity, for example, of one of the byelaws prohibiting public assemblies in the street—but the prospect of all the intrigue involved in canvassing the necessary support bored him utterly. Although none of them individually would challenge the Council, most people would have been glad to see it toppled, but there seemed to be no likely focus for their opposition. Apart from the fear that the Council was in touch with the watch-towers, no one would stand up for Renthall's right to carry on his affair with Mrs Osmond.

Curiously enough, she seemed unaware of these cross-currents when he went to see her that afternoon. She had cleaned the house and was in high humour, the windows wide open to the brilliant air.

‘Charles, what’s the matter with you?’ she chided him when he slumped inertly into a chair. ‘You look like a broody hen.’

‘I felt rather tired this morning. It’s probably the hot weather.’ When she sat down on the arm of the chair he put one hand listlessly on her hip, trying to summon together his energies. ‘Recently I’ve been developing an ideefixe about the Council, I must be going through a crisis of confidence. I need some method of reasserting myself.’

Mrs Osmond stroked his hair soothingly with her cool fingers, her eyes watching him silkily. ‘What you need, Charles, is a little mother love. You’re so isolated at that hotel, among all those old people. Why don’t you rent one of the houses in this road? I’d be able to look after you then.’

Renthall glanced up at her sardonically. ‘Perhaps I could move in here?’ he asked, but she tossed her head back with a derisive snort and went over to the window.

She gazed up at the nearest watch-tower a hundred feet away, its windows closed and silent, the great shaft disappearing into the haze. ‘What do you suppose they’re thinking about?’

Renthall snapped his fingers off-handedly. ‘They’re probably not thinking about anything. Sometimes I wonder whether there’s anyone there at all. The movements we see may be just optical illusions. Although the windows appear to open no one’s ever actually seen any of them. For all we know this place may well be nothing more than an abandoned zoo.’

Mrs Osmond regarded him with rueful amusement. ‘Charles, you do pick some extraordinary metaphors. I often doubt if you’re like the rest of us, I wouldn’t dare say the sort of things you do in case - ‘ She broke off, glancing up involuntarily at the watch-towers hanging from the sky.

Idly, Renthall asked: ‘In case what?’

‘Well, in case—‘ Irritably, she said: ‘Don’t be absurd, Charles, doesn’t the thought of those towers hanging down over us frighten you at all?’

Renthall turned his head slowly and stared up at the watch-towers. Once he had tried to count them, but there seemed little point. ‘Yes, they frighten me,’ he said noncommittally. ‘In the same way that Hanson and the old people at the hotel and everyone else here does. But not in the sense that the boys at school are frightened of me.’

Mrs Osmond nodded, misinterpreting this last remark. ‘Children are very perceptive, Charles. They probably know you’re not interested in them. Unfortunately they’re not old enough to understand what the watch-towers mean.’

She gave a slight shiver, and pulled her cardigan around her shoulders. ‘You know, on the days when they’re busy behind their windows I can hardly move around, it’s terrible. I feel so listless, all I want to do is sit and stare at the wall. Perhaps I’m more sensitive to their, er, radiations than most people.’

Renthall smiled. ‘You must be. Don’t let them depress you. Next time why don’t you put on a paper hat and do a pirouette?’

‘What? Oh, Charles, stop being cynical.’

‘I’m not. Seriously, Julia, do you think it would make any difference?’

Mrs Osmond shook her head sadly. ‘You try, Charles, and then tell me. Where are you going?’

Renthall paused at the window. 'Back to the hotel to rest. By the way, do you know Victor Boardman?'

'I used to, once. Why, what are you getting up to with him?'

'Does he own the garden next to the cinema car park?'

'I think so.' Mrs Osmond laughed. 'Are you going to take up gardening?'

'In a sense.' With a wave, Renthall left.

He began with Dr Clifton, whose room was directly below his own. Clifton's duties at his surgery occupied him for little more than an hour a day - there were virtually no deaths or illnesses - but he still retained sufficient initiative to cultivate a hobby. He had turned one end of his room into a small aviary, containing a dozen canaries, and spent much of his time trying to teach them tricks. His acerbic, matter-of-fact manner always tired Renthall, but he respected the doctor for not sliding into total lethargy like everyone else.

Clifton considered his suggestion carefully. 'I agree with you, something of the sort is probably necessary. A good idea, Renthall. Properly conducted, it might well provide just the lift people need.'

'The main question, Doctor, is one of organization. The only suitable place is the Town Hall.'

Clifton nodded. 'Yes, there's your problem. I'm afraid I've no influence with the Council, if that's what you're suggesting. I don't know what you can do. You'll have to get their permission of course, and in the past they haven't shown themselves to be very radical or original. They prefer to maintain the status quo.'

Renthall nodded, then added casually: 'They're only interested in maintaining their own power. At times I become rather tired of our Council.'

Clifton glanced at him and then turned back to his cages. 'You're preaching revolution, Renthall,' he said quietly, a forefinger stroking the beak of one of the canaries. Pointedly, he refrained from seeing Renthall to the door.

Writing the doctor off, Renthall rested for a few minutes in his room, pacing up and down the strip of faded carpet, then went down to the basement to see the manager, Mulvaney.

'I'm only making some initial inquiries. As yet I haven't applied for permission, but Dr Clifton thinks the idea is excellent, and there's no doubt we'll get it. Are you up to looking after the catering?'

Mulvaney's sallow face watched Renthall sceptically. 'Of course I'm up to it, but how serious are you?' He leaned against his roll-top desk. 'You think you'll get permission? You're wrong, Mr Renthall, the Council wouldn't stand for the idea. They even closed the cinema, so they're not likely to allow a public party. Before you know what you'd have people dancing.'

'I hardly think so, but does the idea appal you so much?'

Mulvaney shook his head, already bored with Renthall. 'You get a permit, Mr Renthall, and then we can talk seriously.'

Tightening his voice, Renthall asked: 'Is it necessary to get the Council's permission? Couldn't we go ahead without?'

Without looking up, Mulvaney sat down at his desk. 'Keep trying, Mr Renthall, it's a great idea.'

During the next few days Renthall pursued his inquiries, in all approaching some half-dozen people. In general he met with the same negative response, but as



he intended he soon noticed a subtle but nonetheless distinct quickening of interest around him. The usual fragmentary murmur of conversation would fade away abruptly as he passed the tables in the dining room, and the service was fractionally more prompt. Hanson no longer took coffee with him in the mornings, and once Renthall saw him in guarded conversation with the town clerk's secretary, a young man called Barnes. This, he assumed, was Hanson's contact.

In the meantime the activity in the watch-towers remained at zero. The endless lines of towers hung down from the bright, hazy sky, the observation windows closed, and the people in the streets below sank slowly into their usual mindless torpor, wandering from hotel to library to caf. Determined on his course of action, Renthall felt his confidence return.

Allowing an interval of a week to elapse, he finally called upon Victor Boardman.

The bootlegger received him in his office above the cinema, greeting him with a wry smile.

'Well, Mr Renthall, I hear you're going into the entertainment business. Drunken gambols and all that. I'm surprised at you.'

'A fête,' Renthall corrected. The seat Boardman had offered him faced towards the window—deliberately, he guessed and provided an uninterrupted view of the watch-tower over the roof of the adjacent furniture store. Only forty feet away, it blocked off half the sky. The metal plates which formed its rectangular sides were annealed together by some process Renthall was unable to identify, neither welded nor riveted, almost as if the entire tower had been cast in situ. He moved to another chair so that his back was to the window.

'The school is still closed, so I thought I'd try to make myself useful. That's what I'm paid for. I've come to you because you've had a good deal of experience.'

'Yes, I've had a lot of experience, Mr Renthall. Very varied. As one of the Council's employees, I take it you have its permission?'

Renthall evaded this. 'The Council is naturally a conservative body, Mr Boardman. Obviously at this stage I'm acting on my own initiative. I shall consult the Council at the appropriate moment later, when I can offer them a practicable proposition.'

Boardman nodded sagely. 'That's sensible, Mr Renthall. Now what exactly do you want me to do? Organize the whole thing for you?'

'No, but naturally I'd be very grateful if you would. For the present I merely want to ask permission to hold the fête on a piece of your property.'

'The cinema? I'm not going to take all those seats out, if that's what you're after.'

'Not the cinema. Though we could use the bar and cloakrooms,' Renthall extemporized, hoping the scheme did not sound too grandiose. 'Is the old beer-garden next to the car park your property?'

For a moment Boardman was silent. He watched Renthall shrewdly, picking his nails with his cigar-cutter, a faint suggestion of admiration in his eyes. 'So you want to hold the fête in the open, Mr Renthall? Is that it?'

Renthall nodded, smiling back at Boardman. 'I'm glad to see you living up to your reputation for getting quickly to the point. Are you prepared to lend the garden? Of course, you'll have a big share of the profits. In fact, if it's any inducement, you can have all the profits.'

Boardman put out his cigar. 'Mr Renthall, you're obviously a man of many parts. I underestimated you. I thought you merely had a grievance against the Council. I hope you know what you're doing.'

'Mr Boardman, will you lend the garden?' Renthall repeated.

There was an amused but thoughtful smile on Boardman's lips as he regarded the watch-tower framed by the window. 'There are two watch-towers directly over the beer-garden, Mr Renthall.'

'I'm fully aware of that. It's obviously the chief attraction of the property. Now, can you give me an answer?'

The two men regarded each other silently, and then Boardman gave an almost imperceptible nod. Renthall realized that his scheme was being taken seriously by Boardman. He was obviously using Renthall for his own purposes, for once having flaunted the Council's authority he would be able to resume all his other, more profitable activities. Of course, the fête would never be held, but in answer to Boardman's questions he outlined a provisional programme. They fixed the date of the fête at a month ahead, and arranged to meet again at the beginning of the next week.

Two days later, as he expected, the first emissaries of the Council came to see him.

He was waiting at his usual table on the café terrace, the silent watch-towers suspended from the air around him, when he saw Hanson hurrying along the street.

'Do join me.' Renthall drew a chair back. 'What's the news?'

'Nothing—though you should know, Charles.' He gave Renthall a dry smile, as if admonishing a favourite pupil, then gazed about the empty terrace for the waitress. 'Service is appallingly bad here. Tell me, Charles, what's all this talk about you and Victor Boardman. I could hardly believe my ears.'

Renthall leaned back in his chair. 'I don't know, you tell me.'

'We—er, I was wondering if Boardman was taking advantage of some perfectly innocent remark he might have overheard. This business of a garden party you're supposed to be organizing with him—it sounds absolutely fantastic.'

'Why?'

'But Charles.' Hanson leaned forward to examine Renthall carefully, trying to make sense of his unruffled pose. 'Surely you aren't serious?'

'But why not? If I want to, why shouldn't I organize a garden party fête, to be more accurate?'

'It doesn't make an iota of difference,' Hanson said tartly. 'Apart from any other reason'—here he glanced skyward 'the fact remains that you are an employee of the, Council.'

Hands in his trouser-pockets, Renthall tipped back his chair. 'But that gives them no mandate to interfere in my private life. You seem to be forgetting, but the terms of my contract specifically exclude any such authority. I am not on the established grade, as my salary differential shows. If the Council disapprove, the only sanction they can apply is to give me the sack.'

'They will, Charles, don't sound so smug.'

Renthall let this pass. 'Fair enough, if they can find anyone else to take on the job. Frankly I doubt it. They've managed to swallow their moral scruples in the past.'

'Charles, this is different. As long as you're discreet no one gives a hoot about your private affairs, but this garden party is a public matter, and well within the Council's province.'

Renthall yawned. 'I'm rather bored with the subject of the Council. Technically, the fête will be a private affair, by invitation only. They've no statutory right to be consulted at all. If a breach of the peace takes place the Chief Constable can take action. Why all the fuss, anyway? I'm merely trying to provide a little harmless festivity.'

Hanson shook his head. 'Charles, you're deliberately evading the point. According to Boardman this fête will take place out of doors—directly under two of the watch-towers. Have you realized what the repercussions would be?'

'Yes.' Renthall formed the word carefully in his mouth. 'Nothing. Absolutely nothing.'

'Charles!' Hanson lowered his head at this apparent blasphemy, glanced up at the watch-towers over the street as if expecting instant retribution to descend from them. 'Look, my dear fellow, take my advice. Drop the whole idea. You don't stand a chance anyway of ever holding this mad jape, so why deliberately court trouble with the Council? Who knows what their real power would be if they were provoked?'

Renthall rose from his seat. He looked up at the watch-tower hanging from the air on the other side of the road, controlling himself when a slight pang of anxiety stirred his heart. 'I'll send you an invitation,' he called back, then walked away to his hotel.

The next afternoon the town clerk's secretary called upon him in his room. During the interval, no doubt intended as a salutary pause for reflection, Renthall had remained at the hotel, reading quietly in his armchair. He paid one brief visit to Mrs Osmond, but she seemed nervous and irritable, evidently aware of the imminent clash. The strain of maintaining an appearance of unconcern had begun to tire Renthall, and he avoided the open streets whenever possible. Fortunately the school had still not opened.

Barnes, the dapper dark-haired secretary, came straight to the point. Refusing Renthall's offer of an armchair, he held a sheet of pink duplicated paper in his hand, apparently a minute of the last Council meeting.

'Mr Renthall, the Council has been informed of your intention to hold a garden fête in some three weeks' time. I have been asked by the chairman of the Watch Committee to express the committee's grave misgivings, and to request you accordingly to terminate all arrangements and cancel the fête immediately, pending an inquiry.'

'I'm sorry, Barnes, but I'm afraid our preparations are too far advanced. We're about to issue invitations.'

Barnes hesitated, casting his eye around Renthall's faded room and few shabby books as if hoping to find some ulterior motive for Renthall's behaviour.

'Mr Renthall, perhaps I could explain that this request is tantamount to a direct order from the Council.'

‘So I’m aware.’ Renthall sat down on his window-sill and gazed out at the watch-towers. ‘Hanson and I went over all this, as you probably know. The Council have no more right to order me to cancel this fête than they have to stop me walking down the street.’

Barnes smiled his thin bureaucratic smirk. ‘Mr Renthall, this is not a matter of the Council’s statutory jurisdiction. This order is issued by virtue of the authority vested in it by its superiors. If you prefer, you can assume that the Council is merely passing on a direct instruction it has received.’ He inclined his head towards the watch-towers.

Renthall stood up. ‘Now we’re at last getting down to business.’ He gathered himself together. ‘Perhaps you could tell the Council to convey to its superiors, as you call them, my polite but firm refusal. Do you get my point?’

Barnes retreated fractionally. He summed Renthall up carefully, then nodded. ‘I think so, Mr Renthall. No doubt you understand what you’re doing.’

After he had gone Renthall drew the blinds over the window and lay down on his bed; for the next hour he made an effort to relax.

His final showdown with the Council was to take place the following day. Summoned to an emergency meeting of the Watch Committee, he accepted the invitation with alacrity, certain that with every member of the committee present the main council chamber would be used. This would give him a perfect opportunity to humiliate the Council by publicly calling their bluff.

Both Hanson and Mrs Osmond assumed that he would capitulate without argument.

‘Well, Charles, you brought it upon yourself,’ Hanson told him. ‘Still, I expect they’ll be lenient with you. It’s a matter of face now.’

‘More than that, I hope,’ Renthall replied. ‘They claim they were passing on a direct instruction from the watchtowers.’

‘Well, yes...’ Hanson gestured vaguely. ‘Of course. Obviously the towers wouldn’t intervene in such a trivial matter. They rely on the Council to keep a watching brief for them, as long as the Council’s authority is respected they’re prepared to remain aloof.’

‘It sounds an ideally simple arrangement. How do you think the communication between the Council and the watchtowers takes place?’ Renthall pointed to the watch-tower across the street from the cabin. The shuttered observation tier hung emptily in the air like an out-of-season gondola. ‘By telephone? Or do they semaphore?’

But Hanson merely laughed and changed the subject.

Julia Osmond was equally vague, but equally convinced of the Council’s infallibility.

‘Of course they receive instructions from the towers, Charles. But don’t worry, they obviously have a sense of proportion - they’ve been letting you come here all this time.’ She turned a monitory finger at Renthall, her broadhipped bulk obscuring the towers from him. ‘That’s your chief fault, Charles. You think you’re more important than you are. Look at you now, sitting there all hunched up with your face like an old shoe. You think the Council and the watch-towers are going to give you some terrible punishment. But they won’t, because you’re not worth it.’

Renthall picked uneagerly at his lunch at the hotel, conscious of the guests watching from the tables around him. Many had brought visitors with them, and he guessed that there would be a full attendance at the meeting that afternoon.

After lunch he retired to his room, made a desultory attempt to read until the meeting at half past two. Outside, the watch-towers hung in their long lines from the bright haze. There was no sign of movement in the observation windows, and Renthall studied them openly, hands in pockets, like a general surveying the dispositions of his enemy's forces. The haze was lower than usual, filling the interstices between the towers, so that in the distance, where the free space below their tips was hidden by the intervening roof-tops, the towers seemed to rise upwards into the air like rectangular chimneys over an industrial landscape, wreathed in white smoke.

The nearest tower was about seventy-five feet away, diagonally to his left, over the eastern end of the open garden shared by the other hotels in the crescent. Just as Renthall turned away, one of the windows in the observation deck appeared to open, the opaque glass pane throwing a spear of sharp sunlight directly towards him. Renthall flinched back, heart suddenly surging, then leaned forward again. The activity in the tower had subsided as instantly as it had arisen. The windows were sealed, no signs of movement behind them. Renthall listened to the sounds from the rooms above and below him. So conspicuous a motion of the window, the first sign of activity for many days, and a certain indication of more to come, should have brought a concerted rush to the balconies. But the hotel was silent, and below he could hear Dr Clifton at his cages by the window, humming absently to himself.

Renthall scanned the windows on the other side of the garden but the lines of craning faces he expected were absent. He examined the watch-tower carefully, assuming that he had seen a window open in a hotel near by. Yet the explanation dissatisfied him. The ray of sunlight had cleft the air like a silver blade, with a curious luminous intensity that only the windows of the watch-towers seemed able to reflect, aimed unerringly at his head.

He broke off to glance at his watch, cursed when he saw that it was after a quarter past two. The Town Hall was a good half-mile away, and he would arrive dishevelled and perspiring.

There was a knock on his door. He opened it to find Mulvaney. 'What is it? I'm busy now.'

'Sorry, Mr Renthall. A man called Barnes from the Council asked me to give you an urgent message. He said the meeting this afternoon has been postponed.'

'Ha!' Leaving the door open, Renthall snapped his fingers contemptuously at the air. 'So they've had second thoughts after all. Discretion is the better part of valour.' Smiling broadly, he called Mulvaney back into his room. 'Mr Mulvaney! Just a moment!'

'Good news, Mr Renthall?'

'Excellent. I've got them on the run.' He added: 'You wait and see, the next meeting of the Watch Committee will be held in private.'

'You might be right, Mr Renthall. Some people think they have over-reached themselves a bit.'

‘Really? That’s rather interesting. Good.’ Renthall noted this mentally, then gestured Mulvaney over to the window. ‘Tell me, Mr Mulvaney, just now while you were coming up the stairs, did you notice any activity out there?’

He gestured briefly towards the tower, not wanting to draw attention to himself by pointing at it. Mulvaney gazed out over the garden, shaking his head slowly. ‘Can’t say I did, not more than usual. What sort of activity?’

‘You know, a window opening...’ When Mulvaney continued to shake his head, Renthall said: ‘Good. Let me know if that fellow Barnes calls again.’

When Mulvaney had gone he strode up and down the room, whistling a Mozart rondo.

Over the next three days, however, the mood of elation gradually faded. To Renthall’s annoyance no further date was fixed for the cancelled committee meeting. He had assumed that it would be held in camera, but the members must have realized that it would make little difference. Everyone would soon know that Renthall had successfully challenged their claim to be in communication with the watch-towers.

Renthall chafed at the possibility that the meeting had been postponed indefinitely. By avoiding a direct clash with Renthall the Council had cleverly side-stepped the danger before them.

Alternatively, Renthall speculated whether he had underestimated them. Perhaps they realized that the real target of his defiance was not the Council, but the watch-towers. The faint possibility—however hard he tried to dismiss it as childish fantasy the fear still persisted—that there was some mysterious collusion between the towers and the Council now began to grow in his mind. The feat had been cleverly conceived as an innocent gesture of defiance towards the towers, and it would be difficult to find something to take its place that would not be blatantly outrageous and stain him indelibly with the sin of hubris.

Besides, as he carefully reminded himself, he was not out to launch open rebellion. Originally he had reacted from a momentary feeling of pique, exasperated by the spectacle of the boredom and lethargy around him and the sullen fear with which everyone viewed the towers. There was no question of challenging their absolute authority—at least, not at this stage. He merely wanted to define the existential margins of their world—if they were caught in a trap, let them at least eat the cheese. Also, he calculated that it would take an affront of truly heroic scale to provoke any reaction from the watch-towers, and that a certain freedom by default was theirs, a small but valuable credit to their account built into the system.

In practical, existential terms this might well be considerable, so that the effective boundary between black and white, between good and evil, was drawn some distance from the theoretical boundary. This watershed was the penumbral zone where the majority of the quickening pleasures of life were to be found, and where Renthall was most at home. Mrs Osmond’s villa lay well within its territory, and Renthall would have liked to move himself over its margins. First, though, he would have to assess the extent of this ‘blue’ shift, or moral parallax, but by cancelling the committee meeting the Council had effectively forestalled him.

As he waited for Barnes to call again a growing sense of frustration came over him. The watch-towers seemed to fill the sky, and he drew the blinds irritably. On

the flat roof, two floors above, a continuous light hammering sounded all day, but he shunned the streets and no longer went to the caf for his morning coffee.

Finally he climbed the stairs to the roof, through the doorway saw two carpenters working under Mulvaney's supervision. They were laying a rough board floor over the tarred cement. As he shielded his eyes from the bright glare a third man came up the stairs behind him, carrying two sections of wooden railing.

'Sorry about the noise, Mr Renthall,' Mulvaney apologized. 'We should be finished by tomorrow.'

'What's going on?' Renthall asked. 'Surely you're not putting a sun garden here.'

'That's the idea.' Mulvaney pointed to the railings. 'A few chairs and umbrellas, be pleasant for the old folk. Dr Clifton suggested it.' He peered down at Renthall, who was still hiding in the doorway. 'You'll have to bring a chair up here yourself, you look as if you could use a little sunshine.'

Renthall raised his eyes to the watch-tower almost directly over their heads. A pebble tossed underhand would easily have rebounded off the corrugated metal underside. The roof was completely exposed to the score of watch-towers hanging in the air around them, and he wondered whether Mulvaney was out of his mind—none of the old people would sit there for more than a second.

Mulvaney pointed to a roof-top on the other side of the garden, where similar activity was taking place. A bright yellow awning was being unfurled, and two seats were already occupied.

Renthall hesitated, lowering his voice. 'But what about the watchtowers?'

'The what—?' Distracted by one of the carpenters, Mulvaney turned away for a moment, then rejoined him. 'Yes, you'll be able to watch everything going on from up here, Mr Renthall.'

Puzzled, Renthall made his way back to his room. Had Mulvaney misheard his question, or was this a fatuous attempt to provoke the towers? Renthall grimly visualized his responsibility if a whole series of petty acts of defiance took place. Perhaps he had accidentally tapped all the repressed resentment that had been accumulating for years?

To Renthall's amazement, a succession of creaking ascents of the staircase the next morning announced the first party of residents to use the sun deck. Just before lunch Renthall went up to the roof, found a group of at least a dozen of the older guests sitting out below the watch-tower, placidly inhaling the cool air. None of them seemed in the least perturbed by the tower. At two or three points around the crescent sun-bathers had emerged, as if answering some deep latent call. People sat on makeshift porches or leaned from the sills, calling to each other.

Equally surprising was the failure of this upsurge of activity to be followed by any reaction from the watch-towers. Half-hidden behind his blinds, Renthall scrutinized the towers carefully, once caught what seemed to be a distant flicker of movement from an observation window half a mile away, but otherwise the towers remained silent, their long ranks receding to the horizon in all directions, motionless and enigmatic. The haze had thinned slightly, and the long shafts protruded further from the sky, their outlines darker and more vibrant.

Shortly before lunch Hanson interrupted his scrutiny. 'Hello, Charles. Great news! The school opens tomorrow. Thank heaven for that, I was getting so bored I could hardly stand up straight.'

Renthall nodded. 'Good. What's galvanized them into life so suddenly?'

'Oh, I don't know. I suppose they had to reopen some time. Aren't you pleased?'

'Of course. Am I still on the staff?'

'Naturally. The Council doesn't bear childish grudges. They might have sacked you a week ago, but things are different now.'

'What do you mean?'

Hanson scrutinized Renthall carefully. 'I mean the school's opened. What is the matter, Charles?'

Renthall went over to the window, his eyes roving along the lines of sun-bathers on the roofs. He waited a few seconds in case there was some sign of activity from the watch-towers.

'When's the Watch Committee going to hear my case?'

Hanson shrugged. 'They won't bother now. They know you're a tougher proposition than some of the people they've been pushing around. Forget the whole thing.'

'But I don't want to forget it. I want the hearing to take place. Damn it, I deliberately invented the whole business of the fete to force them to show their hand. Now they're furiously back-peddalling.'

'Well, what of it? Relax, they have their difficulties too.' He gave a laugh. 'You never know, they'd probably be only too glad of an invitation now.'

'They won't get one. You know, I almost feel they've outwitted me. When the fete doesn't take place everyone will assume I've given in to them.'

'But it will take place. Haven't you seen Boardman recently? He's going great guns, obviously it'll be a tremendous show. Be careful he doesn't cut you out.'

Puzzled, Renthall turned from the window. 'Do you mean Boardman's going ahead with it?'

'Of course. It looks like it anyway. He's got a big marquee over the car park, dozens of stalls, bunting everywhere.'

Renthall drove a fist into his palm. 'The man's insane!' He turned to Hanson. 'We've got to be careful, something's going on. I'm convinced the Council are just biding their time, they're deliberately letting the reins go so we'll overreach ourselves. Have you seen all these people on the roof-tops? Sun-bathing!'

'Good idea. Isn't that what you've wanted all along?'

'Not so blatantly as this.' Renthall pointed to the nearest watch-tower. The windows were sealed, but the light reflected off them was far brighter than usual. 'Sooner or later there'll be a short, sharp reaction. That's what the Council are waiting for.'

'It's nothing to do with the Council. If people want to sit on the roof whose business is it but their own? Are you coming to lunch?'

'In a moment.' Renthall stood quietly by the window, watching Hanson closely. A possibility he had not previously envisaged crossed his mind. He searched for some method of testing it. 'Has the gong gone yet? My watch has stopped.'

Hanson glanced at his wristwatch. 'It's twelve-thirty.' He looked out through the window towards the clock tower in the distance over the Town Hall. One of Renthall's long-standing grievances against his room was that the tip of the nearby watch-tower hung directly over the clock-face, neatly obscuring it. Hanson nodded, re-setting his watch. 'Twelve-thirty-one. I'll see you in a few minutes.'



After Hanson had gone Renthall sat on the bed, his courage ebbing slowly, trying to rationalize this unforeseen development.

The next day he came across his second case.

Boardman surveyed the dingy room distastefully, puzzled by the spectacle of Renthall hunched up in his chair by the window.

'Mr Renthall, there's absolutely no question of cancelling it now. The fair's as good as started already. Anyway, what would be the point?'

'Our arrangement was that it should be a fete,' Renthall pointed out. 'You've turned it into a fun-fair, with a lot of stalls and hurdy-gurdies.'

Unruffled by Renthall's schoolmasterly manner, Boardman scoffed. 'Well, what's the difference? Anyway, my real idea is to roof it over and turn it into a permanent amusement park. The Council won't interfere. They're playing it quiet now.'

'Are they? I doubt it.' Renthall looked down into the garden. People sat about in their shirt sleeves, the women in floral dresses, evidently oblivious of the watch-towers filling the sky a hundred feet above their heads. The haze had receded still further, and at least two hundred yards of shaft were now visible. There were no signs of activity from the towers, but Renthall was convinced that this would soon begin.

'Tell me,' he asked Boardman in a clear voice. 'Aren't you frightened of the watch-towers?'

Boardman seemed puzzled. 'The what towers?' He made a spiral motion with his cigar. 'You mean the big slide? Don't worry, I'm not having one of those, nobody's got the energy to climb all those steps.'

He stuck his cigar in his mouth and ambled to the door. 'Well, so long, Mr Renthall. I'll send you an invite.'

Later that afternoon Renthall went to see Dr Clifton in his room below. 'Excuse me, Doctor,' he apologized, 'but would you mind seeing me on a professional matter?'

'Well, not here, Renthall, I'm supposed to be off-duty.' He turned from his canary cages by the window with a testy frown, then relented when he saw Renthall's intent expression. 'All right, what's the trouble?'

While Clifton washed his hands Renthall explained. 'Tell me, Doctor, is there any mechanism known to you by which the simultaneous hypnosis of large groups of people could occur? We're all familiar with theatrical displays of the hypnotist's art, but I'm thinking of a situation in which the members of an entire small community—such as the residents of the hotels around this crescent—could be induced to accept a given proposition completely conflicting with reality.'

Clifton stopped washing his hands. 'I thought you wanted to see me professionally. I'm a doctor, not a witch doctor. What are you planning now, Renthall? Last week it was a fete, now you want to hypnotize an entire neighbourhood, you'd better be careful.'

Renthall shook his head. 'It's not I who want to carry out the hypnosis, Doctor. In fact I'm afraid the operation has already taken place. I don't know whether you've noticed anything strange about your patients?'

'Nothing more than usual,' Clifton remarked dryly. He watched Renthall with increased interest. 'Who's responsible for this mass hypnosis?' When Renthall

paused and then pointed a forefinger at the ceiling Clifton nodded sagely. 'I see. How sinister.'

'Exactly. I'm glad you understand, Doctor.' Renthall went over to the window, looking out at the sunshades below. He pointed to the watch-towers. 'Just to clarify a small point, Doctor. You do see the watch-towers?'

Clifton hesitated fractionally, moving imperceptibly towards his valise on the desk. Then he nodded: 'Of course.'

'Good. I'm relieved to hear it.' Renthall laughed. 'For a while I was beginning to think that I was the only one in step. Do you realize that both Hanson and Boardman can no longer see the towers? And I'm fairly certain that none of the people down there can or they wouldn't be sitting in the open. I'm convinced that this is the Council's doing, but it seems unlikely that they would have enough power—He broke off, aware that Clifton was watching him fixedly. 'What's the matter? Doctor!'

Clifton quickly took his prescription pad from his valise. 'Renthall, caution is the essence of all strategy. It's important that we beware of over-hastiness. I suggest that we both rest this afternoon. Now, these will give you some sleep—For the first time in several days he ventured out into the street. Head down, angry for being caught out by the doctor, he drove himself along the pavement towards Mrs Osmond, determined to find at least one person who could still see the towers. The streets were more crowded than he could remember for a long time and he was forced to look upward as he swerved in and out of the ambling pedestrians. Overhead, like the assault craft from which some apocalyptic air-raid would be launched, the watch-towers hung down from the sky, framed between the twin spires of the church, blocking off a vista down the principal boulevard, yet unperceived by the afternoon strollers.

Renthall passed the caf, surprised to see the terrace packed with coffee-drinkers, then saw Boardman's marquee in the cinema car park. Music was coming from a creaking wurlitzer, and the gay ribbons of the bunting fluttered in the air.

Twenty yards from Mrs Osmond's he saw her come through her front door, a large straw hat on her head.

'Charles! What are you doing here? I haven't seen you for days, I wondered what was the matter.'

Renthall took the key from her fingers and pushed it back into the lock. Closing the door behind them, he paused in the darkened hall, regaining his breath.

'Charles, what on earth is going on? Is someone after you? You look terrible, my dear. Your face—'

'Never mind my face.' Renthall collected himself, and led the way into the living room. 'Come in here, quickly.' He went over to the window and drew back the blinds, ascertained that the watch-tower over the row of houses opposite was still there. 'Sit down and relax. I'm sorry to rush in like this but you'll understand in a minute.' He waited until Mrs Osmond settled herself reluctantly on the sofa, then rested his palms on the mantelpiece, organizing his thoughts.

'The last few days have been fantastic, you wouldn't believe it, and to cap everything I've just made myself look the biggest possible fool in front of Clifton. God, I could—'

‘Charles—!’

‘Listen! Don’t start interrupting me before I’ve begun, I’ve got enough to contend with. Something absolutely insane is going on everywhere, by some freak I seem to be the only one who’s still compos men tis. I know that sounds as if I’m completely mad, but in fact it’s true. Why, I don’t know; though I’m frightened it may be some sort of reprisal directed at me. However.’ He went over to the window. ‘Julia, what can you see out of that window?’

Mrs Osmond dismantled her hat and squinted at the panes. She fidgeted uncomfortably. ‘Charles, what is going on?—I’ll have to get my glasses.’ She subsided helplessly.

‘Julia! You’ve never needed your glasses before to see these. Now tell me, what can you see?’

‘Well, the row of houses, and the gardens...’

‘Yes, what else?’

‘The windows, of course, and there’s a tree..’

‘What about the sky?’

She nodded. ‘Yes, I can see that, there’s a sort of haze, isn’t there? Or is that my eyes?’

‘No.’ Wearily, Renthall turned away from the window. For the first time a feeling of unassuageable fatigue had come over him. ‘Julia,’ he asked quietly. ‘Don’t you remember the watch-towers?’

She shook her head slowly. ‘No, I don’t. Where were they?’ A look of concern came over her face. She took his arm gently. ‘Dear, what is going on?’

Renthall forced himself to stand upright. ‘I don’t know.’ He drummed his forehead with his free hand. ‘You can’t remember the towers at all, or the observation windows?’ He pointed to the watch-tower hanging down the centre of the window. ‘There—used to be one over those houses. We were always looking at it. Do you remember how we used to draw the curtains upstairs?’

‘Charles! Be careful, people will hear. Where are you going?’

Numbly, Renthall pulled back the door. ‘Outside,’ he said in a flat voice. ‘There’s little point now in staying indoors.’

He let himself through the front door, fifty yards from the house heard her call after him, turned quickly into a side road and hurried towards the first intersection.

Above him he was conscious of the watch-towers hanging in the bright air, but he kept his eyes level with the gates and hedges, scanning the empty houses. Now and then he passed one that was occupied, the family sitting out on the lawn, and once someone called his name, reminding him that the school had started without him. The air was fresh and crisp, the light glimmering off the pavements with an unusual intensity.

Within ten minutes he realized that he had wandered into an unfamiliar part of the town and completely lost himself, with only the aerial lines of watch-towers to guide him, but he still refused to look up at them.

He had entered a poorer quarter of the town, where the narrow empty streets were separated by large waste dumps, and tilting wooden fences sagged between ruined houses. Many of the dwellings were only a single storey high, and the sky

seemed even wider and more open, the distant watch-towers along the horizon like a continuous palisade.

He twisted his foot on a ledge of stone, and hobbled painfully towards a strip of broken fencing that straddled a small rise in the centre of the waste dump. He was perspiring heavily, and loosened his tie, then searched the surrounding straggle of houses for a way back into the streets through which he had come.

Overhead, something moved and caught his eye. Forcing himself to ignore it, Renthall regained his breath, trying to master the curious dizziness that touched his brain. An immense sudden silence hung over the waste ground, so absolute that it was as if some inaudible piercing music was being played at full volume.

To his right, at the edge of the waste ground, he heard feet shuffle slowly across the rubble, and saw the elderly man in the shabby black suit and wing collar who usually loitered outside the Public Library. He hobbled along, hands in pockets, an almost Chaplinesque figure, his weak eyes now and then feebly scanning the sky as if he were searching for something he had lost or forgotten.

Renthall watched him cross the waste ground, but before he could shout the decrepit figure tottered away behind a ruined wall.

Again something moved above him, followed by a third sharp angular motion, and then a succession of rapid shuttles. The stony rubbish at his feet flickered with the reflected light, and abruptly the whole sky sparkled as if the air was opening and shutting.

Then, as suddenly, everything was motionless again.

Composing himself, Renthall waited for a last moment. Then he raised his face to the nearest watch-tower fifty feet above him, and gazed across at the hundreds of towers that hung from the clear sky like giant pillars. The haze had vanished and the shafts of the towers were defined with unprecedented clarity.

As far as he could see, all the observation windows were open. Silently, without moving, the watchers stared down at him.

