

No matter what people say, one place, as Quant Aut discovered, is not just like another. Consider, for example, the wicked planet Chromata . . .

THE ULTIMATE SIN

by Rosel George Brown

HAVING TRAVELED MUCH, Quant should, as he had been told he would, have found that one place is so like another that one had just as well stay home and look for bluebirds in one's back yard.

This rule, however, applies only to those who keep finding themselves wherever they go. Quant had avoided himself all his life, probably by accident. There is supposed to come to each of us, in our adolescence, that point of self-realization, of identity, when one says, My name is Quant Aut and I am I, with all that implies. And then, had this happened, say, to Quant, he would have painted himself blue (or whatever) to frighten his enemies and ornamented himself with a torque (or whatever) to please his friends and within a short time no one, least of all Quant Aut, would have suspected he had not been born with these appurtenances and would carry them to the grave.

Quant, as it happened, was asleep or perhaps had a bad cold on Self-realization Day, and therefore remained a child well into his adulthood.

Anyway, one place is *not* like another.

There had been, for instance, the planet Erx, which no one had ever seen but Quant Aut. The planet Erx, it is true, was a scientific anomaly—but more of the planet Erx later.

At the moment Quant Aut, whose ship had been landed by automatic controls while he finished the process of emerging from suspended animation—at the moment . . . but it seems so unlikely! Quant, who had all his life believed *everything*—which is the only way to learn things, as children do—Quant for the very first time could not believe his eyes.

There had been no question on the planet Erx, you understand. He saw the thing and that made it real, and if the scientists came

along later and proved it was there by means of the most delicate instruments with indescribable names, that was all right. If, on the other hand, they had proved it was not there, that would have been their loss and not Quant's.

But what Quant sees now, or thinks he sees, and he is at this moment losing his innocence—not around him, where it should be, but below him as he walks out and stands on air, is a world sparkling with all the colors unknown to man.

Unknown to man.

Not mauve or off-orange, but completely new colors, which Quant could naturally not describe or compare to anything at all. If you knew only blue, how would you describe red?

It hurt his eyes and it hurt the inside of his mind and he was immediately afraid of it. It was alien as nothing else had ever been alien—something even Tennyson could not have been a part of and for which the bell would not toll.

It was, of course, evil—as it could not possibly be included in the Humanities—and Quant stood and gazed down at the evil of it and the alienness of it, and as his childhood passed from him and the scales fell from his eyes (or rose before them, depending on your view of maturity) and what had previously been in him a spirit of adventure and a childlike curiosity about life and creation—be-

came an exultant desire to plumb depths no man had ever plumbed before, to align himself with unnatural forces, to do something utterly unhuman, utterly monstrous utterly unique.

In short, to sin.

Now Quant was a Unitarian, and as such had been short on sin, Unitarians normally have to figure out what is sinful and then do it and then decide whether or not they should feel guilty, and by the time they've done all that it isn't fun any more—like having to explain the punch line of a joke.

Quant knew that what he was supposed to do, upon discovery of such a planet, was radio back his coordinates and a description of the planet, along with the automatic information from the Planet Analysis tapes, which were recording automatically, or had he remembered to turn them on? All this so that in case he died or got lost at least his initial discovery would not be lost to science. And also because if he failed to report in later, and someone should notice it, and if there were a ship happening to be going nearby (an unlikely eventuality), rescue might possibly be contemplated. Mostly rescue was too expensive, but there was always hope.

So, to forestall the possibility of an unwelcome rescue, Quant took the precaution of making sure he hadn't switched on any communications equipment by mistake.

And prepared to descend into the fulminating colors and shapes of the wicked planet Chromata—for he named it Chromata.

Chromatose, he thought, gazing down through the clear atmosphere. I am becoming chromatose.

Quant checked the planetary analysis—which showed, for one thing, that the planet did not exist and for another that the atmosphere was deficient in oxygen.

Still, there *was* oxygen (some) and atmosphere and nothing poisonous to the lungs, so Quant reentered his ship—with some little difficulty as he found the wind had blown both he and it about a little—and removed his clumsy suit.

He inserted an oxygen capsule into his saphena magna, managing, because he'd had plenty of practice, to spill no blood at all, and he closed the temnomy smoothly on the vein of his ankle and again on his epidermis.

It was a very useful thing to have, this temnomy. Observing suitable sterility, one could insinuate medication into the bloodstream without needles, and the opening and closure were smooth and painless, the flesh binding like the closure on a skinsuit. It was also—the occasion for this does sometimes arise in the life of an adventurer—a suitable spot for quick-acting poison—quicker and less distasteful than swallowing something or cutting something.

Quant then strapped on his pack, which was an easy enough process because he and the contents of his ship were behaving as though they were in free fall—which, according to the instruments they were not. Instruments, however, have their limitations, it being a tricky business to define stasis, since a ship stationary on a planet is moving in the direction and with the speed of the planet's rotation, and also its revolution, not to speak of its acceleration with respect to its galaxy, and the acceleration of its galaxy with respect to the rest of existence, and other unthinkable things.

Quant stepped out of his ship again and realized thoroughly that he was not going to fall to the surface of the planet. Within a hundred miles of the planet, watching its slow, color-twinkling rotation beneath him, he was not falling to it.

The planet Erx, which he had considered the living end, was no precedent. Indeed, he now realized the planet Erx was humanoid.

The planet Erx was simply very tenuous. But this fact did not make it register non-existent on the instruments. It had mass and gravity one-tenth that of earth—though of course the curious behavior of the inhabitants of Erx . . . but more of that later.

Gravity—of course. Quant laughed aloud and called himself several bad names—a habit ac-

quired by lone travelers who have no companion to so designate.

"You sib of a Grilch!" he shouted. (This filthy expression came from a creech house in the lower Venusian swamp area.) "You postprandial trachelesthal . . ."

The planet must be without gravity, which was why his instruments did not recognize its existence.

Then how did it hold its atmosphere? Not speak of the anargent glitter of sinuosities that one would assume were the various shapes of planetary water.

The atmosphere had weight—at least it had resistance—though musn't all matter? Perhaps the gravity was in the matter *on* the planet, the extraneous matter attracting the planet unto itself rather than the usual reverse situation.

In which case if there were any attracting to be done, it would have to be done by Quant. And since the ship's instruments had no provision for landing on a non-gravitic planet, it being difficult, in the absence of gravity, to tell which way is down and to ascertain when bottom is reached, Quant would have to land the ship himself. Manually. That is, he would have to tug it down with his hands.

Whereupon Quant lowered the ship to within fifty feet of the surface—as low as he dared chance a possible crash—and got out of the ship and drifted the rest of the

way down by squirting compressed oxygen at the sky and pulling the ship along behind him by a handhold.

Set amidst a confounding kako-phany of color, his senses disordered by an atmosphere of danger from moving forms—entelechally alarming, not red but of red meaning—Quant felt his space ship tugged at, and winds blowing, and wondered if he would have to tie it by a string to his hand and tug it around after him like a toy balloon.

Something *was* tugging at it. Not blowing winds.

Something pulled at the ship, and, now more strongly, Quant dragged along behind.

He was beginning to be very much afraid. Not only for his human soul, which is really rather vague and usually disappears on sunny mornings, but for his life. What weapons would he need, here where the Humanities did not apply? Not, no doubt, the ones he had.

He shook at his head, trying to clear it of color, so as to be able to see the moving shapes around him. Color and form should be two different things. But for him they blurred here. He fought to open his mind as in nightmares he'd fought to open weighted eyes.

Sounds, too. There was a sur-surruration of sounds, whistling softly in waves and having a physical touch about them, as though they

roughed the hairs of his body.

Quant shut his eyes tight and tried to clear his mind of everything he'd learned between the ages of one and three. This is not easy to do, but since Quant had always accepted each day as an act of faith, he now had only to shift into reverse to come forth with an act of disbelief.

Now his mind felt clear.

He opened his eyes to see it was mostly he that was moving rather than the landscape.

And an interesting landscape it was, if rather unsettling.

But feeling he could perceive his surroundings, and possibly even give names to classes of things (a sort of magic way to control them), Quant lost the section of fear closest to his bowels and proceeded to concentrate on what was pulling at his ship and how to stop it.

"Ho there!" he called (what does one say in such a situation?).

Immediately he was stopped with a bump that almost knocked him out and looking around the ship he noticed that the landscape rushed away in a ten-foot circle around him.

"Ho there!" he called again, and the landscape retreated further, rather in the fashion of Alice Ben Bolt.

Had it been this vegetation, or whatever, dragging him along?

He walked carefully about the ship, remembering to behave as

though he were in free fall, and filing away for future cogitation the fact that the landscape was not all on the ground. It floated at various levels and the interesting cloud formations were more likely to drop ripe fruit on his head than rain.

Though of course they wouldn't drop. They'd just hang there. Which led Quant to wonder what they grew on or in, if not soil. Air-living, perhaps.

The sursurrated loudened and trembled and Quant got the definite impression he was approaching it. Whatever had been dragging him along was also making that sound.

Quant held his thumb on the button of his gun.

"Stick 'em up!" he said, coming around the curve of the ship and thinking that one thing he had never learned was how to use a gun in free fall.

He came then upon a structure of Euclidean nicety which was simultaneously untelescoping vertically and spreading to the ground laterally. Wire-like projections hummed and trembled. Spreading slowly for about a twenty-foot square it began to sink into the ground and as the wires went down the humming stopped all at once, as though in the middle of a phrase, leaving Quant feeling as though he'd gone deaf on a dominant seventh.

Quant examined the skin of his

ship with a contraction of the intestines—other people may feel things in their hearts, but Quant was more likely to feel them lower down—for some sort of damage had been done and since it was of a subtle nature he wouldn't know enough about it to fix it. The color and texture had been changed on a spot forward of the jets. The metal was—not exactly pitted—waffled, or plaided, in a tiny pattern left inlaid with acerulian colors.

Also, when he moved back a bit to see if any other damage had been done, the ship leaned back on its tail and stuck its nose up into the air, and stayed that way.

It had acquired a bit of gravity.

"Well, God damn," Quant thought, and he got out a sandwich. Not really a sandwich, of course, but a compressed capsule which he hoped there was sufficient oxygen in the air to make into what is euphemistically referred to as a "meal."

There was, and he sat down on a convenient boulder to eat (drink) it and this required a bit of wrestling because he'd forgotten about the null-grav business.

At least, was his first thought, my ship is anchored.

And I, was his second thought, feel different and a little heavier, at least not quite so floaty—does one collect gravity here?

The air in his lungs, no doubt, leaving tiny deposits of aerial mat-

ter with its peculiar gravity. And dusts of some sort on his skin suit—though his skin suit was supposed to repel dust and light matter of all sorts. Still, light matter would not exist here, so it would be heavy matter.

He looked his skin suit over and decided it was making him itch, so he took it off. Actually what he wanted was to *feel* the planet he had been hearing and seeing.

He should have worried about himself, because two senses are enough for most people to sightsee with. One investigates with a couple of senses and a lot of instruments.

But what he was doing was not investigating. He was abandoning himself to an inconceivably alien world and not being overly intellectual, he found mere mental abandonment unsatisfying.

And he was not accustomed to abandoning himself with his clothes on.

His cigarette burned badly but he drew at it anyway and saw that the smoke changed color in the air, and that the air was inhabited, too. Not, like the planet Erx, with barely visible beings who seemed solid only as to their edges—and it was because of their edges that he was forced to observe their disgusting . . . but Quant was in no mood to contemplate the disgusting customs of the planet Erx.

The air on Chromata was gay and shapely with swarms of vege-

tation—or perhaps dust or animal matter or both or all—that undulated and danced and showed the shape of the wind. And sometimes they rose and spread and draped across the sun, and sometimes they spread across the ground in ropes or sheets and when Quant went to grab one, to discover the nature of its feel, it wrapped itself around him and tickled his nostrils and made him sneeze.

Quant laughed and looked at his watch, which was always correct and which ran on the pulse of his blood and because of his relatively calm nature and lack of disease generally was pretty close to solar time. It told him when to eat and when to replenish oxygen and when to sleep—all things an explorer must frequently do in minimal ways. It also told him approximately what time it was relative to other people, since we all keep approximately the same time.

It told him he had a couple of hours left on his oxygen, and he laughed into the wind and let the sheet-like Chromatan thing slip more tightly about him.

It was an odd feeling. Rather the way a woman must feel when she's wearing a satin drape-dress. It must slither across her skin as she moves.

Quant unwound the thing from him—it was quite heavy—and watched it sheet off in the wind.

It wafted toward the right and reached an orange sticklike projection that leaned up from the earth. And it wound around the angular body and digested it, down to the ground, so that the geometrical thing no longer existed. And the sheetlike thing changed color and divided into two and blew off in a sparkle.

Animal, Quant asked himself, vegetable, or mineral?

The really important question is, am I edible.

He looked at his arms and they were foreign. The hairs on his arms were inhabited with dust or parasites—not saffron, not indigo, but wrong-colored—and he couldn't help wondering if he were being absorbed. He brushed at it and it didn't come off like dust (but then this wouldn't be normal dust). It could be scraped away with the knife from his pack, but then it stuck on the knife and more collected on his body.

It didn't hurt. It just sat there.

He was getting heavier all the time, and it was much more comfortable than free fall. He liked, too, to think that he was attracting the planet, instead of the planet attracting him.

He started back for his ship, because he suddenly realized he should not have taken his eyes from it, and then he stopped.

Something was talking to him. No, at him. Insistently and in whispers and mutters and mur-

murs and occasionally a slightly angry emphasis, sounding like the clearing of a throat. So he stood stock still, as a child would when he can hear from the next room the murmur of conversation which is no doubt about him, but can't make out the separate words. And he tensed his lips across his teeth, which is a marvelous way to improve the hearing, and concentrated all of his energies into his ears.

It was coming through. Yes. He was beginning to under . . .

"God damn it, you're standing on my head!" it said. (It didn't actually say it in Terran words like that, of course, and it wasn't actually a head, but this is the sort of phrase that can be made comprehensible even in a foreign language. And even if the other thing isn't a language, but more an agitation of the motes of the air and a teasing of the prickle cell layer of the skin.)

Quant jumped to one side quickly, which sent him sprawling not quite to the ground (he wasn't heavy enough to have much balance yet).

The thing drew itself around into a circle and said reproachfully, "Why did you hurt me if you didn't want to eat me?"

"I didn't know you were there," Quant answered. "I'm sorry."

"That's nice for you, but it doesn't help me. You have no consciousness?"

"Of course I have consciousness. I just wasn't noticing where I was walking."

"Mutually exclusive statements," the creature stated. "Well, what's wrong with me? Why aren't you eating me?"

"Eat you!" cried Quant, regarding the set of iridescent blisters with whom he was conversing.

"I know I can't eat you because you popped two of my blebs when you stepped on my head and you were no more absorbable than dirt and now you say that you don't want to eat me. You *can't* eat me! That's what it is." The creature retreated and extended its blistered surface into a unresolvable ellipse which set Quant's teeth on edged. "You're not human!"

"I'm not human." But of course, Quant thought, I'm only translating what the creature is obviously trying to say into words and they can't be expected to match very well.

"The One remains," the creature quoted, or so it came out in Quant's neural response, "the many change and pass; But you can't change and pass."

"You mean you all eat each other and change form but retain some central consciousness so you don't really die? It sounds very comforting. You see, I've never been really satisfied by the thought that I would turn into grass and flowers when I die, because I won't *know* I'm grass and flowers. It

would make a big difference if I thought a flower knew it was a flower, and particularly if it also knew it was me. It was I, I mean."

"I don't absorb you," the creature said. "And I mean that was a double entendre. And there's something else wrong with you. You lean at odd angles. It's not just unrhymic, it's . . . eerie."

"I'm nongravitic," Quant said. "You see, where I come from, the planet furnishes the gravity. I mean, I've got the same amount of gravity I thought all matter was supposed to have, but no more. I depend on the planet to keep me in the proper position. Whereas gravity seems to be a property of you instead of your planet."

"You're *dirt*!" the creature coughed in a sursurrated scream. "You're a great, big walking blob of dirt!"

"No, no," cried Quant, forgetting to whisper, and to his horror the creature popped all its blebs and a mournful liquid poured out into the ambient atmosphere, and it shuddered and streamed away from him.

The vegetation round about sank into the ground or slid away or floated off, each to its nature.

"I must go and warn the Others," the dying (Changing and Passing) creature hissed. "Who's hungry?" Quant heard it broadcasting. "I've got something important to be absorbed. Who's hungry?" And it blew away.

Which left Quant to clamber up his ship to the port, wondering if he were going to be attacked by the creatures of Chromata.

What I should do now, Quant thought, is I should go home, provided my ship will fly. It was odd to remember, but he really did have a home. A wife who, by now, was really a good deal older than he, because of the time he'd spent in hiberno, but whom he still loved when he was around her—partly because Quant had never sat a set of values that required women to be young, and partly because she kept having this or that plasticized and she gave fair to die young no matter how long she lived.

Yes, there was Annamarie, who was always glad to see him, and perfumed the bed when he came home, and who was also a little glad when he left, for she had arranged her life without him and while of course she loved him, it was easier and less confusing to love him at a distance and devote Sunday afternoons to writing him long letters. But if he took off now and went home she'd be very glad to see him and so would the children—no, they were no longer children—still, they'd always been fond of him and Annamarie had done such a good job they really thought he was a marvelous father, which of course he wasn't.

He had responsibilities, which were well covered by insurance.

And a responsibility to science, which he found he really didn't care about.

After all, Quant thought, entering his ship and finding it distasteful, what does science care about me? And besides, Chromata had something Arts and Sciences could speak about only in vague generalities.

Immortality.

Quant ran his tongue over his lips and came away with a taste like . . . not like anything else. Like the float of a bubble, perhaps. Or air where the wind has been.

I'm eating things and breathing things, he thought. Will I change?

But he had already changed.

The inside of the ship was the wrong shape and there was no voluptuousness in even the softest of the cushions, or the small supply of aged brandy, or the tapes of magnificent music, or any of the other few human pleasures which are small and portable.

Whereas Chromata . . .

Quant went outside again, climbed down and planked out on the ground, leaning on his elbows and watching an incredible sunset stretch up from the horizon and around the levels of life that floated in conscious peace over Chromata.

Was he sliding or were the tetragonous growths over there moving? There is no proper human organ to tell us we're moving,

which can be confusing in train stations.

It was the ground beneath him, Quant found, as his elbow slid away. It was coming alive with the sunset.

A nocturnal creature, he thought, rolling over and getting up quickly, in case he were on somebody's head again.

The ground shifted and moved about him and softened and Quant found himself wondering how deep it was.

And wondered if this indicated a strong death wish, and if so, whether it could really be counted a death wish, since Chromata held in its digestive system the juices of immortality.

The more Quant thought about it, the less patient he felt with his mortal coil. For he would like to be a glinting sheet blowing in the wind, or a collapsable lattice, or a floating cloud, or even a sluggish marsh flowing over the earth, spread for whatever moons might rise.

Quant hadn't even checked to see what moons the planet had.

Darkness rushed out at him, but it was not the night, it was the earth, or the ooze of the earth, beneath which he sank and his eyes were gone and his mouth was stopped.

It really doesn't matter, he thought. I've got my oxygen capsule and I don't need to breathe. Not for a little while.

Besides that, it really didn't matter anyway.

He wasn't actually sinking. He was moving with voluptuous tides that caressed him and took him in and felt him with new senses. Something bubbly about it. He felt as water must feel when it's mixed with wine (or used to when the ancients did this with regularity.)

And the reason such a simile occurred to Quant was that he *was* mixing. Racial intermixture, he thought. Something even sexual, he thought, but he didn't think it very much because it sounded perverted. What he was having was a previously unknown emotion.

But what am I losing? he thought. Maybe myself. Maybe I won't stay myself and then it'll all be for nothing and I'll be gone like a popped balloon.

"My name is Quant Aut!" he shouted. He was holding on to it. "My name is Quant Aut!"

"So your name is Quant Aut," said the Ooze, which had begun to tremble violently at the noise. "Here out of the kindness of my heart I've got you half digested and what do you do? You throw pointed sounds at me. How do you do that, anyway?"

"With my voice," Quant whispered. "No, I guess I'm doing it some other way now, but the principle is the same. I've got pointed thoughts. I can't help it. I'm from another world."

"Ridiculous. The rumor was that you're dirt. You're not. You've got nocturnal chemistry but—God damn it, you taste terrible."

"I'm sorry. Look, you can't go off and leave me *half-digested*. You can't imagine what a mess I'd be."

"I didn't know you'd be so loathsome. Besides, it's taking too long and I find you dull."

"Please," said Quant, who wondered, sweating, how it would feel to be left out half digested—how he would look and how revolting the pain would be and how long it would take him to die, particularly if he'd lost the use of his limbs and couldn't dispatch himself quickly. "Please. Maybe you'll learn to like me. And what makes you think I'm dull? What do you like to do while you're eating?"

"I like stories," the Ooze said. "But it's too much to expect that you'll know any good stories."

"Do they have to be funny?" Quant couldn't think of a joke to save his life. And he recalled times in bars when he'd finally remembered a joke but the punch line had left him at the last minute.

"No. Life is real, life if earnest. Do you have any earnest stories?"

"Ernest and Frank," said Quant "I can tell you my life story."

The Ooze groaned.

"But this is different," said Quant hastily. "I come from another world and I've had many interesting adventures."

"Embroider a little."

"I don't need to embroider. I . . ." Quant racked his brains. "There was the planet Erx, for instance."

"O.K. for instance . . . what's that scratchy stuff?"

"My beard. I didn't depilate when I came out of hiberno but there isn't much of it. The planet Erx is invisible."

"Silly. If there's no way to perceive it then it doesn't exist."

"Wrong! It wasn't visible to ordinary Terran senses—Terra is the planet I'm from—but I don't seem to have ordinary human senses. Or more likely, my mind didn't set in ordinary Terran patterns. I used to consider it a defect, but . . ."

"I loath self-analysis. What about the planet Erx?"

"Well, the planet Erx is an enormous, very tenuous disk, like an overgrown cr. (I'm being assimilated, Quant thought. I didn't used to know what a cr was). It is so large and so attenuated that you would normally go right through it, only when I picked it up on the ship's TV—I saw it, you understand—it immediately struck me that it showed that something besides nature had been tampering with it. Not that the mind isn't part of nature but—an excessive tendency to reverse the second law of thermodynamics usually has some intelligence behind it. And so, approaching slowly and keep-

ing my mind open, I stopped at the planet Erx and wandered freely among the inhabitants."

"Indigestible?" asked the Ooze with the shudder reserved for aliens and ghouls.

"Yes. No. That is, I didn't try. They were so tenuous I could wander in and out of them. Anyway, they were not, as you might be thinking, amorphous, but very rigid in shape and in fact fitted into each other like a jigsaw puzzle. This is the way they slept or banded together in times of panic or sat and watched public spectacles—not all the inhabitants of the planet at once, you understand. They had separate patterns by family groups."

"This was their form of feeding on each other?"

"No, no. They had a repulsive custom but that wasn't it."

"What's repulsive about feeding on each other?"

Quant went to bite his tongue, and found he didn't have one. He could do it figuratively, which turned out to be fully as satisfactory, and he realized then that he was going to go through life—eternity (which is not, after all, forever)—with his homosapient habits. And ooze though he was now, undulating to double moonlight, he was also a mental structure as stiff with lines and angles as an implanted sd. I only thought I had a flexible mind, Quant decided. Or only relatively flexible.

It was an odd reverse. Quant was used to thinking of himself—when he did think of himself, which hadn't happened much until lately—as having a shaped body and an amorphous mind. And here he was with an amorphous body and a shaped mind.

Well, anyway I'm getting to know myself, he thought.

"Was it sexual?" the Ooze (the part of the ooze which Quant was not) asked. "This is how they merged to divide?"

"No, no. It was much more disgusting than that."

"You find an awful lot of things disgusting, for someone distasteful himself. I'm beginning to get bored and I've hit a pocket of little rocks. I can't manage them."

"Just let them go. That must be my fillings. It's a plastic compound of some sort. No, this jigsaw business was just a matter of custom reinforced by evolution. It happened that on the planet Erx, acquired characteristics were inherited."

"Of course."

"No. Here you acquire a whole body. I mean, when the physical individual . . ."

"Get on to the disgusting habit."

"Well, there was of course intra-familial interlocking and along with it intrafamilial mating (though the two are not to be confused.) Because of the complexity and diverseness of the pattern a place could almost always be

found for the children. But sometimes there was an odd member to whom there was no fitting, or sometimes for social or political reasons a weaker family was to be joined to a stronger one and there was no natural fitting. So in this case they . . . you are not the right shape to understand this."

"I know what it's like to be rigid," the Ooze said, gliding over a boulder and running down in a stream.

"Then, they take and bend the person so he *does* fit. You understand this entails breaking all his bones and tearing his flesh, which is just as solid to him as mine used to be to me."

"A broken sr must be absorbed immediately," the Ooze said. "Otherwise his susurrations are too horrible to bear."

"That's it. It's the ultimate in torture, but the Erxian doesn't die. He lives on and even reproduces and he is not allowed to die until there is a child big enough to occupy his position. And all this time he is in the most excruciating and ceaseless torment."

The Ooze shuddered. "The noise doesn't kill the others?"

"The others," said Quant, who found that even now it sickened him to remember it, "the others laugh at it for being a misfit. You see, it has no hope, no sympathy, no future and even its death is planned only at the convenience of others."

"Ah, the pity of it," the Ooze said. "I'm glad it isn't true, but it increases my gravity just to think of it."

"But it is true."

Quant was aware of a luminescent bubble sinking toward him, turning iridescent almost-gold in the moonlights. The bubble rolled as Quant and the ooze coated it, and carried Quant upward. He could feel his drag on it, but it shifted its gravity in some way to compensate, and he rose with the tides of the air.

"How soft the moonlights sleep on yonder banks," quoted the bubble melodiously—or this is how it came out in Quant's mind, because whatever the bubble was saying was poetry and as Quant's mind was unable to produce anything original and a literal translation would have missed the meaning completely, bits of suitable quotation had to be dredged up from high school lit.

Which set in front of Quant's mind, for no reason at all, a sudden nostalgic picture—Quant tended to think in slides rather than motion picture. A result, perhaps, of inadequate educational

aids in his first three grades—a picture of the half acres where he spent childhood summers, where the sunlight wove through two leafed branches and flowed away in gold through a tiny spring that ran down between tree roots. And he became so consumed with a need to go home again that his tongue clove to his palate and he could feel his Chromatan form shiver and contract in a rhythmic fashion.

He thought of the warmth of his wife and his clear-voiced children and even, one supposes, of God, because he said, My God, what have I done!

And the bubble, who had perhaps read his thoughts, or perhaps just happened to say it, or even perhaps was saying something entirely different, said, "What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?"

Only Quant finally got over his mood and he decided it had profited him a good deal.

Which is a very bad moral, but then Quant was never again heard of by what we think of as the civilized world.

