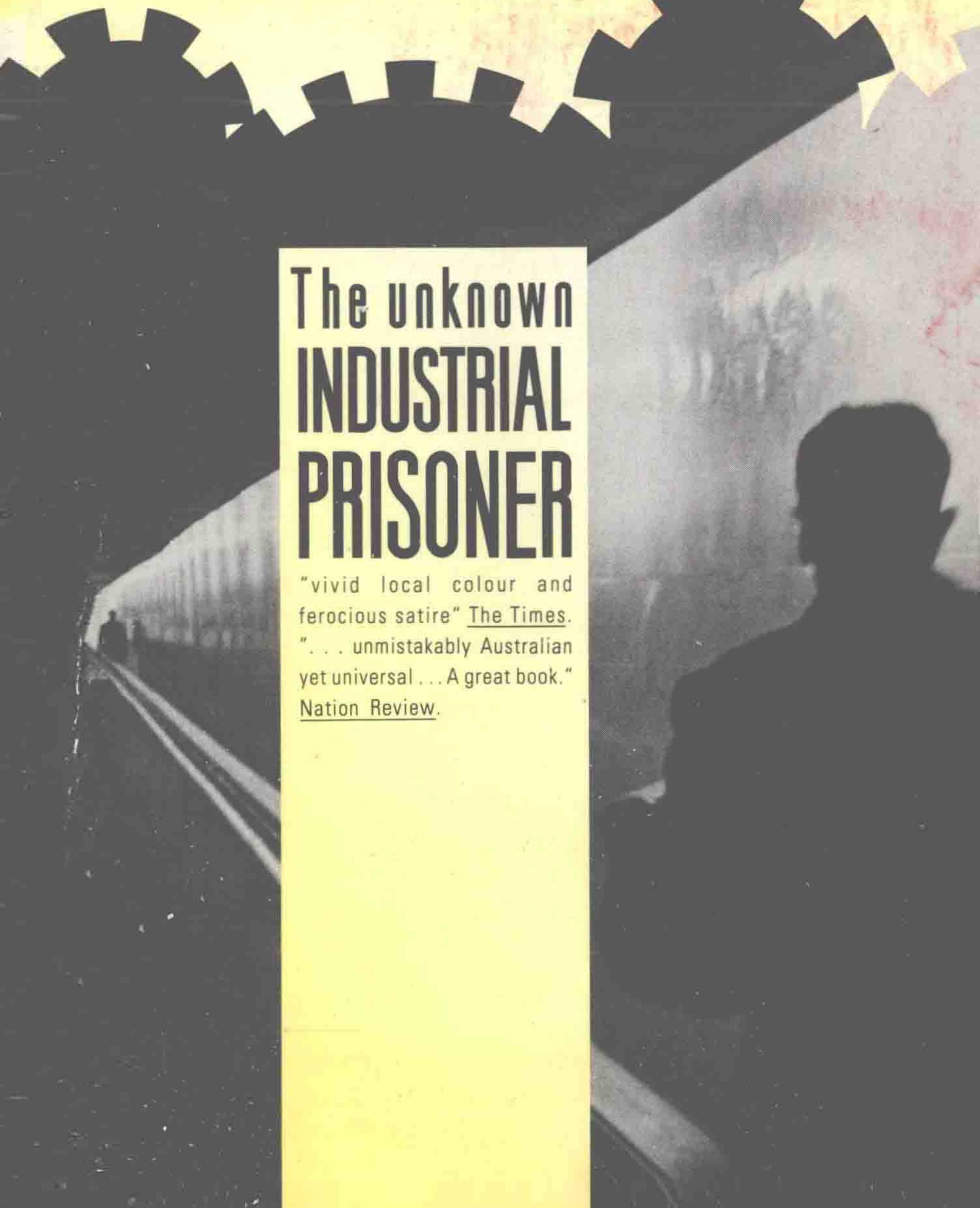
DAVID IRELAND



The unknown INDUSTRIAL PRISONER

"vivid local colour and ferocious satire" The Times.
". . . unmistakably Australian yet universal . . . A great book." Nation Review.

THE UNKNOWN INDUSTRIAL PRISONER

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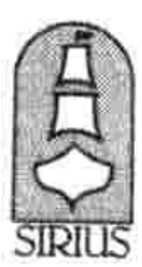

*D*avid Ireland's *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner* won the Miles Franklin Award in 1972. David Ireland has also won the Miles Franklin Award for two other novels, *The Glass Canoe* (1976) and *A Woman of the Future* (1980). His other works are *The Chantic Bird* (1966), *The Flesheaters* (1972), *Burn* (1974), *City of Women* (1981), *Archimedes and the Seagle* (1984), and *Bloodfather* (1988).

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ONE DAY IN A PENAL COLONY

LOWER DEPTHS It was the same every morning. At ten to six reveille sounded. Mostly a broom handle was applied to the green dented side of a locker, one of sixty to hold the clothes of the men of the four shifts. This time someone with a sense of humour had taken a length of two-inch plastic hose and used three or four lockers as a gong, producing a deafening, heart-stopping crash. This was a bad thing to do; it split the hose used to get hot water from the taps over the handbasin into the mop bucket. Finances didn't run to another tap or to the employment of cleaners. The echoes died quickly into the concrete.

'Spread out!' roared the Glass Canoe. His voice was throaty and rich and greedy as if his words were cream. He'd taken his wake-up pill. 'Stand aside or lose a limb!' He was always nasty when it wasn't his turn to go down on night shift. His face smiled when he bashed the lockers with the hose, but that smile was for the Glass Canoe, not the other prisoners. He advanced into the narrow floor space between the rows of lockers with mop and bucket of hot water. Red-eyed, faces puffed and pouchy, hampered and confused by early morning horns, the sleepers were up, desperately scrambling to get hundreds of pieces of scrap rag—their beds—up off the concrete and back into the rag carton before the Glass Canoe could spill hot water on them with the legitimate excuse that the cleaning roster had to start on time. He was a large and formidable man with a history of mental illness; his head full of ambitions, his pocket full of pills, his mouth full of other men's words. He had no trouble getting past Doctor Death when he came up for his medical.

Doctor Death, who would pronounce a prisoner fit for work if he could stand unaided, breathe and had a detectable pulse, was a paid company man in the best understood sense of the word: he knew what his modest two hundred dollars a month was worth and gave service to that amount, making three short visits a week. Six hours. Put out your tongue. Drop your tweeds. Cough. He wasn't paid to look for nervous disabilities, just cripples and dead men.

This was shift 2 at the cracking plant. Friday morning, the last of seven consecutive horror shift mornings. Pay day. The normal visible life at the Administration end of the refinery would proceed for the rest of the day and close down at four. Three other shifts would keep the revenue-producing end going—the refinery itself, whose columns rose spirelike into the distance—and shift 2 would come back at seven Monday morning for another seven days. In this place no day started. Nothing ended or began, things just went anonymously on. Morning was a start for some, an end for others.

They were more than half asleep still; only the fear whipped up by the Glass Canoe's savage voice got them moving quickly. And the heart-thumping shock of his way of waking them. They were demoralized, cold and cramped and stupid and something less than men. This was due to night shift work; no reflection is intended on the economic circumstances they had been allowed by the wise and benevolent workings of an almost planned economy to attain. Strong young men who'd never been tired in their lives were stopped cold by night work.

Night shift was sleeplessness, it was an upside down stomach, bowel movements back to front. It was waking up in sunlight at home after two hours sleep to the sound of motor mowers, children, pneumatic drills, door to door salesmen. It was trying to sleep through summer days drenched in sweat, eyeballs grating in sandy sockets, and waking not knowing what day it was. Or where you were, or who you were. And it stretched before them for the rest of their working lives.

Dust and silverfish dropped from overalls and hair and boots back into the rags from which they came. Look back at the title of this chapter, it has saved me an explanation.

Most stooped unthinkingly to scratch the inch-wide residual scar of chains passed down from father to son, from ankle to ankle for half a dozen generations, their legacy from the bloody and accursed empire which, to the amusement of its old enemies and its powerful pretended friends, had since died a painful, lingering death. Though you would not know this if you examined the laws of the colony: all were promulgated in the name of the sovereign of another country.

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Somewhere beyond the refinery's dome of dust and gas the sun shone splendidly golden.

GENERAL COMPULSION Dutch Treat eyed the glare of day with annoyance and prepared to put his earphones away and pack up his crystal set. Daylight was no time to be contacting God. Night, when stars shone and the impediment of light was removed, was the right time. God dwelt in impenetrable darkness and could only be contacted by radio.

Blue Hills, who usually had a better hideaway up on the structures, pulled the beanie from his head, the woollen cap decorated with concentric circles of red and white. His only contact with the society about him was that he was a onetime verbal supporter of a metropolitan football side and grew orchids in his spare time. A shiftworker now, there was a time when he wasn't; he could still remember going to see the football every week; the yell of the crowd, beer-flushed faces, men selling doubles, ferocious women barrackers, the sly pee into empty cans. It was a long time ago. He had been in for eleven years.

He had fifteen years to go to retire at sixty. It was a long time. A lot of orchids opening and falling and one year less of life for each few years on shift.

The country towns had nothing to offer, no new cities were being developed or dams built in the country's dead centre; prisoners were allowed to drift jobless to the few large coastal cities from all over Australia as soon as they left school, to choose their place of detention. Since wherever they looked the land was owned by someone else, the only place they were not trespassers was on the roads and there were laws about loitering and vagrancy. You had to keep moving and you had to have money or else. There was an alternative. Without alternatives there can be no democracy. There was an infinite freedom of choice: they could starve sitting, standing, asleep or awake; they could starve on a meat or vegetarian diet. Any way they liked as long as they didn't bother anyone. Unemployment payments weren't meant to be lived on. They weren't compelled by others to apply to any one place of labour, but they understood that once accepted for detention their boss or commandant had power over them just as great and far more immediate than the government of the country. To all intents their employer was more powerful, for he was the main point of contact between government and prisoner: he deducted the government's tax. Apart from this he prescribed how and when men should come and go, how they dressed, when they ate, the movements of

their arms and legs, the words they spoke. There were accepted facial expressions, compulsory signs of loyalty, accepted opinions, desirable morals, compulsory attendance on pain of loss of food money, and the rule, made by employers, that the prisoners must not refuse to work no matter how unfairly they considered they were treated. This had once been relaxed and the right to strike obtained, but this right was being eroded away and soon would be no right at all. Employers simply applied to a Court and a strike ban was written in to prisoners' Awards: no one consulted the prisoners. The days of five hundred lashes were gone but in their place were strike penalties of five hundred dollars a day. The word Democracy had been heard for centuries on political platforms but was nowhere to be seen in the daily earning lives of citizens. They knuckled under or they got out. As for having a say in the running of the enterprise that repaid their support by rigidly controlling them . . .

The funny thing was that with all this power, employers were not the State, they were free men. They could come and go out of one industry into another, they could employ or dismiss, make new rules and change old ones. No responsibility beyond the elementary one of providing themselves with a workforce able to work. If they didn't want to pay an extra cent in wages, they appealed to the prisoners' patriotism—think of the economy's good. The economy's good consisted of each employer maximizing sales or profit or both: there was a maximum wage but no maximum profit.

However, these considerations didn't bother prisoners. Fifteen-odd years to go. All Blue Hills had now were the orchids and his beanie—it kept his head warm at night—and the extra money from the shift penalty rates prescribed under the provisions of the Industrial Service (General Compulsion) Bill.

Penalties? Who was penalized? At the best of times any of them could have made only a confused answer to this question, but now all were numb, too numb for thinking, including those who had stayed up almost reading, almost sleeping, almost listening for the phone, almost alert for the steps of inexperienced foremen who did not know the ropes and might come stumbling in on those who had gone down. A Commissioner of Conciliation ruled once that a man was less than fit on night shift, showing a greater understanding of refinery working conditions than any other person who sat in judgment on prisoners' grievances. He was preparing to reduce their shift loading percentage and in fact did, but the fact didn't register, they thought of him as their champion. But no amount of money makes up for lost sleep.

What was Puroil? In Australia it was a few gardens in which distant proprietors planted money and after a while tangled masses of plants grew, though with no fairy princess inside waiting to be wakened with a kiss. Their financial budgets were larger than the States in which they operated. What was Puroil? At Clearwater it was a sprawling refinery, an army of white shirts, a fleet of wagons, a number of apparently separate companies, dozens of monolithic departments protected from each other by an armour of functional difference and jealousy. On the refinery site it was two hundred and fifty shabby prisoners, a heavy overload of foremen, supervisors, plant controllers, shift controllers, up to the giddy height of section-heads (popularly miscalled Suction Heads, a metaphor deriving from pumps) who were clerks for the technologists; project and process engineers and superintendents who were whipping-boys for the—whisper it!—the Old Man himself, the Manager, who was actually only a Branch Manager and a sort of bum-boy for Head Office in Victoria which was a backward colonial outpost in the eyes of the London office, which was a junior partner in British-European Puroil its mighty self, which was the property of anonymous shareholders.

Did these people know their humblest prisoners were asleep on the job? Could they have ridden easily on their magic carpet of dividend cheques if they had known the foundation of their empire was missing? Would they have suffered attacks of vertigo, thinking the whole edifice was tottering? Not at all. For not only was their investment spread over dozens of countries so that whatever tariff barriers were erected Puroil could get underneath them and whatever upheavals occurred Puroil would survive and only people would suffer, but with real ingenuity the humble prisoner was being replaced as the foundation on which the structure was built; machines were to be the foundation. Machines that ran day and night; machines that ran for years. Why imprison these men? Why not free them?

This was a transition stage. The refinery processes were more automatic and needed far fewer men than a manned assembly line, but were far short of automation.

On the job, it was not necessary to do anything about it unless a transition man was caught sleeping. If no one actually tripped over a body there was no need to find one, for owing to the many sudden, strange shifts of Puroil industrial policy, it was not always clear which body was going to be in the soup: sleeper's or finder's. If there was some industrial advantage to be won by turning a blind eye perhaps on the eve of a wage agreement, an eager foreman might easily find himself caned severely and with a bad staff

report. It was demonstrably bad to be one of the lowest bodies, a part of Labour, but being on the Staff wasn't all beer and kisses either. It was a one-way ladder suspended over the cruel sea of separation.

BOOKS VERBOTEN 'What's this!' the Glass Canoe exulted. 'Books! Papers!' He had spied the poor, torn Westerns, science fiction novels and *Reader's Digests* left lying about, and the sheets of newspaper that Bubbles had used to insulate his sleeping rags from the cold concrete.

Books were forbidden to prisoners. Even when the plants ran well for twelve months and there were hours between alarm buzzers on dreary night shifts or between routine checks and instrument readings, the men were expected to sit and stare at the concrete floor; and, to give them their due, most did. Puroil preferred zombies. Standing instructions expressly forbade reading during working hours, or the bringing into the refinery of books or newspapers.

Yet there they were. The company guards in their smart field-grey uniforms and peaked caps—if you took the stiffening wire out of the crown you could have a real Rommel cap, and they did—the guards realized that operator bods could cause them a lot more work if they chose, so they went easy on them. When the men's bags were opened under their noses on the way out each shift, they were blind to little things like paperbacks. They looked mainly for 44-gallon drums. In return, the men obligingly failed to report them when they neglected to open the boots of certain outgoing cars.

The Glass Canoe picked up the reading matter, pocketed a war novel he hadn't read and shot the rest in with the rubbish.

THE HOUR OF THE PEARL The frightful noise made by the Glass Canoe in the locker-room woke the foreman, who sat in the far corner of the foremen's room, his back to the door, apparently gazing down at his hands. He had dozed off. He, too, observed the rule that you didn't sleep obviously. Man is a day animal and Stillsons was very tired. He got his name from a habit of trying to do fitters' work: this led unfailingly to Union trouble but he couldn't kick the habit. Supervisors were not to do operators' work. Operators were not to encroach on tradesmen's work. This was the custom of years—without it where would they all fit in?

When Stillsons pulled himself together and tried with cold water

to splash the sleep from his swollen face, he found from the Western Salesman, who volunteered the information and asked for action, that the Glass Canoe had damaged the men's lockers. He didn't mention he'd been cruelly wakened. He was one of those at Union meetings who sat well back on the outskirts of the crowd and hurled comments, like grenades, into the centre. Then ducked. Stillsons was on the point of tackling the Glass Canoe about it when some of the others came after him into the amenities room where the Glass Canoe was mopping. He mopped with such vigour after his pill, backing out of the room as he worked, that Stillsons was in danger of being impaled on the mop handle. Those behind pretended they couldn't see him and had him in a squeeze. They turned their backs and wouldn't move, pretending to look at the coloured nudes on the wall. To make clear his position you need to know that the amenities room, where fourteen men had their meals, measured fourteen feet by eight; a large part of the space was taken up by three tables, a cold box, oven and sink, all decrepit trade-ins from a dealer's yard; it was half the size of the foremen's office, which accommodated three. Like every building on the refinery it was designed somewhere in Europe. Stillsons was rescued by the Samurai, who came to the door of the amenities room and said, in his cold voice that was never loud but always managed to silence everyone, 'The Enforcer'.

The Samurai never allowed himself to be awakened by reveille, he was up and about before the cleaning roster had to start. No one ever surprised him, but then no one was eager to tangle with him either on the job or outside the massive blue steel gates which so impressively guarded the entrance to the works. The first thing he was told when he started on shift was to keep out of the Enforcer's way. 'Tread on his toes and he'll get you if it takes years.' The Samurai had met men like this before.

Stillsons, however, was made of different stuff. He turned and brushed his obstructors aside and scream-whispered, 'Where is he?' The mention of the shift superintendent's name was enough. He darted around, his head sinking down into his shirt as if he were an animal retracting its vulnerable parts, as if his body remembered the flogging past, his face white from night shift and blank with fear.

'Where? Did he come in? Did he ask for me?' In his anxiety he made to touch the Samurai, perhaps by the shirt, but even this human support was denied him. You didn't casually touch the Samurai. It was very hard to touch him. You didn't see his feet move, he simply slid out of reach. Now he kept after Stillsons.

'Time you went up to report to the Enforcer. There's nothing for

you to do here.' Stillsons hesitated. Thank God the Enforcer hadn't seen him asleep. He'd dob his own mother. 'Unless you want to help with the mop.' The mob laughed heartlessly; no one wanted to side with a foreman, not in a crowd. They would sneak into his office later one by one and square off.

Since this specimen of Puroil management still hesitated, it was necessary for the Samurai to put out a greater effort to get rid of him. To be without a foreman in this part of the morning was a good thing. Once the evidence of the night had been safely stowed and the floors of the amenities, locker-room, toilets and hundred-foot control room had been swept and mopped, and this latest day marked off in scratches on the cement walls, there was time for leisurely dressing and, if you got in early, a shower. There were two showers among the fourteen men, but one wouldn't work if the other was started first. Bubbles was first showered. He wiped a pore closing stink repressant over his armpits for that fresh cool carefree feeling. It kept the sweat in. Choking clouds of baby talc surrounded him. He loved his body and overhauled it for the girls. His tongue was still cocky-caged from the night before, his huge pink belly tight as a drum. He'd had his six hours down. All he had to do now was order a new pair of boots, his present pair were slightly worn at the heel. They'd be worth three dollars at the pub.

The Samurai was quickly dressed and had the next hour to himself for thinking or just picking over the laundered overalls to see if his friends had left him one of his own pairs. He enjoyed this one hour of the shift. At seven they would be out the gate and gone. He had never worked on the better sections of the refinery—pumphouses, utilities, bitumen, distillation, platforming plants—where, on night shift, if the plant was producing and running steady, the men waited for the visit of the mobile canteen at midnight, then for the foreman's visit soon after, then half went straight down, taking their turn in a civilized manner and were wakened at six by the foreman ringing their phone. Yes, that was a better reveille. There were no vacancies on those sections. Months ago, when the Good Shepherd was telling them of the European owners' expansion plans, he'd said 'The honeymoon's over.' With the new investment would come a more rigid control. The cracker was the first big complex needing its own on-the-spot supervision. On all other plants supervisors were visitors; the men kept the plant steady so there'd be no visits.

BIG DADDY The Samurai sat watching the rest of his shift come dressed from the locker-room. Technically they were

citizens, allowed to reproduce at random. A place had to be found for their children, too. As he watched, something like a fine despair seemed to spray up from somewhere inside him and shower his organs of concern with a set of patterned words, the same words that had often risen to his tongue when he saw them attacking each other openly or in secret. It was man against man at every level and the company suffered from the situation's wastefulness, but no one saw it as a blot that should be published, condemned, eradicated. Poor devils, you can't take care of yourselves, you need a father to watch over you and fight the battles you should be fighting against the false and the unfair, the cruel and the oppressive. . . . And, as usual, he knew that although he had heart and ability for such a fight and many wanted him to be their delegate, to stand in the front line and take the company's first shots, he had never convinced himself that he had the basic inclination. Mostly the Union attracted men looking for an excuse to get off their plants when they felt like it. Those with ideas, energy and initiative got a second job outside. The Union knew only one thing: how to go for money. But what was the use of a wage increase awarded because prices had risen and industry could afford it, when as soon as the increase was awarded prices rose again because industry couldn't afford it? If the Samurai had been a man of ambition, self-seeking could have carried him through and he could have built a career on serving them, but not from love. He did not—he could not—love his brothers.

And yet he had no inherited ankle scar to scratch.

Official, pompous things amused him. He chuckled still over the name Puroil Refining, Termitary & Grinding Works painted in large letters on control block walls. Every so often it was painted out, but it always reappeared. He repeated the name aloud to the others. Few laughed. Only the Great White Father, who had written it. He met this man on his first day at the plant, as he started on afternoon shift, just before the day workers went home.

He said, 'There's our termitary', as they passed the administration block in the company bus, and sure enough there were the little ant-people running up and down stairs, on view behind plate-glass, arguing silently with each other or sitting impassively for hours in offices equally on display. A glass box, completely enclosed except for tiny ventilation holes. He had worked there himself before transferring to the works, but he had never seen the building this way before. A great manorhouse watching over its feudal fields and wage-serfs.

'What about the grinding works?' he asked the Great White

Father, who was exceedingly tall and bony and good-natured.

'The whole thing is a grinding works. Each man, if he lets it happen, is ground down a little each day until, finely and smoothly honed of all eccentricities and irregularities and the originality that could save him, the grinding suddenly stops at sixty. Then they shot you out. You wait five years to qualify for the old age pension, and when you qualify you make your choice: whether to take the government one or carry on with the company pension. They're pretty close to the same thing, in cash. Under our beneficent social system, one disqualifies you from the other. Most of us won't have to worry, we're all specially picked and processed so we peg out within a year or two of retiring. The system is further safeguarded; in the last few years of service they down-grade you so your pension won't be much, anyway, in case you escape the health hazard. You see, your pension amount is tied to your earnings in your last couple of years service. Demote you, pay less. You're just an item of cost. The bigger the organization, the smaller the value of each man in it. And this one's huge.'

The very tall man's sea-blue eyes sparkled and danced so much during this short lecture that the Samurai kept listening attentively so as not to miss the joke, which he felt sure was coming. But no, the Great White Father was serious. He seemed to enjoy talking—the sort of man who enjoyed everything. Laughter patterned his deeply creased face, lined with the scars and lacerations of a varied, reprehensible, non-respectable, wholly enjoyable past.

'You said, if a man lets it happen . . .'

'If you let them grind you down, yes. You don't have to.'

'What else?'

'Fight 'em! Every step of the way!'

'They've got the whip hand. What do you fight with?'

'Smiles, a quick wit, sex, alcohol, and never say Yes to the bastards. Once you recognize the place is a prison, you're well off. The best that can be said is everyone draws an indefinite sentence. The final horror of a life behind barbed wire is mercifully withheld.' He glanced out at the high wire fence they were passing then, topped with several strands of barbed wire. 'You see, the battleground where they beat you is in here.' His long, friendly brown hand lay relaxed on his own high, resonant chest.

But just where the Samurai was expecting him to go on, he suddenly stood. The bus stopped. Their crew was decanted like a carelessly handled bacterial culture outside the host body of the low grey control block on their growing plant. Drawn by a power unseen, the human bacteria quickly made their way inside and were apparently devoured. Gunga Din, lean, brown, small and dry,

went first to the urn to check the water level and turn it on ready for the first cup of tea.

The Samurai tried to catch up with the Great White Father, and did succeed, but all he would say was: 'That's where your Gallipoli is, in there.' And a long, bony finger prodded his chest, then was gone, busy with locker key and bootlaces.

'What do you mean, an indefinite sentence?' He felt foolish as he persisted, but this seemed to be a man worth talking to. The rest talked interminably of second-hand cars and overtime.

'Indefinite? You don't know when you'll get the bullet, do you?' And turned away to sniff his boots, then to scratch his right ankle. When he had his boots on, he went to wipe some dried mud on to a pile of rags in the corner, but stopped himself in time. The Glass Canoe didn't, and was busy rubbing his feet on the rags before the Great White Father tapped his shoulder.

'Humdinger,' he said. The Glass Canoe looked down. The rags stirred and stretched, yawned and looked up.

'Is that what you think of your fellow workers?'

'Christ, I'm sorry, mate,' said the Glass Canoe and everyone gaped. Perhaps he was getting sick again.

On the job, events moved slowly. On the drawing board in the Admin block though, for eight hours a day, the pace was frantic until four, when the white-shirted multitude suddenly went home. Their effort might have been more wisely spread over the twenty-four hours to take advantage of the quiet of the dark hours, but white-collar men don't yet do shifts.

The tall man had another word for him when he was dressed for work. 'No one enters those blue gates only to make gasoline, bitumen or ethylene from crude. Oil *and* excreta, that's what they fractionate here. Us and oil. With foremen, controllers, suction heads, superintendents, managers and all the rest, there's maybe forty grades. Forty grades of shit. That's all any of us are. White shirts, brown shirts, overalls, boiler suits, the lot. Shit. The place is a correction centre. The purpose of giving you a job is to keep you off the streets. It's still a penal colony. All the thousands of companies are penal sub-contractors to the Government.'

Puroil's land included a stretch of what had once been parkland. Residents' petitions, questions in Parliament, real estate developers' organized, agonized pleas, no amount of democratic pressure was able to beat a foreign oil company. A few words were altered on a piece of paper somewhere, the parkland was declared industrial land and Puroil had a foothold in New South Wales. The total of 350 acres included, on the river side, some of the swampiest land this side of Botany Bay, but mangroves were cleared, swamp flats

partitioned and drained and filled until only a few dozen acres on the river bank were left in their natural state. Another hundred acres of mangroves still stood on the other side of Eel River, just down from the gasoline depot of a pretended rival of Puroil: Puroil supplied them from a nice fat silver pipeline that nuzzled into the slime of the river bed and came up again out of the ground handy to their shiny white tanks.

Puroil supplied the depot of another company too, with a line that ran half a mile under cleared clay. Wagons of rival companies that ran out of their own brand, simply called in and gulped down a load of Puroil, went out and sold it as their own. Even Puroil sent out grey unmarked wagons—they had brother companies with different names. The rival companies fixed the price between themselves in the first place, the Government approved their figure then made a big deal of getting them to reduce half a cent a gallon when crude went down a cent. Then they all advertised like mad and called it competition.

At Puroil, the largest vessels of the new cracking plant were in position and complicated mazes of pipelines were being lagged with glass wool and aluminium sheet. Turbines, pumps, compressors, heaters, coolers, columns were assembled from many parts of the world, there were even a few girders and pipelines from Australia. Puroil never gave out the usual unctuous bumph about the refinery belonging to the Australian people; it was very clear that whatever faceless people owned it were a long way off. They were clever faceless people. At that distance they were able to persuade Australians to pass an Act of Parliament subsidizing their search for more oil. Even with retained profits and the help of liberal depreciation provisions they didn't feel able to bear the full cost themselves. They even persuaded Australia that Puroil's increased wealth was good for Australia. The way they put it was that it was Australia's wealth.

The plant was a new design, the first of its kind; there was a power recovery system hooked in to the catalyst reaction and regeneration cycle. Integrated, vulnerable, but designed to save half a million dollars a year on fuel bills. This one complex of twelve plant units cost forty million dollars. Even so it was an economy plant, as it said in the operators' manual. The overseas owners weren't willing to provide enough standby equipment. On two thirds of design feed-rate the cost would be recovered in two years, after which the profit was enormous. And in seven days of twenty-four-hour running, the wages of the sixty men operating it would be paid for one year out of profit on gasoline alone, aside from sales of steam to neighbouring industries, top gas for the ethylene

compressors, gas and slurry oils to the gasworks, low pressure gas for bottling, cycle oils and furnace oil to the many little oil processing factories that sprang up round the refinery. The normal cracker, they were told, ran continuously for eighteen months to two years before shutting down for inspection and repairs.

WONDERS OF THE WORLD While the Samurai and the rest of the troops were down in the control room waiting the last half hour for the bus that would take them up to the blue gates a thousand yards away, other bipeds had come out of the structures. One of these was Far Away Places.

Far Away Places had been standing on a metal grating two hundred feet up, looking west into the light mist lifting from the distant Blue Mountains. His night had been quiet and solitary, with no nightmare awakening, on several bags inside one of the top walkways in the reactor vessel. Until the plant started there would be no regular work for men like him, and in the absence of intelligent operator training courses, he and the rest had nothing to do but learn the plant, which meant study flow schemes and walk over the structures. On night shift, it meant melt into the darkness and keep out of sight. There had been a course, but the instructors had only been able to talk about cracking plants they knew in other countries, and this one was different. Neither instructors nor men had ever seen a power recovery system.

As he looked down at the squat control room with its flat roof already scarred by well-aimed bolts and metal droppings from the welders, Blue Hills and little Gunga Din came out to empty rubbish from small tins into large tins. He saw how like rats they were, darting about outside for a space, then ducking back to shelter. The air was gauzy with gas.

'Look at it,' he said aloud. 'Air. Running with crap. Call that air. We breathe that shit in.'

If only a man could get away. A small farm somewhere. A man could produce all he needed to eat, you'd never need go near places like this, never be herded on to an assembly line or a process and never have to muck in with people you hated. Other people. Keep to yourself. A few sheep, fruit trees, bit of a garden. Christ, it was a glorious dream! It was freedom.

Freedom? It was isolation and that was better. Feel of the wind on your face, the sun warming you, the grass growing the same as it had for millions of years. Mending the fences. Enough food for you and the dogs. A dream. A man wakes up one day, realizes the world was made for other people and knows he's going to be at