This month we take the unprecedented step of offering the Guest Editorial chair to a reader instead of one of the well-known authors in the field. John Baxter of Sydney, Australia, was invited to air his views on the strength of the many forthright and constructive letters he has sent us during the past year or so and we were therefore not surprised to find that much of his background has been devoted to the science fiction field as an amateur.

Aged 22 and due to be married shortly, he found a Murray Leinster story, "First Contact," in a flying book ten years ago and became attracted to science fiction, eventually joining the Sydney s-f group and editing several of its journals. From there he began to correspond with other s-f readers and groups abroad, contributing articles to various amateur magazines (a pattern from which many of today's professional authors have developed) and, to fill in his spare time, became a Civil Servant with the New South Wales Government.

Apart from science fiction, he is widely read (liking John Updike, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Nelson Algren) appreciates modern jazz and collects records, studies and criticises "art" films and is a keen photographer. Within the s-f field his favourite authors are Blish, Ballard, Sturgeon and Damon Knight (especially the latter's criticisms) and one of his main ambitions is to write a novel, s-f or otherwise.

From the foregoing knowledge it is safe to predict that John Baxter will soon be making a name for himself as a science fiction writer. He has already served his apprenticeship.
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Editor: JOHN CARNELL

TWO SHILLINGS AND SIXPENCE

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Guest Editorial

So far, all of our Guest Editorials have been by authors. To represent a reader’s viewpoint, we invited John Baxter of Sydney, Australia, to give his reactions to past editorials and his thoughts on science fiction in general.

View From
The Underground
by JOHN BAXTER

During the last few months, we have seen some very interesting opinions expressed in the editorial pages of New Worlds Science Fiction. In fact, the recent series of Guest Editorials represents the most promising new feature published in a science fiction magazine for some time. These essays allowed one to get inside the writer’s mind, to follow his reasoning and grasp at least in part the philosophy which makes him write as he does. To me, this is fascinating, and I assume that any keen student of science fiction and fantasy shares my interest. The appearance of these essays was encouraging also, as the average magazine purveying science fiction these days seems terrified of even mentioning the subject in its editorial pages. There is a great deal of rather inept scientific speculation there, and occasionally a complaint about lack of material or high costs, but on the whole science fiction as literature is universally ignored.

Another praiseworthy fact is that the essays so far published have been uniformly well-written; erudite, entertaining, often
humourous, always professional. Unfortunately all of them have been, in my opinion, short-sighted, illogical and inconclusive. Not one of the contributing editors actually came to grips with the problem he sought to solve; not one offered even a partial solution to the troubles of contemporary science fiction. As literary essays, the Guest Editorials were fine; as constructive criticism, a dead loss.

Why? A clue lies in the word "professional." The Guest Editorials were written by professional authors, and naturally they expressed the views of those people who write, think and talk science fiction most of their lives. Messrs. Aldiss, Rackham, Temple, Sellings, etc., are all men who have spent a great deal of time in the field, and most of them have have been so involved for many years. Obviously their views would differ from those held by a person like myself, an interested amateur who reads and studies science fiction, but who makes no money from it at all. I have no doubt that each Guest Editorial represented the honest views of its writer, but when a man is discussing the thing which means his bread and butter (or at least the jam thereon) one can hardly expect him to be completely objective.

To my mind, every one of the Guest Editorials so far published has been based on a false premise; that science fiction can be judged as a complete and separate genre with its own rules, an autonomous field almost unconnected with the mainstream of literature. Mr. Temple discussed the role of sex in science fiction, inferring that it was necessarily different to that occupied by sex in other types of fiction. Mr. Sellings suggested a return "to the roots," a movement almost completely contrary to the trend in other areas of literature. Messrs. Rackham and Brunner found fault with the special philosophy which they felt science fiction writers should have, and questioned his approach to the problems which they assumed it was his job to solve. All writers agreed that the criteria of ordinary fiction just weren't applicable to s-f and fantasy. With their essays, they were attempting to provide some helpful advice on the exploration of what, to them, is virgin territory.

Is it reasonable to assume that science fiction is different to other kinds of fiction? If so, in what way does it differ? The conventional answer (and one which almost all writers seem to accept without question) is that science fiction has a "purpose,"
had never been written for British science fiction. A reader once stated that the right type of psi story We contend that Keith Woodcott’s two-part serial is just right internationally and introduces a slan-like atmosphere into what has become a highly controversial theme.

CRACK OF DOOM

by KEITH WOODCOTT

Part One of Two Parts

one

The air was as clear as glass. The stars above Earth burned like white-hot needles, offering an indistinct less-than-twilight, and the last of the day’s warmth was seeping away from the Painted Rocks which had been the excuse to come out this far from the city.

He and Aura, Gascon thought, were probably the only people for ten miles in any direction, except those living in the psion village further out towards the desert—and psions had never bothered him when he had come out here before. Aura, though, had been nervous at first, and it had taken him a long time to soothe her worries.

But the car was a cosy haven, and the tautness was going out of her.

Abruptly, it was back. She was lifting her head, her eyes widening.

"Philip!" she whispered. "Philip, what was that?"
"What was what?" Gascon said, nuzzling her fair hair.
“A—a noise!” She pushed him away from her and sat up.
“Listen, there it is again!”
Gascon sighed and turned his head. This time she wasn’t imagining things; there was a shrill hoarse cry from somewhere nearby, etching the night like acid. It was an eerie, unpleasant sound, and he felt his scalp crawl.
“I don’t know,” he said slowly. “I’ve never heard anything like it here before.”
He put the window of the car down and leaned out. The cry came again, and with it an irregular grinding noise, as of footfalls on loose stones. But then there was renewed silence.
He said eventually, “It’s probably only a wild animal—there still are some out this way.”
“Wild animals!” Aura’s voice was sharp with alarm.
“You didn’t say anything about wild animals!”
“I don’t mean anything big enough to be dangerous,” Gascon soothed. “Little things, like foxes—that’s all.” He gestured at the car. “They wouldn’t bother us in here, anyway.”

He tried to put his arms round her again, but she avoided him, her eyes searching the featureless dark. She was shivering.
“I can’t hear it now,” she said.
“It’s—” Gascon began and broke off. This time the cry was louder and more desperate, and seemed even closer. There were scrabbling noises.
“I don’t think it is an animal after all,” he said reluctantly.
“It sounds more like a child.”
He came to a sudden decision, picked up his laser-flashlight and made to open the door on his side of the car.
Aura caught at his arm. “Philip! You’re not going to leave me by myself!”
“I’m only going to take a look,” Gascon said. “If it is a child screaming out there, do you want me to sit and do nothing?”
“You said a moment ago it was an animal!”
“I hadn’t heard it so clearly then,” Gascon snapped.
“But if it is a child, it must be from the psion village—out here, it must be!” Aura’s voice was ragged. “Philip, it’s nothing to do with you—don’t get out!”
He snapped on the flashlight and by its fierce beam looked at her as though he had never seen her before. In a curious
tone, he said, "Psions are still people, and a child of theirs is a child, and if it’s screaming like that it needs help."

She folded her hands so that her nails dug into her palms. Her beautiful face was suddenly ugly. "Philip, if you get out of this car and leave me by myself, I’ll never speak to you again."

A wave of anger rose in Gascon’s mind, and he slammed the door back in its grooves. He said, "You’re being completely unreasonable. Put the lights on if you want to keep me in sight. I’m only going to take a look, that’s all."

He got to the ground, the brilliance of the flashlight dancing at random with his movements across the gravelly ground and up the sides of the Painted Rocks, revealing their abstract flow of colour—white, ochre, green, orange. He hesitated a moment, feeling the oppressive weight of the empty night, and then walked forward slowly.

Behind him, the car’s lamps came on, trebling the illumination, and he had to pause while his eyes adjusted to the glare. That was why, when he heard the hum of the engine, he did not at first realise what was happening. When he did, it was too late.

He spun round, seeing the car rising to operating height, and caught a glimpse of Aura’s white and angry face behind the driver’s window; then she was hauling at the steering control, the car was swinging around, and accelerating madly back the way it had come.

"Aura!" he shouted, and ran futilely after the vehicle. He had taken no more than five paces when his foot found a rock that twisted under his weight and he lost his balance.

He threw out his hands to break the fall, and the flashlight went off as it struck the ground. The diffuse fiery pain of bad grazing spread over his palms and knees.

By the time he was able to pick himself up, the car was out of sight on the twisting track that led to the highway.

For a minute he was much too angry to do anything but curse. Then he mastered himself and started to take stock of his situation. He bent down and fumbled on the ground for the flashlight, but when he located it he could not make it work—the impact had distorted the laser and probably broken a connection somewhere inside. He vented a little more of his rage by swinging the useless object over his head and hurling it away.
The crash of its landing among the rocks brought a renewal of the screams. In the act of dabbing at his palms with a handkerchief, he froze. Now that he was alone and stranded, the sound was far more frightening—almost menacing.

Was it a child? Even if it was, were the screams really an appeal for help? It was one thing to be scornful in the car of Aura's irrational reaction to the idea of encountering psions; it was another to find himself compelled to act without resources.

While he was still rooted to the spot, the character of the cries changed; the violence seemed to go out of them and they came nearer to a hysterical moan. Additionally, he began to hear more background noises than before—of the same kind, the noise of feet in gravel and on rock, but from different points further away.

As his eyes re-adapted to the colourless starlight, he also discerned hints of movement ahead: something whitish, appearing from shadow and then disappearing before he could focus on it. It was coming this way, very fast. From the brief glimpses he had, he judged he had been right to think of a child screaming. Whatever was driving it, it wasn't pain. It must be terror. No one seriously injured could leap and race across this sort of terrain.

He cast around him for a hiding-place—clearly, it was no use running. At best he would turn an ankle. He hadn't even been able to run after the departing car without losing his footing and hurting himself.

But before he had had time to select a shelter, he glanced back to where he had seen the whitish form moving, and found that it was heading straight for him, head down, arms and legs driving now that it had come to a piece of ground level enough to run at top speed. A boy, naked and barefoot, aged about twelve or at most fifteen; a psion child.

It was absurd to think that he would run straight into Gascon But that—a matter of seconds later—was what happened. The boy never raised his head. He merely charged at Gascon, who reflexively lifted his arms and tried to fend him off, then caught hold of him.

The boy's eyes, wide as they could go, seemed to recognise the presence of a human being for the first time. He struggled, but Gascon held him fast; though wiry, the boy was exhausted.
On finding it was useless to try and break free, he started to scream again.

Part of Gascon’s mind had somehow remained aloof from what was happening, making a sort of explanatory comment. Psion children, supposedly, like their parents, were able to detect the thoughts of each other and of ordinary folk; indeed, it was the faculty of reading minds which compelled them to live apart in their isolated communities. Most of them could not endure the psychic battering caused by the population of a city.

Yet this boy had run full tilt into someone he apparently didn’t know was there. Consequently he presumably was not a psion; he must have come from the psion village, unclothted as he was, he was fleeing from some intolerable threat . . .

Once more Gascon’s scalp crawled, as the running footsteps that had all the time continued in the distance came closer and louder, and human silhouettes appeared following the trail of the boy. Desperately Gascon tried to think of some way of escape for the boy as well as himself, but no possibility came to him.

If it was true that this was a normal boy and not a psion, and if it was something psions had done which had so terrified him, then it would be dreadful to make him go back with those who had come to recapture him. But though the boy might not be a psion, there was no doubt that those coming after, were. And it took deep hypnosis to hide deception from a psionic probe.

Then all Gascon’s deductions were turned topsy-turvy.

First, the boy ceased to scream. His taut muscles relaxed, and he no longer tried to break away from Gascon. Then a shadowy figure—a bearded man, inches taller than Gascon, wearing homespun and homemade boots—checked his pace from a lope to a fast walk, striding over the last twenty-five yards to where Gascon and the boy were standing. Not a word was said, but the boy nodded as though answering something, eased his arm from Gascon’s grasp—which had now slackened—and walked calmly to meet the new arrival. The man threw his arm around the boy’s shoulders as though to comfort him.

So the boy was a psion after all! Gascon was bewildered.

The bearded man, his arm still around the boy, spoke now in a voice which sounded rusty with lack of use. He said, “Thank you, friend. You’re a miracle. My son didn’t realise there was anyone here since the car went off, and nor did I.” A pause; then he ended on a lower tone, “He might have gone running clear to the city, if you hadn’t held him long enough for me to get close and call him.”
Gascon said slowly, "But I thought—"

"Thought we could see into your mind?" The bearded man nodded, his head moving dark on dark shoulders. "Mostly we can. But you're a psinul—didn't you know? You have no psionic emanations at all. That was why my son was so scared when he saw you with his eyes. If you ran into an invisible man, you'd be pretty upset, I guess. I have to keep telling myself you're there, because we're psi-dominated the same way most folks are eye-dominated."

Other people were coming up now, slowly, a couple of them limping: about half a dozen in all, forming a group around the bearded man and his son. They looked towards Gascon with a curious intentness. Gascon licked his lips.

He said, "I'm a psinul? I've heard of such people, but I never knew . . ." His voice faded involuntarily, and he gave a nervous laugh.

"They're rare," the bearded man said. "I only ever met one other like you."

There was something astonishingly reassuring about this information. Gascon felt confidence flood into him. So he could think of his own thoughts without these people eavesdropping—that put this affair back on a much more level basis! He said challengingly, "Well, now, I guess you ought to tell me what it is that's scared this boy of yours out of his wits. I listened to his screams, and they were ugly. I shouldn't like to think that any of you did that to a kid."

The grouped psions didn't say anything, but he guessed they were exchanging communications after their own fashion. After a few moments of silence, during which the boy seemed to recover and turned to look towards Gascon with the rest, the bearded man spoke again.

"No, it wasn't our doing. We can't hurt people, friend. We daren't. If one of us hurts someone else, he shares the pain."

"Then what scared the boy?" Gascon pressed. "Something did! Something horrible, I'm sure!"

In the same rusty tone as the bearded man, another of the psions answered him.

"As far as we can tell, friend, Elze's boy was running from the end of everything."
It didn’t seem to make sense, no matter how Gascon looked at the words in his mind. After a while, he said so, thinking that the man who had spoken might have put his thought badly into words because it was a long while since he had needed to use them.

One of the psions sat down on the ground, and then they all did so, maintaining their distance of about five or six paces from Gascon. The effect was eerie—it gave Gascon the vague impression that he had watched not half a dozen individuals but an extended single organism composing itself to rest. It occurred to him that even if their talent didn’t compel psions to segregate themselves, ordinary folk would probably avoid them if they often did disquieting things like this.

The bearded man, whose name would be Elze if Gascon had heard correctly, squatted crosslegged and put his hands on his knees.

"Our friend Hutton here wasn’t deliberately exaggerating," he said wryly. He seemed to have got back very quickly into the habit of talking with words; it occurred to Gascon that possibly he was one of the psions capable of enduring the presence of ordinary people, who maintained the necessary links between his community and the rest of the world.

"But—the end of everything?" Gascon said.

"It seems like it." Elze hesitated. "I don’t quite know how I can give you the picture; I wouldn’t even try except that if we didn’t explain you’d maybe spread some inaccurate story around about how we torment and madden our kids." He raised a hand in a defensive gesture. "If I’m doing you wrong, I apologise, but I can’t see into your thoughts, so I have to guess what you might do.

"Suppose you think of a shout, yes? A shout that never stops, that you can’t shut out, that you can’t ignore. Like a couple quarrelling the other side of a wall thick enough to blur the words, but thin enough to let you hear they’re mad at each other, and you’re trying to go to sleep. That’s what my boy was running from."

Gascon shook his head.

Patiently, Elze tried again. "It’s not clear enough to communicate more than vague impressions, but it’s loud. If you don’t fix hard on something else, it gets you thinking about
something—something terrible. A total and complete disaster. There’s a sense of everything coming to a stop—of the cosmos grinding to a halt, or blowing up, or just vanishing. Permanently. And blended in with that, there’s a suggestion of security of salvation, but that’s not so clear, and even if you concentrate all you get is the concept of heading back where you came from. My boy was lying in my house, trying to go to sleep against this shouting. We all know how tough it is.” He glanced round at the group of his fellow psions, and received nods of confirmation. “He didn’t make it. Maybe it gave him a bad dream—that’s common enough. And he got this notion that he could escape by heading back where we came from, towards the city. Of course, if he’d made it, he’d have broken under the pressure when people started to wake up tomorrow morning. So I guess I owe you my kid’s sanity.”

Gascon said slowly, “Shouting, you call it. You mean it’s a powerful psionic emission with these—these overtones you describe. Right?” On getting Elze’s nod, he went on, “So where does it come from? What causes it? And can’t you do anything about it? If you’re telling me the truth, your kids must be in a bad way.”

“I’m telling the truth,” Elze said. “We get out of the habit of lying—between ourselves, we can’t, and only a psinul like yourself could lie to one of us, so it doesn’t make much sense to bother with anything except the truth. As to where it comes from—well, from the stars.”

“I didn’t know psions could beam over interstellar distances,” Gascon said, feeling a shiver that wasn’t only due to the chill of the desert night. “We can’t,” Elze said. “Someone—or something—can. Now.”

“Now? You mean this is new? When did it begin?”

“Roughly three weeks back,” Elze said. “And ever since, it’s been getting stronger.”

He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand, and his son, who had recovered completely now he was in the presence of others of his own kind, hunched towards him worriedly.

“But you don’t know where?” Gascon pressed him. The part of him which had earlier maintained its detached commentary on his encounter with the psion child had come to dominate his thinking now, and it seemed more important to
find out about this extraordinary tale of Elze’s than to worry about his own predicament.

For a moment, Elze didn’t reply. Then he said in a tone of faint puzzlement, “Do you know anything about the Autonomy of Regnier?”

Gascon frowned. “Of course. It’s a moderately populated planet in Sagittarius somewhere, maintained by the Starfolk as a genetic pool and ruled by a puppet overlord whom they installed. About the only other thing I know about it is that there are Old Race relics there.” He paused. “Is that where it’s coming from?”

“I doubt it,” Elze said heavily. “But the name sometimes comes into our minds when we aren’t thinking about anything special. And that’s all we can tell you. We can’t do anything about it, because Regnier is in Starfolk space—and you must have heard how Starfolk treat us psions.”

He shrugged, and started to get to his feet; so did the rest of the psions, exhibiting again that uncanny unison movement which had disturbed Gascon previously. Awareness of the situation in which he found himself flooded back into Gascon’s mind, and he said, “Wait a minute! How about helping me find my way back to the highway, at least? You said you were obliged to me—”

“You won’t need our help,” Elze said. He waved at the sky. “There’s a floater coming down this way. You can’t see it—it’s blacked out—but I can hear the crew thinking. Two men, officials of some kind. On your left, about a mile off.”

Reflexively, Gascon looked up in the indicated direction. If there was a floater there, even if it was blacked out, he ought to be able to detect it when it transited a star. Fifteen seconds’ hard staring showed him nothing, and he looked back at Elze.

“I don’t see—” he began, and broke off. Elze was no longer there, nor were his companions. The instant they saw him turn his eyes away, they must have reached wordless agreement and sprinted for the cover of the shadows between the rocks. Indignantly, he set his hands on his hips and stared after them. So much for their being obliged for his help in enabling them to catch up with the boy! How was he to make his way to a road now, with neither light nor guidance?

Suddenly, there was light. Blinding, sun-bright light, pouring down from overhead and transfusing him with its beam as though with a spear. He threw his hands up to cover his
eyes and cried out with the shock, and a giant voice spoke from the air near the source of the light.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?"

This was the floater Elze had promised him. Greatly relieved, Gascon cupped his hands round his mouth, squinting now against the glare, and shouted back.

"Gascon—Philip Gascon! I'm stranded here! My girl drove off in my car and left me! Can you take me to the city?"

He hesitated, thinking maybe that was too much to ask, and added, "Or down to the nearest highway, maybe!"

There was no immediate answer; faintly, as though the microphone of the loudhailer system on the floater was picking up a discussion between the members of the crew, Gascon heard indistinct voices but could not make out what was being said. The light left him for a few seconds and swept over the nearby area, and his gaze automatically followed it, but there was no sign at all of the psions.

At last the floater came down to hover a foot from the ground and about ten feet away from where Gascon was standing. The level of the outside light was dimmed until he could see the faces of the crew peering at him through the bubble. They scrutinised him thoroughly and exchanged glances. One of them shrugged and slid back the door of the vehicle. He got out.

In his hand he was holding a maser-focused energy gun, and it was pointed unwaveringly at Gascon.

"Hey!" Gascon said, taking half a pace backward. "What's that for? Who are you, anyway?"

The man with the gun didn't take his eyes from Gascon. He said, "I'm Sergeant Clew—Special Agency, seconded to the Department of Psion Affairs. My colleague is Sergeant Warley. Come close slowly and you can see my ID card if you're not satisfied."

Gascon hesitated and then shook his head. "I'll take your word for it," he said. "But what's the gun for?"

"Check him over, Sid," the man still inside the floater said. "I'll cover you."

Clew nodded, warily holstered his weapon, and came close enough to Gascon to pat him in all the places where he might have a gun of his own concealed.

"Clean," he grunted, stepping back.
“Right,” Warley answered. Gascon could see him lean forward inside the bubble. “Now when we challenged you, mister you said you were—uh—Philip Gascon. That right?”

“Yes.” Gascon touched his sore palms and winced. “I’m doing postgraduate work at the university—cosmoarcheological department.”

“I see. You have some evidence to prove that?”

“Why, of course—” Gascon broke off, an appalling thought striking him. “Hell, no! Everything was in my car!”

“And where is your car!” Warley’s tone was silky. “You said something about your girl driving off in it, I think.”

“That’s exactly what she did, damn her.” Gascon felt a constricting tightness in his throat.

The two sergeants exchanged another glance, and then Clew sighed. “All right, Gascon—if that is your name—get in the floater.” He stepped aside and made an imperious gesture.

“Uh... well, okay,” Gascon agreed. “But I assure you, all you’ll have to do is to get in touch with somebody at the university, and—”

“It isn’t up to us to decide that,” Clew cut in.

“Now wait a moment! You can’t detain me—you haven’t any authority. I’ve done nothing illegal.” Gascon tried to maintain a firm tone, but in fact he was not at all confident; it was the first time in his twenty-five years he had had any direct contact with officials in authority like these two.

Warley smiled. It wasn’t at all a cynical smile, and it far from matched his answer.

“There’s an old saying about ignorance of the law being no excuse. You ought to be aware that there’s no human activity which isn’t illegal under some regulation or another. Eating and sleeping are tough to tackle, but anything else... If you want the chapter and verse, you’re held pending investigation of your presence in an area defined under Planetary Statute one—oh—eight, six—oh—four, subsection K, as an area designated for an official purpose. Oh, get in and sit down!” he finished on irritated note. “It’s better than huddling among the rocks till the morning, anyway.”
Errida came into the hallway of her home and very quietly closed the front door behind her. She stood for a few moments, listening.

The first sound she heard was her brother moaning. That was why she had shut the door so gently. Franek had been ill for over a week now, and it seemed nothing could be done for him except to be very silent about the house and let him rest.

At least, that was what her parents told her. Ordinarily she wouldn’t have questioned their judgment—she was only fifteen, and she had been brought up to respect her parents as sensible people.

But sometimes she was tempted to think they might be wrong about Franek—or even, though she hated the idea, that they might be keeping something from her. After all, neither her father nor her mother was medically qualified, so how could they be sure nothing could be done to help Franek unless they called in a doctor? And they hadn’t done so.

It hurt her to hear Franek’s tormented moans.

Suddenly she stiffened. In addition to her brother, she could hear other voices, coming from the family-room here at the end of the hall. She recognised her father and mother talking in low tones, but there was another voice—a man’s—which was strange to her, and she caught the mention of Franek’s name.

They must finally have sent for a doctor, then. She gave a sigh of relief and hurried down the hallway.

As she opened the door of the family room, there was instant silence, and all three turned their heads to look who had come in, tensing as though they were afraid. Errida looked from one to another of them, her heart sinking. She had never thought that she would find an atmosphere of near-terror in her own home.

In the levellest voice she could manage, she greeted her parents and then looked inquiringly at the man she didn’t know. “If you’re busy, I’ll leave you by yourselves,” she offered.

The stranger, whose face was very pale, and whose hands were locked together in his lap as though to stop them shaking, glanced at her father. He said, “She doesn’t know, Crowb.”

Her father shook his head, looking at Errida. He seemed to have grown older all of a sudden. He said, “But we’re going to have to tell her. Sit down, Errida.”
There was a sense of doom in her mind now. She obeyed, almost surprised at how calm she was. She tried to smile at her mother, who seemed unable to respond.

"Is it something to do with Franek?" she said.

"In a way." Her father licked his lips. "This is an old friend of ours, Errida—Jazey Hine. We haven’t seen each other for a long time. I’m afraid he’s brought bad news.”

"Very bad news," Errida’s mother said huskily.

"Leece, honey!" said her husband. She closed her eyes for a moment, hard, as though to squeeze back tears, and turned her head away.

"I can guess what it is, then," Errida said. She sat very straight on her chair, thinking: I’ve often wondered how it would feel if it happened to me, Errida Crowd. Now I’m going to know.

After a pause, she put it into words and spoke them. “The Starfolk want me,” she said.

Her father glared at the man he had named as Jazey Hine, who stirred uncomfortably, not looking directly at her. He said, “It’s not definite yet, but—well, you see, I work in the government, and I get to see the lists of young people from whom the selections are made. You’re on the latest list.”

"What are we going to do?" Leece said.

"Well—there isn’t anything to do, is there?" Errida answered. "Except hope, I guess. They don’t take everyone, after all. They take a long time to choose, too."

"You stand the news very well, I must admit," Hine said. "But in this particular case, you’re wrong. We were just discussing, before you got home, how we could get you and your family away from here and into hiding.”

Errida, startled, looked at her parents. "But that’s not fair!" she exclaimed. "It’s selfish to do a thing like that! I mean—I mean this is just one of the facts of life, and it has to happen to somebody, and if we try and hide, the Starfolk will take it out of..." Her voice tailed away uncertainly, for Hine was shaking his head.

"All that is quite true, Errida," he agreed. "But it isn’t as simple as that. You asked if my bad news had anything to do with Franek. And it has. Do you know what’s wrong with your brother?"

Wordlessly, eyes wide, Errida shook her head.
“He’s a psion,” Hine said in a brittle voice. “What’s happening to him—this state of intolerable misery and this lost moaning—is happening to all the psions on Regnier. Franek is only twelve; he can’t hide it. It isn’t easy for the rest of us, come to that.”

Errida put her hand to her mouth. “You—you can’t mean it,” she whispered.

“It’s perfectly true!” her father snapped.

Errida didn’t turn to him; she was staring at Hine as if fascinated. “And you?” she said. “You’re a psion?”

Hine gave a bitter laugh. “You’re surprised to find I don’t look any different from anyone else, aren’t you? Well, I’m not very different. I’m one of the lucky ones, who aren’t so sensitive that to be among ordinary people drives them crazy. I’ve made out for more than twenty-five years. Now do you begin to see why it’s necessary to get you and your family out of the way? If they come to take you for the Starfolk, they’ll check on your whole family. They’ll find out about Franek—he’s only twelve, and the way he’s acting will make them suspect the truth. If you run off and hide, the worst that’ll happen is a fine imposed on the community-group. But if they find out, they’ll kill Franek, they may kill you, and they’ll certainly separate and sterilise your parents.” His forehead was glistening with sweat, and he paused to take a tissue and wipe it away.

“We were going to have to do something soon anyway,” her father said in a brittle tone. “Whatever it is that’s troubling Franek, we couldn’t keep his condition secret much longer.”

“I can tell you what’s troubling your boy,” Hine said. “A sense of ultimate disaster. A sense of total and absolute—ending. Only worse than words can indicate. It’s a psionic signal, so loud it shakes the brain in the skull if you let it. The kids are suffering worst of all, but I’ve seen some cases—well, that’s irrelevant. You’re not consciously aware of it, but it’s certainly getting through to ordinary people. You can tell by the tension all over the place.”

Crowb, staring at his friend, spoke in an undertone to Leece, and she obediently got up and went to fetch some cups and a container of liquor. As impassively as a machine, she poured for all of them, including Errida, who took hers and sat cradling it between her hands, wondering whether it would make her feel less faint if she plucked up the courage to swig it down.
“I thought it was just the—the—you know,” Leece said, sitting down again.

Hine gulped his drink and set the cup down with a bang. He said, “It’s hell’s own situation facing us. Yes, some of the tension is rational after what happened, but what happened may have been connected with the tension—we don’t yet know. Thanks for the drink; I needed it. Now you know as much as I do, and I’ll have to be on my way. I’ll get word to you as soon as I possibly can about the time of your departure, okay?"

Rising to his feet, he put out his hand to Crowb, who gripped it fervently. He turned to Leece, and she made to do the same, but her face seemed to crumple and she had to put her hands to her eyes. Lastly he turned to Errida and fixed her with a sharp gaze.

“As for you, young woman!” he said. “You’re going to have to clear your mind of a lot of Starfolk-inspired nonsense. What’s this piece about ‘biologically disadvantageous sport’ going through your head? Ah!” He scowled as Errida flinched away. “A chunk out of an official teacher-text, is it? I thought we’d eliminated that one from circulation. Biologically disadvantageous nothing. Take another look at me and think it over.”

He strode to the door, waving aside Leece when she made to go with him, and in a few moments the front door was heard to slam.

“I—I think I’ll go and see to Franek,” Leece said into the edgy silence that followed.

Crowb nodded. “Me,” he said without relish, “I have to do as Jazey suggested—try and get Errida here accustomed to the truth.” He poured himself another drink, and sat down facing his pale, trembling daughter.

“Do you remember—when you were about four or five years old—we moved from the city out here to the Plainsedge?” he said.

“Y-yes.”

“That was just after we first met Jazey Hine. That was the first time he risked his life to help us. Don’t interrupt!” he added as he saw words form on Errida’s lips. “Franek was just beginning to talk then, and that’s when they start to spot psions like him, the very sensitive kind. Understand that first, please. Jazey Hine came to us, not knowing that he could
convince us, not knowing that if he told us what he was we wouldn’t recoil in horror and turn him in. We didn’t. I think your mother had already started to suspect—about Franek, I mean. You can’t predict the birth of a psion.

“Jazey Hine did everything he could for us. He arranged for us to move out here where Franek could be protected by distance from other people, at night, when the mind’s defences are lowered by sleep. For almost two years we took turns—you’ll remember this, because you were older by then—we took turns to sit up all night beside his cot, thinking of the need to keep his psionic ability secret. It was a hard struggle, but it worked. Even you didn’t know.”

“No, I didn’t know,” Errida whispered.

“I don’t know how much longer it could have gone on,” Crowb said, passing a hand over his face. “But there’s no use speculating—it’s a waste of time. I’ll tell you some more of what Jazey passed on to us, so you’ll see how urgent and desperate the situation is. You’ve noticed the atmosphere of tension everywhere these past few weeks, yes?”

“I guess so.”

“As you heard, Jazey said it had something to do with this psionic warning of disaster that’s making Franek ill. That’s his view, but he also said that the government is in a state of total confusion. The Starfolk lost a ship—something over a month ago—commanded by their Zone Dominator, Angus Chalkind. They thought it might be sabotage, and they investigated. It was. And the reason seems to have been that there was a psion aboard.”

“Oh.” Errida made it a long thin empty sound.

“You know how the Starfolk encourage the anti-psion feeling here on Regnier. Well, I guess they were trapped by their own actions in this. It must have been the act of a fanatic to destroy the ship because of one psion. But the Starfolk won’t ever admit it was their own fault. The ship’s last call was Regnier, and it was here that the psion managed to get on it. So the government has had an ultimatum: either they find those responsible—not just some scapegoats, but the real culprits—or the Starfolk withdraw their services from this planet.”

Errida thought of all the lessons she had had in school about the way in which the inhabitants of Regnier depended on the goodness of the Starfolk for their survival. True enough; they
couldn’t support more than half their population from their own local resources. Replenishing the genetic pools of the starfolk was the price they paid for the help they received.

She said slowly, “But—but that’s going to be fatal for us!”

“Very likely,” her father agreed, and emptied his cup.

“But if this is true, and they don’t find the people who blew up the starship, then what good is it trying to hide anyway? The Starfolk are strict! They’ll keep their word, and life just won’t be worth living!”

“That’s what Jazey said,” her father confirmed sombrely.

“But there is some hope. Faint, but conceivable. You see, if the Starfolk abandon us, there is one other place we can turn for help, and from Jazey’s information it’ll be readily forthcoming.”

“Where? Who would help us? Who could?”

“Earth,” her father said. He got to his feet. “I don’t have time to go into detail—we must plan our escape. Jazey says there’s an idea circulating that we might find refuge in the ruins of the Old Race colony, and for want of any better suggestion, that’s where we’ll have to go.”

four

Executive Harys Fold had never needed much sleep—some five hours a night was adequate for his tirelessly alert mind—and he was on the terrace of his home sipping coffee and watching the dawn stain the sky shell-pink when a call came through.

“Sub-Executive Mallow is calling from the Department of Psion Affairs,” said the melodious voice from the air. Reflexively, Fold checked his watch, though he knew what the time was, and what an extraordinary hour it was for Mallow of all people to be wanting him.

“Connect,” he said. The air over the nearest floor-set communicator panel darkened and appeared to grow solid, and there was the image of Mallow—ruddy-cheeked, usually jovial in manner, but at present wearing a deep-etched frown.

“I didn’t wake you, I see, Harys,” he said, glancing up from a file-playback just included in the area of the image. “That puts you one up on me already. They got me from bed at a quarter of three.”

“I’m watching the dawn. I recommend it; it steadies the nerves by reminding one of the high probability that natural
processes will continue.” Fold spoke in a light voice, but he was scrutinising Mallow’s face as he did so, reading from his expression clues to the seriousness of his business. “What can I do for you, anyway?”

“I think I may be able to do something for you,” Mallow corrected. “What it is, I’m not sure. According to young Aimen, whose lap this affair was dropped in when it happened, you’ve been taking an interest in the Autonomy of Regnier lately. Is that so?”

Fold set down his cup with great care. He said, “Regnier—and the Department of Psion Affairs. The combination is an interesting one. Go on.”

“You mean you can’t tell me before I tell you?” A ghost of his normal self peeped through Mallow’s aura of gloom. “All right, here’s the whole story so far.

“You know the psion community near here—the one about two miles into the desert, which they call Hopestown. Well, there’s a Special Agency watch on the area, of course. At about midnight, they caught some movement on the infrared scanners at the watchpost between the psion village and the highway. People coming out from the village. They sent a floater to look into it. It looked like a domestic matter, some kid running away and his folks going after him—which has happened several times lately. They weren’t going to take any further notice, except for the fact that when the psions caught the boy and headed for home, they left someone behind. Not a known psion. Since there’s only one psion in Hopestown who can stand the company of ordinary people, a man called Elze who acts as their outside spokesman, they went down to investigate this stranger, who’d been talking to them.” Mallow glanced up from the file-playback again, raising a thick finger.

“Significant point number one: this young man—his name is Philip Gascon—claimed that the reason the psions could stay and talk to him was that he is a psinul.”

“Really!” Fold said, his eyebrows rising. “I make the odds against that approximately sixteen million to one.”

“At least,” Mallow agreed. He ran over the rest of what Gascon had said about himself. “Aimen, who took charge of Gascon when he was delivered, is a painstaking worker. He fetched me from bed for two reasons. First, nobody except a psion can say whether this Gascon is a psinul or not, and in view of the circumstances he wondered whether we might have chanced across the first undercover psion known on Earth.”
Fold nodded thoughtfully. It was, after all, only an assumption that all Earth’s psions were in isolated communities; on planets in Starfolk-dominated space, such as Regnier, a very high percentage of psions lived with their less talented cousins.

"Second," Mallow pursued, "even if this weren’t so, the explanation the psions gave—according to Gascon’s story—for the state of terror in which this kid ran away from home was full of provocative hints. Has anything come down to you about a psionic warning of the end of everything?"

Fold showed no reaction. He said, "Where does Regnier come into this?"

Mallow told him what Gascon had reported.

"I see. Thanks very much for getting hold of me." Fold frowned. "As a matter of fact, I ought to have thought of checking with you. You’ve given me a helpful lead."

Mallow tilted his round head to one side. He said with a rueful inflection, "I was hoping you’d do the same for me. As far as I can tell, Aimen know more about the importance of this than I do. What do you want done with Gascon, for example?"

"Oh, turn him loose. On what you’ve now told me, he’s a psinul all right, not an undercover psion. Or even if he is, he’s not doing any harm to anyone. What does he do, by the way? I think you said he was a postgraduate student at the university."

"He’s studying cosmoarcheology."

"He’s what?" Fold jerked forward in his chair.

Mallow repeated his last statement, blinking. "What’s so extraordinary about that? I agree, it seems like a foolish choice to study the subject on Earth, where as far as we know the Old Race never came, but people do do it."

"A cosmoarcheologist who’s also a psinul," Fold muttered—to himself rather than to Mallow. "Much more of this, and I’m going to start believing in luck. Check up on this man Gascon, will you? I mean thoroughly. I want his entire life-history. I want what he’s told you double-checked with—ah—Elze, I think you said was the name. The outside spokesman for Hopestown. No, wait a moment. Make your inquiries at some other psion settlement, the further away the better."

Mallow was silent for a long while. At last he stirred in his chair. He said dispiritedly, "Am I to take it that you consider this—this psionic warning seriously?"
“I’m not sure about that,” Fold answered. “But about Regnier, I am sure. Be quick with what I’ve asked you, will you?”

“Damnation! What is it about Regnier? Or is it so crucial I’m not entitled to know?”

Fold told him. During the recital, Mallow’s face went as nearly pale as his ruddy complexion would allow. Finally he raised a hand defensively.

“That’s enough!” he said. “Much more, and you’ll make me sorry I asked. I’ll have that information for you by evening. And I just hope they were courteous to Gascon when they took him in for questioning, because it sounds as though he may be the only person in a position to do anything.”

That was probably an exaggeration, Fold thought when Mallow’s image had faded, leaving an echo in memory of his last remark. There was almost always more than one way to tackle problems—even problems of the magnitude posed by Regnier at the moment—but the discovery of a psiinul trained in this particular discipline suggested a course which had both simplicity and convenience to commend it.

Now he was going to have to wait until he could ask whether Gascon would co-operate.

Restlessly, he got up from his chair and began to pace the terrace. Background facts, unverbalised, ticked through his mind as he weighed the possible advantages of his idea.

When men went to the stars, they found evidence that somebody else had been there. Not on the first planets of other suns that they visited, but on the terra-type world of the third system, and the fifth, and the eighth, ninth, and tenth, and thereafter many more times. There had been extensive colonisation and conversion; there were characteristic non-native plants and animals, traces of what human beings would call public works, and over a hundred thousand different artifacts.

At first it was momentarily expected that the two races would meet. Then some of the relics were dated with fair accuracy, and it began to be realised that the Old Race—the name was crude but handy—had flourished eighty to a hundred thousand years before men found their traces.

The fear of a head-on collision with superior aliens receded, to be replaced by a subtler one. The Old Race had gone, whether from plague, or racial decay, or defeat, or suicide. The question was: Would the same mysterious fate overtake humanity too?
But by the time this question was properly formulated, there was a barrier across the paths of further investigation, especially in the direction of Sagittarius and the galactic centre, towards which Old Race relics became more numerous and the signs indicated longer-established colonies.

The barrier was—in the traditional sense—political.

In the early days of starflight, all starships were from Earth, the only human world capable of the immense technical effort required for their building and operation. That phase didn’t last long. Colony-worlds invented short cuts under pressure of necessity, and put their own ships into the sky, outlining the network of trade and cultural exchanges that had later grown so rapidly.

Another phase followed. In the old and stable culture of Earth, there were superficial waves of fashion, but the underlying structure remained constant. It had to be that way. Change would engender friction, and that would hinder the smooth running of the painfully evolved society in which everyone was prosperous and content. Earth set a high price on contentment.

So the crews of starships from Earth could make several voyages and each time return to the same environment they had left, without undue psychological disturbance.

But the crews of starships built on the rapidly evolving colony-worlds could make the same number of trips, touch down for furlough on six worlds in six different stages of development, and go home to find that the environment they had started from had vanished forever. A ship might load its cargo from ox-carts on one planet, and unload with antigrav platforms on the next.

Cut off by the sheer speed of progress on their home planets from any secure cultural foundation, the crews of the ships began more and more to seek such a culture among themselves. The suggestion was made, and gratefully snatched at, that this might be the next stage of human evolution—one free from the confinement of a planetary surface. Armoured with this belief, the first of the Starfolk recognised themselves.

When it became known that matings between second-generation Starfolk often, and those between third-generation Starfolk always, were sterile, the creed was shaken but not broken. Compare this to the amphibian stage, they said; we
are land-animals who must return to the sea to breed. It's a transitional period for us.

They solved the problem by striking a bargain with the worlds which had become dependent during their early struggles on the starfolk's services. They made such worlds into their genetic pools, recruiting fresh human heritage-lines from them and so ensuring the future of their culture.

As far as Earth was concerned, the evolutionary argument of the Starfolk was false. The spontaneous appearance of psions was far more significant. Earth—old, wise, tolerant—tolerated psions. The Starfolk, seeing them as rival claimants, could not; they encouraged psion persecution and extended their distrust to Earth and its associated planets where psions were permitted to exist openly.

Regnier was one of the oldest colonies to become fully subservient to the Starfolk. And something had gone wrong on Regnier. It was in Starfolk space, and it took much diplomatic argument to obtain permission for Earthborn visitors to go to such a planet. Earth consequently depended for most of its news of such worlds on second-hand data gathered by travellers from the planets on the tenuous borderline between the two spheres of influence.

Rumours that the Starfolk were going to abandon Regnier were multiplying, and if that happened, Earth could not watch and do nothing. But until it happened—if it did—Earth might well have to watch and do nothing.

The day had long gone when people of Earth were persistently reminded that they were members of a governed society. Generations of patient experiment had refined the exercise of authority to a subtle minimum. But insofar as government existed, it was conducted by people like Harys Fold, whose heredity and training had been combined to enable them to cope with the massive information-flow on which the human community relied.

The purpose of gathering so much information was naturally to use it as a guide for action. Until Mallow called him, Fold had been in possession of news which suggested no profitable action. If this man Gascon really was a psinul, though, and if he was willing to help, something constructive could now be done.
Alone in the huge echoing laboratory, Gascon bent over his work-bench. In front of him was a row of Old Race artifacts of the type arbitrarily assigned to Category 829, brought to Earth from a half a dozen different worlds. Each was a single crystal, immensely hard, in which a resonance pattern had been imprinted eighty or a hundred thousand years ago.

The Old Race must have had hundreds of techniques more advanced than those of humanity, but crystal resonance imprinting was the first, and so far the only, one which men had adapted for their own use. Not that the possible applications were limited—on the contrary, vibratory patterns based on the Old Race method of forming special crystalline structures were in use for many purposes—but the Old Race had thought in such a different way . . .

“Gascon!”

Gascon slid his stool back on its runners and sighed as Scannell strode towards him between the racks of artifacts, fragments and microspools. The professor’s image of what a scientific mentor should be like seemed to have a Renaissance source; he affected a short black cloak, which swung behind him with his haste. He had a sheet of paper in his hand.

Pausing beside his pupil, he glanced over the bench.

“Getting anywhere?” he demanded.

Gascon shrugged. “There’s another entry for the culture-dispersion map, I guess—I’ve found parallel patterns here from Regnier and Fairhaven—but it would be a hell of a sight simpler if someone would discover the purpose of the things.”

Scannell snorted. “I keep telling you, don’t be anthropocentric about them! Suppose a non-human investigator tried to decipher the ‘language’ of a symphony recording, how far would he get? All we know is that these are records, but we don’t know whether they’re of language or of something as abstract as music. You know that perfectly well, and anyway I didn’t come to talk about that.” He tapped the folded paper he held on the back of his other hand.

“You got into some trouble the night before last!”

Gascon winced. He said, “Yes, professor, I certainly did. What’s more, I paid for it. I spent a night under palaeolithic conditions in a Special Agency watchpost, I’ll never be on speaking terms with my girl again, she rammed a rock with my car and did expensive damage—yes, I got into trouble!”
Scannell grunted. "In the modern world it’s a considerable feat to get involved with the authorities. More than you could manage, I’d have said. However, I have here a letter from one Harys Fold. Executive Harys Fold, no less. He seems to have interested himself in what you did."

Now what? Gascon felt a dull wash of dismay colour his thoughts. He said, "Professor, they told me it was all over and done with—and anyway it was nothing serious."

Scannell didn’t respond. He glanced around for another stool, found one, and hitched himself up on it, carefully disposing his cloak behind him. "I came to ask you a question, Gascon. An all-important question, in the circumstances. I want to know precisely why you’re studying cosmoarcheology. Was it because it offered a soft option and the chance to indulge a kind of fashionable hobby with a doctorate at the end of three years?"

Gascon was appalled. From the sharpness of Scannell’s question, it appeared that there was a risk of something being done to stop him working at the university—at least, that was the first idea that sprang to mind to account for it. What on earth had he done? What fantastic suspicions had his misadventure aroused?

He was still struggling to find a satisfactory answer when Scannell tired of waiting and looked down at the paper he had in his hand. He opened it, but it was upside down from Gascon’s point of view, and all he could clearly see was the heavy official inscription at the top. It said OFFICE OF THE EXECUTIVE, MINISTRY OF ALL-HUMAN AFFAIRS.

"Well, your comment on this letter will tell me what you really feel about your work," Scannell said. "Listen!" He began to read in sonorous tones.

"Dear Professor Scannell, one of your students came to the attention of a department of this Ministry the other evening. The case was reported to me, and it reminded me of a matter which has for some time concerned me."

Gascon felt a stir of puzzlement. Scannell went on.

"It seems absurd that when we have known of the Old Race for so long we should still only have mastered one of their scientific techniques—crystal resonance imprinting—and, as I am advised, not have found out even yet what the Old Race themselves used it for."
"The obstacle to further progress appears to be lack of access to Old Race sites in the Starfolk sphere of influence. It's time something was done to remedy this state of affairs. I am informed that on Regnier there are extensive Old Race relics which have not so far been studied by cosmoarcheologists from Earth. In the hope of setting a precedent for fuller interchange of data on this and similar sites, I am prepared to exercise my influence to secure for one of your students—I'd suggest Philip Gascon, to whom I referred at the beginning of this letter—permission to visit Regnier.

"If Mr. Gascon wishes to see me and discuss the matter, I'm at his service."

Scannell folded the letter violently, and looked up at his pupil. "I don't know what it was you said to them," he stated emphatically. "But I do know that I'd give an arm for this opportunity. There's material on Regnier that's never been touched by anyone except bumbling amateurs, because the Starfolk are so distrustful of visitors from Earth. Well?"

Dazed by the unexpected impact of the letter, Gascon shook his head. "But this is absurd," he said slowly. "There must be more to it than he says. If he's genuinely concerned to get experts to Regnier he ought to pick an expert."

"Of course it's absurd," Scannell agreed grimly. "I'm not saying you're the worst pupil I've ever had, but you're a long way from the most outstanding, and you know it. On the other hand, a man doesn't get to hold an Executive post if he's a fool. Fold has a reason for this offer, and I doubt if it's got much to do with scientific curiosity. That point is what stopped me from saying plaintively, 'Why him? Why not me?'"

He gave a sudden wry smile.

"I guess I'd better see him," Gascon said. "It's such a wonderful chance I'd hate to turn it down. But I'm very much afraid it has strings to it."

"You're an extremely shrewd young man, apparently," Fold said. He cocked his long head and gave Gascon a quizzical smile. "Of course I have an ulterior motive. Suppose you tell me what it is—after what you've already learned, it's conceivable you'll be able to work it out."

Gascon hesitated. He glanced about him. They were sitting on a kind of terrace outside Fold's home, on the top of a gentle hill whose slopes ran green towards an inlet of the sea. It was
a very pleasant place, and as such had perhaps predisposed Gascon to like Fold on sight; whatever the cause, there was no doubt he felt drawn to this lean, nervous man in dull blue clothes. The word that sprang to mind was "capable"—but then, that went without saying. He was what he was.

"It has something to do with my being a psinul?" Gascon hazarded at last.

Fold inclined his head. "Very much so. Tell me, how did learning this about yourself affect you? Can you explain it for me? Be as accurate as you can."

"Well, I think it hit me in three successive waves," Gascon answered, frowning. "First, because I was face to face with psions, it made me a bit more confident in talking to them. Then it came to seem rather neutral—a point which wasn't apt to affect my life one way or the other unless I came frequently into contact with psions, and that was improbable. But now..."

Fold raised an eyebrow, waiting.

"It seems that it must matter. Somehow." Gascon made a vague gesture. "Psinuls are even rarer than psions, they tell me—the incidence is one in sixteen or seventeen million people, while psions are one in two million or even commoner."

"But you have no idea what the real significance of this is?" Gascon shook his head.

"Then I'll tell you," Fold asserted. He rose to his feet and began to pace with a sort of springy animal grace, back and forth along the terrace. "Not only that, but I'll tell you a lot of things you didn't know about yourself. It's already influenced your life, in the choice of a career."

"How?" Gascon demanded.

"Setting aside the fact that cosmoarcheology is currently fashionable for intellectuals, has it never struck you as a peculiar life's work for an intelligent young man on one of the worlds that the Old Race apparently never visited?" Fold quirked his lips. "Be honest, now!"

"I—yes, I guess it is, at bottom." Gascon paused. "But there's the chance of fieldwork on other planets if I do well, you know. Even without this wonderful offer you've made."

"It's a poorish substitute. Most of the known Old Race relics on the local worlds have been thoroughly studied; the new ground will be broken in Starfolk space, not in ours. And you like lonely places, don't you? Like the edge of the desert, where you took your girl the other night."
Gascon nodded.

"It’s all part of the same thing," Fold said. "A psinul like yourself not only has no psionic emanations for psions to perceive—he has no power of psionic perception either, not even the rudimentary talent which millennia of genetic selection has encouraged among the communities of socially-organised man. Other people are in a sense mysterious to you; you can’t instinctively make the judgments they make, and you’re compelled to resort to intellectual analysis, which is far more difficult. You feel this lack—you compensate somewhat by leaning over backwards, as for instance when you decided to go help the psion youth who was screaming despite your girl saying she would desert you if you did. You felt it more necessary to display social responsibility than to keep the girl. I must say I’d have done the same thing, but I’d have immobilised the car."

Again Fold gave his wry smile. "So in selecting a career you found yourself drawn to one where there was a mystery offering only a pure intellectual solution, or none at all: the study of the Old Race. Does it make sense to you?"

Gascon’s face was pale, and he wasn’t looking at Fold. He took his time over answering, but when he did so his reply was a whispered, "Yes."

"I thought so. Now I understand that while you’re not brilliant, you’re an able worker in your chosen field, and doing a lot of sound, reliable research as far as research is possible on Earth. It so happens that we need to get someone to Regnier. I’ll give you details later, but the survival of approximately half the planet’s population will be at stake if the rumours we’ve been hearing are true. We have ways of obtaining intelligence reports by intermediaries, but we want a more direct approach. There’s no foreseeable reason why we shouldn’t persuade the Starfolk to allow a cosmoarcheologist to go there—a real one, who’ll do real study, not faked. It may take some time to arrange matters, but it’ll be done. The Starfolk claim to be evolutionary superiors of the rest of us, and they’re therefore that much closer to the doom that overtook the Old Race. So they’re concerned, too.

"But a cosmoarcheologist who’s a psinul would be perfect."

"So Elze was telling the truth," Gascon muttered,

"You’re even shrewder than I’d thought," Fold exclaimed.

"Yes, we’ve learned that psions on other worlds—especially
those nearer the Starfolk sphere of influence—are suffering this unaccountable psionic derangement. Elze informed you that it had associations with Regnier. This would suggest that on Regnier this intangible bombardment of concepts of disaster may affect the whole population, not to mention the Starfolk who rule them. If so, only a psinul can assess the situation without psionic bias.”

“You want me to be a spy,” Gascon suggested. The archaic word had overtones of historical adventure-drama.

“If you like.” Fold ceased his pacing and turned to face the younger man. “To be still more candid, I’m offering you a bribe. You see, there are several possible explanations for this psionic ‘shout.’ It may be the signal of agony endured in a psion pogrom on Regnier—the last we heard, such a pogrom was a strong possibility. Alternatively, it might be a signal from the future; there are theoretical grounds for believing psionic communication need not take place in present time. In that case, it may really be a warning of the end of everything, and we can’t do very much about it.

“But the most acceptable hypothesis is that it’s from the past, and that the Old Race left a psionic warning of their fate for those who might follow them, which has recently become meaningful to us because we’ve passed some crucial point on the same path they followed.

“So the bribe I’m offering is a tempting one—a chance to be the man who actually solves the mystery of the Old Race’s disappearance. What do you say?”

six

For Errida Crowb, the days following the visit of Jazey Hine stretched into a nightmare from which there was no hope of escape. At first she tried to convince herself that it would end—or at least be improved—when the date of their departure was settled; then she had to postpone it to the day of that departure; now, when it was imminent, she had to give up the pretense and face facts.

Short of the miracle which her father had referred to, life was going to be a bitter, evil, miserable experience for her from now on.
Before, though one could not say life out here on the Plains-edge was as comfortable and easy as in the city where she had been born and where she had friends of her own age whom she still visited, there had been so much to look forward to. The risk of being chosen to swell the Starfolk’s genetic pool was the faintest of shadows across her days; almost half the young people of Regnier were considered for adoption into a starflying family group, but only a few score each year could be taken, and—whether through altruism or mere convenience—the Starfolk would always select those who seemed discontented with their old lot if there was otherwise nothing to choose between several possible candidates.

It was with these points in mind that Errida had been able to take Jazey Hine’s bad news so calmly at first; she was content with her family and her probable future, and she was sure she had no specially attractive talent to mark her out for the Starfolk. The odds were in favour of her being passed over.

But the Starfolk were thorough, and they detested psions.

This was one of the hardest things to accept. Like all children brought up on Regnier, she had been taught to regard the Starfolk as a superior order of humans, to watch with excitement and respect when they made their rare appearances on-planet braced against gravity and protected by elaborate filters from airborne infection. All around her there had always been examples of Starfolk generosity—for instance, she could remember how the Plains had been when the Crowb family first came here, an endless ocean of native weeds and mosses against which the fight was unceasing, and how the nature of the area had changed when the Starfolk, after long experiment and research, imported a species of insect from Nebo and turned it loose.

So the official lesson was easy to learn. Part of it involved the argument of which Jazey Hine had been so scornful, yet which seemed so logical. “Psions cannot be the next evolutionary stage, because their talent, so-called, is really a handicap. They have to hide from ordinary people; often they go insane or kill themselves. They’re non-viable.”

For the first time, on learning that her brother was one of these sports, Errida was trying to find an answer to the counter-question: “If the Starfolk are so sure about psions, why do they go to such lengths to eliminate them—if not to keep down a potential rival?”
There was an even more difficult problem. The Starfolk encouraged hatred of psions—true. The ship over which the trouble had started, had been sabotaged because a psion was aboard—true, on the Starfolk's own assertions. In that case, what right had they to threaten a whole planet with famine and sickness in retaliation?

This was the thing that her father laboured over and over again when Errida talked to him about it, struggling to set her own opinions in perspective, to decide what was fact and what propaganda among what she had been told. The anti-psion societies that flourished on Regnier had Starfolk support; she had seen their tracts and sometimes met people who subscribed to them. Surely it was the Starfolk's fault that a psion had ever got aboard one of their ships, and a Zone Dominator's command ship, at that.

They were acting out of spite—that was what it came down to. Reluctantly Errida was being driven to admit the truth.

"How's your girl taking it?" Hine said.

Crowb gave a ghost of a smile. "She's tough," he answered. "She's good Crowb stock. And I took the shock of finding that my son was a psion, didn't I?"

"You stood it pretty well," Hine nodded. He glanced around him at the family-room in which they sat talking, noting the handworked decoration and the solid but attractive furnishings. "You pulled yourself up a long way afterwards, too, which is more than some people manage. It's an incidental advantage of our arranging to move people with psion children out to the sticks—you avoid the sensation of curious strangers staring at you all the time."

Crowb was quiet for a moment. Then he said, not looking at the psion, "It must be bad on worlds where the Starfolk had a tight grip before there was any—any undercover organisation of psions to take care of kids like Franek."

Hine gave him a steady look. He said, "I note the way you phrase it."

"You note everything that goes on in my head," Crowb said. "I can't hide anything. I don't much care—it wasn't done for my sake, but I've had the benefit."

"Yes. Well, since you have everything to gain and nothing to lose, I'll clear up that point for you. Where do you think Hollur Starkness was going on that ship which was sabotaged?"

"Was that his name? You didn't tell me."
"What odds does it make?"
Crowb nodded. "Going somewhere where there isn’t a psion organisation yet. I see. You help your own kind somehow."

"Don’t try and avoid thinking about the division between us," Hine said bitterly. "It exists. As for the question you have in mind to ask: no, we can’t find out by psionic means who it was who blew up Angus Chalkind’s ship. Or, if we do, it’ll be blind chance that brings us to the culprit. Naturally it would delight us to be able to turn in a fanatical anti-psion cultist to the Starfolk who encourage their hatred of us. But it means sifting through the minds which most repel us, where we find foul distorted images of psions mirrored wherever we look. I can’t describe that to you, but you’re getting a vague idea of it. Ugh!"

He shifted in his chair, and went on in a lighter tone.
"Errida’s just come into the hallway; she heard my voice and she’s standing there wondering if she can pluck up the courage to come and talk to us. She may be taking it well on the surface, Crowb, but I’m afraid the strain is beginning to tell underneath."

"That’s supposed to surprise me?" Crowb said, curling his lip. "Errida!" he added loudly, and the door was slid back a moment later.

The tension of the past several days had left its mark on the girl’s face, giving her an astonishing likeness to her mother—making her look older, with lines sketched on her forehead and around her mouth, and dark circles below her eyes suggesting little sleep and much worry. She was neglecting her appearance too, and her shirt was crumpled, her sandals dusty.

She uttered no greeting, but walked across the floor to come to a stop facing Hine. She still said nothing, merely looked at him with no expression.

"Errida!" Crowb said. "Your manners!"

Neither Errida nor Hine took any notice. After a moment, Hine, gazing at the girl, said, "Yes, Errida, I am a psion. But remember I’ve lived most of my life among people who aren’t, and I’ve been compelled to adjust—like a man with good hearing who’s grown up among a whole townful of folk who are deaf. So I’m not quite sensitive enough to pick out details of all the questions you’re thinking. They’re jumbled together; you keep switching your attention."
Errida set her small chin in a determined manner, and Hine reacted.

"Your father and I were just talking about that," he said after a moment. "Of course it's only Franek who really concerns us directly. If this were Earth, or any world in Earth's sphere of influence, we'd have asked to adopt your brother and brought him up in an isolated psion community where his mind could develop perfectly sanely. But it's no good thinking that we're going to cheat you, or harm you. We can't harm people — don't even the Starfolk say so? Isn't this another argument they advance to show that we're biologically handicapped by being so vulnerable?"

Errida nodded, biting down on her lower lip. As Hine said, the Starfolk considered that a psion's inability to defend himself against another's violence by retaliating in kind was a severe disadvantage.

"And — yes, we are going to try and establish a small psion community at the Old Race site. It seems to us that we may be safe there, for a while at any rate. We're going to have to get along with each other; there's no alternative. For you, it won't be for long. It'll be a point of honour with the Starfolk to keep their word and abandon this planet to its fate if they don't find the people who sabotaged Chalkind's ship. After that, it'll be a matter of only months before Earth steps in—assuming we can get news of our plight to Earth, and we're doing everything in our power to make sure they hear about us and react.

"You're thinking: what if the Starfolk do find the culprits?" A gleam of sweat showed on Hine's forehead, and he glanced at Crowb. "Your daughter is more astute than you are, did you know that? You and Leece must be carrying some interesting recessives."

"How do you mean?" Crowb demanded.

"A few minutes ago I was feeding you an answer to the question of whether we psions could locate and identify the criminals. I'm a psion in hiding, remember that. I've had to get into the habit of giving people the answers that will set their minds at rest, make them less hostile, less suspicious." A note of anxious self-justification was creeping into his voice; he wiped at his damp face. "So I told you that we'd dearly love to hand over those anti-psion cultists to the Starfolk for retribution. But Errida knows why in fact we wouldn't."
"I don’t quite follow," Crowb muttered, and looked at his daughter.

"The psions want to get rid of the Starfolk," Errida said bluntly. "So long as they can prevent the criminals from falling into the government’s hands and being surrendered to the Starfolk, there’s an outside chance of them keeping their word—"

"A certainty!" Hine interrupted. "I’ve looked into the minds of Starfolk. I know their ideas of honour and principle."

"That’s as it may be," Errida answered. "But suppose your gamble doesn’t work, and we lose both the Starfolk and the support of Earth, which never arrives, or comes too late. We’re dependent! The Starfolk have made us parasites, incapable of surviving on our own."

"Why, that’s so," Crowb agreed. "Jazey, how about that?"

Hine didn’t answer, and Errida curled her lip. She said, "Not so pure and innocent, your psions, are they? But just as willing to gamble with the future of a whole planet as the Starfolk have proved to be."

"Don’t hate us," Hine whispered. "It would be better for everyone, for you and your family, to be rid of the Starfolk and look to Earth instead."

"What do you know about Earth?" Errida challenged. "You’ve shown me how my ideas of the real universe have been coloured by Starfolk propaganda. You’ve destroyed my faith in their honesty and superiority. Why should I take your word when you make promises about what Earth is going to do? How is it that you know more about Earth than I do? The Starfolk stand between you and the truth, too; all your hopes may be founded on legends and myths!"

Hine got stiffly to his feet. He had the expression of a man who has endured intense pain for a long time, but there was a kind of dignity about him. He said, "You’re too young to know this, Errida. Moreover, you’re feeling the effects, as all of us are—psions and ordinary folk alike—of this continual exposure to a psionic shout of disaster. But the fact remains: it’s better for a human being to have hopes, than to resign the struggle. Whether the hopes are well-founded or baseless, they count."

He turned to Crowb and put out his hand. "This is the last time I’ll be able to see you before you go," he said. "You
know all the arrangements now. Good luck. I'll see you when the time comes."

Crowb hesitated. Then he took Hine's hand doubtfully, and the psion gave a harsh laugh.

"I said your daughter was smarter than you. She doesn't trust me at all, but she can't think of a better course of action, and she admits she's got to fall in with my proposals. You've just been shown reasons for not trusting me, so you're doubting the usefulness of my plan even though you—ah, hell! That's what hope does. Where would we be without it? Goodbye, Errida," he finished, turning. "Think well of me. If you can."

"I'll try," Errida said, her face very white. "I will try."

seven

In the long moment after Fold had put his proposition, Gascon heard nothing but the roar of his blood in his ears. He felt as though he had been brought to the edge of a cliff, and there shown the whole pageant of his life, every scene of memory asking a single question: is it for anything? His vanity was still smarting a little under the assuredness with which Fold had argued from his nature as a psinul to his choice of career, to his lack of success in personal relationships, and to his empty-seeming future.

He said at last, hearing how shaky his voice was, "In other words, you're looking for a human tool."

"A tool?" Fold took the term, gravely considered it, and rejected it. "A weapon, Gascon. A weapon. In the modern world the name doesn't readily relate to anything, does it? But I assure you it's appropriate."

He dropped back into the chair facing Gascon, crossed his legs, set his elbows on the chair's arms and then laid the tips of his fingers together so that his arched hands made a sharp point opposing the sharp point of his chin.

"May I ask you one more question, to be answered with the same total honesty?" he went on. "Do you find life exciting?"

"No, I guess not," Gascon muttered.

"I do. I find it tremendously exciting." Fold cocked his eyebrow as though suspecting a reaction of disbelief. "Maybe you find that hard to accept in our placid environment. But we are carrying on a struggle that may in the end prove as decisive for the future course of our race as any that has ever
been fought. Are we stupid creatures, or the heirs to the cosmos? Both. Both. We have never found an enemy to oppose us so keenly as our own blockheaded obstinacy, our lazy-minded refusal to notice facts staring us in the face. Why, there has more than once been a time when we might have ended our progress for good by exterminating ourselves! You’re familiar with the history of the Dark Ages, I presume.”

“‘Yes, I made a special study of them, in the hope of finding some clue to the disappearance of the Old Race there.”

Fold chuckled. “‘Without success, I imagine. War could scarcely have accounted for a race spread over forty-odd planets. But that’s by the way. I’m seeking your agreement that our worst obstacle is human silliness.”

Gascon nodded.

“I hear day in, day out, proof that this silliness still dominates our affairs. I don’t think many people have much idea of what an Executive like myself actually does, so I’ll explain. Picture the complexity of our society, on Earth, on all the planets in our sphere of influence in the local part of the galaxy. People travel; goods are transported; these are straightforward, and are supervised and co-ordinated automatically.

“But in addition to this, things happen. A man dies, a great work of art is created, a situation of political tension arises, vents from the Starfolk sphere of influence—where we have no control—intrude on our so-smooth operations. We cannot leave those to machinery, although when you look at me you must picture the machines which I employ as well. Often, a pattern of events develops which seems to me significant, because I’m a human being. A problem. A potential crisis. Danger! At first, only an itch at the back of the mind, but later, either a skull-bursting headache or . . .’” He hesitated, uncharacteristically. “‘A moment ago I mentioned a work of art. To me, the solution of a problem still barely formulated, before it becomes actively harmful, is like artistic creation. This is why I find life so exciting. There’s never any end to the challenges it presents.

“Currently, the challenge comes from an almost unparalleled example of human silliness: the self-appointment of the Starfolk as our evolutionary superiors. They need that belief as a psychological prop, but it’s founded on nothing better than an environmental accident. What does count in this respect is the
appearance of psions. This 'warning of the end of everything' which Elze first described to you seems to me real and important. I know, from studies I've conducted, that human beings, like any other animal, respond to environmental pressure by non-conscious selection for valuable traits. This is not to say that some mysterious racial will proposes goals and finds ways to meet them—nothing says, "We need a sense of perception-at-a-distance; let us grow eyes!" But it does mean that at the bottom of Earth's atmosphere, with the particular kind of radiation available, eyes developed which responded to the most convenient octave of the spectrum. Some additional extension into the infrared would have been still better, but nonetheless—I'm sorry, I'm digressing again.

"The appearance of psions is a response to an environmental requirement, which has forced into the open a talent formerly latent. What did this? What acted on our minds as incident sunlight acted on the primal eye? I don't know. But however I consider the question, I reach one conclusion: we're going to be benefited by this new development.

"And as I told you, I'm inclined to the belief that there may be a connection between this psionic shout and the fate of the Old Race. We, the human species, need to destroy the artificial barrier which the conceit of the Starfolk has erected between two parts of us; we also desperately need to know what became of our predecessors. You—if you accept my offer—can become a double-edged weapon and we shall use you to attack both these problems at once.

"Now—I mean now!—yes or no?"

All the time Fold had been speaking, Gascon had been paying attention with only half his mind. He had been comparing the intenseness Fold displayed, his obvious fascination with his existence, and his own half-hearted, non-engaged, apathetic acceptance of life. He realised that Fold had probably used skilful psychological and semantic tricks to emphasise the contrast, but he didn't care. The contrast was real, and it made him angry with himself.

He set his head back defiantly and looked Fold straight in the eyes.

"You know how to turn people's conceit to your own advantage, don't you?" he said with a trace of bitterness.

"Not conceit. Self-esteem," Fold corrected calmly. "If you refuse my offer now, you will feel extremely ashamed of
yourself. And I say rightly! When a task as important as this one waits to be done, the only qualification is ability to do it, and the only motive is one of conscience."

"And you think I can do it?"

"If you can't at the moment," Fold shrugged, "before you actually go to Regnier, you'll be equipped with everything half a millennium of Earthly scientific progress can provide. In fact, that's an additional incentive I omitted to include in my bribe. The Starfolk would think it odd if we asked to send to Regnier anyone but the absolute cream of your profession, so our first step will be to make you the most knowledgeable cosmoarcheologist who ever lived."

There was no single symbol of Starfolk domination to mark the face of Regnier. But there was the starport, and sometimes in the disturbed brain of Jazey Hine it seemed that the starport served the purpose of a brand—as though a searing-hot iron had been plunged down through the planet's atmosphere and left a patch of fifty square miles of concrete scar-tissue as an indelible sign of ownership.

Waiting on the vantage platform of the communications tower with other government officials, he looked out over the grey, apparently boundless expanse, seeing with his eyes how the warm air distorted the rigid surface and made it waver like a pond with ripples.

But he wasn't concentrating on what he saw. He was a psion, even though he had masked the fact from almost everyone he knew, and psions were dominated by their new sense as other people were dominated by vision.

Suppose a sighted man were to find himself among a tribe of blind savages, Hine thought, and was compelled to pretend to blindness; to stumble about their village, being consciously awkward except (and what a world of suffering was in that word "except"!) when it served his purpose to use his eyes in order that people should think he was astute.

Here, now he stood with the most notable men of his planet: Overlord Irdus himself, the Starfolk's puppet, who danced on strings pulled from the other side of the sky; his consort, robed in dazzling chrome-plated garments, her hands heavy with rings, her lips heavy with paint; Chem, and Owitz, and Breckitt the frightened ones, the men with the intelligence Irdus lacked, who had never—quite—understood how it was that Irdus remained as the Overlord and the agent of the Starfolk, but who
understood perfectly well that if the Starfolk kept their word and abandoned their planet to its fate, the hunger-maddened people would rend first of all Chem, and Owitz, and Brekitt.

Irdus was too stupidly optimistic to comprehend this fact. Irdus was the Overlord because he had Jazey Hine as his personal confidant and adviser, and Jazey Hine could pick the brains of the other three and by dropping hints to Irdus could ensure that they were anticipated in their plots.

The Overlord had to be a stupid man, or Hine would never have been able to maintain his position. Any one of the others would have exiled Hine—not realising he was a psion, but simply recognising that he was too subtle, too ingenious, too dangerous to tolerate so near the seats of power.

At the moment Brekitt, the member of the trio whom Hine regarded as the greediest for power, was taut with the same unease that was assailing everyone on the planet, and to which psions were vibrating like sympathetic strings on a musical instrument. Brekitt responded strongly to it because he had staked much of his career on the anti-psion societies, hoping to impress the Starfolk by his diligence in keeping down their rivals; now, when anti-psion agitation had backfired, he was sensing the psionic warning of the absolute end, and applying it to his own career.

Brekitt was going to do something drastic, one day soon, but he had not yet formulated any plan. Hine, keeping his eyes carefully averted, made a mental note, and found it being washed from the slate of memory by a single repeating phrase: 

*I'm tired, I'm tired, I'm tired . . . *

That was in himself, not in one of the others, not even in one of the horde of hangers-on who crowded the vantage platform clear to the opposite rail.

"Broaching atmosphere now!" someone called from below, in the communications room itself, and automatically their eyes moved upward, seeking in the blue vault of the sky the unbearable brightness of the downcoming starship.

The Starfolk would ask what progress in finding the criminals who destroyed Chalkind's ship. There was no progress, and that was why all the leaders of Regnier were assembled, to emphasise their diligence to their masters. None of them would trust another to speak for him.
Belatedly, Hine remembered to look upwards with the rest of them, although his mind was already feeling towards the presence of the crew. There was something—a grimness, a single purpose . . .?

Irdus was thinking about him, but not in any specific terms. There was the sound, distant—of course; the ship slowed to less than sonic velocity when it was still many miles overhead—but sharp enough to make them wince. Their minds raced faster, so that Jazey Hine had to make a deliberate effort to mute his awareness of their thoughts as at the same time he strained up towards the ship. And—

No!

“Hine!” Irdus was saying sharply. “Hine!”

And the ship was dropping towards the starport, and the ground crews were assembling in their ranks like social insects, and the tower on which Hine stood seemed to be swaying in a gigantic gale. The ship, ovoidal, pulsing with power, black as its natural habitat of space, ticking like a time-bomb with the news of a new and near disaster.

“Hine!” Irdus rasped, finally looking round, amazed to find his normally attentive aide so dilatory.

“I’m sorry,” Hine choked out, his voice a blurred whisper. “I’m sorry! I—I think I’m a little ill, sir. It’ll pass.”

Irdus gave an “it had better” snort, and Breckitt noted Hine’s weakness with a stir of interest, and Hine could pay no attention.

Old Race sites on Regnier—cosmoarcheologist from Earth—exhaustive study—precedent—wariness but indisputably important if Earth . . . first go over them ourselves, see what those subtle Earthmen think so important . . .

The Old Race site, where he was planning to send the Crowbs, and where so many of the psions on Regnier had been hoping to hide, was going to be invaded by the Starfolk—now!

eight

Like thieves, like murderers, the Crowb family prepared for their sneaking night-time departure. Errida took part in the work without being part of it, committing nothing of herself but a passive shell, pale, worried, and unfailingly obedient. Jazey Hine had been right—she had every reason to suspect him of using her and her family for pro-psion purposes, but she had no alternative to offer.
So she worked, and suffered in silence. By turns she hated the Starfolk, herself, and Jazey Hine, but mostly the Starfolk, because it was after all true to say that Jazey Hine had saved her life; when a psion was located, it was customary to kill, or at least sterilise, the same-generation sibs of the family.

The night chosen for their escape was that on which the Starfolk were landing to present the new Zone Dominator to Overlord Irdus; Hine had argued that although Breckitt would certainly be whipping up anti-psion feeling to impress the visitors, the enforced celebrations would occupy the minds of most people in the city, and few would give any thought to the family from the country. There was no reasonable alternative to going through the city; crossing the Plains was too conspicuous, and so was the idea of making their way up the river on which the Old Race site was located. A detour around the starport would be both long and dangerous.

So: the city. And that meant that they dared not take with them any more than a few necessities—some clothes, some provisions, and what tools they could muster.

The Old Race had chosen this area of the planet, this large island in the temperate zone, for the same reason that men had followed them in colonising it before any other. It was of manageable size. But whereas men had settled near the flat Plains, the Old Race, who seemed to have outgrown the need of starports and who always cultivated the seas of their colony-worlds, had preferred to concentrate at the place where the Plains sloped very gently into an expanse of tidal marshes, and had presumably used the latter to acclimatise their own associated fauna and flora and to adapt the native types which were potentially useful.

Of course, the tide of nearly a hundred millennia had erased all the traces except those which were high and dry. The ruins were extensive, true, and they had been exhaustively studied by the earliest human visitors, so that now they were merely a seldom-visited curiosity, of a kind common to several planets—but Errida seemed to remember that at first she had wondered why Hine was so sure they offered refuge.

She was no longer so doubtful. She had no logical reason to have been reassured, but possibly her subconscious had arrived at a satisfactory conclusion. She was too busy to worry about that.
Now at last it was time: a cloudy night, with half a moon showing occasionally over the Plains, and a wind blowing off the ocean with the pungent scent of the native lifeforms that spawned out there in this early-summer season. This had been the background of Errida’s conscious life, and airborne scent had run through her youth like a leitmotif, as the raw stink of native mosses on the Plains had been replaced by the scent of plants with Earthly ancestors, food-plants, timber stocks and grasses to be pulped for their essential compounds.

While her parents were undertaking the last delicate job before leaving—bringing poor Franek from his bed with their minds full of the need for him to hide his talent during the journey—she stood outside the house and stared about her, thinking of the memories the place held for her.

It must be true that one day the patient rule of Earth would replace the iron grip of the Starfolk, here on Regnier! Hine must be speaking from certainty rather than mere hope!

“Errida!” her father was calling. “Errida, are you coming?” His voice was ragged-edged with suspense. She spun on her heel and hurried to the car. It was old—a perquisite of her father’s job with the Plains Conversion Commission—but it was well maintained and ran smoothly. Her mother was already in the back, her arm around Franek, whose face was death-white and who stared ahead of him with lack-lustre eyes very wide, like two screaming mouths.

The car rose to operating height and began to hum down the track towards the city. Errida didn’t look back. She had promised herself that she wouldn’t. The old life was finished.

“Now let’s just make sure everyone knows what we’re doing,” her father said when they had been travelling in silence for some minutes. “Leece, how’s Franek?”

At the sound of his name the boy whimpered, and Leece did not answer, thinking that was enough. Crowb, his face almost as pale as his son’s, said, “All right, Errida. Go over it.”

“We’re making for the Low Dam area,” Errida recited tonelessly. “That’s one and a half miles inside the site, north by north-west from the Stub Tower. There are tunnels there supposed to have been hydroelectric sluices, which are going to be shelter for us and where there’s adequate water. We can’t take the car into the site, because it can be traced if anyone spots it, so we’ll abandon it in the marsh somewhere where it will sink quickly, on the far side from where we’re hiding.
"When we get to the tunnel—"

"Errida!" her mother said sharply from the rear seats. "Do we have to go through it all again?"

Her husband glanced back at her. "Leece, our lives depend on our knowing exactly what we're doing!"

"Think of Franek!" Leece whispered, as though by lowering her voice she could hide her meaning from her psion child.

"Oh, of course!" Errida said brightly, her tone ringing as false as a lead coin. "We ought to be thinking clean happy thoughts! I'll tell you something funny that happened in school last year—"

"I guess it would be best if we all shut up," her father said stiffly.

Franek gave a cry of pain, and they all stared at him. He had closed his eyes and was biting hard on his lower lip. Leece clutched him more tightly to her.

"I did that, I'm afraid," Crowb said bitterly after a moment. "I couldn't help it. I was thinking what a hell of a thing it is to have your thoughts wide open to someone like him. I—got angry, I guess."

"Then think of what it's going to be like when Earth takes over!" Errida heard herself say, the words cracking like a whip. "It's something to look forward to, anyway!"

Her father gave her a surprised and respectful look. He said eventually, "Yes. Yes, I reckon we can do that. A good idea."

Clouds swirled over the moon. Ahead, the death-trap of the city began to loom with a misty light.

At last the frontages of the tall buildings closed in on them like the walls of a prison in which a frenetic excitement reigned—a prison in which absolute licence had been given to all the inmates because they were condemned to die. Even knowing that the Starfolk had come to present the new Zone Dominator, and that there was bound to be some compulsory merrymaking, they had not expected this.

"Why didn't Hine warn us?" Crowb said between clenched teeth, as they turned into the avenue which formed the spine of the city and saw what lay ahead of them. There was almost no traffic moving—there was no room for traffic, for the population had flooded out on the streets like ants from a broken hill. The commercial and public districts of the city met on this line,
and the vast central square lay across it, so it was probable that
the crowd had begun there, and had flooded out into the
surrounding area when the square was full.

“There’s no chance of getting through,” Errida muttered,
leaning forward in her seat and staring at the crowds. The
lights were garish; here and there someone in the throng
who affected chromed clothing flung them back like a mirror turned
at random. There was a raucous chanting, but the words were
indistinct.

“Find a way round through side-streets!” Leece called
from the back seat. “You’ll have to be quick—Franek’s never
been in the city like this before, and he’s suffering dreadfully.”

Errida glanced behind her, and found that her brother’s teeth
were chattering, while his forehead ran with sweat. With a
cynicism that a month ago would have been unthinkable, she
said, “Do you suppose Breckitt has been whipping up the
crowds with anti-psion sentiment?”

“More than likely,” her father agreed curtly, and swung the
car down a street to the left. “But I don’t see much hope of
getting through quickly—we’re going to have to cross the other
main avenue anyway, and that’s the one from the starport, so
it may be even more crowded.”

“At least we’ll only have to cross it,” Leece pointed out.
“We shan’t have to work our way through the square as well.”

The car turned right, and the road was clear for some
distance, to the junction with the avenue from the starport; this
was better than they hoped. Errida, her fingers curled over, her
nails digging into her palms, listened to the chanting as it grew
louder with their approach.

“Do you know what they’re singing?” she said at last, her
voice thin and weak. “That’s a hymn to the glory of the
Starfolk which we had to learn in school. It’s got a lot of bad
things about psions in it.”

“Quiet,” her father warned. “There are police here. We’ll
have to stop.”

He braked, and from the edge of the crowd which, lining the
route from the starport, here closed off the end of the road they
had come down, a man in uniform came striding over. He was
sweating and grinning as he rapped on the top of the car for it
to be opened.

“Just in time for the fun!” he said. “Pull over and come
on down with the rest of ’em!”
What "fun!" Errida stared up, trying to keep her face from showing any reaction. Her father cleared his throat.

"Uh—I guess we hadn’t better leave the car, officer," he said. "My boy back there isn’t well. A fever of some kind. I wouldn’t want to take him among so many people in case it’s contagious."

The policeman looked over at Franek, noting his air of suffering and Leece’s taut concern for him. He shrugged. "I guess maybe you’re right—we have worries enough. I hear the Starfolk aren’t pleased that they didn’t find the people who blew up that ship of theirs. But we’re giving ’em a couple of psions as a consolation prize. You haven’t any chance of getting across the avenue till the parade’s finished, so you’d best sit here and wait."

"Uh—how long?" Crowb ventured.

"Quarter-hour, maybe twenty minutes." There was a loud yell from behind him, and the policeman turned; on finding the crowd boiling with excitement, he strode back towards it.

None of them said anything. For some moments, none of them moved.

And then Franek could bear it no longer. His voice came as though it were being torn out of him like his living heart, and he screamed.

"They’re going to kill them! They’re going to kill them!"

And he had fought free of Leece and was leaping from the car.

"Stop him!" Leece moaned. Her husband flung open his door and went after Franek; Errida went after him; Leece followed, overtaking her daughter almost at once, her feet winged by terror. But Franek was lost in the fringe of the crowd before they could catch him, and when they tried to plunge in after him there was a backwash of angry people jostling them away. Someone who had missed both her parents and Franek seized hold of Errida as she followed, and cursed her for bumping into him. Struggling to get loose, she missed the next things that happened.

But from what she saw, she could reconstruct them.

Franek, his young mind crammed past bursting-point with the sadistic, hate-filled images of the crowd, had eeled his way between the people as far as the policeman who had spoken to
them in the car. At that same moment the captured psions were being marched past in the roadway—two miserable girl-children, younger even than Franek, followed by their parents and relatives, guarded by six ranks of marching men.

Franek beat at the policeman with clubbed fists, his face contorted with terror; even then, the policeman might have thought nothing of it, recognising the boy's parents as they came to reclaim him, ready to plead fever and delirium.

But the two child-psions in the road sensed the presence of another of their kind, clutched at a straw, reacted, came to a stop and looked towards where Franek was struggling with the policeman. The onlookers' attention went with theirs.

And the policeman bawled, his astonishment ringing in the words, "He's another of them! He's another psion—this kid here! And his folks!"

He pointed dramatically. With a growl like a wild beast, with fists and feet for claws, the crowd moved in. *To kill.*

*To be concluded*

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**THE LITERARY LINE-UP**

Story ratings for No. 116 were:

1. Probability Factor - - - - - - Philip High
2. Field Hospital (conclusion) - - - - - - James White
3. Stimulus - - - - - - John Brunner
4. Flame In The Flux Field - - - Kenneth Bulmer

Story ratings for No. 117 were:

1. The Dawson Diaries (Part 1) - - John Rackham
2. Initiation Rites - - - - - - Joseph L. Green
3. Dragonfly - - - - - - Lee Harding
4. Pixy Planet - - - - - - Alan Burns
4. The Seventh Man - - - - Kathleen James
To our knowledge there has only been three good religious science fiction short stories ever published (and two of them are by Ray Bradbury). It is a subject not readily acceptable to the genre and requires a delicate touch to avoid the pitfalls of conflicting theological beliefs. We are convinced that Harry Harrison’s story is the fourth good one—but, naturally, controversial.

The Streets Of Ashkalon
by HARRY HARRISON

Somewhere above, hidden by the eternal clouds of Wesker’s World, a muffled thunder rumbled and grew. Trader Gath stopped suddenly when he heard it, his boots sinking slowly into the muck, and cupped his good ear to catch the sound. It swelled and waned in the thick atmosphere, growing louder.

“That noise is the same as the noise of your sky-ship,” Itin said, with stolid Wesker logicality, slowly pulverizing the idea in his mind and turning over the bits one by one for closer examination. “But your ship is still sitting where you landed it. It must be, even though we cannot see it, because you are the only one who can operate it. And even if anyone else could operate it we would have heard it rising into the sky. Since we did not, and if this sound is a sky-ship sound, then it must mean . . .”

“Yes, another ship,” Gath said, too absorbed in his own thoughts to wait for the laborious Weskerian chains of logic to clank their way through to the end. Of course it was another spacer, it had been only a matter of time before one appeared, and undoubtedly this one was homing on the S.S. radar reflector as he had done. His own ship would show up clearly on the newcomer’s screen and they would probably set down as close to it as they could.
“You better go ahead, Itin,” he said. “Use the water so you can get to the village quickly. Tell everyone to get back into the swamps, well clear of the hard ground. That ship is landing on instruments and anyone underneath at touchdown is going to be cooked.”

This immediate threat was clear enough to the little Wesker amphibian. Before Gath finished speaking Itin’s ribbed ears had folded like a bat’s wing and he slipped silently into the nearby canal. Gath squelched on through the mud, making as good time as he could over the clinging surface. He had just reached the fringes of the village clearing when the rumbling grew to a head-splitting roar and the spacer broke through the low hanging layer of clouds above. Gath shielded his eyes from the down-reaching tongue of flame and examined the growing form of the grey-black ship with mixed feelings.

After almost a standard year on Wesker’s World he had to fight down a longing for human companionship of any kind. While this buried fragment of herd-spirit chattered for the rest of the monkey tribe, his trader’s mind was busily drawing a line under a column of figures and adding up the total. This could very well be another trader’s ship, and if it were his monopoly of the Wesker trade was at an end. Then again, this might not be a trader at all, which was the reason he stayed in the shelter of the giant fern and loosened his gun in its holster.

The ship baked dry a hundred square meters of mud, the roaring blast died and the landing feet crunched down through the crackling crust. Metal creaked and settled into place while the cloud of smoke and steam slowly drifted lower in the humid air.

“Gath—you native-cheating extortionist—where are you?” the ship’s speaker boomed. The lines of the spacer had looked only slightly familiar, but there was no mistaking the rasping tones of that familiar voice. Gath had a twisted smile when he stepped out into the open and whistled shrilly through two fingers. A directional microphone ground out of its casing on the ship’s fin and twisted in his direction.

“What are you doing here, Singh?” he shouted towards the mike. “Too crooked to find a planet of your own and have to come here to steal an honest trader’s profits?”

“Honest!” the amplified voice roared. “This from the man who has been in more jails than cathouses—and that a
goodly number in itself, I do declare. Sorry, friend of my youth, but I cannot join you in exploiting this aboriginal pest-hole. I am on course to a more fairly atmosphered world where a fortune is waiting to be made. I only stopped here since an opportunity presented itself to turn an honest credit by running a taxi service. I bring you friendship, the perfect companionship, a man in a different line of business who might help you in yours. I'd come out and say hello myself, except I would have to decon for biologicals. I'm cycling the passenger through the lock so I hope you won't mind helping with his luggage."

At least there would be no other trader on the planet now, that worry was gone. But Gath still wondered what sort of passenger would be taking one-way passage to an uninhabited world. And what was behind that concealed hint of merriment in Singh's voice? He walked around to the far side of the spacer where the ramp had dropped, and looked up at the man in the cargo lock who was wrestling ineffectually with a large crate. The man turned towards him and Gath saw the clerical dog-collar and knew just what it was Singh had been chuckling about.

"What are you doing here?" Gath asked, and in spite of his attempt at self control he snapped the words. If the man noticed this he ignored it, because he was still smiling and putting out his hand as he came down the ramp.

"Father Mark," he said, "of the Missionary Society of Brothers. I'm very pleased to meet."

"I said what are you doing here." Gath's voice was under control now, quiet and cold. He knew what had to be done, and it must be done quickly or not at all.

"That should be obvious," Father Mark said, his good nature still unruffled. "Our missionary society has raised funds to send spiritual emissaries to alien worlds for the first time. I was lucky enough."

"Take your luggage and get back into the ship. You're not wanted here and have no permission to land. You'll be a liability and there is no one on Wesker to take care of you. Get back into the ship."

"I don't know who you are sir, or why you are lying to me," the priest said. He was still calm but the smile was gone. "But I have studied galactic law and the history of this planet very well. There are no diseases or beasts here that I should have"
any particular fear of. It is also an open planet, and until the Space Survey changes that status I have as much right to be here as you do."

The man was of course right, but Gath couldn’t let him know that. He had been bluffing, hoping the priest didn’t know his rights. But he did. There was only one distasteful course left for him, and he had better do it while there was still time left.

"Get back in that ship," he shouted, not hiding his anger now. With a smooth motion his gun was out of the holster and the pitted black muzzle only inches from the priest’s stomach. The man’s face turned white, but he did not move.

"What the hell are you doing, Gath?!” Singh’s shocked voice grated from the speaker. "The guy paid his fare and you have no rights at all to throw him off the planet."

"I have this right," Gath said, raising his gun and sighting between the priest’s eyes. "I give him thirty seconds to get back aboard the ship or I pull the trigger."

"Well I think you are either off your head or playing a joke," Singh’s exasperated voice rasped down at them. "If a joke, it is in bad taste, and either way you’re not getting away with it. Two can play at that game, only I can play it better."

There was the rumble of heavy bearings and the remote-controlled four-gun turret on the ship’s side rotated and pointed at Gath. "Now—down gun and give Father Mark a hand with the luggage,” the speaker commanded, a trace of humour back in the voice now. "As much as I would like to help, Old Friend, I cannot. I feel it is time you had a chance to talk to the father, after all I have had the opportunity of speaking with him all the way from Earth."

Gath jammed the gun back into the holster with an acute feeling of loss. Father Mark stepped forward, the winning smile back now and a bible taken from a pocket of his robe, in his raised hand. "My son," he said.

"I’m not your son," was all Gath could choke out as the bitterness and the defeat welled up in him. His fist drew back as the anger rose, and the best he could do was open the fist so he struck only with the flat of his hand. Still the blow sent the priest crashing to the ground and fluttered the white pages of the book splattering into the thick mud.
Itin and the other Weskers had watched everything with seemingly emotionless interest, and Gath made no attempt to answer their unspoken questions. He started towards his house, but turned back when he saw they were still unmoving.

"A new man has come," he told them. "He will need help with the things he has brought. If he doesn't have any place for them, you can put them in the big warehouse until he has a place of his own."

He watched them waddle across the clearing towards the ship, then went inside and gained a certain satisfaction from slamming the door hard enough to crack one of the panes. There was an equal amount of painful pleasure in breaking out one of the few remaining bottles of Irish whiskey that he had been saving for a special occasion. Well, this was special enough, though not really what he had had in mind. The whiskey was not good and burned away some of the bad taste in his mouth, but not all of it. If his tactics had worked, success would have justified everything. But he had failed and in addition to the pain of failure there was the acute feeling that he had made a horse's ass out of himself. Singh had blasted off without any goodbyes. There was no telling what sense he had made of the whole matter, though he would surely carry some strange stories back to the traders' lodge. Well, that could be worried about the next time Gath signed in. Right now he had to go about setting things right with the missionary. Squinting out through the rain he saw the man struggling to erect a collapsible tent while the entire population of the village stood in ordered ranks and watched. Naturally none of them offered to help.

By the time the tent was up and the crates and boxes stowed inside of it the rain had stopped. The level of fluid in the bottle was a good bit lower and Gath felt more like facing up to the unavoidable meeting. In truth, he was looking forward to talking to the man. This whole nasty business aside, after an entire solitary year any human companionship looked good. *Will you join me now for dinner?* Gath, he wrote on the back of an old invoice. But maybe the guy was too frightened to come? which was no way to start any kind of relationship. Rummaging under the bunk, he found a box that was big enough and put his pistol inside. Itin was of course waiting outside the door when he opened it, since this was his tour as Knowledge Collector. He handed him the note and box.
“Would you take these to the new man,” he said.

“No, it’s not!” Gath snapped. “His name is Mark. But I’m only asking you to deliver this, not get involved in conversation.”

As always when he lost his temper, the literal minded Weskers won the round. “You are not asking for conversation,” Itin said slowly, “but Mark may ask for conversation. And others will ask me his name, if I do not know his name…” The voice cut off as Gath slammed the door. This didn’t work in the long run either because next time he saw Itin—a day, a week, or even a month later—the monologue would be picked up on the very word it had ended and the thought rambled out to its last frayed end. Gath cursed under his breath and poured water over a pair of the tastier concentrates that he had left.

“Come in,” he said when there was a quiet knock on the door. The priest entered and held out the box with the gun.

“Thank you for the loan, Mr. Gath, I appreciate the spirit that made you send it. I have no idea of what caused the unhappy affair when I landed, but I think it would be best forgotten if we are going to be on this planet together for any length of time.”

“Drink?” Gath asked, taking the box and pointing to the bottle on the table. He poured two glasses full and handed one to the priest. “That’s about what I had in mind, but I still owe you an explanation of what happened out there.” He scowled into his glass for a second, then raised it to the other man. “It’s a big universe and I guess we have to make out as best we can. Here’s to Sanity.”

“God be with you,” Father Mark said, and raised his glass as well.

“Not with me or with this planet,” Gath said firmly. “And that’s the crux of the matter.” He half-drained the glass and sighed.

“Do you say that to shock me?” the priest asked with a smile. “I assure you it doesn’t.”

“Not intended to shock. I meant it quite literally. I suppose I’m what you would call an atheist, so revealed religion is no concern of mine. While these natives, simple and unlettered stone-age types that they are, have managed to come this far with no superstitions or traces of deism—whatsoever. I had hoped that they might continue that way.”
“What are you saying?” the priest frowned. “Do you mean they have no gods, no belief in the hereafter? They must die...?”

“‘Die they do, and to dust returneth like the rest of the animals. They have thunder, trees and water without having thunder-gods, tree sprites or water nymphs. They have no ugly little gods, taboos or spells to hagride and limit their lives. They are the only primitive people I have ever encountered that are completely free of superstition and appear to be much happier and sane because of it. I just wanted to keep them that way.’

“You wanted to keep them from God—from salvation?” the priest’s eyes widened and he recoiled slightly.

“No,” Gath said. “I wanted to keep them from superstition until they knew more and could think about it realistically without being absorbed and perhaps destroyed by it.”

“You’re being insulting to the Church, sir, to equate it with superstition...”

“Please,” Gath said, raising his hand. “No theological arguments. I don’t think your society footed the bill for this trip just to attempt a conversion on me. Just accept the fact that my beliefs have been arrived at through careful thought over a period of years, and no amount of undergraduate metaphysics will change them. I’ll promise not to try and convert you—if you will do the same for me.”

“Agreed, Mr. Gath. As you have reminded me, my mission here is to save these souls, and that is what I must do. But why should my work disturb you so much that you try and keep me from landing? Even threaten me with your gun, and...” the priest broke off and looked into his glass.

“And even slug you?” Gath asked, suddenly frowning. “There was no excuse for that, and I would like to say that I’m sorry. Plain bad manners and even worse temper. Live alone long enough and you find yourself doing that kind of thing.” He brooded down at his big hands where they lay on the table, reading memories into the scars and callouses patterned there.

“Let’s just call it frustration, for lack of a better word. In your business you must have had a lot of chance to peep into darker places in men’s minds and you should know a bit about motives and happiness. I have had too busy a life to ever consider settling down and raising a family, and right up until recently I never missed it. Maybe leakage radiation is softening
up my brain, but I had begun to think of these furry and fishy Weskers as being a little like my own children, that I was somehow responsible to them."

"We are all His children," Father Mark said quietly.

"Well here are some of His children that can’t even imagine His existence," Gath snapped, suddenly angry at himself for allowing gentler emotions to show through.

Yet he forgot himself at once, leaning forward with the intensity of his feelings. "Can’t you realize the importance of this? Live with these Weskers awhile and you will discover a simple and happy life that matches the state of grace you people are always talking about. They get pleasure from their lives—and cause no one pain. By circumstance they have evolved on an almost barren world, so have never had a chance to grow out of a physical stone age culture. But mentally they are our match—or perhaps better. They have all learned my language so I can easily explain the many things they want to know. Knowledge and the gaining of knowledge gives them real satisfaction. They tend to be exasperating at times because every new fact must be related to the structure of all other things, but the more they learn the faster this process becomes. Someday they are going to be man’s equal in every way, perhaps surpass us. If—would you do me a favour?"

"Whatever I can."

"Leave them alone. Or teach them if you must—history and science, philosophy, law, anything that will help them face the realities of the greater universe they never even knew existed before. But don’t confuse them with your hatreds and pain, guilt, sin and punishment. Who knows the harm . . ."

"You are being insulting, sir!" the priest said, jumping to his feet. The top of his grey head barely came to the massive spaceman’s chin, yet he showed no fear in defending what he believed was right. Gath, standing now himself, was no longer the penitent. They faced each other in anger, as men have always stood, unbending in the defence of that which is right.

"Yours is the insult," Gath shouted. "The incredible egotism to feel that your derivative little mythology, differing only slightly from the thousands of others that still burden men, can do anything but confuse their still fresh minds. Don’t you realize that they believe in truth—and have never heard of such a thing as a lie. They have not been trained yet to understand
that other kinds of minds can think differently from theirs. Will you spare them this . . .?"

"I will do my duty which is His will, Mr. Gath. I will bring them His word so they can be saved!"

When the priest opened the door the wind caught it and blew it wide. He vanished into the stormswept darkness and the door swung back and forth and a splatter of raindrops blew in. Gath's boots left muddy footprints when he closed the door, shutting out the sight of Itin sitting patiently and uncomplaining in the storm, hoping only that Gath might stop for a moment and leave with him some of the wonderful knowledge of which he had so much.

By unspoken consent that first night was never mentioned again. After a few days of loneliness, made worse because each knew of the others proximity, they found themselves talking on carefully neutral grounds. Gath slowly packed and stowed away his stock and never admitted that his work was finished and he could leave at any time. He had a fair amount of interesting drugs and botanicals that would fetch a good price. And the Wesker artifacts were sure to create a sensation in the sophisticated galactic market. Crafts on the planet here had been limited before his arrival, mostly pieces of carving painfully chipped into the hard wood with fragments of stone. He had supplied tools and a stock of raw metal from his own supplies, nothing more than that.

In a few months the Weskers had not only learned to work with the new materials, but had translated their own designs and forms into the most alien—but most beautiful—artifacts that he had ever seen. All he had to do was release these on the market to create a primary demand, then return for a new supply. The Weskers wanted only books and tools and knowledge in return, and through their own efforts he knew they would pull themselves into the galactic union.

This is what Gath had hoped. But a wind of change was blowing through the settlement that had grown up around his ship. No longer was he the centre of attention and focal point of the village life. He had to grin when he thought of his fall from power, yet there was very little humour in the smile. Serious and attentive Weskers still took turns of duty as Knowledge Collectors, but their stale recording of dry facts was in sharp contrast to the intellectual hurricane that surrounded the priest. Where Gath had made them work for each book
and machine, the priest gave freely. Gath had tried to be progressive in his supply of knowledge, treating them as bright but unlettered children. He had wanted them to walk before they could run, to master one step before going on to the next.

Father Mark simply brought them the benefits of Christianity. The only physical work he required was the construction of a church, a place of worship and learning. More Weskers had appeared out of the limitless planetary swamps and within days the roof was up, supported on a framework of poles. Each morning the congregation worked a little while on the walls, then hurried inside to learn the all-promising, all-encompassing, all important facts about the universe.

Gath never told the Weskers what he thought about their new interest, and this was mainly because they had never asked him. Pride or honour stood in the way of his grabbing a willing listener and pouring out his grievances. Perhaps it would have been different if Itin was on Collecting duty, he was the brightest of the lot, but Itin had been rotated the day after the priest had arrived and Gath had not talked to him since.

It was a surprise then, when after seventeen of the trebly-long Wesker days, he found a delegation at his doorstep when he emerged after breakfast. Itin was their spokesman, and his mouth was open slightly. Many of the other Weskers had their mouths open as well, one even appeared to be yawning, clearly revealing the double row of sharp teeth and the purple-black throat. The mouths impressed Gath as to the seriousness of the meeting: this was the one Wesker expression he had learned to recognize. An open mouth indicated some strong emotion; happiness, sadness, anger, he could never be really sure which. The Weskers were normally placid and he had never seen enough open mouths to tell what was causing them. But he was surrounded by them now.

“Will you help us, Gath,” Itin said. “We have a question.”
“‘I’ll answer any questions you ask,’” Gath said, with more than a hint of misgiving. “‘What is it?’
“Is there a God?’”
“What do you mean by ‘God?’” Gath asked in turn. What should he tell them? What had been going on in their minds that they should come to him with this question?
“God is our Father in Heaven, who made us all and protects us. Whom we pray to for aid, and if we are Saved will find a place . . .”
"That's enough," Gath said. "There is no God."

All of them had their mouths open now, even Itin, as they looked at Gath and thought about his answer. The rows of pink teeth would have been frightening if he hadn't known these creatures so well. For one instant he wondered if perhaps they had been already indoctrinated and looked upon him as a heretic, but he brushed the thought away.

"Thank you," Itin said, and they turned and left.

Though the morning was still cool Gath noticed that he was sweating and he wondered why.

The reaction was not long in coming. Itin returned that same afternoon. "Will you come to the church?" he asked. "Many of the things that we study are difficult to learn, but none as difficult as this. We need your help because we must hear you and Father Mark talk together. This is because he says one thing is true and you say another is true and both cannot be true at the same time. We must find out what is true."

"I'll come, of course," Gath said, trying to hide the sudden feeling of elation. He had done nothing, but the Weskers had come to him anyway. There could still be grounds for hope that they might yet be free.

It was hot inside the church, and Gath was surprised at the number of Weskers who were there, more than he had seen gathered at any one time before. There were many open mouths. Father Mark sat at a table covered with books. He looked unhappy but didn't say anything when Gath came in. Gath spoke first.

"I hope you realize this is their idea—that they came to me of their own free will and asked me to come here?"

"I know that," the priest said resignedly, "At times they can be very difficult. But they are learning and want to believe, and that is what is important."

"Father Mark, Trader Gath, we need your help," Itin said. "You both know many things that we do not know. You must help us come to religion which is not an easy thing to do." Gath started to say something, then changed his mind. Itin went on. "We have read the bibles and all the books that Father Mark gave us, and one thing is clear. We have discussed this and we are all agreed. These books are very different from the ones that Trader Gath gave us. In Trader Gath's books
there is the universe which we have not seen, and it goes on without God, for he is mentioned nowhere, we have searched very carefully. In Father Mark’s books He is everywhere and nothing can go without Him. One of these must be right and the other must be wrong. We do not know how this can be, but after we find out which is right then perhaps we will know. If God does not exist . . .”

“Of course He exists, my children,” Father Mark said in a voice of heartfelt intensity. “He is our Father in Heaven who has created us all . . .”

“Who created God?” Itin asked and the murmur ceased and everyone of the Weskers watched Father Mark intensely. He recoiled a bit under the impact of their eyes, then smiled. “Nothing created God, since he is the Creator. He always was . . .”

“If he always was in existence—why cannot the universe have always been in existence? Without having had a creator?” Itin broke in with a rush or words. The importance of the question was obvious. The priest answered slowly, with infinite patience.

“Have faith, that is all you need. Just believe.”

“How can we believe without proof?”

“Belief needs no proof—if you have faith!”

A babble of voices arose in the room and more of the Wesker mouths were open now as they tried to force their thoughts through the tangled skein of words and separate out the thread of truth.

“Can you tell us, Gath?” Itin asked, and the sound of his voice quieted the hubbub.

“I can tell you to use the scientific method which can examine all things—including itself—and give you answers that can prove the truth or falsity of any statement.”

“That is what we must do,” Itin said, “we had reached the same conclusion.” He held a thick book before him and a ripple of nods ran across the watchers. “We have been studying the bible as Father Mark told us to do, and we have found the answer. God will make a miracle for us, thereby proving that He is watching us. And by this sign we will know Him and go to Him.”

“That is the sin of false pride,” Father Mark said. “God needs no miracles to prove his existence.”
"But we need a miracle!" Itin shouted, and though he wasn’t human there was still the cry for need in his voice. "We have read here of many smaller miracles, loaves, fishes, wine, snakes—many of them, for much smaller reasons. Now all he need do is make a miracle and he will bring us all to him—the wonder of an entire new world worshipping at His throne, as you have told us Father Mark. And you have told us how important this is. We have discussed this and find that there is only one miracle that is best for this kind of thing."

His boredom and amused interest in the incessant theological wrangling drained from Gath in a single instant. He had not been really thinking or he would have seen where all this was leading. By turning slightly he could see the illustration in the bible where Itin held it open, and knew in advance what picture he would see. He rose slowly from his chair, as if stretching and turned to the priest behind him.

"Get ready!" he whispered. "Get out the back and get to the ship, I'll keep them busy here. I don't think they'll harm me."

"What do you mean...?" Father Mark asked, blinking in surprise.

"Get out you fool!" Gath hissed. "What miracle do you think they mean? What miracle is supposed to have converted the world to Christianity?"

"No!" Father Mark said, "It cannot be. It just cannot be...!"

"Get moving!" Gath shouted, dragging the priest from the chair and hurling him towards the rear wall. Father Mark stumbled to a halt, turned back. Gath leaped for him, but it was already too late. The amphibians were small, but there was so many of them. Gath lashed out and his fist struck Itin, hurling him back into the crowd. The others came on as he fought his way towards the priest. He beat at them but it was like struggling against the waves. The furry, musky bodies washed over and engulfed him. He struggled until they tied him, and he still struggled until they beat on his head until he stopped. Then they pulled him outside where he could only lie in the rain and curse and watch.

Of course the Weskers were marvellous craftsmen, and everything had been constructed down to the last detail, following the illustration in the bible. There was the cross, planted firmly in the top of the small hill, the gleaming metal spikes, the
hammer. Father Mark had been stripped and draped in a carefully pleated loincloth. They led him out of the church and at the sight of the cross he almost fainted. After that he held his head high and determined to die as he had lived, with faith.

Yet this was hard. It was unbearable even for Gath, who only watched. It is one thing to talk of crucifixion and look at the gently carved bodies in the dim light of prayer. It is another to see a man naked, ropes cutting into his skin where he hangs from a bar of wood. And to see the needle-tipped spike raised and placed against the soft flesh of his palm, to see the hammer come back with the calm deliberation of an artisan’s measured stroke. Then to hear the thick sound of metal penetrating flesh.

Then to hear the screams.

Few are born to be martyrs and Father Mark was not one of them. With the first blows the blood ran from his lips where his clenched teeth met. Then his mouth was wide and his head strained back and the awful guttural horror of his screams sliced through the sussuration of the falling rain. It resounded as a silent echo from the masses of watching Weskers, for whatever emotion opened their mouths was now tearing at their bodies with all its force, and row after row of gaping jaws reflected the crucified priest’s agony.

Mercifully he fainted and the last nail was driven home. Blood ran from the raw wounds, mixed with the rain to drip faintly pink from his feet as the life ran out of him. At this time, somewhere at this time, sobbing and tearing at his own bonds, numbed from the blows on the head, Gath lost consciousness.

He awoke in his own warehouse and it was dark. Someone was cutting away the woven ropes they had bound him with. The rain still dripped and splashed outside.

"Itin," he said. It could be no one else.

"Yes," the alien voice whispered back. "The others are all talking in the church. Lin died after you struck his head, and Inon is very sick. There are some that say you should be crucified too, and I think that is what will happen. Or perhaps killed by striking on the head. They have found in the bible where it says . . ."

"I know." With infinite weariness. "An eye for an eye. You’ll find lots of things like that once you start looking. It’s a wonderful book." His head ached terribly.
"You must go, you can get to your ship without anyone seeing you. There has been enough killing." Itin as well, spoke with a newfound weariness.

Gath experimented, pulling himself to his feet. He pressed his head to the rough wall until the nausea stopped. "He's dead." He said it as a statement, not a question.

"Yes, some time ago. Or I could not have come away to see you."

"And buried of course, or they wouldn't be thinking about starting on me next."

"And buried!" There was almost a ring of emotion in the alien's voice, an echo of the dead priest's. "He is buried and he will rise on High. It is written and that is the way it will happen. Father Mark will be so happy that it has happened like this." The voice ended in a sound like a human sob, but of course it couldn't have been that since Itin was alien, and not human at all.

Gath painfully worked his way around the wall towards the door, leaning against the wall so he wouldn't fall.

"We did the right thing, didn't we?" Itin asked. There was no answer. "He will rise up, Gath, won't he rise?"

Gath was at the door and enough light came from the brightly lit church to show his torn and bloody hands clutching at the frame. Itin's face swam into sight close to his, and Gath felt the delicate, many fingered hands with the sharp nails catch at his clothes.

"He will rise, won't he Gath?"

"No," Gath said, "he is going to stay buried right where you put him. Nothing is going to happen because he is dead and he is going to stay dead."

The rain runnelled through Itin's fur and his mouth was opened so wide that he seemed to be screaming into the uncaring night. Only with effort could he talk, squeezing out the alien thoughts in an alien language.

"Then we will not be saved? We will not become pure?"

"You were pure," Gath said, in a voice somewhere between a sob and a laugh. "That's the horrible ugly dirty part of it. You were pure. Now you are..."

"Murderers," Itin said, and the water ran down from his lowered head and streamed away into the darkness.

Harry Harrison
New author Steve Hall is rapidly making a most interesting mark on science fiction by his delicate new approach to popular themes. The following story has much of the sense of wonder Arthur Clarke instilled into his early stories—a simple theme, too, exploration of the moon.

PANDORA'S BOX

by STEVE HALL

Many are the mysteries which have intrigued, baffled, and often terrified humanity when it was confronted by them down the centuries. Always, the contemporary level of knowledge seemed inadequate to cope with the situation at hand. It was so with the Marie Celeste, the Loch Ness Monster, and the Abominable Snowman. Was it sufficient to deal with the first enigma of the Space Age—Pandora's Box?

The Face of the Unknown

Xerxes

The alarm clock shrilled out its peremptory message. Greg Thomson, rolled over on his bunk, opened his eyes and squinted at the clock-face. Its three hands informed him that it was '8 a.m.' on the fifth twenty-four hour period of the current lunar 'day.' He pressed the button that stilled the persistent clamour, and lay back to luxuriate for another five minutes before showing a leg to the other occupants of Moonbase One.

If everything was going well out at the Receiver site, the day would mark the forging of yet another link in the chain of discovery which would lead to the stars.
Greg mentally reviewed the sequence of events which had led to him being appointed as the Chief Construction Engineer of the United Nations’ base on Earth’s natural satellite.

The first four trips to the Moon, had been made, two each, by separate Russian and American expeditions after enormous efforts and expense by the rival factions. It was obvious though that if space was to be really mastered, the chemical rocket was not the answer—you could cross the Himalayas on foot, but an aeroplane was infinitely superior as a means of transportation. The world needed a major breakthrough to make further headway, and it didn’t have long to wait. As so often happens, the needs of the day produced the man, and the man produced what was required—Bascombe discovered the principle of the Matter Transmitter that did not require an electronic receiver. Although the device could not transmit living creatures (some unknown factor in its operation snuffed out life’s magic spark) it could send fuel and supplies of any and every description.

America and Russia had swallowed their national pride, and rushed to join forces with the European Common Market group which had Bascombe’s device. Soviet and American rocket know-how would contribute to the effort which could make the conquest of space a joint human one.

A simple but masterful plan had been evolved to accomplish the short journey to the lunar surface. Step one, had put a prefabricated base and the Transmat Receiver into orbit around the Moon itself. Step two, transferred rocket fuel into a temporary orbit about the Earth. Step three, saw the Earth-Moon rocket complete with construction crew and their Chief Engineer climb up from the terrestrial surface, refuel from the orbital stockpile, and continue to the Moon. There, they had ferried the crated, temporary living quarters, and the Receiver components to the satellite proper.

Two months’ work had established the base on a firm, if somewhat cramped footing, and enabled the Receiver to be assembled. Today, the results of the crew’s efforts would be tried and tested.

Thomson looked at the clock again, it was five after eight. He picked up the telephone from its shelf at the side of his bunk, and dialled seven. Two miles away, his construction foreman answered promptly and briefly. “Receiver site, McTavish speaking.”
"Morning Jock, how's the battle?"
"Everything's finished on schedule. Are ye comin' out in
time to inspect it before the trial run?"
"You should know me better than to ask that. On this kind
of a job I don't even trust myself. I'll be with you in an hour
and a half."

The Chief Construction Engineer of Moonbase One replaced
the telephone on its stand and swung his legs over the edge of
his bunk. He looked around the confined cubicle almost
fondly, he had grown quite attached to his kennel-like quarters
in the last two months.
"Your life is limited," he said to the plastic walls. "If all
goes well today, the new base will arrive and you'll be relegated
to a museum."

He poured water from a big jug into a polythene bowl, and
had a leisurely wash, leaving the water for later collection and
return to the recycling plant; the luxury of water on tap, wash
basins, and waste pipes had to wait for the completion of the
new, permanent base. After a session with the shaver, he
donned his clothes and strolled to the Mess-room.

Pete Chalmers, his second-in-command was waiting for him
at their usual table.
"'Morning Greg," said Chalmers. "What'll it be, coffee,
bacon and eggs?"
"Don't tell me there's a choice."
"Well," replied his side-kick, pulling out the hoary, old
chestnut, "you could have coffee, eggs and bacon."
"Fair enough, I'll take that for a change," said Greg, keep-
ing a straight face.

The music coming from the radio faded.
"And now," said an unmistakeable B.B.C. voice, "it's time
for the weather forecast and news."
"Switch it off Pete," grunted Greg. "I can tell you all you
need to know." He pursed his lips when the radio had lapsed
into silence, and gave out with a very passable imitation of the
announcer's tones. "The weather all over our area today will
be bloody hot, as it was yesterday, and as it will be tomorrow
and the day after that. Everyone is advised to wear Space
Bikinis, or they are liable to kick the bucket from heat-stroke
and/or asphyxiation." He paused for breath, then continued.
"To-day, man's greatest venture should come to fruition when
the Matter Transmitter plays its first game of interplanetary
netball, always assuming of course, that some bird-brain hasn’t forgotten something vital to the whole operation.” He pushed his plate of food away moodily, the content of his banter had unconsciously betrayed his pre-test nerves. “I’m not in the mood for eating, let’s get out to the job.”

“At least drink your coffee,” said Pete, “you’ll need something to perspire with.”

Greg realised the sense of Pete’s remark, and swallowed his drink before they headed for the air-lock.

Space coveralls had been nicknamed bikini’s on the same principle that called a big man ‘Tiny’. As the two men were getting into the clumsy but efficient suits, Pete spoke: “How’s everything out at the site?”

“McTavish says that they’re all set for a dummy run—I hope that his optimism is not ill-founded.”

“Well, it won’t be long before we know. Are you ready for out?”

Greg snapped down the last clip on his fish-bowl and nodded affirmatively. Pete thumbed the air-lock entrance button, the door slid open and they stepped in. Two seconds after they had broken the lightbeam stretching across the aperture, a photo-electric relay operated and switched on the door mechanism, which closed behind them. Five seconds later still, after the high-speed extractors had withdrawn most of the two hundred cubic feet of air from the lock, a red light glowed and the outer door moved silently to one side. They walked through a second beam on to the Moon’s arid top-soil, and obediently, the door slid to.

Twenty yards away stood the crude, open-sided shelter which shielded their Moon-Buggy from the searing rays of the Sun.

The two engineers plodded across the grey surface with the gliding motion appropriate to a low-gravity environment, their space-shod feet scuffing up the fine, epidermal dust in long, low trajectories. The tiny, magnetic antenna on the crest of each man’s space helmet swung constantly to point at the other, maintaining the slender thread of a communication channel open and ready for the transmission of speech with only a minimal energy drain on the batteries of the minute transceivers built into the suits.

Both men stepped easily on to the low deck of the Moon-Buggy. It was a simple but rugged vehicle, ideal for the Moon.
At the rear, was the bank of heavy-duty, storage batteries which provided the energy for the electric motors driving the large, cellular-tyred wheels. Mounted over the batteries were the bench-type seats, with the steering wheel and control dashboard in front. A light canopy of mirror-surfaced, stainless steel shaded the whole vehicle, overhanging all wheels to deflect the burning, space-raw rays of the Sun. The whole thing reminded Greg of the Earthly insect which strutted around carrying a piece of a leaf for a parasol.

Greg seated himself behind the wheel and switched on the motors, keeping one armoured foot on the clutch. A slight vibration transmitted itself from the prime-movers, and he gently lifted his boot. The vehicle lumbered out from under its shelter, accelerating up to its top speed of ten miles per hour as he fed out more juice from the batteries.

They rolled along in silence for about a mile, both men admiring yet again the jagged grandeur around them, and the lazy beauty of the Earth’s globe floating serenely above the saw-toothed horizon. Then, away to their right, they saw a signal light blinking red, green, white, in a regular sequence. The vehicle lurched to a standstill.

“What the hell is that?” demanded Greg, pointing.

Pete took one look, then rummaged in the kit-box alongside his seat, finally pulling out a pair of binoculars. Their eyepieces were especially shaped for using with the bubble of a space-helmet, and he held them, up busily adjusting the focussing spindle.

“It looks like a cube,” he replied at length. “There’s a small tripod on top carrying the lamp we can see flashing.”

What Greg saw when he peered eagerly through the binoculars at the distant mystery object, added nothing to Pete’s brief, but adequate description.

“D’you think one of the crew could have rigged the thing up for a joke?” he asked.

“I doubt it,” answered Chalmers. “Old man McTavish would have their intestines for suspenders if he even suspected them of that sort of a carry-on. Still, we’ve no time to waste, it’s getting on towards the transmission time. We can find out if somebody’s playing the fool when we get to the site.”

“Right,” said Greg, lifting his foot from the clutch. “Forward me proud beauty.”
The clumsy-looking vehicle rolled over the grey pumice, its tracks sometimes mingling with existing ones, and sometimes forming a virgin trail.

The enigmatic light continued winking out its signal with the unquestioning obedience of an automaton.

At the Receiver site, the construction crew were in the clearing up stage, conveying everything extraneous back to the stores hut.

The Receiver itself was a fifty-foot square metal net supported on legs which held it forty feet above the lunar surface. The legs, in turn, could retract into cushioned sockets let into the ground.

Putting materials into a temporary orbit in empty space had been relatively easy with the twin beams of the Matter Transmitter—no great accuracy was required—but placing them precisely on the Moon over nearly a quarter of a million miles was another thing again. Since the calculated accuracy over that distance was plus or minus fifteen feet in all directions, the solution devised was to transmit ten foot square containers aimed at a point in space twenty feet above the centre of the net and catch the crates as they materialised and fell under the gentle gravity. If all went well, a comfortable base equipped with everything necessary for scientific exploration and observation could follow quickly.

The big net hung emptily between its sprung supports in a much flatter curve than would have been the case on Earth. Greg and Pete trundled solemnly around it, stopping at each supporting leg to check that everything was in order. After completing the full circuit, they conferred with McTavish and then moved over to the radio hut. Inside the little air-tight dome, Greg removed his helmet and switched on the high-powered Moon/Earth communication set, waiting patiently for the directional antenna to get its bowl lined up on the distant target. A small, green light glowed on the panel before him indicating that all was ready. He leaned forward a little and spoke into the pedestal mike: “Moonbase One calling Earth come in please.”

After the customary two and a half seconds time-lag, a voice answered promptly: “Earth to Moonbase One, receiving you loud and clear, proceed with your message please.”

Greg nodded as if it was a video transmission.
“Thomson speaking, and reporting that the Transmat Receiver net is ready for trial. Are you set up for the dummy run with a test container?”

Again, there was the irritating period of silence before the answer came across space.

“Everything set to go at this end in two minutes if you will confirm. Radar direction and distance control has been locked on.”

Greg turned to his foreman. “O.K. Jock, turn on all warning lights at the net will you?”

McTavish flicked a switch and looked out through the window. A cluster of brilliant, red lights blazed on and off at each of the net’s metal legs. The construction crew members were retreating in the direction of the radio hut. McTavish raised his hand and gave a thumb up, all-clear signal to his chief.

Thomson spoke again to Earth.

“Moonbase One reporting Receiver site clear; go ahead with transmission of test piece.”

“Earth to Moonbase, transmission programmed for ten seconds from . . . now.”

The transit time for the radio message itself took a little over one second of the count-down, so Greg allowed for this by starting at ‘eight.’ A split-second after he had uttered, “zero!” the trio staring unblinkingly out at the Receiver, saw a ten-foot, steel cube materialise abruptly, slightly off-centre and about thirty feet above the big net. Matter transmission was virtually instantaneous.

“Good shot!” exclaimed Greg relievedly.

The container fell with slow-motion ponderousness into the supporting web of the metal mesh, its inertia pressing the strand downwards. It reached the full extent of its downward motion and rebounded slowly upwards as the elasticity of the net’s mountings tried to restore themselves to normal. The oscillations died gradually away, the net’s automatic control mechanism allowing it to sag and damp out the up and down cycle that might otherwise have gone on for some time. In a remarkably short time, the captive container lay quiescent, looking like a monster fly in a massive spider’s web.

Greg shook hands thankfully with Pete and McTavish, then turned back to the radio.
“Moonbase One to Earth,” he intoned into the waiting mike, “container received O.K. Standby please, will advise you further in a few minutes—out.

“Right Jock,” he continued to his foreman, “get your lads to lower the net and remove the container. Keep it safe, they’ll want that for a museum piece later. When you’ve cleared things, nip back here.” The construction head watched as the Scot relayed his instructions, after first switching off the warning lights.

When the unloading was under way, he spoke to the foreman on a different subject. “When Pete and I were driving over, we saw some sort of a signal over there,” he pointed at the plain outside. “It was flashing a regular series of coloured lights from the top of a box about half a mile away. Have any of the boys been cooking up a stunt?”

The Scot looked at Greg unbelievingly, and shook his head. “It isna possible. One of the three of us always accompanies the gang out and back—how could they do it without us seeing them?”

“Have you seen any of them wandering away from here during your shifts, Pete?” pursued Greg.

“No,” stated his deputy definitely. “And to be honest, I can’t see any of them walking out that distance at any time—after all, they’re very much aware of the alienness of the conditions under which they are working. I think the very risk inherent in such a journey would scare them away from the possibility.”

Greg grunted noncommittally. “It looks as if I’m the only one who’s been out that way then.”

“You’ve been out there?” chorussed Chalmers and McTavish.

“Sure, I took a bit of a diversion going back to base, one time about three days before the end of the last lunar day.”

“But you issued strict instructions that no-one was to do that sort of thing alone,” accused Pete.

“I know,” replied Greg lamely, “but I thought I ought to have a look at the surrounding area just in case.”

Pete was still inclined to be argumentative, “In case of what?”

“In case of something like this,” snapped Greg, his slightly frayed nerves showing again. “Jock, I’ll tell Earth to continue sending useful cargo from now on to your instructions. Mean-
while, Pete and I will go and have a look at what Santa Claus has left out there."

The two engineers boarded the Moon-Buggy in a chilly silence, and headed towards the signal light still monotonously flashing its coloured pulses. They soon picked up the tracks made by Thomson on his previous trip.

Greg broke the strained silence. "I don’t remember seeing anything foreign when I was here the last time."

"That means that whatever it is, has been put there during the last twenty-two days Earth-time," responded Pete.

"Not necessarily," demurred Greg, "I suppose I could have missed it, if the light wasn’t operating at the time."

They trundled on in silence for a few more minutes.

The box loomed up before them, fairly and squarely between the parallel tyre tracks.

Pete took up the conversation where it had been left dangling. "I don’t think you could have missed that," he said dryly. "It must be all of three feet high; the Buggy’s deck is only eighteen inches off the ground."

Greg stopped their vehicle a few yards short of the box, strode to a point between them and eyed their relative heights critically.

"There’s no doubt about it, the damn thing’s too high for me to have gone over it, so it’s been placed there since I passed this way. Oh well, I suppose we may as well see what those playful types back there have left. They must have foxed the three of us somehow."

"Faxed nothing," retorted Pete, "just take a look around. There’s no other tracks or foot-prints but our own."

Greg stood stockstill and searched the area surrounding the box for as far as he could see—the harsh light of the Sun concealed nothing—there were no other marks in the featureless grey dust.

"I still think it’s a gag," he said. "They could have erased all signs of disturbance."

"All the way back to the site?" queried Chalmers ironically.

"Some people will do anything for a laugh," returned his chief.

"You could be right, I suppose," admitted Pete. "Let’s see what’s inside, always assuming of course, that we can open it."
The two men approached the mystery object. Greg circled it warily, suspecting some harebrained booby-trap. After his second complete circuit, he lifted off the still-winking lamp, placed it aside on the ground, and gave a preliminary opinion. “I can’t see any sign of a hinge or lock on the top and side; it looks almost as if somebody had stuck six slabs of metal together at the edges.”

He peered more closely at the hairline crack where the top of the box met the sides. “Presumably the thing is meant to open, or is that the joke—that it’s a hollow, lidless, metal cube?” He stretched his arms across the inch-thick slab that formed the top of the box, hooking his gloved fingers over the edge, and pulled experimentally. Nothing happened. When he had repeated the gambit, after moving through ninety degrees, with the same negative result, he spoke again. “Evidently it isn’t intended to slide off. Let’s try levering with something.”

Pete trudged back to the Moon-Buggy for some tools, while Greg wished that he could mop his sweat-beaded brow; with the sun approaching its highest point in the ebon sky, the downpour of radiant energy was intense enough to tax the suit’s ability to convert it quickly into electrical energy and store it in the built-in batteries.

The lid lifted quite easily when Greg gently hammered the slender blade of a chisel into the crack where it joined one side. The reason why it wouldn’t slide off was then obvious. A stud, half an inch long, projected upwards from each side of the box and fitted neatly into a matching socket in the lid. The slab of metal itself was surprisingly light, even allowing for the Moon’s gravity. Casting it aside, both men peered into the box.

Suspended snugly in an encircling bracket, was an egg-shaped object about eighteen inches across its major diameter. It looked like the eccentric hub of a four-spoked wheel, and reflected a brilliant image of the Sun in its mirror-bright surface. Dead in the centre of its curving, upper periphery, was set a red-glowing button, whose indented surface invited an exploring forefinger. Pete seemed fascinated by the metallic egg, and automatically dipped in with his hand to press the button. When his questing finger was only scant inches away from the ruby-tipped push, Greg grasped his partner’s wrist roughly and jerked it back.

“Snap out of it Pete. God knows what will happen if you touch that thing.”
Chalmers came of his daze with a rush at the sharp words, "Sorry Greg, it seemed like the right thing to so."

The construction engineer nodded his head in agreement. "Whoever planted this baby, wanted that to be the first reaction." He searched the sky and the bleak lunar terrain. "Somebody out there lowered this thing from a spaceship, deliberately placing it so that we would notice it between my old tracks. To make doubly sure, they put a signal light on top."

"You seem pretty sure all of a sudden that it wasn't any of our lads," said Pete.

"I admit I was unconvinced at first," agreed his chief, "but there's too much evidence now to think otherwise. Aside from the absence of tracks, the lid of the box was a dead giveaway."

Chalmers frowned at that one.

"Don't you see, Pete? Suppose you wanted to lower a box to the surface below. You want a lid on it to carry the signal light, the lid must open easily, but mustn't slide off when you're planting the box. What could fit the bill better than the arrangement we found? Also if you want any more evidence, do you honestly think that the construction crew could have made the thing inside the box?"

Chalmers shook his head.

"The problem we're now stuck with," continued Greg, "is why the whole shebang has been deliberately dumped here and our attention drawn to it." He thought for a moment while Chalmers gazed blankly at the box seeking an inspiration that would not come. "See if you've got a hacksaw in your kit and cut a corner off the lid."

"Why?" said Pete.

"I'd like to take a sample of that metal or alloy, back to the Base with us and run a few tests on it."

"Why not take the whole thing back?" said Chalmers. "It's not so heavy that we couldn't lift it on to the Buggy."

"How do you know that moving the box wouldn't cause some reaction?" returned Greg shrewdly.

"I hadn't thought of it that way," said Pete with dawning comprehension of the enigma.

"I had; now let's get that piece hacked off and the lid put back in position. Even too much sunlight playing on the egg might cause something to happen."
Once back at the Base, Greg conducted his tests on the portion of the lid which they had brought back. It was slightly heavier than aluminium, magnetic, had a high melting point, and was like no other known metal.

Earth was baffled by the very full report given to them and counselled extreme caution. A full team of experts was promised to consider the whole matter. They were scheduled to arrive in three days. While they were en route, Greg and Pete visited the box daily like worshippers at a shrine. It was photographed from all angles, inside and out, but apart from lifting the lid, was not touched or moved.

The two engineers became increasingly morose as their imagination ran riot over the possibilities inherent in the situation. The relief which they felt when the team from Earth arrived, however, was short-lived; the newcomers didn’t have any bright ideas either.

By common consent, Greg chaired the meeting which was held twenty-four hours after the visitors had inspected the mystery object and its contents.

“‘Well, gentlemen,’ he said, ‘I’ve probably had more time to brood over this matter than you have, and I’ve reached certain conclusions which I’d like to put to you, if no-one has any objections.’

One of the group seated around the table in the Mess was Bascombe, the inventor of the Matter Transmitter. He voiced the unspoken feelings of everyone. “I think we’d all be delighted to hear what you’ve got to say.”

Greg nodded, as others indicated their assent.

“First, let’s agree that the object which bedevils us is alien, and that it is a mechanism of some sort. The trick is to figure out just what kind of a mechanism. It could be some sort of a communicator which would be actuated by the red button. After all, the aliens could be a cautious lot who would prefer the first contact to be at a distance, with them knowing where we are, without us, in turn, knowing their location.”

His listeners, including Bascombe, seemed favourably impressed by the idea, but obviously were waiting to hear more before committing themselves.

When nobody spoke, the Chief Construction Engineer of Moonbase One continued: “There is, however, another and more ominous possibility; let’s suppose that the device is destructive.”
Bascombe broke the tingling silence which followed the engineer's last remark.

"Is there any reason to consider that possibility? Presumably, if the aliens had wanted to destroy us, they could have launched a missile without any warning, so why go out of their way to let us know about it?"

"Maybe they have peculiar ethics which wouldn't permit them to attack us unless we had first committed some aggressive act against them. Or maybe they want to find out just how we would deal with this situation, with destruction as the price for acting wrongly."

"You mean," said Bascombe, "that they want us destroyed but may be too squeamish to actually pull the trigger so to speak, or that alternatively, it may be some sort of a test?"

"Correct," confirmed Greg. "There may be other reasons which will fit equally well, but these seem to be enough for our immediate consideration, and we can't afford to take any risk."

"What if we do nothing?" probed the inventor. "Wouldn't that rather queer the pitch?"

"Not necessarily. It seems reasonably obvious that they would have installed some sort of timing mechanism which will activate the Egg automatically if we make no move ourselves.

"The whole point that I'm trying to make, is that we've been deliberately confronted with a problem packet (for reasons at the moment unknown to us) which we've got to do something about. If we do the wrong thing, we face heaven knows what consequences; if we do nothing, I think we'll have to face them anyway. Now what I'd like to know is, has anyone else a better hypothesis to put forward? And bear in mind, that any theory should be so promising, that it completely invalidates the risks which I've described."

Bascombe took the initiative again when there were no volunteers willing to theorise.

"I think we should have a vote on the matter."

"Fair enough," nodded Greg. "Will everyone who accepts my reasoning please show?"

There were no dissenters, and no need for a second showing of hands.

"Right," continued the engineer, "we should now consider what we are going to do about Pandora's Box out there."

"I think I know what you have in mind," interrupted Bascombe.
The rest of the committee looked from one to the other in mystification.

"Carry on with your explanation, Mr. Bascombe," urged Greg.

"Well," said the inventor, "we can't move the box, and we can't leave it there, so why not transmit it to some point in space far enough away that it can't harm us whatever it does?"

"Could you rig up a Transmitter around it without disturbance?" asked Greg.

"Quite easily," confirmed Bascombe. "As a matter of fact, the components for a complete Transmitter are ready to be sent to you right now. We could have it assembled in a few days."

"Make that forty-eight hours—I've a hunch that our time may run out fairly soon."

"Let me have enough men and it can be done."

"You shall have all you want, and we'll work right around the clock."

It was exactly forty hours later, when the news came that the portable Matter Transmitter was completely erected around Pandora's Box.

Bascombe, red-eyed with fatigue, looked at Greg, who was in little better shape, and grinned. "All right, now tell me where you want it sent."

The engineer returned his smile, "Well, I thought that if possible, we should know what happens when the Egg is activated, so how about sending it to a definite destination—say Alpha Centauri, we know that it has no planets—could you do that with reasonable accuracy?"

Bascombe punched keys on a pocket calculator. "That's four light-years away, I reckon I could place her within half a million miles of the star—will that do?"

The construction man nodded. "Let's go, the quicker that thing vamooses, the better."

A little over four years later, on October the 4th, 1974, Alpha Centauri was seen to vanish from the sight of the automatic tracking cameras set up on the Moon. One month later, a United Earth government was an accomplished fact.

Steve Hall
Downes had found a minor paradise of his own and didn't want to be rescued. When they found him, his rescuers also had to combat the environment of an alien planet.

Serpent In Paradise

by MORRIS NAGEL

The planet had no name. Somerville, as he stood staring gloomily at its level horizon, could not even remember its symbol. It was a worthless, dry, almost lifeless world, and he would be glad when they had left it.

He turned and walked back towards the others. Woolley had already shouldered the medical kit, and stood waiting. Lang was squatting on the red sand beside the other two packs, waiting for Somerville to return.

"There's no doubt about it," Somerville said. "His ship crash-landed about a quarter of a mile over there"—he pointed in the direction from which he had just come—"but his rescue beam is coming from the opposite direction. He must have left the ship and walked into the desert."

Taking up the pack of rescue rations, he began to lead the way. Lang and Woolley followed, Lang carrying the water. All three were feeling depressed with the hopelessness of their mission. It was one of the most important rules of survival to stay in the ship. Downes could only have left it because it had become uninhabitable after the crash, or because he had lost his senses. Either way, his chances of survival were impossibly remote.
Somerville looked behind. Their footprints made a long dotted scar across the red sand to their ship. Beyond the ship, almost masked by its tall thin bulk, a distant hump of dark metal was still visible. Ahead of them, there was nothing but the flat red desert. Perhaps they should have examined the wreckage first, before going into this wasteland?

He wondered what had driven Downes to leave the shelter of his ship and lose himself out there. Four weeks earlier, Earth time, Downes had radioed that his air regenerator had failed, but that the nearest planet had a breathable atmosphere. There seemed to be no immediate danger. His emergency oxygen supply was ample to last him until he landed, and in case he should be unable to repair the damage, a rescue ship was sent immediately.

One more message was received from Downes, just before he made his landing. Then there was silence, and the men in the approaching rescue ship wondered which was out of action—the radio, or Downes?

They had walked for over half a mile when the sand began to give way to pebbles.

"Well, at least we won't have to dig for his body beneath a pile of sand," said Woolley. "I wasn't looking forward to finding him buried."

"Don't start counting your chickens," replied Lang. "With our luck, we might be back on sand in no time. You can hardly tell the difference a hundred yards ahead—it's all the same damned colour. How far do we have to go now?"

Somerville checked the small beam tracer which hung on a cord around his neck.

"We're very close. His signal is coming almost at full strength."

They searched the waste before them with new interest. Nothing could be seen but the flat red surface stretching to the horizon. The pebbles beneath their feet were slowly giving way to broad red rocks. Above them was a beautifully blue sky; they knew that only near the poles, where there was enough water to support even a small forest or two, would they find that sky marked with a few light clouds.

Lang threw up his arms. "I'm thirsty already," he said. "If we don't find Downes soon, we'll have finished off all his water for him. Come to think of it—"
He stopped as Somerville, who had been rechecking the tracer, exclaimed in surprise, "Good Lord, we’ve passed him!"
"How could we?" asked Woolley. "The desert is flat as a board. Even if we missed him by two hundred yards, we should have been able to see him clearly."
"Bad luck," said Lang. "He’s buried after all."
Somerville turned the tracer slowly.
"We’re still close," he said, "so close that the tracer is virtually useless. Our best chance is back to the right. If that doesn’t work, we’ll have to move away and take bearings on him from different directions."

They moved slowly back, splitting up to cover more ground.
"Look at this," cried Lang. He had stopped and bent over a small white shape lying at the edge of one of the wide flat rocks.
"A skeleton! What the devil is a skeleton doing out here?" Woolley gave it a quick inspection.
"It was a dog," he said. "No particular breed, but almost certainly not native to this area. It’s my guess that it came with Downes."
Lang had been looking carefully around the area once more. Now he came up with what resembled a flat green matchbox in his hand.
"You’re right," he said. "Here’s the rescue beam. The dog must have carried it here."
"But what could have picked the bones so clean?" asked Somerville. "Deserts are supposed to dehydrate and preserve bodies, rather than decay them, aren’t they?"
"A completely lifeless desert is very rare," replied Woolley.
"There are probably swarms of small scavengers—insects and animals—in the area, waiting to make a meal of anything that happens to die here. We should have thought of this before. Downes will probably be in the same condition, but his clothes should make it easier for us to see him."
For a moment there was silence. Lang broke it.
"Would you believe it?" he muttered. "We’ve been wearing the soles off our boots chasing a runaway mongrel. Downes must be lying back relaxing in his cabin this very minute, wondering why we’re taking so long to walk to his ship." He turned his eyes to heaven. "Bless the adventurous millionaire!" he exclaimed. "Not only does he go gallivanting around space on his own in his private ship, as if the universe were his back garden, but he takes his pets along with him!"
At that moment, from quite nearby, a strong deep voice called out:

"Is anybody there?"

Somerville, Woolley and Lang gazed at each other in amazement. The desert around them was just as desolate and empty as before.

"That's the oddest echo I ever heard," muttered Lang.

"Don't tell me it's Downes? It can't be—he's dead!"

"Is anybody there?" the voice repeated.

"It must be Downes," said Woolley. "But what is he doing—hiding from us?"

"This is a silly time for games," Lang said; then he realized their position, and went on: "Well, what are we, a rescue team or spectators at a film show? Shouldn't we be yelling back to him?"

Somerville had the best voice. He cried loudly: "Hello! Where are you?"

"Near the big rocks!" came the reply. "You'll see when you reach them!"

They looked about for anything which could be termed a "big rock." Everywhere were wide expanses of solid red rock, but nothing which stood out from the rest. They walked a little further forward, and realized that there was a group of rocks which seemed to rise a foot or two from the ground.

In their curiosity they almost ran towards the group. As they approached, a scene of unexpected beauty was exposed to their wondering eyes.

In the centre of the raised group of rocks was what appeared to be a small, steep-sided valley, perhaps sixty feet long and fifteen across. A clear stream flowed out of a thick tangle of green leaves and brilliant yellow blossoms at one end and disappeared into the rock at the other. In between, it trickled down a pebbly bed through a level strip of emerald turf. Several bushy shrubs, their leaves a mixture of blue and green, were dotted here and there along its course; the shade beneath them looked delightfully cool. And in the centre of this haven, twenty feet directly below his three would-be rescuers, Archibald Downes sat on a small rock with his trousers rolled up above his knees and his feet in the water, looking up and waving.

"Come on down," he called. Then, pointing to the upper end of the valley, he added, "Try up there, it's not as steep."
He casually lifted his feet from the water and went to meet them.

The valley was even more attractive from within. From the rocks above, it had seemed a green jewel set beautifully, but helplessly, in the intolerable desert of arid red. Now the jewel had become greater than the desert. No red could be seen except in the rock walls which framed the valley, and this was almost completely subdued by the greens and blues and yellows of the vegetation, and the crystal of the water. The sun was still hot overhead in the deep slice of sky, but its rays did not seem to strike as strongly as they had outside. Somerville realized that, for a large part of the day, the valley would be in the shade of its own walls.

There were other things which he noticed. He bathed his ears in the pleasant gurgling of the stream, a sound which he had not heard for many months of living in the artificial shells of spaceships and stations. Inhaling deeply, he smelt the sweet perfume of the large yellow blossoms at his side, each with the edges of its petals tinted with brown, and most with small green globes in their centres. And when he lay at his ease upon the grass, he discovered countless tiny flowers scattered amidst the blades, each a different pastel shade.

Lang had stripped to his skin, tossing his clothes randomly upon the turf, and now only his head emerged from the pool he had found near the head of the stream. He was sighing to himself in appreciation. In the meantime, Woolley was inspecting the thicket from which the stream flowed.

Downes had watched them settle in with a broad smile. He seemed to feel the pride of a man displaying his new home to his friends for the first time, and listening to their praises. His story remained untold; he was obviously in good health, and business could quite easily follow pleasure with no harm done. But he had been alone for a long time, and wanted to talk to somebody again. He approached Somerville.

"Your friend Woolley is a tall chap, isn’t he?” he said. "I thought five foot three was the maximum height allowed for you government space crews? How did he get past the regulations?"

"They made an exception in his case,“ replied Somerville. "Woolley is a minor genius in his way—apparently one of the few men to have a knowledge of the various sciences which is
both wide and deep. He even serves as our doctor, and I can personally vouch for his ability there. Look at him now. In a minute or two he’ll probably come walking over here and tell us in a few words the whole basic ecology of that plant.”

“I believe I can surprise him myself if he does.” Downes scratched at his ear. “Incidentally, do you happen to have any books aboard your ship? Novels, I mean, not reference books or manuals. I’m only a light reader.”

“Yes, of course. We’d go crazy without books and games to pass the time . . . Oh, I see what you mean—you must have been looking forward to a good book through all these weeks. When we go back you can take your pick. I’ll play you at chess or cards, if you like.”

Downes gazed at the stream. “When we go back. Yes, I suppose so . . . although I was hoping that someone could fetch them straight away . . .”

“We can leave now, if that’s what you want,” said Somerville, looking at him in surprise. “But there’s no point in anyone making a special double trip, there and back, just to bring a couple of books.” He suddenly realized that he and the others may have been a little hasty in pronouncing Downes healthy. Certainly he had no bones broken, and he was well-fed; but what did they know of the effect of his experiences upon his mind?

Downes smiled again. “You’re right. I’ve been in this place too long. I’m beginning to think that I’m stuck here permanently. But we shan’t go now. Spend the night here—it’s much more pleasant than your ship, and I don’t mind waiting a little longer.”

At that moment, Woolley approached them. “Astounding,” he was saying, “phenomenal.” He stood looking back at the thicket. “That plant simply gorges itself with minerals. I managed to reach the hole behind it and taste the water as it left the rock. It’s utterly unpalatable, almost solid with minerals. Yet on the other side, why, it’s almost pure. That tangle of roots must haul everything out of the stream like a machine, as fast as the water can flow through it.”

“You haven’t seen anything yet,” Downes assured him. Pride in his knowledge brought a hint of superiority into the intended banter of his tone.
He walked over and picked a blossom. His audience gathered round in silence as it showed immediate signs of decay. Its brownish tint spread in from the edges, and it began to wilt. Downes threw it into the stream.

"As fast as you pick them, they grow back somewhere else," he said.

"Too hungry for their own good, eh?" came Lang's voice. He had dressed and come across to see what had caught their interest. He felt one of the leaves; it was thick and soft. "Is this what you've been living on?"

"No," replied Downes, "they're too bitter to eat. I've been eating the flowers."

They looked again at the yellow blossoms, and realized that the petals, too, were reasonably thick.

"The animals seemed to be eating them, so I decided to do the same. It was obvious that my canned foods wouldn't last the distance, so what had I to lose? I still have the cans, buried as reserve under what I call my sleeping tree."

"Animals?" exclaimed Woolley. "What do you know about the animals?"

"They're only small ones," said Downes. "They come out of the desert at night to drink and feed, but they never bother me."

Somerville spoke slowly. "I think it's time we heard your story," he said.

They sat comfortably in the expanding shade of the rock wall. Downes told his story quite calmly, as if it had not happened to himself but was something which he had read in a book.

"I had almost landed when I lost control," he said. "Perhaps it was my fault, perhaps the ship's, I still don't know. The ship skidded sideways across the sand and then ploughed in. I think its nose struck a buried rock. When I came to, its whole frame was twisted and broken, and all the water had escaped from the tanks. I tried to call you on the radio, but that was out of action too.

"It was obvious that I had absolutely no chance of survival if I stayed in the ship. I had plenty of food but no water, and it would be four weeks before you arrived. On the other hand, if I went outside into the desert there was at least the slightest chance that I might find water and survive. If I failed, I would simply die sooner. It was a tough decision, but that's how I built up my fortune—making tough decisions, and landing on my feet."
“I filled a pack with canned food, strapped my rescue beam to my arm, and set off. Harold, my dog, followed behind.

“I soon realized my error in walking through the heat of the day. There was no shade, but I buried myself in the sand and covered my head to shield myself from the sun. When night came, I thought of digging for water, but even after I managed to clear three holes in the sand, I found only rock.”

“That whole area of sand is nothing but a thin covering over solid rock,” interrupted Somerville. “We made certain of it before we risked landing there.”

Downes nodded, and went on: “I must have started to lose my senses and forgotten to check my bearings by the sun and the stars, to have circled back so close to the ship. By the third night, I was ready to collapse. Harold had to be carried, and the sand had given way to flat rocks which were torture to my blistered feet.

“Suddenly Harold came to life. He struggled to be set down then almost ran forward into the darkness—this planet has no moon and the stars are very hard to see by. I tried to follow him, but it was no use. I was too exhausted. I gave up and lay down to sleep.

“Just before dawn, I was awakened by Harold licking my face. He led me to this valley. Evidently he had smelt it from a distance, come to it, rested here for a while, then remembered me and gone back. Hardly the behaviour of man’s best friend, but better late than never.”

“What happened to Harold?” asked Lang. “Didn’t the food agree with him?”

“That may even be true,” replied Downes. “Sometime around midday, he seemed to go crazy. He hurtled around the valley as if the devil was after him, then grabbed up my rescue beam in his teeth and disappeared into the desert. The crash and the journey may have been too much for him—delayed shock, or brain damage, perhaps. I wish I knew.”

“What about the animals you mentioned?” asked Woolley.

“Oh, yes. They come every night to drink from the stream, and I think to eat the grass and flowers too. They vary from tiny insects to creatures about six inches long. None of them seem to stay long. Whenever I manage to keep track of one, it leaves within ten minutes, and I suppose that the others are doing the same. Don’t ask me what they look like, because I can’t tell you. As I said, evenings here are quite dark.”
Lang gave a snort. "What do you do—sleep in a tree?"
"Of course not," said Downes with a rather forced smile. "Those shrubs would never hold my weight. I sleep beneath one of them, sheltered from the little dew that falls."
"But don't the animals frighten you?" Lang persisted.
"Especially after what they did to the mongrel?"
"Not any more. They never take any notice of me. After the first night or two, I began to ignore them just as much in return. And I didn't know about Harold's body." He turned to Somerville. "Now it's your turn. I want to know all the news of the last few weeks. Wars, murders, accidents—my stomach is strong enough to take them all."

They did as Downes suggested and spent the night in the valley. As evening fell, they could hear a breeze passing across the desert overhead, but only the merest whispers of it found their way down into this shelter. Downes told them that the wind never seemed to grow any stronger than this, for which he was thankful—if it did, then it would probably sweep up a few sand dunes and bury the place.

An hour after dark, Somerville was wakened by Lang's hand on his shoulder.
"Don't move," Lang breathed. "Just listen. We'll be eaten alive."

Somerville looked around. The faint light from the stars revealed countless small shadows slipping past towards the stream. The breeze had almost died, and the only sounds were the deep breathing of Downes and Woolley, and the rustling and scraping of these anonymous shapes. He listened harder; there was some other sound, he was sure, but one which he could not quite make himself conscious of. Then he realized that it was a high-pitched whine, very faint and almost above the range of his hearing. Somewhere there must be swarms of insects on the move. Were they, too, coming into the valley?

Lang whispered again in his ear: "I'd like to put a torch on them, but I hate to think what the effect might be. This is one time I intend to take it carefully. They might be anything from harmless lizards to deadly scorpions, or both."
"Or something worse, native to this planet," suggested Somerville cheerfully.
"I wish we hadn't stopped here," said Lang. "It isn't just these animals—I simply don't like the place. For one thing,
it’s like a prison, nothing but walls wherever you look. For
another, the smell of those flowers is too sickly for me; it makes
me feel ill. And I don’t trust Downes. He smiles very prettily,
but I’m sure that he would like nothing better than to hit me
solidly below the belt.”

“And can you blame him? You’ve been biting him ever
since we arrived.”

“Only because he makes me feel nervous. What with his
chummy smiles and shifty eyes, I don’t trust him at all.”

Somerville made no reply. The steady movement of the
advancing creatures was now being countered by that of those
returning to the desert. He wondered why they left so soon.
But then, why should they stay? They came, did as their
instincts or their need bade them, and left. Quite unlike
himself. I came, I saw, I stopped for the night . . .

With the sweet scent of the blossoms in his nostrils, and the
gentle rustling of the night visitors in his ears, he slept.

They woke when the sun began to descend the wall into the
valley. Lang had calculated that they should take off soon after
the sun passed its zenith, which left them plenty of time to
return to the ship; but they planned to go back early before the
day grew too hot.

Curiosity led them to follow Downes’s example and eat a
breakfast of the thick yellow petals. The flavour was surpris-
ingly good, somewhat resembling a rich mixture of nuts. Lang
made a point of telling Downes that he did not have much of a
liking for nuts.

Somerville was taking a last bathe in the stream when
Downes asked him how he had slept.

“Quite well, thanks,” he said, “once I got used to those
animals of yours. I’m afraid that the memory of Harold’s body
worried me for a while.”

“Were you cold at all?” asked Downes.

“No, I wasn’t. Come to think of it, that’s rather strange,
isn’t it? Aren’t deserts usually very cold at night?”

“That was what I thought when I first came here, but the
rocks seem to retain the heat. It might explain why the winds
are never too strong.” He paused, then went on, a little too
casually: “You know, it should be possible to lead quite a
happy life here, shouldn’t it? I mean, what more do you need?
Food, water, peace and quiet—no worries about wars, no
official forms to fill in. Lie in the sun all day. We could trap
some of the animals and see if they are edible. Perhaps we
could make pets of some of them. It would be a simple.
satisfying life. What more could you ask for?"

"Women!" called Lang from the shade of a nearby shrub.
Downes faltered, but went on, "I'm not joking—"

"Neither am I," Lang called back. "Spend the rest of my
life in this hole in the ground? Not likely!"

"Are you really serious?" asked Somerville.

"Yes, I am," replied Downes. "Thousands of people
dream of such a place as this. It's a little paradise, if you only
see it in the right perspective. Where's Woolley? He'll
appreciate it, I'm sure."

"I can tell you exactly what Woolley will say," said Somer-
ville. "He'll disagree. To Woolley, your suggestion will be
an invitation to throw away civilization for the sake of a quiet
cave. The fact that your cave is self-heating does not matter.
He likes to have access to libraries, and news of any new
discoveries. And for that matter, I agree with him."

Downes' smile still clung to his face, but now it was looking
rather frayed at the edges. He gathered his reserves, and was
about to say something more when a loud sharp scream
sounded from the desert overhead.

All heads jerked around.

"Where's Woolley?" cried Somerville.

A second later his question was answered. A tall figure
came running recklessly down the slope at the head of the valley
As it neared the bottom, it fell forwards and skidded into the
stream.

Somerville and Lang ran towards him. Downes stared in
horror, and followed slowly behind, whispering to himself.

"What happened?" asked Somerville urgently. "Are you
all right?"

Woolley groaned and sat up.

"I think so," he said. "Except for a few bruises, of course."
He cupped his hands in the stream and took a mouthful of
water. "I went up to look at the desert... It was only a
minute or two. I felt hot and sweaty, and I began to shake.
Then a terrible pain seemed to twist from my chest down to my
stomach in quick waves. It was agony... I managed to
stumble back to the valley before I passed out."
“You shouldn’t have gone. You shouldn’t have gone,” Downes muttered reproachfully, almost whining.

“But what was it? Did you see anything?”

“Nothing,” said Woolley, “I saw nothing. But I smelt something.” He looked malevolently into Downes’s eyes. “I smelt clean air. And as soon as I came back into the valley, I was all right again. I’m going up there again, Downes, and if my guess is correct . . .”

“No!” cried Downes. “Don’t do it! I’m sorry, I’m sorry . . . I’ll tell you, you don’t have to go.”

His eyes were moist, his mouth twisted with fear and remorse. Somerville was surprised that the friendly smile could have crumpled so suddenly. What was going on?

“I lied to you. My dog didn’t go mad. I had left my rescue beam in the desert where I slept. It might not have been safe there, so I sent Harold to fetch it for me. I was afraid that, if I went, I might get lost . . .”

“Come to the point!” Lang interrupted.

“I . . . I went up to watch him go. He reached the beam—it was close by—and started to come back. Then he began to bark and howl and leap wildly in the air. I was just about to run to help him when it hit me too. I fell down and rolled back into the valley. I recovered straight away.

“I’m sorry, believe me—but that was after only two hours in the valley, and you’ve been here for nearly a whole day . . . There is no hope, none at all . . . The scent of those yellow flowers is a drug, a habit-forming drug. My dog died because he was taken from it.

“You cannot return to your ship. We are all hopelessly addicted to this thing. I’ve tried to escape it, believe me. The pain is too much. It killed Harold . . .”

“You bloody swine!” breathed Lang. His voice was cold and full of hate. He spat deliberately at Downes’s feet, and his voice rose. “I’m going to thrash you until nothing but your skin holds you in one piece. I’m going to—”

“No!” cried Somerville. “Leave him alone, Lang! We’ll beat this yet. At least we won’t starve, and they’ll send someone after us when we don’t report back. It will only be a month or two. Why, we can go back to the ship now—take some of the flowers with us, and keep smelling them on the way.”
“I thought of that,” whimpered Downes, “but they die as soon as you pick them. You can’t even transplant them. It’s no use. We have to stay here.”

“But why did you do it?” asked Lang. “Why did you bring us in? You could have warned us, couldn’t you?”

Downes was ready to weep. “You don’t understand. I haven’t spoken to a soul, not even over the phone, for a whole month. The animals frightened me—they still do, but what can I do about them? I was lonely, I wanted company. If I had told you about the scent, nobody would ever have come in here again. I would have been alone for the rest of my life. But it’s different now. We can be happy here, I know we can. Please, don’t be angry. We have all we need. We can be happy.”

“The medical kit!” exclaimed Somerville. “Woolley, perhaps we can experiment and find an antidote.”

“That’s it,” Lang agreed. “There must be something we can use as a cure.”

Woolley had stood silent until now, gazing at the stream. Now he spoke bitterly. “Yes, perhaps, if we had the time.”

“If?” asked Somerville. “What do you mean?”

Woolley pointed at a yellow blossom that had fallen off its stem and was bobbing along with the current. It disappeared into the hole where the stream returned to its dark rock home.

“How long have the flowers been falling like that?” he asked.

Downes looked up. “A week, two weeks,” he said.

“And how long have the petals been edged with brown? And when did those green balls appear at the centre of the flowers?”

“A little before they began to drop, I think. But the flavour has improved—”

“Don’t you see?” exclaimed Woolley. “Are you blind, Downes, or just a fool? It is the end of the flowering season. In a day, or a week, there will be nothing left but the fruit! Do you understand what that means, Downes? There will be no more scent!”

Downes’s bottom lip began to quiver. “Forgive me,” he pleaded, “I didn’t realize. I only wanted to be happy, please believe me, please . . .” He began to weep at last, falling to his knees in his remorse.

Another flower floated rapidly past him, to be sucked inexorably beneath the solid red mass of rock.

Morris Nagel
Everything at the fun fair was preset for the customers to win—sometimes, however the machines paid off an additional dividend. With Joey, who wanted to be a Space-Medic it turned out to be revolutionary.

The Craving for Blackness

by ROBERT RAY

Joey fingered the change in his pocket for the third time, feeling excited and scared, and thoughtfully biting his lower lip, he had to be honest with himself, he felt greedy. They were half-way up in the fun fair, and when John, his father, gave him two ten unit notes to get some change, he heedlessly ran to a change automat tucked away in one corner, and staring listless under the flickering gold light, he tendered the first into the thin slot. Waiting while the photo-electric cells studied the note and satisfied, gurgled out the metallic coins into the small wire basket, he slid the second note into the slot even before counting the change.

He hardly had time to scoop out the coins before the second lot of change cascaded almost on top of his hand. Staring at the coins, his heart started to palpitate fast when he realised it was too much. It was, in fact, twice the amount he was supposed to get. Jamming the money into his pocket, Joey grabbed the second lot out and it was the same. He had put in two ten unit notes and he got forty units change in coins.

As he was walking and often jostling beside his parents, Viv, and John, his right trousers pocket weighed down heavily and he had to keep his hand in it, his fist full of coins, to avoid them rattling and tinkling like mad. Of course it was wrong, he
should have told it immediately to John or one of the attendants, dressed in phosphorescent yellow to stand out in the crowd, but he didn’t.

Joey felt guilty and mean, this small gesture of wrong gave him in a sense, retribution for the night. In their family shorthand talk they called the night the ‘blaze-night’ and he hated it. After all, he was nearly fourteen, and although he didn’t mind coming to the fun fair now and again, he’d grown to dislike ‘blaze-nights,’ something he had to hide from Viv and John, because what originally was meant to be a night of distraction for him, was now a night for them... only Joey didn’t think they would have admitted it to themselves.

Very well, he’d tag along if he must, there was no sense in disillusioning them, even if the time must slowly come when they’d look at him as an individual rather than as a child.

“Where now, Joey?” asked John with a wide grin. “This is your night, you know.”

“Yes... well...” Joey looked round with confusion, he didn’t really care a damn what they did, so long as he didn’t have to make conversation... “What about there?” He pointed to the right, where the flickering lights adorned the top of the huge room with the enormous letters of I.Q.

“It’s your party, Joey, but don’t expect me to play. Last time everybody smirked at me when my son, very much less than half my age, beat me mercilessly,” said John, laughing, and Joey didn’t mind the laugh, he knew John hadn’t really minded it. To tell the truth, he looked pleased as anything when the prize slid out from the mouth of the machine.

They went over, their progress slow in the gay crowd. Joey sat down in front of the first machine and moved restlessly as he felt John and Viv standing behind his back on either side. He dropped a unit coin into the slot and, feeling reckless, selected the button with number eighteen on it. Knowing John and Viv looked at each other, he hunched over the five selector keys and waited for the first group of words to appear. He missed the first lot. With near panic Joey realised that by punching the button for eighteen years old, he had drastically limited himself with time. The pause between groups was almost halved. It wasn’t the balmy weather which gave birth to the fine mist of perspiration on his forehead, he was excited and his fingers trembled slightly as he stared at the opaque
window, at the words, and pressed the key he thought to be appropriate.

After ten minutes of fight, the words gave way to geometrical symbols, and there he didn’t even try to make up his mind. Taking one look at the contrast sign, he encompassed the selection of five in the right hand corner and completely intuitively, he picked one and pressed the key. Above the little window he could just see lights flashing every time he was right, and Joey felt people gathering behind him, pressing John and Viv to his back, and he could distinguish when he was wrong from their sharp indrawn breaths.

He couldn’t even look up for over twenty minutes. His fingers trembled slightly on the keys, and he muttered an audible ‘damn’ when he pressed the wrong key simply because his finger slipped. When the small window turned black, Joey sat back in his chair, feeling a post-exam twitter as he waited for the small plastic token to pop out from the machine, giving him his score. Viv put her hand on his shoulder and Joey tilted his head to stroke it with the back of his head.

The small window lit up at the same time as the token popped out, and there was a hustle of relieved breaths and laughter as the number 182 flashed on to the screen for a full ten seconds.

Joey turned round just as John shrugged his shoulders in a theatrical resignation and addressed the twenty or so people.

“I’m married to a genius, my son is a genius, why can’t I be a genius?”

“You want too much, buddy,” said a middle aged man wearing a clown’s hat.

“I don’t know,” said the woman beside him. “I reckon it takes a genius to marry one.” They all laughed.

“Can you read or write?” asked a boy with a student’s cap on, grinning, but without malice.

Standing up from the chair, Joey said in a loud voice and without a smile:

“My Dad is a rocket pilot.”

“Aha,” said the student at once, “then he has flashes of genius.”

The crowd laughed as they dispersed slowly, and the student, smiling at them, sat down in the chair vacated by Joey, his girl in a flimsy tunic standing beside him. He called to Joey as they started to walk away,
“Let’s hope the machine didn’t regroup, I never hit over a hundred and thirty.”

Viv got hold of his left hand and Joey quickly put the right one back into his pocket, starting to feel embarrassed by the coins in it.

“That was marvellous, Joey,” said Viv, pressing his hand. “I felt a bit apprehensive when you went over your age group. May I have the token?”

“Sure.” He pulled out his hand from hers and, getting the slim plastic token from his pocket, offered it to Viv. “It wasn’t much, really, after a while you know the sort of combination coming . . . you’ve just got to be quick, that’s all.”

“What about a drink, everybody? So many people trampled over my feet the last hour, I’ve just got to sit down. Viv?”

“I wouldn’t mind one. How about you, Joey?”

“Yeah, that’d be nice.”

They went across the central walk and, twisting among the amusement booths, stepped off from the concrete and walked into the park. The whole amusement fair was built in a crescent shape, the two narrow ends starting from the sea and the middle left as a large park, with tables and chairs scattered among the trees and bushes, the only light in the park supplied by the random changing colours of neon, right around them.

They sat down at a small table and John pressed a button at the edge, calling an attendant, then sat back and looked at the brilliant display of lights right around. The sound coming from the strip was like an over-rich Christmas pudding, underlaid with the noise of the sea, hammering at them from the darkness. Joey shifted the coins and absently blinked several times a sure sign when he was agitated, not that he dreamed of telling John and Viv. He looked at them as they leaned right back in the contour chairs and although they both had the same dreamy detached look, it changed every second as different colours bathed them.

Even if it was dishonesty, he was damned if he was going to tell them. For a moment he even toyed with the idea of asking for a couple more notes and running back to the same machine, but he discarded the idea, shocked. No . . . it had happened right out of the blue and he felt he was justified in keeping it. Well, not justified, wrong remained wrong irrelevant of his
“Yes. I know I’m sure. You know the times when I went out and said I was going out with the boys for a joy ride? I didn’t. I used to go to the park and lie on my back, thinking about this for hours on end. I want to be a medic.”

“ But that’s wonderful, Joey,” said Viv, her smile strangely alien in a golden-green neon light. “ I think you’re going to be a wonderful medic.” The repetition of the word ‘wonderful’ showed an immense relief in her voice, her short cropped hair now gliding in a shaft of blue.

“I think you made a wise choice, Joey,” said his father, and he too sounded suddenly at ease.

“Well, yeah . . . but . . .”

“Well, is there any more to it?” asked Viv.

“Yes, Viv . . . I want to specialise in Space-Medic.”

“Oh!” Her face turned tender and serious at the same time. Joey didn’t know anybody else who was so marvellously soft a woman as Viv, in spite of . . . he nervously tucked back the thought into a bottom drawer of his brain. But he knew it was there. “If that’s what you want,” continued Viv with a half smile, “but I should have thought this family is already represented well enough . . .”

“Darling,” slid in smoothly his father’s voice, “Joey is nearly fourteen and that token in your pocket proves that he is perfectly capable of making up his own mind. If that’s what he wants to be, it’s all right with me.”

It was typically John, he knew what he meant, he understood him, as he always did. Joey hitched himself to the edge of the chair, and disregarding the attendant as he silently stepped to their table, putting the frosty looking glasses in front of them, he turned to Viv and gesticulated nervously, his voice slightly breaking in the process.

“I’m not even thinking of the planetary runs, Viv, you know they’re working on a true space drive and by the time I qualify we may even reach out for the stars. What do we know as yet? Nothing. You can’t tell me that the measly runs we’re making now is the whole answer, can you? I’ve read in a magazine that according to the latest . . .”

“Joey, you don’t have to convince us, you can do it if that’s what you want. I suggest we have a celebration drink to your decision. Here . . . take your glass and we’ll drink to your success.”
Joey self-consciously picked up the proffered glass and, lifting it separately to both, swallowed a large mouthful of icy liquid. He drank too fast, because when he placed the glass back on to the table, he went into a paroxysm of coughing as he felt a fully grown iceberg sliding down inside of him. John and Viv laughed with him and their faces were composed, but nevertheless there was a slightly strained atmosphere, like a gauze, as they smiled at each other. Feeling happy, or at least relieved, that his news went down so well, Joey picked up his glass again, and now, bracing himself and knowing what to expect, drained it right down, his toes tingling in a most delightful manner.

"Hey, take it easy, Joey, lager may not be very alcoholic, but it still comes under that heading." John’s voice was full of life, and Joey felt there was a masculine caress in it. He became shy, grinning back at his father.

"To tell you the truth, I feel quite dizzy from the news," said Viv. "What shall we do? Go on with the fair, or . . . ?"

"Yes . . . yes . . ." said Joey quickly. "I’d like a session with the party-booths."

He was aware when his parents exchanged looks again, but he didn’t care, tonight was the night. Tonight, he wanted to see something he’d never seen before. Party-booths was an abbreviated name for participation booths and it catered for both sexes and all ages, so it was nothing new to Joey, but tonight, after telling his parents his plan, he was going to select a programme which so far he wasn’t allowed to. They must have known what he had in mind, because as they walked back to the glaring, screaming fair, with insidious smells and faces of the faceless crowd, smudged and sinuously contorted by colours, first hitting at them, then sucked in and absorbed into the huge Chagall-like mosaic, they pressed to him on either side, the contact serving as an encouragement or as a prayer.

When they got to the booths, John looked at Viv meaningly and she, fluttering her fingers at them, stepped into a booth, the concertina type door silently closing behind her. That meant she wanted something simple, for which she didn’t have to be measured, and it was only a matter of dropping a coin beside one of the many programmes indicated on the wall, sitting down in the special chair and pulling the helmet over her head.

Well, it wasn’t for him.
Joey marched up to the middle of the large room and, walking straight into the try-out booth, sat down and waited for John to come up beside him. The attendant, dressed in the phosphorescent tunic, came up and looked at John questioningly.

"What will it be for the young man? History? Crime? Love? On second thoughts, I may not be able to show very much with the last group." He sounded conspiratory and jovial, making Joey squirm in his chair, but before he had a chance to say a word, John spoke up.

"Space, please."

Whistling loudly, the attendant turned to Joey.

"What could I have been thinking of; of course, space. You look like the type of boy who can take a lot too. Well now, you just slide your hands in these gloves . . . that's right . . . and then I'll slip the helmet over your head and show you a few sensations. Let's see how you can stand terrible aliens."

Bending his head forward, avoiding and blocking the helmet lowered on his head, Joey said with his heart hammering like mad:

"I don't mean fiction . . . I want space."

The fellow beside him suddenly looked serious and glanced at John. His father pulled out his identity plaque and, letting him read it, he repeated the main information from it.

"Yes, I'm a rocket pilot, and of course I'll sign the form."

"That's different, sir," said the attendant, and going to the desk in the corner, came back with a form and gave it to John. Joey was nervous and he felt like saying something rude to the man, but now he turned to him and there wasn't a trace of the false jocularity on his face as he said:

"Don't be disappointed if you're not able to see the major programmes. With your father a rocket pilot, it won't be long before you'll get the lot."

Helplessly informative, Joey confided in him as John was signing the form.

"I'm going to specialise in Space-Medic."

"Good luck, son, we need you."

Joey noticed that in the gaudy glare of yellow from the tunic, the man's face reflected wishfulness, and the few hairs sticking out from his nose made him seem incredibly human, almost like a friend. Taking the signed form from John, he placed it in a wire basket, and gently pushing Joey's head in the right position, lowered the helmet right down to his neck. There
THE CRAVING FOR BLACKNESS

was an opaque window in the middle, through which Joey could see the booths in front, and on the top of the window, inch-high letters in black said TRY-OUT.

The next moment he was on a rocket, the dials in front real and working.

A blink, and he was reading TRY-OUT.

Then he was on a rocket, just hurtling down to Luna port.

TRY-OUT.

Then he was in a rocket just getting away from the moon, space enveloping the view screen, with Earth only in the corner.

TRY-OUT.

Then he looked at the fantastic conglomeration of stars in a Galaxy, he couldn’t recognise which, and the next moment there was something else and the letters of TRY-OUT-LIMIT flashed in front of him.

Joey was breathing hard as the helmet was lifted from his head. His forehead was glistening with fine perspiration as he turned questioningly to the man beside him, not even sparing a glance for John.

“Excellent, son, all but two grades. Go in number five booth and I’ll channel a programme into you. What about you, sir? Like to try anything?”

“No thank you,” said John seriously. “I’ll just wait here.”

Joey went into number five booth, and as the door softly concertina’d shut, sat down, and without any further preamble, pulled the helmet over his head and waited. First there was blankness and his fingers slid nervously to and fro on the arms of the chair, marvelling how sensitive his fingers were. He could feel every little design in the plastic material, following each and every contour, and he was nervously trying to make out what it looked like, when a voice sounded inside his head, making him jump, as it did every time he tried it.

“Please make sure the metal contacts at the back of your head are fitted smoothly. You are now going to see restricted material. In case of an emotional fuse, remain in your seat and don’t be alarmed at the slight prick in your thighs, it will only be a necessary sedative administered for your own sake. In case of an emotional fuse, this sedative is compulsory.

“Harry’s thrills, the best thrills in the fair, wish you a happy participation.”
The next moment Joey was sitting in a control chair, his hands on the jet levers, his eyes staring and drinking in the space in the huge view screen occupying his entire vision. Naturally, there were no portholes, the gymbal seat had a small panel in front of it, at an easy reach for his relaxed fingers, and the screen actually was a globe and he was sitting in the middle. With tricks of the optic, it seemed as if he was suspended in space, on the gymbal seat and the panel real. It was frightening, but absolutely necessary, to give the pilot an all-encompassing view.

Joey flicked a lever, superimposing the space behind him to the right corner of the screen, and he was staring at the domes of Luna; and a good way off, the orbiting space station, from where the ships to the planets took off. He was heading towards Earth. Joey stared at the fuzzy ball of blue and grey suspended in front of the immense black cloth and he was so happy, he nearly cried.

So this was space. He knew every instrument on the panel, although he had never seen one before, but that was the beauty of the participation booths... you not only were there, but there was also the knowledge to keep you going, it appeared as if he was making the decisions, instead of running on a pre-cut film. He strained his fingers and with great difficulty, reached the main control and pulled it slowly towards him, waiting for the picture of space to alter—but nothing happened. The exertion slumped him back in his chair, and with a defeated grin allowed himself to be hurtled to whatever story the helmet was set.

Oddly, he was by himself. The film obviously didn’t include the silly and completely unreal side effects, which the thrill booths usually associated with. He was alone. There were no other spacemen, there was no evident danger from which he would have to pull out the ship, none of the swash-buckling adventures he was loath to have.

Earth grew with every passing second, the continents now visible, and Joey grew uneasy at the same time. He’d seen this much on ordinary films, weren’t they going to show him something more than that? And another thing, how was it that he could remember so clearly that it was only a party-booth? There were missing pieces, and the first answer came when the now huge globe of Earth gracefully slid to his extreme left and the ship turned back in a parabolic arc, curving away from
Earth and for a few minutes, whilst it turned sufficiently deeply, bringing back the pale globe of the moon. In those few minutes Joey was sweating, waiting desperately for the moon to appear again. His progress was now very much faster, and it wasn’t long before the moon had grown enormous in his view sphere, then it slowly started to swing to his right and the ship went on with increasing speed.

Joey, white faced, eased on the controls, but it didn’t make the slightest difference, the ship sped on, accumulating velocity as the moon slowly receded on his right, leaving nothing but empty space and millions of stars.

They didn’t look real though, they shone with a brilliance he’d only heard about, but they weren’t real, it was the vastness of black and blue, the space with no sides, no top and no bottom which mattered, which was slowly but surely growing heavier and heavier, laying on his chest, forcing his breath to come in insipid little jerks, and his eyes to bulge.

It was overwhelming. The glittering stars were now only insignificant holes in the fabric. It was the depthless dark pressing on him, and as the ship sped on and on, Joey didn’t even believe the reality of the seat and the panel. There was no Earth with hazy green and blue, nor the cheating paleness of the moon, there was nothing he could fasten his eyes on, but space!

For minutes and minutes, or it might have been hours, he was tumbling and turning, detached from reality. He didn’t even breathe, he just fell with his mouth wide open, no sound though, and no dreams.

This was the way to madness. Joey scratched at space with his fingers and, willing himself to stop, he surveyed the world with no end. Suddenly, there was his panel, and he became aware of the ship ... laughing, understanding the drive, which spewed men into space, rammed home the speed controls fully, home and focussing his eyes on a point in infinity which wasn’t even there ... waited and waited to crumble the unknown under his feet ... by speed ... with speed.

There was absolutely no sensation of movement, but he knew he was hurtling with immensity, and he no longer wanted to see a fixed point.

YOU’RE SAFE.
YOU’RE SAFE.
YOU’RE SAFE.
YOU’RE SAFE.
It kept flashing on and on in front of his eyes, the inside of the helmet hot and full of mist, and as Joey tried to comprehend the drastic change and reading aloud YOU’RE SAFE he felt a slight prick in his thigh.

The next moment, somebody lifted the helmet from his head and through the tears which came from nowhere, he recognised John standing beside him and wiping his head, the concertina door open, allowing Viv to stand there and look at him with open sadness.

“You’re all right, Joey, you’re all right,” said John, helping him out from the chair.

“What happened?” he wanted to know, but he knew the answer . . . oh yes, he knew the answer.

They were using one of the many underground corridors to get to the car park without being mixed up in the crowd, the happy crowd, their laughter chasing away reality, their shuffling feet free and moving distance, unlike their brain. As the belt of the corridor whispered under their feet, Joey held on to his father’s hand desperately and looking straight ahead, he kept muttering,

“I nearly had ’im. I nearly had ’im.”

“I’ve participated in an underwater holiday in the Adriatic,” said Viv, her fingers searching out Joey’s and pressing them, waiting rebuttal and sighing happily when it didn’t come.

“Why is it so big, John? Why?” Joey still didn’t look at either, his eyes were fastened at the throat of the moving belt, fascinated by their passage, the belt moving like an animated thing, like a huge worm consuming itself.

“There is peace, Joey, because all men are united against something, which is so much bigger than themselves. It’s got to be bigger,” said John.

“Got to be?” asked Joey with fear.

“Not got to be, it is bigger, Joey,” said Viv quietly.

“You wouldn’t know, Viv, you’re not a man.” His voice was sure and dark with pain; he remembered the coins in his pocket. Lifting his head and looking at John, who was watching him all the while, Joey blinked away a tear unashamedly and tried a feeble smile.

“I’ve cheated, John.” John’s face was square, his mouth thickish with emotion, and the dreamy light blue lighting of the corridor etched wisdom on his face. He didn’t speak, he was
waiting for Joey to continue. "You know when I went to change two notes? The machine went haywire and gave me twice as much . . . I still have the money."

"You wanted to cheat?" asked John, slow, but without anger.

"Yes." His answer was quick, too quick.

"It's also a game, Joey, every now and again, some of these new changing machines are set to pay out twice the amount."

"Damn."

"You wanted to cheat." Now it was a statement.

"How could I?" said Joey bitterly. "Everything is preset to win in the end. I wish I could have cheated. I wish I could have got somewhere, in spite of the odds and against the rules. Can't we ever go against the rules, John?"

"It's like this belt, son, you can move on it in any direction, but it will travel on the same way."

"Somebody built this belt."

"Joey . . ." Viv stepped a half step ahead, turning and still holding on to his hand, and looked fully in his face. Her voice was defending, defeated. "You could build a new belt but you're limited. You could build this belt to move forward or the opposite direction. It could slant, go up or down, but you're limited . . . the principle built into it limits you . . . don't you see that?"

For a moment Joey stared back at her, the tiny wrinkles radiating from the corners of her eyes told of laughter, but the two deep lines chiselled beside her lips were two little cries—permanent. He was jealous of those lines. Joey looked at the strange woman standing in front of him and, pulling his fingers from her unresisting hand, he leaned on John.

"Mother . . . tonight I've become a man, and men must build even if men have to destroy what stands, to put newness in its place." He felt pompous, yet still he had to say it. Suddenly the light wavered and Joey felt hazy. With interest he watched as Viv grew larger and larger in front of him. His eyes were on her face, without moving she'd grown, his eyes now scanning lamely her chest, then her waist. Then everything went opaque.

"John."

"That's all right, it's only the sedative."

"Don't you think . . . ."
"No." Joey felt himself being picked up and pressed to the chest of John. "You open the car and drive, I'll sit with him in the back."

He wasn't completely out. He knew when they got into the car and the muffled power of the drive glided them out from the park. The colours chased after them, the sound, like a gentle turbine, followed them for a long way, then it was only darkness and warmth and safety.

Standing beside the observation barrier with John, Joey thought, quite inconsistently, of hunger. He couldn't eat a bite this morning, instead, he took a short walk in the garden, and leaning on the dwarf Japanese tree his mother, that is, Viv, was so proud of, scanning the sky. The sun was hardly above the horizon and there were no clouds, but the vivid light blue of the sky was like the cloak of a magician. Joey knew what it hid, and if he stared hard enough, focusing his eyes at the tip of his nose, things came bursting at the seams and he could see what he wanted to see.

And at that sight, he stood and stared.

Out on the field the rocket stood poised, ready to lift on its tail of flame and, thrusting Mother Earth behind, go on, streaking into the light blue, to leave that behind too for the sake of darkness. Then it would slow at the orbiting space station and the people transferred into the real ship, which would gently accelerate into the Abyss.

It moved. Then it was thundering and it was all over.

To watch a rocket ship was always an anti-climax; before the sound could beat defiance into the blood, like the savage rhythm of a military march, the sleek shape of the ship was out of sight, leaving a bitter craving behind.

"Why?"

He said it aloud, gripping the rails, whitening his knuckles. He looked up at nowhere, cheated. The question slowly curved upon itself, lazily as cigarette smoke and confidentially as the somersaulting form of a trampoline jumper. The question had an echo, but it echoed before his lips formed the begging question, before he opened his lips and, bursting the tenuous air barrier, created the resonance, before his mind slid back like a hurt thought, asking, but not really wanting an answer.

The answer came though... it had to, there was too much hurt between them.
"Why the metamorphosis of the butterfly? Why the tears, when the wind rattles the branches in "Tapiola?" Why do we curl up, soft and warm, with dark mauve and shriek of lilac?"
"I'll find the answer."
"You may," said the gentle voice, "but in the meanwhile, men fly into darkness, their muscles strained and brittle, and when they face the emptiness their reason buckles and they want to tear open their flesh to bare their nerve endings and mate it with the darkness and they feel they're God . . . ."
"Who are we?"
"Or," went on the voice remorselessly, "they twine into a foetal hug and scream in wanting to get back to the womb."
"Then?"
"Women are! The same spasmodic terror, which brought you into this world, which makes them bow and accept. They bend where we break. But don't be bitter. One day, men also will reach the darkness. Till then, Viv is up there, and other wives and mothers, doing our work . . . and then one day, we too will be humble enough."

They slowly left the barrier, and side by side, without speaking, walked to the entrance of the field. It wasn't an answer, only words chained together, sounds to keep fear away.

Robert Ray

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The first faster-than-light trip to Alpha Centauri was a failure: although Bianchi returned safely he couldn't remember landing on a planet—like an echo, however, memory came bouncing back.

MOONBEAM
by DAVID ROME

He knew. He knew!
But Knowledge hid itself in his whirling mind . . . .
So the Moonbeam had failed, and he sat here in his little shadowed cave, TEPset controls still clinging to his temples, big soup-plates framing his world. On his chest was the weight of survival equipment: dome-tent, tools, food, water. All needed if Doc Fiskey's dream had come true.

Think of a shout, Doc had told them before the test. A body, broken down into a blast of energy. Hurled across hyperspace like a shout across a valley!

Five hours to Alpha Centauri. Light-years through space, as effortlessly as the gust of a wind across a deep river.

The secret heart of the Moonbeam had pulsed. Once. Twice. And to the watchers at the console, the test had seemed to begin according to plan. Bianchi's body, in the snugseat, had pulsed in rhythm with the Moonbeam's magic. With no sound at all, he had vanished from his cave in the bank of instruments.
Five hours later, at the time when Bianchi should have been materializing in the deserts of the second planet of the Centauri system, Doc Fiskey himself had taken over from the TEPset operator. He had pulled the soup-plates down over his temples, glanced at the operator for confirmation, and spoken with a trembling voice into the transmitting set.

"Moonbeam calling Bianchi . . ."

But no answer had come back, across the deep river.

For fifteen hours, Doc had stayed by the set. The others—Mackateer, Logan, Lang—had isolated themselves, each man alone, watching the empty snugseat.

And now this moment had arrived. Bianchi was back, and failure stared them in the face. I saw nothing. I felt nothing. I didn’t land.

And suddenly Bianchi saw anger in Mackateer’s big face. The technician crushed a paper cup half-filled with coffee. “Felt nothing! What else could we expect from a Newt!”

Doc Fiskey came fussing between them. “Mac, Mac. We all feel disappointment—”

“Does he?” Mackateer stabbed a finger at Bianchi. “Do you feel it, Bianchi? The hell you do! You’ve got no feeling!”

Logan spoke wearily. “Lay off it, Mac.”

“Sure,” said Mackateer. “Born in a soup. Blue-printed without fear. He’d give us reactions, eh?”

“Lay off it!” snapped Logan.

And silence filled the room then, except for the Moonbeam humming away to itself. A year of planning. Months of construction. Weeks of tuning the heartbeat to perfection . . . That’s what each man was thinking. Mackateer, Logan, Lang. And Doc.

Bianchi stared into the moving shadows of his mind. Mackateer is right, he thought. I have no feelings. My soul is a piece of equipment to ride to the stars . . .

No, said Knowledge, in his mind. Not even that.

It was hours later now, Bianchi sat with bent head, watching the others take the Moonbeam apart. Doc Fiskey, thin face darkened by fatigue, poked and prodded—tested, retested. All night they worked, until the Moonbeam was together again, agleam with its own peculiar life. But they had found nothing.
Doc Fiskey stood alone, shaking his head slowly. "It should have worked," he said. He was talking to no one. Logan came to his side, taking his arm.

"There's nothing more we can do. We're dead-beat, and what we need most of all now is sleep. All of us."

Bianchi, raising his head, saw Doc's eyes turn toward him.

"It should have worked..." Doc said again. And there was something in those eyes.

Deep down inside Bianchi that look stirred Knowledge. It rose from within, rustling and whispering through his mind, until he knew that he had to escape from this room—from the Moonbeam, from Doc—and the others.

It was easy to do. He got to his feet and walked out.
Into the city.

The first grey stain of light was across the sky, and the city was coming to life. This is your city, thought Bianchi. A gleaming thing, this city of his, as the light grew stronger, and the buildings were lit with early sunlight. People came on to the streets and walked along with him. Bugs and Shoots and Public Transport growled and whistled and hissed past him in all directions.

He crossed the road to the base of a tower. Above, a silver dart shrieked overhead. It vanished into the tower, was hidden a moment, then reappeared. It picked up speed and was gone.

People rushed past Bianchi and into the day.

He knew where he was going. He climbed the tower and waited until a dart appeared from the other direction. It hissed to a halt, doors opened, people bundled out. Bianchi got in and sat down.

The dart began to move again, and the city was unreeled beneath him. He began to think about the Moonbeam.

No sensation at all, he had told them. And that had been true. He had heard the TEPset murmuring in his mind... no more than that. Just a wakening up, in the snugseat.

The silver dart stopped three times, and soon Bianchi was alone. He stared out of the round windows and watched that tall white building in the distance drawing closer.

The womb, said Knowledge, softly, in his mind.

What?
The place of Bianchi's birth!
But Knowledge was caught, held, dizzied. And lost.
Bianchi got out of the car and descended. He stepped on to the street in bright sunlight. The sky was blue overhead, flashing with its daylight stars. Skybugs, coming and going.

He walked through the quiet streets, tasting the air. Ahead, the white building loomed above the bowed-down heads of tenements. A tower, bleached in sunlight. It grew taller as Bianchi approached. A faint haze of steam drifted in the blue sky now.

Bianchi rounded a last corner, and the smaller buildings came to an end. He stood with his face against a steel-and-wire gate, looking across an open lawn at the slender building which rose toward the sun.

To one side of the gate was a small concrete pill, with a steel door and a spyhole. An eye appeared at the spyhole and studied Bianchi for a moment. Then the door opened and a man stepped into the bright light. Cradled in his arms was Authority.

"You got business here?" said Authority.

The mesh of the gate broke the man up into cells. One eye there. One eye here. A nose. A flat-lipped mouth.

"What the hell d'you want?" Authority raised its snout guardedly.

"Just to look," said Bianchi.

"At what?"

Bianchi put his eyes up close to the wire, his fingers hooked into the mesh. "At that," he said. "At the Kitchen." He nodded toward the white tower where the steam hung with odour in the bright blue air. "I was born here."

"No, said Knowledge. Bianchi was born here."

"I was born here!" he said again.

Authority moved a step closer to the wire. "You, me, and a thousand other Newts," he said flatly. "Better get back to your duty."

"Duty?"

"Your're assigned, aren't you? Research. Somewhere. We're all assigned, buddy."

"The Moonbeam couldn't cross the river," said Bianchi.

Authority screwed its face into a hardness, a toughness.

"Get the hell out of here. Get back to the city."

Bianchi raised his eyes to look at the white tower one last time. He smelled the steam, and it smelled of life, not death. He didn't belong here.

Not here, not with life.
He lay in darkness, in the cubicle allotted to him at the Centre. For some reason he had not undressed. He told himself that it was because Doc Fiskey would want him down in the control room early. But this wasn’t the reason.

So he lay awake in the dawn, with closed eyes. With eyes tight-closed so that he could not see the man who lay on the bed. Himself. And as the light grew stronger, and became full Knowledge inside himself, he felt the first shrill cry of fear and loneliness rising from his mind.

The vidphone buzzed.
The cry was silenced.
“Bianchi here,” he said.

Doc Fiskey spoke quietly. “Can you come to the control room, Gus?”

Too calm, too calm, that voice.
“Are you running a test?” said Bianchi.


Bianchi put down the handset, stared for a long time at the pearly screen. So Doc Fiskey knew, too. And Mackateer, Logan, Lang. They all knew.

He washed his face and hands. Dried his hands and held them under the early light at the window, studying the short fingers. The square nails. The myriad lines and patterns and whirls.

Then he went down to the control room.

He felt their eyes on him as he stepped in through the big, vaultlike door. They were all there. Logan was pale, a shadow of disbelief still remaining in his eyes. Lang backed away a little, just a single, shuffled step. But Bianchi saw it. He came to a halt, fixing his eyes on Doc Fiskey and Mackateer, at the TEPset controls.

Doc Fiskey said quietly, without turning, “You already know, don’t you—Gus?” The hesitation before he spoke the name was slight. But it was there.

“Yes,” Bianchi said.

And the loneliness swept over him, and he bowed his head in humiliation.

Now Doc turned. He could not disguise the faint tremble of excitement in his voice. “This is almost beyond belief! With knowledge like this we hold the key to the world in our fingers!”
The TEPset spattered, like a child with nastiness in its mouth. "Bianchi to Moonbeam . . . You hearing me now, Doc?"

Doc Fiskey leaned forward slightly. "That's good, Gus. We're hearing you clearly."

"It was the cortex that was fouled up, Doc. Sorry to give you a fright. The Moonbeam worked fine. I hit true space a yard above the desert. A soft landing, everything, exactly the way we planned it. If this damned TEPset hadn't gone dead on me . . . ."

Doc Fiskey tuned the voice down with a slow turn of his wrist. All eyes in the room were on the man they had known as Bianchi.

"It's crazy . . . " growled Mackateer. There was the light of something strange in his eyes. But he held it down. "Doc, how could it happen? How the hell could it happen?"

Bianchi, too, raised his eyes.

"How?"

Think of a shout, Doc had told them. A blast of energy hurled across hyperspace. Like a shout across a valley.

"And shouts have their echoes . . . " Doc said softly.

"You mean," Lang said, "that Bianchi hit true space and bounced, like a ball off a wall?"

"An echo of him bounced," Doc said. "Bianchi went through. It was his echo that came back to the Moonbeam!"

They looked at the man they had known as Bianchi.

"Impossible!" said Logan.

"Insane!" said Lang.

But they could not take their eyes from him.

He left them. Left them with their fear, their disbelief. He fled up the grey tunnels of the Centre, escaped into the pure bright city above.

But he didn't belong here now.

He wandered through the sunlit day, until it was night and he knew they were searching for him. Somewhere along the way he had lost his coat, torn his shirt. He stumbled as he walked, avoided by passers-by, dodged with shouted curses by the bug-shoot drivers. He crossed the wide black road and was whisked up a tower. He stood on the empty station watching the blue lights of a dart whispering toward him.
The dart halted with a hissing of doors. He stepped in, sat down in the empty car. He stared at the face he saw in the round window as the dart plunged into the night.

I am Bianchi.

There is my face.

*But Bianchi is across the space-river. How can it be yours?*

He raised his fist and smashed it against the dark glass where the white blur grimaced and mocked him. The glass didn’t break. A great pain came into his hand and he held it and wept.

At the next tower, he got out of the car.

Below him, floodlighted brighter than the sun, was the Kitchen. He smelled the steam. *They made Bianchi here. They have the secret of life!*

Sleeves tattering in the cooler wind that swept these empty streets, he ran down out of the sky to press his face against the wire gate. The green lawn stretched away into the floodlit brightness. Under the steel door of the concrete pill, a thinner edge of light showed.

Bianchi backed away from the gate into the smudgy circle of night. Moving alongside the high fence, treading with care, he dipped down into a hollow where he was hidden from the road. He reached up his hands and moved to climb the wire fence.

A brown furry creature, sent scampering in panic by his footfall, dashed headlong into the mesh. There was a flash of vivid blue light, an explosion of sparks. Above the odour of steam rose the smell of burning flesh.

Bianchi recoiled, trembling.

He remembered the gate. He had touched the gate. He stumbled out of the hollow and back to the little concrete pill. Through the wires, he watched that strip of light. There was no sound. Just the stirring of the wind.

Bianchi put one hand and one foot in the mesh and hauled himself up with a quick jerk. He straddled the top of the gate, lit by floodlights now. For a moment, he perched there. Then, silently, he lowered himself down on the inside.

His feet touched the white concrete. With a terrifying crash of sound, alarm bells began to ring. The door of the pill burst open, and into the full light ran Authority.

A flash of fire stabbed out, and pain seared through Bianchi’s shoulder. He launched himself forward. Knocked
the gun up high as it flared again. He grappled with Authority, wrenched the weapon free. On his toes, legs spread wide, he faced the sounds of men and dogs, advancing toward him across the lawn.

Faced them for an instant. Then whirled, climbed the gate. And fled.

The grey tunnels of the Centre were cold. But when he burst into the Moonbeam's control room, it was suddenly hot under the bright lights.

Doc, Mackateer, Logan, faced him.

He advanced slowly, the big gun cradled in his hands. He saw the fear come up like an opening lid in Mackateer's face. He saw the up-and-down line between Logan's eyes go deeper. Doc Fiskey's hands fluttered down from the TEPset controls.

"We searched for you ..." Logan said quietly. "We wanted to help you."

"Yeah," Mackateer said quickly. "We wanted to help."

Bianchi backed toward the Moonbeam's snugseat. He ducked his head, the firm line of the couch pressing his thighs from behind. He motioned at Logan with the gun.

"Ed, I want you to press the big master switch. That's all."

"Why, Gus?" Logan said softly. "Gus, it can't change anything."

"Go ahead!" Mackateer said harshly. "Do what he says!"

Bianchi held Logan's eyes. "I've got to destroy him, Ed ..." He slid further back into the cave. Lay there, pointing the gun between his uptilted feet. "Press it, Ed. Before I count to three."

"Gus, can't you see—"

It was Mackateer who leapt in, face distorting. "Press it! He'll kill us all!" The big arm swept Logan aside, the big fist mashed down on the master switch. "You filthy damned nothing!" screamed Mackateer.

In the snugseat, Bianchi felt his body begin to go. But for a final moment, he could still see. Could still move his arms. He pointed the gun at the heart of the TEPset control and pulled the trigger. The trillon menocircuits blew up with a roar, and the room filled with smoke ...
Bianchi stood on the sands of Alpha Centauri.

He was completely alone. The sun shone down out of a deep purple sky, shimmering in heat haze across the dunes, blazing from the valley floor below.

With the weapon in his hands, Bianchi began to walk down the powdery slope. Far below him now, he could see a patch of whiteness against the glare. A dome-tent.

There was no sign of life. Sweat rolled down his face as he drew closer to the tent. Now he could see the canvas flapping in the hot dry wind. Under one raised wall, he caught the glint of equipment: the TEPset. No sound came from it.

And now, for the first time, he saw the man.

He was in shadow, crouched over the set. His face was hidden, and he was absorbed in his work. He made no move as Bianchi stepped silently closer.

Stepped close enough to level the gun. To aim.

And fire.

The big gun bucked in Bianchi’s hands. Sound blasted outward through the walls of the tent, and the dead man crashed forward across the TEPset. A spreading pool of life stained the shining metal, falling down to darken the whiter sand.

I am! cried Bianchi. I am!

And then the sound of the shot struck the dunes, and the echo started back. It rolled down on the tent like a rumble of thunder, and passed on. To rebound from the rim of the valley again, like a wave crashing off a high cliff, washing back once more, across the desert floor.

Returning, as an echo must.
Always returning . . .
He knew. He knew!
But Knowledge hid itself in his whirling mind . . .
So the Moonbeam had failed, and he sat here in his little shadowed cave . . .

David Rome
whereas other types of fiction are written primarily to entertain. The "function" of science fiction is generally agreed to be that of a social critic, pointing out possible ways in which our technology may one day affect us and, in general, making educated guesses on the future of the world. What evidence do we have to support his claim? Well, let's try looking at science fiction in context, as a part of all literature rather than as a little world of its own. What do we see? A section of English fiction about forty years of age, employing a few hundred minor writers whose output represents perhaps one thousandth of the total books and magazines published today. It has had its booms and slumps, but at no time in its varied history has science fiction ever represented more than a minuscule fraction of the total published fiction. I seriously doubt that so tiny a part of literature can be said to have any measurable effect on the society we live in.

Of course, quantity is not always a reliable guide to efficacy. Works like Zola's *J'Accuse* pamphlet show how much damage can be done by even the smallest book. But let's remember that examples like this are rare indeed, and generally produced by writers who have brilliant records both before and after the publication of their most celebrated book. By contrast, most of the science fiction published these days has been written by men who, academically speaking, are not especially well endowed. In a field dominated by men like Lewis Mumford, Bertrand Russell, Arnold Toynbee and Will Durant, all of whom have spent lifetimes in the study of their subject, the presence of writers with one or perhaps two degrees is almost presumptuous. It's not possible that a science fiction writer could, in a few years, attain the erudition and insight of men who have devoted decades to the study of society's weakness, strength and possible lines of development. When it comes to intelligence and scholarship and all-round ability, we don't stand a chance in the extrapolation business. There are a hundred writers living who could belt science fiction right out of the ground.

If you doubt that writers like Mumford and Durant are competing with science fiction (and beating it hollow), try reading through one of their books with an eye towards possible s-f plot ideas. Where a fumbling piece of guesswork
on the part of a science fiction writer is hailed as a brilliant exercise in extrapolation, the serious social writers of today toss out infinitely more complex concepts as if they were too minor to even consider seriously.

Take Lewis Mumford’s *The City in History*, a recent and easily available sample. The book is packed with ideas that could provide the basis for a hundred science fiction stories. For instance, note his suggestion that a city, because of its planning and location, could foster a neurosis in its inhabitants and transfer that neurosis to everybody who entered the city or had contact with its people. Or his theory that the matriarchal control of a society would be mirrored in everything that the society produced, including artifacts, architecture, religion, philosophy and economy. (Science fiction’s speculation along this particular line has so far produced spaceships with chintz curtains and that’s about all.) The entire book has as its theme the possible future developments of the city and consequently of the people who live in it, areas which science fiction has touched on only briefly, if at all. Beside scholarship of such brilliance, the work of s-f writers in the field of social extrapolation is paltry to the point of insignificance.

Science fiction’s ability as a critic, assuming it ever had any (which is doubtful), was blighted from the moment when an s-f writer was first made dependent on the popular taste for his livelihood. You can’t write meaningful criticism when there is always the question in your mind “Am I going too far? Will people accept anything as extreme as this?” The “legitimate,” writers like Mumford, Huxley and Durant, safely installed in Chairs of Sociology or Philosophy at affluent universities and guaranteed of a substantial readership drawn from professional colleagues and fellow writers, can afford to be almost brutally critical.

Not so the professional science fiction writer, generally a young man with a family, dependent on a small number of readers and an even smaller group of editors for his income. Even if he knows that most of his readers are above idiot-level (and many writers apparently do not), he also knows that many of them are more interested in a diverting and colourful piece of fiction rather than anything requiring excessively serious thinking. He has to satisfy both sides and his own conscience as well, a dilemma complex enough to give anybody a headache. While this state of affairs exists, social criticism in
science fiction will continue to be unworthy of serious consideration.

So we can’t offer social criticism. What else do we have to give to the intelligent reader? Science? I doubt if our scientific extrapolations are any better than our social ones. Few s-f writers have a background in physics or chemistry, and because of this we are again outclassed by writers who have been in the field longer than us, and who have the necessary approach to write original scientific extrapolation.

A great deal of capital has been made of the current popularity of Analog magazine, which places a heavy accent on science in its material. However, a closer look at Analog’s boom, with special attention paid to the letter column, shows us that the magazine has moved on to a completely different readership, more or less abandoning the people who supported it up until four or five years ago. Analog is working a new vein, the young technologists, supplying them with scientific amusettes and light reading for hours spent out of the lab. Science fiction as literature has no place in John Campbell’s scheme of things, and I personally feel that his line of development represents a dead end for anybody following it. Unless s-f is prepared to make a complete break with its present readership, as did Analog, and institute drastic changes in its style of presentation, publication and distribution (almost impossible tasks, I feel), it will never be able to offer worthwhile scientific speculation, any more than it can offer worthwhile social criticism.

Unfortunately, our trouble goes even deeper than this! If the contemporary science fiction writers decided to abandon their futile lines of reasoning and concentrate on the basic feeling of what they are writing about, they would probably still not be successful. Science fiction is completely out of phase with contemporary literature. We’ve lived in our ivory tower too long. While we’ve been speculating about the human race writers outside have been perfecting their technique, honing the English language so that it is sharp enough to cut into any subject and extract every last piece of meaning from it. They are continually experimenting with approaches, rhythms, contrasts, new techniques and new ways of using them on old ideas, while we are still using the outdated style of the 1920’s.
The kind of over-plotted narrative story that makes up the bulk of short and middle-length s-f these days is almost unknown in modern literature. Most "outside" writers realise that, in the confined space of a short story, there is little one can do about construction of character or background. The short story is for mood and emotion. It catches the brief moment of insight and then stops while it is ahead. Novels are used for the exhaustive delineation of character. They examine every tiny facet of a person, placing him in situation after situation to show how he behaves under pressures of varying types and degrees. This requires consummate writing skill of the type that no s-f writer at present possesses. Science fiction could not, for instance, have produced a novel as convincing as J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in The Rye*, with its squirming adolescent protagonist Holden Caulfield.

We just don't have the right approach or the correct technique to write modern fiction. Character development is beyond us—we are so shackled to the outdated conventions of science fiction that even the most talented writers among us cannot write a novel which doesn’t reduce the main character to a cipher without life or interest. Take a good long look at the best novels produced recently—Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land*, Sturgeon's *Some of Your Blood*, Budry's *Rogue Moon*. Every character is, as Damon Knight once put it, "pure knotty pine." I will admit that some young writers, most of them English, are trying to break away from the old conventions, and are experimenting with new ideas and techniques. J. G. Ballard is one; his "*The Sound Sweep*" and "*Track 12*" represent at least the beginning of a new school of science fiction. Brian Aldiss occasionally shows signs of intriguing individuality—"*Poor Little Warrior*!" and "*Soldiers Running*" and especially "*Moon of Delight*" have something new and interesting in them—but the promise is late in being fulfilled. It's a sad hard fact that, in general, science fiction produces the most old-fashioned writing in the world today.

As a picture of unrelieved gloom, the foregoing must represent a new low. Perhaps I've been too pessimistic, but I feel it's about time we faced the fact that there are defects and problems in science fiction, and a strong presentation of the principal ones seems the best way to bring this home. So much for the defects and drawbacks—do we have anything worthwhile to offer? I feel we most definitely do. We can give imagination. No, not
the old "sense of wonder" cliche; (which nobody has ever actually explained to the satisfaction of anybody I know). I mean something more important than some kind of vague escape device.

The writers and readers of science fiction have one completely unique ability that has the seeds of great literature in it. We can see in science a new kind of beauty. This is the very basis of science fiction, the mainspring which keeps it going and the force that draws people to it. In many ways, it is a completely new aesthetic sense. We are the only people who are able to look on science as something beautiful. A rocket is as lovely, in its way, as a pretty girl. An artificial satellite isn't just one part of an international communications hookup or a symbol of our continuing battle with the Russians—it's something almost mystical. We readers and writers are the people who sat up most of the night (well, at least most of Australian fandom did) to listen to the reports of John Glenn's orbital flight, and who found that report exciting not because it was news, but because it was a magnificent epic of human endurance. We saw it in colour. We saw the rocket and the space outside the capsule window and all the other things we had been reading about for years. To us, it was more than just "one in the eye" for Russia.

This particular way of looking at science has produced the greatest writing in science fiction; Sturgeon's New Look at gestalt psychology in More Than Human, Bester's exploration of psi talents in Tiger! Tiger! and The Demolished Man, Clement on planetary exploration in Mission of Gravity. These men wrote about science with feeling and imagination, looking on it not as part of an industrial revolution or as a social mechanism but as something beautiful and often terrifying. They have the courage to stop worrying about the little green men or their own psychoses, look up at the rings of Saturn or the moons of Jupiter and say "God, it's wonderful!"

Conclusions then? We should trim our plots of the outdated thinking that motivates them. Stop worrying whether our stories "mean" anything; the beauty of art is "meaning" enough. Stop worrying if the characters "stand up and cast a shadow"—stop worrying about character development at all if you like; a number of young writers, John Updike for instance, get along fine without strong characters, relying on the beauty and skill of their writing. Abandon the thinking that
demands a beginning, a middle and an end for every story, and concentrate on writing logical, craftsmanlike prose. After all, a science fiction writer is a writer first, a creator of science fiction second. Try creating stories which can stand up under critical examination from mainstream critics. This way, science fiction has a chance to rejoin the body of literature and attract discerning readers from outside the field. Then maybe we will be able to get rid of the stigma that has been attached to s-f for so long. Most important of all, we’ll be able to get rid of that type of story which science fiction has produced in such large quantities during the last few years—science fiction which is an affront to the reader of taste, an insult to the intelligence of the scientist and a source of amusement to the critic.

As a sort of footnote, I’d like to stress that the opinions set out above do not represent the current climate of thought in all of fandom. There are hundreds of amateur magazines in fandom, and hundreds of fans like myself who edit and write for these journals. All of us tend to have strong views and to hold those views with some energy. However, almost every fan I know is a widely read person both inside and outside s-f, and all of them are undoubtedly comparing s-f with other literature to the detriment of science fiction. There is a growing contempt for the literary quality of what is being served up to us today by many of the science fiction magazines. Fandom is trying to do something about this—it offers awards for the best s-f publishes, provides a forum for the discussing of problems, even produced s-f that conforms to its standards and submits it to the professional magazines—but it’s an uphill fight.

If all editors were as far-seeing as John Carnell, and all writers as co-operative as Jim Blish, Avram Davidson and the others who regularly write for the amateur magazines, things would perhaps be easier. I feel fandom can be a great help to science fiction, both as a breeding ground for future writers and in the capacity of a constructive critic, a sort of “loyal opposition,” a shadowy underground who tries to point out the faults and pitfalls which may not always be apparent to the professional writer, in very much the same way as I have tried to do in this editorial.

John Baxter
On Guest Editorials . . .

Dear Mr. Carnell,

J. G. Ballard’s editorial in New Worlds No. 118, was excellent. It had some really original, and intriguing, ideas. I found myself agreeing with a great deal of what he had to say; but not I am afraid, with his attitude towards space-fiction.

Let me put it this way: I believe that s-f occupies a very special, if not unique position in world literature, and for a particular reason. You either catch the s-f bug early or not at all. It is possible that no significant proportion of the regular readership is recruited from other than the very young, and if this were so it might radically alter some attitudes towards the genre.

What, for instance, is there about s-f that attracts the young reader? (First of all, of course, he has to have some interest in popular science, otherwise he won’t be attracted at all.) I think that the three most important things are conflict, sometimes manifesting itself as violent action, the lure of new horizons, with all the excitement and the curiosity that this engenders, and scientific information in an easily assimilable form. Can anyone deny that these things are mostly found together in space-fiction?

What about the older readers? Well, J. G. Ballard says: ‘. . . The old-guard space opera fans . . . probably form the solid backbone of present s-f readership . . .’ Quite, and we all know what happens when you remove the backbone, metaphorically or otherwise; the whole thing collapses. I’m one of the ‘old-guard’ myself. I started reading the stuff way back in the days when the only s-f we could lay hands on came into the country stashed around machinery as mere packing, and ended up in pink covers, because the original covers had been removed.

To quote Mr. Ballard again: ‘. . . unless s-f evolves, sooner or later other media are going to step in and take away from it
its main distinction the right to be the shop window of tomorrow.’ This puzzles me. What other media? I really don’t think that there is any need for anxiety on this score.

Just the same this guest editorial is the best to date. I very much like his ideas and suggestions concerned with different forms of time and the ‘... psycho-literary ideas ... meta-biological and meta-chemical concepts ...’ etc. Somewhere here there could be a major breakthrough and, I am afraid, a resulting sharp division between s-f as we know it, and what Mr. Ballard has in mind, which is on a more intellectual level. There is probably room for both; but not, I am sure, in the same magazine.

E. Mackin,
Liverpool, 7.

Dear Mr. Carnell,

J. G. Ballard’s Guest Editorial raises some interesting points. Most important is his contention that space fiction can no longer offer really worthwhile challenges to the s-f writer. Before doing my best to tear apart this contention, I will go half-way with Mr. Ballard by agreeing that many space stories suffer from a singular lack of depth. This, however, is not a fundamental weakness in the character of space fiction, but a very human fault which could be found in any literary form.

Laziness.

The trouble is that it seems so easy to follow in the well-worn footsteps of the early writers, taking their basic ideas and assumptions for granted. This results in the glib, blase type of yarn which has become too wearily familiar. The main ingredient in any space story is surely: wonder. Given that, a space story should be as capable of experimental enthusiasm as any other. Why should “a rocket and planet” story have confined physical and psychological dimensions? What does Mr. Ballard mean when he says that “Earth is the only truly alien planet?” Remembering that science fiction is a speculative form of literature I think it must be agreed that the cosmos must always be one of its prime interests.

Now for some concrete examples to demonstrate that the space story is still a fruitful field for the original writer: High Vacuum by Charles Eric Maine is an intensively psychological story; the fact that it takes place on the Moon adds to rather than detracts from the characterisation possibilities.
Alfred Bester’s *The Stars My Destination* was surely one of the most complex and imaginative novels ever written. Would it have been so vivid and alive minus the space background?

Finally, coming home to *New Worlds*, Donald Malcolm’s “Yorick” was the antithesis of the “narrow imaginative limits” of which Mr. Ballard speaks. This yarn accomplished several goals which too many writers ignore. First, current astronomical knowledge and theory; too many writers fail altogether to utilise this. Second, succeeding in blending the old sense of wonder with a third sense of humour. This leads to a more believable yarn. And third, the close attention paid to characterisation.

But let us heed Mr. Ballard’s warning. The space story is at the cross-roads. We must ensure that the Space Age acts as an inspiration, and not as competition.

James Inglis,
*Ayrshire, Scotland.*

Dear Mr. Carnell,

As one of the hitherto silent members of the *New Worlds* readership, may I offer a few comments on things in general.

First, of all the Guest Editorials so far published, I liked Phillip High’s the best. No nonsense and straight to the point. Like Mr. High I have not lost my sense of wonder, although at times some stories just leave me cold (even in *New Worlds*). Two such stories were “Billenium” and Sturgeon’s “Venus Plus X.”

I believe the only way to retain this sense of wonder is for authors to let their imaginations run loose with a vengeance. There have been some good examples of imaginative writing in *New Worlds*, stories such as “Echo,” “Routine Exercise” and “Junior Partner,” not to forget currently “The Dawson Diaries” to only mention a few.

Next, regarding experiments, the more the better, even on old themes such as space travel and time travel but please, no “sick” stories. By sick I mean the kind of thing being currently foisted on to the public today by the film industry in an effort to bolster up their trade. I would like to say a word in defence of the American magazines. One or two readers seem to think they are on the way out, I disagree, there is plenty of life left in *Analog* and *Galaxy* yet. The reader who complains that the “Sector General” stories are getting “old hat” is right. James White should call it a day after “Field Hospital.”
Perhaps if you reject any further "Sector General" stories Mr. White will reward us all with another special treat. What are the chances of getting a story, or perhaps even a serial from Eric Frank Russell? Or is he lost to New Worlds now? Finally, congratulations for the many fine stories being published in Science Fantasy, the best fantasy magazine on the market today. Also likewise Science Fiction Adventures. Carry on the good work.

H. Higgins,
Walthamstow, E.17.

Dear Sir,

I thought that no lover of s-f would again use the odious comparisons which were produced again in Philip E. High's guest editorial. By comparing s-f with 'Westerns,' 'Romances' and 'Detectives' he sets back by five years the progress that has been made by authors like Blish, Bradbury etc., to have our type of literature accepted as just that—Literature with a capital 'L.'

The forms of stories that he mentions as being of comparable worth are merely extremely light entertainment for people who are able, nay, willing to have their thinking done for them. What is unfortunately known as 'Science Fiction' provides more than a few pages of entertainment, it also provides that most valuable commodity, 'food for thought.'

Mr. High goes on to ask what has happened to the aggressive type of illustrating that was in vogue years back. Surely, one of the bigger obstacles in the way of large sales of s-f literature is the use of most unfortunate covers on most paperbacks. It would appear that some of the artists responsible for the covers of some pocket books have not read what's under the cover—they have only drawn a picture as unusual as possible and put a star or two here and there and there you are—an s-f cover. How can the genre be taken seriously when these covers show the most outlandish creatures and edifices that only an imbecile would imagine could exist. As Mr. High says, the authors' job is to say what could happen, so also is it the job of the cover artists to show what could exist, unless the painting is purely abstract, which even then is a trifle risque.

All in all, the sooner that all authors, critics and readers accept the fact that s-f is a serious art form, from both literary and visual art approaches, the sooner will we see a general acceptance of the genre and the sooner will we see regular reviews by responsible critics in every newspaper.
Incidentally, can anyone please think of another phrase to take the place of 'Science Fiction.' Those two words have made life as difficult as the words 'Flying Saucers.'

P. Hickey,
R.A.F. Wildenrath BFPO 42.

Dear Sir,

Most or all of your guest editorials seem to fall into the same basic error of immoderation. Each puts forward one solution for science fiction ills and claims it as the one and only. True, science fiction needs more and more believable characterisation, social consciousness, psychology or what have you. True, the science seems to have gone out of the fiction. Remedying either of these faults alone will do some good but not enough.

Without the derided gadget, be it an object or an idea, science fiction ceases to have any real identity and will disappear back into the mainstream and at present the standard of fictional gadgeteering is abysmal. Mr. Conklin's analogy of the recirculated water in a fountain is beautifully accurate in this context, since most recent magazine science fiction science seems to have been learnt from science fiction magazines. This does not lead to much novelty of approach or ideas.

Part of the reason for this sorry state of affairs may be the attitude, again expressed by Mr. Conklin, that 'We are—let's face it—pretty darn limited in the major areas of science and technology suitable for reasonably likely science fictional embroidery; it would be difficult if not impossible, for example, to write a thrilling melodrama about the recent discoveries in ATP and DNA in biochemistry.'

Why should it be impossible? And if science fiction writers are going to avoid trying something just because it is difficult, or start to limit themselves in any way, they had better give up and write short stories for the women's magazines. However, if this fate is too appalling, they could always start a course of the New Scientist, Scientific American, Discovery, elementary physics, chemistry and biology texts and anything else the public library or private funds will run to. By the time the gentlemen graduate to Nature, a journal fascinating in its obscurity, things should start to be rather interesting.

This is still not enough. The pure gadget story, however interesting, is only a small part of the field and if science fiction is to be Literature, with a Social Consciousness, integrity, awareness and a sense of values, it has to be able to
meet mainstream literature on the mainstream’s ground, which is people. This is easy enough really, all you have to do is write down what people would actually say and do in a given situation.

Well, it looks easy enough when Mr. Shakespeare does it.

Thus, a good science fiction story should have interesting and preferably original scientific or pseudo-scientific ideas, some vestige of shape (it doesn’t have to be a plot and it doesn’t have to be likely, just believable) and real seeming people, human or otherwise.

Unfortunately, in practice, the gimmick and the characters seem to be mutually exclusive. Theodore Sturgeon writes very well about people, so well that his technical gadgets, however ingenious, always seem anti-climactic. James Blish, on the other hand, invents or applies the most interesting gadgets, but his characters are always a little two-dimensional. If anyone does manage to strike a happy medium it is usually a compromise without outstanding ideas or characters.

This is stating the case in pure black and white terms. There are writers who produce stories with ideas and good characterisation, but each of the parts is less than it could have been. Maybe this is not a bad thing, but what would happen if a writer could combine, for instance, the scientific approach of Blish with the Humanity of Sturgeon, integrated with the ability of Heinlein or Clarke?

In fact, it seems that the best answer for science fiction’s troubles would be a sudden influx of Genius, but since this seems unlikely, authors will probably continue to do the best they know how.

It had better be good.

N. J. Patterson,
Torpoint, Cornwall.

Satisfied Reader ...

Dear Mr. Carnell,

I would like to tell you how much I enjoy your three Nova publications. I have been reading s-f since the 1940’s and can’t understand why there is so much fuss about the “Lost sense of wonder.” (How I wince whenever that cliche is dredged up). Of course s-f has changed, just as jazz has changed over the years. I liked the best of the old stuff and I like the best of the new. Writing standards have certainly been
raised, and new ideas are being developed in spite of what the critics say.

To move from the general to the particular, I would like to offer a few personal views about writers. J. G. Ballard is my favourite, because he combines imaginative plots with superb writing. Kenneth Bulmer writes excellent fantasy. John Brunner and Brian Aldiss are also very good, but I have a feeling that they are writing too many stories and therefore do not always produce their best work. David Rome, among the newcomers, writes a rattling good yarn; and Michael Moorcock and Thomas Burnett Swann have contributed some good fantasy to *Science Fantasy*.

I have just finished reading S.F. No. 53, and thoroughly enjoyed it. Michael Moorcock's story never flagged, J. G. Ballard was as good as ever, Edward Mackin was also at his best, and the Grodnik story (by a new writer?) completed an excellent edition.

The cover of S.F. 53 was the best for many months. The covers to Nos. 50 and 51 were among the most tasteless I have ever seen. Covers are an important part of s-f and fantasy mags, and they often fail to do justice to the quality of the stories inside. I feel this is particularly true of *Science Fantasy*.

I hope I haven't sounded too pompous a note at airing a few of my opinions. Many thanks to you as editor for the pleasure I get out of the Nova mags. You can rate me a highly satisfied customer.

Archie Potts,
*Clifton, York.*

Faster-than-light?

Dear John,

As an avid s-f fan, I decided to try and find out more about why our heroes cannot go faster than light. So being a low grade mathematician, I read a non-mathematical treatment of Relativity (by Einstein himself).

Far from finding out why not, I could not find any reason against it. The crucial question seems to be, relative to which body may we not travel faster than light?

The assumption implicit in most stories seems to be, relative to Earth. But why should this be? Once we are in space, who is to say where we came from? Perhaps we should be careful not to paint 'Earth' or 'Terra' etc., on the rocket.
It may be argued that we are not able to travel faster than light relative to anything. As experimental evidence, the failure to accelerate sub-atomic particle to a velocity faster than light may be quoted.

But here, it must be realised we are saying “faster than light, relative to the thing which is doing the accelerating i.e., the magnet.” But they are travelling faster than light relative to a chap walking home in the opposite direction to that in which the particles are travelling (at 99.9 recurring % of the speed of light relative to the magnet).

All this may seem somewhat of an attack on opposing evidence, without any advance of positive facts. There is just one I would like you to consider.

When we look out into space, galaxies at great distances from us are receding at over half the speed of light. So presumably two in opposite directions from here are receding, relative to each other, at greater than the speed of light.

I suggest when we get into space, we pretend that we are from one of these galaxies.

Colin Daly,
Balham, S.W. 12.

P.S. If we assume an acceleration of one gee to the half way point, and a deceleration of one gee to the star (this assumes the star has zero velocity relative to Earth), then we can make the nearest star (4 light-years away) in a little under four years.

That is if my maths is correct.

And better still, a two hundred light-years journey would only take about 25 years.
This should interest you ..

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