

Locust Years

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This amazing story, written in October 1967 and first published in 1968, is the original version with the hand-written amendments. Most of the inserts are at the bottom of the pages. The ones which appeared on separate pages have a two-way red box link.

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Kinglake opened the thick, leather-bound, log book with distaste for the chore that lay ahead. It was no help to know that it was his own fault. If he had spent a few minutes each week keeping it up to date, he would not be faced now with nearly a year's arrears of entry.

April. The cruelest month. Nothing put down since September last. He fished in an untidy drawer for a vacation list. He would need dates for periods when the school had been closed.

The rhythmic thump of a pile driver started up again and his solid brass ash bowl began to sidle over the desk top.

His long, thin, old-man's hand reached out automatically for a black briar pipe and he filled it carefully in a delaying tactic. With blue, fragrant smoke wreathing gratefully round his head, he started again.

It was a long record. Ran from the school's building in 1892. Copper plate entries on the first pages. Signed every now and then by visiting inspectors to confirm that the children of the deserving poor were being put through their paces and kept in good order. Entries about rickets and head lice. ⁽¹⁷⁾ Not much of that now. Still some though, in spite of the Welfare State. A hard core that even the phalanx of do-gooders could

(A) Up to scratch, you could say.

not wrinkle out of squalor.

He leafed through to 1914. Patriotic messages. A folded blue hectograph stuck in. An illustration from a cyclostyled magazine. There was a spidery biplane, banking at an improbable angle, with a youngster in cadet uniform leaning out waving a Union Jack. On the ground a group of boys were waving back. ^(A) ~~The school had been intimately bound up with that holocaust.~~

November 11th, 1918. News of the Armistice had come in the course of the morning. All boys on roll in those days. They had been assembled in the school hall and had cheered for the return of their brothers and fathers. Well, children would cheer for ~~the war~~ ^{a black pig.} He wondered if they had been any more socially or politically conscious of what it was all about than a similar group would be today. Probably not.

The headmaster had sent the janitor down to the town hall to ask for the rest of the day as a holiday. Not granted. Some regulation was against it. Millions of dead and the opening of a new era; but ~~officialdom was out to keep the books tidy.~~ ^{The books had to be neat.}

Morning sunlight came from tall narrow windows. Warmth in it. He was grateful. Blood getting thin. How many more winters could he stand? Retirement at the end of the session. Good or bad? More of Enid with her iron tongue and uncertain temper. That was a line of speculation he did not

(A) A caption, "We are behind you."

want to follow.

He turned quickly through a hundred pages to his last entry. Changes of style in writing marked the careers of his predecessors in the post. Many of them careful record keepers. How would the next man assess his own crabbed contribution?

Not many pages to body out twenty five years. Bald statements of opening and closing. Many teachers, many children come and gone. What had he done himself? Not a lot. Kept the lunatic fringe of so-called progressives at bay. Allowed his staff freedom to do their job in their own way.

In the yellow light, he could see that the room was full of dust. Extensive alterations were going on. All this wing was due to come down and be remodelled.

Maybe it was the dust that was making him light-headed. He had noticed it for the last two days particularly. Like the beginning of a feverish cold with items in peripheral vision sliding about.

The thump of the machine seemed to catch a harmonic of his heart beat and he felt suddenly that it was controlling his breathing. Too much tobacco. God, he'd have to knock that off. Save it for the home front, where there was more need for a euphoric.

A voice at his elbow surprised him; he had neither seen nor heard Prenton come in.

"Are you all right, Mr. Kinglake?" There was a note

of eager concern in the craft specialist's voice. He was one who found a macabre delight in human pathology. So far, in their quarter century of brink confrontation, he had not yet had the pleasure of finding Kinglake in anything but health.

"All right? Of course I'm all right. What is it?"

"The contractors Mr. Kinglake, I promise you I'll have ^(A) ~~to~~ go, if you don't get them to see reason."

"What's worrying you?"

Prenton had a responsibility for general discipline at the boys' end of the building.

"It's that hole, Mr. Kinglake. There was no call for that excavation. They should have waited till we were off the site. I tell you its like a mine shaft. Anybody falling in there has had his dinner I can tell you. Aye, and his tea."

Kinglake found that he heard the words as though his ears had been shifted away from his head and were passing on the data through a bad line. He forced himself to go through the motions of lighting a match and saw the flame tremble as he put it across the bowl of his briar.

But the words seemed to come clearly enough, "Don't worry about it, man. Nobody is going to fall in. They'll put barriers up before the end of the morning."

"Barriers, barriers. No barriers are going to stop some of these little devils from getting near. Right at the boys' door there. My flesh creeps. Creeps. Every time they

(A) to put in for a transfer,

come out."

"I'll talk to the foreman. Maybe they can put up a solid screen. It won't be there long. I know they start pouring in the filling today."

Suddenly he felt ice-cold, as though he had been spotlighted in a beam of refrigeration.

He clenched his teeth on the mouthpiece of his briar and controlled his voice with an effort. There was definitely something wrong. Pride made him determined to face it alone. He said, "Very well, Mr. Prenton, I'll see to it. Leave it with me."

A form of words. How often had he used it? How often had he found that there was nothing profitable to be done?

He heard the clamour of the construction work break in on him as the door opened, and mute slightly again as Prenton pulled it close behind him. The walls of the room were shimmering as though he was looking at them through the convection currents above a coke brazier.

A solid, dependable artefact - the brass, cauldron-shaped ash bowl had shifted itself until it was chocked against the spine of the log book. He put both hands out and grasped it by its two lug handles. ^{(A) ~~His~~ new paragraph.} His own face, distorted by ~~the~~ curvature, stared back at him from the polished surface. Plumped out. No wrinkles. Under forty you would think. A

New paragraph

(A) From dead cold, he ^{was now}
almost unbearably hot. ^{the bowl was vibrating}
~~the surface~~

^{like a dowsers' rod.}
~~was warm~~ ^{the skin}
~~was~~ ^{was} A focus for more

thermal agitation than could be
explained by the shaft of dusky
sunlight falling there. His head
was pulsing, swelling and contracting
like a pump ~~diaphragm~~ diaphragm.

Beating up to hit a frenetic
rhythm, as though it was aligning
itself to a ^{fluctuating} ~~power~~ power field
concentrated suddenly in this place.

Something had to go. Something
had to break. Kinglake was fighting
to breathe.

blue strip under the chin puzzled him and he saw one hand go up ~~to touch~~ *to his throat*.

The wrist was momentarily strange. ^(P) ~~and~~ Yet he knew it was his. He was not leaving a familiar scene for a fantasy; but waking from a fantasy into reality. ^(B) In front of him was the ~~area~~ ^{site} console. He shivered and stretched. Too many late nights and early mornings. A lot of work to get through before the end of the day shift.

His name was on the panel, Sam Taylor, and he wondered why it had momentarily seemed as though it belonged to somebody else.

Both hands forward on the co-ordinator, he eased it along to take up some slack that had developed in his short cat nap. Excavators were trailing on ~~the~~ disposal cars; ~~and~~ already two tubs were waiting to be filled and a third coming into the screen from the far corner of the site where it had tipped its load.

Not serious ^{out of phase} ~~problems~~; but he prided himself on keeping a sustained and balanced flow of effort. Also there was some waste. The waiting tubs were consuming as much energy as they would if they were working and he had a budget to meet.

Sam Taylor traversed the site and ran the data into a computer bank as it came from his long, oblong scanner.

His machinery was all round the perimeter, like a

(A) Carried a multicoloured flat disk on a metallic strip.

(B) He had ~~been pulled~~ ~~been pulled~~ ~~himself~~ through an iron gate into a new world; which was at once strange and not strange. The brief seconds that it took to orientate were enough to sink the past. Kinglake was long gone.

siege train. Diggers, stabilisers, gyro jacks. He was virtually holding the old building up with one hand and slipping in a new set of foundations. All done with mirrors.

Tape chattered out to give him a written gloss on the state of the operation. All to plan. Bore samples had given a forecast of density and cohesive index that was being justified to a fraction of a percent.

Except at the corner of the site nearest his operations room. That was where the hold up was. There was satisfaction in finding that it was something he could not have been expected to foresee. A development outside the probability level at which he was working.

He pressed a request button for his works technician. Labour force of three for this assignment. All skilled maintenance men. Hardly necessary except for fine adjustments and some resetting of the robot tools when he wanted a change of function. Williams took a minute to answer the call and Sam Taylor suspended work on the foundation for the new tower block. There was plenty to do elsewhere. It was a major reconstruction of the old polytech.

Sweeping through a physical education space, he paused for the recreative pleasure of focussing on the girl who was leading a class through a callisthenic drill. Helda Greer. An athletico-somatic type, currently poised in an arabesque that would have had Rodin's dry bones rattling round for a hammer and chisel.

Williams, coming through the door at his back said sourly, "Must be a hermo. No good that sort. I like something you can get a hold of." He knew it would needle Taylor and it was one in a long line of jabs he had been making since they started the assignment.

At forty-nine Theo Williams had twice missed the regrading which should have put him in the executive slot and he reckoned it was an insult, to be put to work under a man who had stepped straight into control from a desk at Construction Faculty.

Sam Taylor knew it and he had sidestepped every confrontation. He wanted the job to go well and he was prepared to move a long way in a man-management ploy. This time, however, he twisted round and took a steady look at the narrow, Welsh face of his top hand.

There was no mistaking the dark pleasure of malice. He said, evenly, "Okay Williams, keep your mind on the job and we'll get along. This sample. Run it through the analyser and see what we have."

Williams hesitated for a long second, then lifted the shining metal cylinder he had brought in and fed it into the receptor slot on the console. His back was eloquent enough; it said as plainly as if he had spoken it out, "All right you clever, young bastard. You're the boss. But I'll wait my time."

Taylor went on with his review. Only ten minutes to

the midday break. Then he would have to stop work and leave the gear at safe while the two thousand students on the site milled around for their recreation period. He was meeting Helda in the staff refec. Maybe, she would be in a mood where he could push the case along. Get her nearer a frame of mind to accept a marriage contract.

Tracking through a practical History room, he stopped long enough to watch a woolly mammoth materialise in the clear, projection arena. ⁽²⁾ It was at the end of its tether. Bristling with throwing spears, literally foreshortened, because its front legs were sunk to the knees in a pit. Twenty stocky tribesmen were yelling their heads off and pitching lianas over its back to anchor it down.

Watching the History projectors could be a life's work. Would need to be for somebody, or all that redirected imagery would run to waste again. Twenty years now, since the first reflector probes had intercepted those etiolated ripples which had gone out from the Earth's past and were still streaming away carrying pictures of the present. Accelerated and amplified, they were being beamed back again to give the first authentic reconstruction of time past. ⁽³⁾

If he hadn't settled for engineering, Taylor reckoned he could have made a career in it. There was a lot more to do. So far, it was a hit and miss business to get the probes in the right place. No selective refinement was yet possible. Particular

(A)

Behind floor-to-ceiling grilles of
rough insulator.

(B)

Not that it had been done without
recklessy trouble. Massive forces needed
in the amplification stages had been
hard to handle. Spill over and freak
effect had been common. Some projection
~~venues~~ arenas had been turned into
charred ruin. There had been some doubt
about whether his own influx of electronic
machinery would unsettle the field. But as
of now the projection looked okay.

places and particular times could not be isolated. But what had been tapped, put every record that had ever been made out of date. Somewhere along the line, sometime, they would find the piece that finished the jigsaw of man himself. Just where his ancestry lay.

Williams broke in with, "It's a mixture of straight concrete and a plastic filler. Some local soil variant acted as catalyst. Went dense. It happens."

"Not often. What's the index?"

"Fifteen per cent up on what you gave as the maximum tolerance for auto adjustment."

The 'you' was stressed just enough to suggest that Williams himself would not have been so stupid.

Taylor went systematically round his console bringing everything to safe. Work ceased all round the perimeter. He could take a look at the rogue section before he started up for the afternoon run. Meanwhile his tolerance for Williams's attitude was wearing thin.

He said, "We used standard sampling practice. There was no way of knowing that there was a deviant patch at the tower foundation. But since you've brought it up, we'll be sure. Make a fresh sampling at metre intervals, round the tower. See how far the condition goes. I'll look at it before we start up."

In spite of the reasonableness of the tone, Williams

recognised it as a turn of the screw. "That'll take an hour. In my own time."

"If it's time you want, Williams, I can arrange that. All the time in the world. The next Labour Board is Thursday. By Thursday week you could be on a ship for Xuthus, where they need all the civil engineers they can get."

It was the first time he had cracked the whip and he waited for Williams to counter. It was a real enough threat, though. As engineer-in-charge, he had absolute control of the work force and an adverse report could get any one of them up for redeployment. Coupled with a memo on attitude, it would be enough to close promotion prospects for all time.

When it came, Williams's response was almost deferential. "No need for that, Controller. Of course I'll see to it right away."

Eager eyes, light-brown hair curving into the nape of her neck. Still wearing a pale-yellow, practice leotard that melded in like a simple colour change of brown skin, Helda Greer was already waiting at a window seat table. Sam Taylor, making an approach run from her left and unobserved until he spoke into the shell ear turned his way, would have settled for some quote of cosmic grandeur, but in actual fact said, "Hi. Sorry I'm late."

Theo Williams watching it sourly on the scanner

rated it higher than it deserved, working on the warm smile of welcome and the quick turn of the head that sent her hair moving under centrifugal urge. "The smooth young bastard." He toyed with the idea of pushing a non-recurrent shock wave to drop on the table and then reconsidered. "I'll fix him all right and I'll fix him good. This project means a lot to him. When I've finished, he'll wish he'd never taken it on."

He fished round the site waiting for an idea that was in the germ stage to grow by division.

In the History arena, the actualiser was still transmitting and a few students were watching the mammoth through its last agonies. Interrupting that would be something. Part of the contract was an assurance that there would be no interference with the work of the college.

He made some adjustments. Gathered a ~~beam~~^{ball} of free energy from the idle machines. ^(A) Enough to heat and light a fair-sized town. Dropping that in the arena would shatter any wave pattern thereabout. Taylor would have to carry the can and it would take some explaining away.

With nice calculation, he aimed for the centre of the beast's forehead and ~~pushed down the pin.~~ ^{collapsed the containing lines of force.}

For a count of three, he believed he was on the wrong tack. Then matter from round the scene began to fold in. He saw a group of students scatter and try for the door. There was a trembling in the structure beneath his own feet.

(A) Held it in a magnetic field

Two men and a girl, who had been standing up close to the barrier, were drawn through it ^(A) and seemed to be sucked into the animal's slab side.

It reared up. Trailing ropes snapped like pack thread. In a ferocious concentration of energy, it heaved its forelegs out of the pit and was charging for the barrier.

Williams tried to follow ^{reestablish the field} it with the beam; but his hands were slippery with sweat. Suddenly clumsy, he ^{reinforced} ~~was~~ ^{unbalanced} ~~the delicate field set that had contained~~ ^{the} the plasma and a charred swathe of destruction blacked across the screen.

He threw the master key and killed ^{output.} ~~the field.~~ Now he could hear some of the racket that was coming from inside the building. Time to get out.

He picked up his gear and made for the tower excavation. He would be discovered busy about his master's business, seal from the sole of his foot to his widow's peak.

When the plastic wall of the partition at his back shattered towards him and a massive ^(B) head broke through, he was leaning over the hole, guiding a sampling tube into the depths. Turning and stepping back, carried him over the threshold of no return. He was falling; even before a ^{glowing,} crimson-stained tusk nudged into his side.

Sam Taylor heard the outbreak of chaos from the refectory and thought at first that some of his holding jacks had crumpled.

(A) in a mask,

(B) semi-transparent

He was out through the door two seconds ahead of the nearest diner, unaware that Helda was less than a metre behind him.

They were in a spiral circulation space that ran like a processional way to the heart of the polytech complex. Older elements of the building showed up at intervals. Part of Taylor's assignment was to rationalise the structure and bring it all up to 22nd century specification.

Nearing the History arena at the centre, he passed the turn off for his control cabin. That would save time. He checked, turned and cannoned into Helda. There was a brief second to register that she was fully with him in this. Concerned that it should not be any fault that could be pinned on him.

"In here. Use the screen to find out."

Methodically, he started at the middle and went out in concentric sweeps. It was easy enough to pick up. Devastation started in the wrecked arena and trailed out in the wake of some moving agent. Random movement, difficult to get a direction.

Then they saw it. The ^(A) ~~robot~~ had blundered through a relatively thin partition wall and had come up against a piece of the old fabric. Solid stonework that had once been an outside wall. He was nudging at it, swaying backwards and forwards a metre at a time. ^(B) Rhythmic vibration was carried

(A) energy ball filling out the mammoth shape

(B) Somehow, the mind ^{structures} ~~patterns~~ of the original beast were imposing a behaviour pattern on the composite form.

through to the floor at their feet.

Helda said, "I can't believe it."

"Believe it or not, he'll have it down."

"What can you do?"

Taylor was checking round to gather a power surge. The positions of the controls worried him. They were already in rough adjustment.

With a sudden intuition, he knew that they had been used before. Williams. It had to be Williams. Maybe he had triggered this off.

If that were so, another injection of plasma would be the worst thing.

Trying to reason it out, he said aloud, "It hasn't all that much power or it wouldn't be balked by that wall. Therefore we can neutralise it with enough ^{inert} ~~heavy~~ material.

Near the tower, he had already lined up a caterpillar dumper, set to pour in new foundation material. In ten seconds flat, he was in its rugged cab with the controls on manual spinning it slowly on its tracks.

Helda said, "Is there anything I can do?"

"Hold on to your seat."

It was never meant for crossing rubble and they leaned at a crazy angle as he followed the path the mammoth had taken when it backed away from Williams.

Alarm bells were ringing in every corridor. A group of senior staff crossed their path and he waved them away. The dumper was adding to the structural damage and his mind was racing with calculation to assess if the building would take any more or fold up round them.

The mammoth was still there and edged round clumsily to face them. Small red eyes, ^(R) stupid with pain and anger; level with the high driving seat.

As it lumbered forward, Taylor opened the sluice.

A metre-wide jet of grey ^{insulator} ~~sluice~~, hit between its tusks and began to set as it came into the air. Movement forward stopped. Head waving sluggishly from side to side it tried to weigh up a menace which nothing in its past had prepared it for.

Then it was knee deep, with the first layers already rock hard. He shifted the chute and set hoop bands over its back and then filled in, until there was a tight cocoon of material hiding it from sight. When it was done, there was only a grey block, half filling the room. God, that would take some shifting. The foundation material was designed for use where it would never have to be moved again. Days of work there, with a labour gang chipping it out with lasers.

Taylor sat still and considered his losses. Hardly a possibility of meeting contract date. Nobody was going to fall over backwards to make excuses for him. All Lombard

(R) set in a notional, half-resolved lead;

Street to a china orange, they would pull him back to head office and send in another engineer.

Another aspect of the affair struck home. Demoted from the top slot, he was in no position to push ahead for Helda. Only executive grades could jump the statutory age requirement. She wouldn't be around in three years time.

He said with heavy finality, "That's it, then. I'll have to report this to Auto Union. There'll be an investigation unit down within the hour."

"But it isn't your fault."

"Indirectly it may be," - he offered no other explanation and pushed past her to get through the hatch. "Don't hang about here. There may be more to come down."

One thing he could do, and that right away was find Williams and squeeze the pips out of him. He had to know just what had set this up.

The principal of the college, tall, balding, white faced, met him outside his office. "I knew I should never have agreed to this work while the college was in session. Somebody will pay for this. Do you know there are seven students missing? Costly equipment ruined. Rooms smashed. We shall have to close."

projection developed
~~it~~ "What makes you think I had any part in it. That ~~it~~ walked out of your History arena. It had to be stopped."

"Of course. Of course. But what made the actualiser

fail? There are eye witnesses. Technicians at the actualiser control. An external power field was brought in. A failure, to say the least, in your equipment. Criminal charges could lie against your company. Criminal carelessness."

Sam Taylor knew the man had a point; but he was too bitterly aware of the personal angles to try for conciliation. "All right. You'll have your say. As for now, get off my back. See that all personnel are clear of the building. There may be more danger of collapse. I'll make it safe."

Thirty minutes of intensive effort, with his machines moving along silent corridors, shoring, rebuilding, clearing rubble and he was satisfied.

With the extension plans etched on his mind like a blue print, he worked on lines that would fall in with the final requirements for the site. In some ways, it was the most productive half hour since the assignment had begun. Whoever carried on with it, would find that there was no major part of the emergency work that had to be done over.

He had talked to his other two men. Kestler, a heavy, slow-moving Swede who was clearly mystified by the whole business. Andy Clarke, elderly, a man of few words, one of the best workers in the whole Auto-Union labour force. Neither could have done it. Nor did they know where Williams could be.

The sampling gear was out of its rack. Sam Taylor reckoned he could start from there. Williams could have gone

to the tower excavation.

He took Kestler and Clarke along. If Williams was in a homicidal mood, he would need help. In the event, it was Kestler who found the operating cable for the sampler, "Here, Controller. He was working here."

There was a thirty metre drop and a slow swirl of white sludge at the bottom. Darker patches that could be the outline of a body. Water had been coming in from the subsoil.

Taylor said, "Rig a line. I'll go down."

Thigh deep, he found solid ground under his feet and had to walk clumsily to catch Williams and lean him up against the central lump of foundation that his diggers had been finding hard to clear.

As a witness for any side he could only be reached by a crystal ball. Taylor ran his hands over the dense material of the column. Since he was there, he might as well pick up a sample for himself. Other faces were looking down from the rim. A ring of heads staring at the treg in the hole.

They saw him gather in the sampling shuttle and activate it like a drill against the wall. They saw a long dark crack appear, as if the material had a flaw in it, and a ragged, oblong slab two metres high fall out, so that Taylor had to throw himself clear to get from under.

What they did not immediately see was the dark cavity that it revealed and the well-preserved body of a man who fixed him with sightless eyes in a face that was an older version

of his own, before the air got to his vacuum-sealed flesh and it disintegrated into dust.

Sam Taylor collected his personal files and zipped them in a document case. Reaction from Auto Union had been as swift as he guessed it would be. Suspension had been immediate and a relief engineer was even now, very now, on his hot-foot way. There was no doubt, either, how the enquiry would go.

He sat at the console, checking that he was leaving a straight edge for his successor. It was, anyway, something to do and gave his mind a non-self-regarding focus.

Helda Greer was standing behind him before he had registered that she had come through the door.

"I heard you were going and I came right away. I'm sorry. It wasn't your fault."

"That's all right. It could be. I ought to have known Williams was a nut."

"That makes two people you couldn't weigh up" - her hands were on his shoulders and she was meeting his eyes in the reflection on the blank scanner.

"Two people?" - it was not a feint. He really did not know what she was getting at.

"You're making this very hard for a well-brought up girl. I'm sorry about the job; because I know what it means

to you. But I'm not a status-seeker. It doesn't make any difference as far as I'm concerned."

Sam Taylor sat very still. Obstinate he had to be sure. "It will be three years before I can offer a contract."

"I can wait three years." Her head was over his shoulder, hair a fragrant, silk pad against his cheek. She quoted softly - "I will restore to you the years that the locust has eaten."

Even the pale image in the screen carried the affirmative. An earnest that it was ^{indeed so.} ~~as she said.~~ Obscurely, he felt that there was a pattern in it. It seemed inevitable, now that it was out and said. As though something prepared a long time ago had come to fruition. Helda had moved round between him and the screen and leaned back on the sloping presentation table. ^(A)

He put his hands on either side of her head.

^(B)

Kinglake looked stupidly at the brass bowl between his hands as though he had not seen it before in his life.

How long he had been sitting with his arms stretched forward on his desk, he could not tell. But his erect back twinged stiffly as he moved.

Now there was no room for doubt. He would have to see the quack. Get home if possible. Better to phone from

(B)

In the History Projection Lab a maintenance mech snapped back the last panel of a long spread. "Well it's okay. ~~Nothing~~ Nothing gone dis. You say it's ~~being~~ been working true? God knows why. Must have been leaking harmonics all over the opera. You've been dead lucky there were no side effects if you own making. Don't spread it about, or the legal boys wont have a case against Auto Union."

(A) Taylor felt a sudden ~~lightning~~ lightning of spirit as if the ~~old~~ old man of the sea had been lifted off his back.

~~Lab~~ New shock paragraph.
In the History projection lab, ~~the~~ maintenance mech snapped back a panel and said, "Okay try her again. Bring it up slowly, you. You say it worked all right before that surge back? God knows why. Must have been leaking power all over the site." ~~double space.~~

there. Ought he to drive his car? Hell, he was past caring. He felt cold, with an indefinable sense of loss. As though the most important thing in the world had been taken from him. What was that, then? There were precious few things he cared one way or the other about. That was age for you; he had been dying by ~~insignificant~~^{increments} ~~stages~~ for years and now the cumulative check had been rung up. Surprised by regression.

Kinglake heaved himself out of his chair. When he was standing, his legs felt curiously light and tubular. His footsteps came to him as though his ears were twice as far from the ground as usual.

A short dog-leg corridor ran from his office to the school assembly hall and a small reception area inside the main door.

There was the muffled sound of music as a class went through a broadcast rhythm and mime period. It was a typical school noise. That and distant singing, had been a background to his thoughts for more years than he cared to think about.

As he turned left to make for the main door, there was a surge of noise at his back as the hall door opened. Someone coming out. It occurred to him he could use a messenger to tell his deputy that he was going home.

Surprisingly, the girl who was closing the swing door was not known to him by name. A newcomer. Family had moved in from a neighbouring town during the week. Still, she would be

able to pass on the message.

Supporting himself with one hand on the wall, he said, "Just a minute. Before you rejoin your class. Would you be so good as to find Mrs. Charlton. Tell her I have had to go home. I'll telephone and let her know when I shall be back."

She was only two metres away beginning, "Are you sure you're all right to go alone Mr. Kinglake?..."

Now he could see her clearly. Oval face, straight hair, light brown. Very expressive eyes, which held genuine concern, turning suddenly to a puzzled kind of recognition as though she was seeing ~~him~~ ^{someone she knew well, but whose name she had forgotten.} ~~in a new way.~~

His voice was the saddest sound she had ever heard and the words made no kind of surface sense, though at a deep level she accepted that they were meant for her.

"Thank you, Helda. Whether I like it or not, I shall have to manage alone for the locust years. Find Mrs. Charlton."

April sunshine in the porch, blinding his eyes. Kinglake put down his head and went ^{unseeing,} ~~blindly~~ out on a path he had taken for so many years it was part of the furniture of his mind.

It was not until he was in free fall he remembered the tower excavation. He clamped his jaw tight to hold back a shout and hit the bottom erect as a guardsman with his hands stiffly by his sides.

As his feet touched down, the first pouring of a new plastic filler surged from the waiting chutes and filled the foundations to ~~metre above his head~~ ^{seven metres} above his head.