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no. 135

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EDITOR : JOHN CARNELL

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guest editorial

*the very nature of Geoff Doherty's interesting guest editorial prompts us to play havoc with the title—but, read on for his interpretation of one of the most heated discussions which took place at this year's British convention*

# s . x , s - f , and c . . . . . p

by g. h. doherty

---

One of the most stimulating talks at this year's BSFA Convention turned out to be Harry Harrison's deceptively lightweight, "Sex, Censorship and Science Fiction." He had obviously intended the whole thing as an exercise in comic relief with serious undertones, and he was very successful in provoking both laughter and heated discussion.

The assemblage of *fans* was titillated by his outstanding visual-aids: a splendid, long-to-be-remembered, nubile nude and a magnified rear-view of a couple of infants sitting on a potty! These aroused some general interest, if nothing else, but the effect was as nothing compared with his eloquent appeal to the audience's sympathy which followed. Who would not shed a tear at the thought of a Harrison MS being torn to shreds by the Medusa-type censor in the editorial offices of a well-known American s-f magazine?



This certainly raised a laugh ; but seriously, what are we to think of editors—on both sides of the pond—who not only remove long passages of admittedly salacious, pornographic or sadistic material from the stories they accept, but even alter words or phrases without any reference to the authors of these lesser crimes ? Minor vulgarities, of course, like *pot*, *belly*, (what about pot-belly ?) or *breasts*—nothing in FOUR LETTERS that you can get away with in the name of ART, old boy, if you're swimming in the mainstream these days. No sir, all that happens is that you turn to page x of the printed edition of your story and find that the text has been mutilated.

Naturally, this kind of maltreatment is calculated to raise the hackles of any self-respecting writer. However, the main point of Harry Harrison's talk was simply that there seems to be a very juvenile criterion of what is acceptable and inoffensive amongst editors of s-f magazines, and that this places an unnecessary restraint on a writer who is trying to achieve some degree of verisimilitude ; a degree of restraint, too, which is not demanded by *any* other branch of adult fiction or entertainment at all.

He suggested in fairness to the editors, that this retrograde attitude in these days of enlightenment has been adopted (a) because s-f is desperately trying to live down the wholly unwarranted reputation for lewdness that the old Beauty-and-the-B.E.M.-type covers earned for the last generation of pulps and (b) because so much s-f is read by youngsters that the stories ought to be kept ' clean and pure.'

These were serious ideas put over in a humorous way and enlarged upon in private discussions afterwards. Mack Reynolds, for instance, had some interesting points to make about restrictions of this kind—not merely editorial, but in addition those imposed by social convention. Thus, he thought, no professional writer who wants to sell his works to a reasonably wide audience can ever write what people, especially men talking to men, ever really say.

This is irksome, but something with which writers who have mellowed, matured beyond the desire to shock their audience into some kind of response, are able, grudgingly, to come to terms.



*what is the effect upon a lesser  
person when his ideal apparently has  
'feet of clay'? when the symbol is removed,  
what is left?*

# man - hunt

by john rackham

---

A tiny green light on the panel winked in time with the passing seconds, counting out the last few moments of hyper-jump. Will Reece watched it, but without attention. That part of his mind, like the whole of the rest of the ship's mechanism about him, was on automatic and all taken care of. The calm, almost hypnotic, blink-blink-blink of the light, served to count over for him the perplexing events of the past forty-eight hours.

Reece, at twenty-eight was large, lean, and as fit as constant and rigorous discipline could make him. He filled his Galactopol-grey uniform snugly and none of the content was fat. This was just as it should be, for he was, and was proud to be, a top-rank field operative, a 'G'-man first-class. His was a just pride, to be taken for granted but not unduly dwelt on. Until forty-eight hours ago he would have assumed himself able to meet and handle any situation within the framework of his job.

But now, also silent and watching the beating count of the light, was Thody Krager. Superficially, Krager was as like Reece as a brother. As he sat, quite relaxed in his padded seat, at a ninety-degree angle to Reece and within easy reach of duplicate controls, he too wore the grey of Galactopol. But



Krager, twenty years older than Reece, was forty-eight and on his breast-pocket blazed a single sun-burst in gold. To the knowledgeable, that single symbol spoke volumes, set Krager apart, made him different. And there were other not so obvious differences, too.

Reece thought back. The signal had started it all, that official message that had called him out of the middle of a routine and unimportant assignment. The three-dot code spelled urgency, the heading warned of R and A . . . 'rendezvous with and assist,' but nothing to be unduly excited about, not until he had read the name and subscript of the person seeking assistance. Thody Krager ; G-Prime ! From that point on, Reece had read the signal and committed its instructions to memory by long-trained habit.

The meat of it was commonplace enough. Objective ; Buller Hawkins, alias 'Bully.' Operation ; track, find and take into safe custody, *alive*. Then there had followed a comprehensive data-listing on Hawkins, giving his description, the point at which he was last seen, details of his ship and equipment, a summary of his infamy and an estimate of his character. On that reading Hawkins was totally amoral, asocial, vicious, violent and versatile, ready and willing to turn his hand to any and every means for gaining a fast reward.

Nothing to cavil at there. By the look of it, Bully Hawkins richly deserved all that was coming to him and not before time. Reece had hunted men before, many times. As a 'G'-man, first-class, it was all part of the job. Nor was R and A anything novel. Across the giant sprawl of the Galaxy the men of Galactopol were thinly spread and well used to helping one another, with no question. But to be signalled to the aid of a G-Prime was something quite different, was an event !

The G-Primes were living legend. No-one outside of the select few of the hierarchy, the governing council, knew exactly how many there were, or who or where they all were at any given time. Rumour had it that there were only a hundred or so of that supreme status in the whole organisation. There were other rumours, too. Reece, out of his experience and expertise, knew how to discipline his imagination, but he had felt a thrill, nevertheless. Knowingly to meet a G-Prime was rare enough in itself. To be called out to work in co-operation with one was . . . overwhelming.



At least, it had been. Now, forty-eight hours later, Reece wasn't so certain. Pride had given way to perplexity. He could not have said exactly just what he had expected, but certainly not what he had found.

The winking light went out for the last time and then came on again, glaring brightly. There was that sudden vertiginous spin and swirl, that sense of being flung into the rim of a spinning wheel and then the shock of sudden stopping. Reece gasped off the momentary nausea and craned forward to study the read-out in the trace-and-track scope. Krager did likewise. All round the control-room the peripheral screens were ablaze, rich with pin-point star-images, bright patterns of burning jewels against the black velvet backdrop of space, but neither man spared so much as a glance for the beauty.

"How does it look, to you?" Krager asked.

"Pretty close," Reece studied the snag-toothed curves which fled across the screen. "We ought to do it in a couple more jumps, with luck. I'll set her up for a fifteen-minute re-think and see what she makes of it. That all right with you?"

"Whatever you think best. I'll go get us a couple of coffee-bulbs." Krager twisted up out of his seat and stepped across to the centre hatch, to drop down out of sight, leaving Reece to carry out the re-set.

That was the way it had been all along. Krager had done nothing but watch and issue a rare and unnecessary instruction. He had shown no initiative, no power of command at all. Most of the time he had not even seemed interested, had been withdrawn and keeping company with his own private thoughts. By the unguarded expression on his face at such times, those thoughts had not been pleasant ones.

Reece made the re-set competently and efficiently, almost without any conscious thought. The tube-face before him resolved into featureless green as the complex instrument busied itself with its task. From various antennae in the hull it greedily sucked in a wealth of data of all kinds, evaluating and weighing each item, all the way from microscopic whirls, eddies and disturbances in the external plasma-stream, to gross and solid values for major masses in the vicinity. Visual stars, radio-sources, dust drifts, micro-meteor impacts, somewhere among those lay the blurred traces of Hawkins in flight. Incoming data had to be matched and compared with what it



already had safely stored about Hawkins, his ship, its characteristic 'wake' and flight-pattern. Then it would strike a balance, an exquisitely calculated balance between possibilities and probabilities, and guess just where Hawkins ought to be by now. A superb device, it did things no man could ever do and did them well. G-men called it, with affection, the 'bloodhound,' and prized it greatly.

But there was no equivalent machine that would perform the same kind of educated guesswork on the problem Reece had inside his own head, as he sat back. G-Prime=legend=superman. That had been his basic equation. For such men, five to seven years counted as a lifetime, and a secure and safe desk job at the end of it was counted as just reward. Rumour had it that you made G-Prime by thirty years of age or you didn't make it ever. And you had to be in the superman class to get that kind of expertise by that age. But Krager was now forty-eight. It said so, right there on the I.D. card he had shown along with his credentials. So he had been in the seat of power three times as long as anyone would expect. It showed, too, when you looked closely. Reece had had plenty of time to observe the deep grooves of strain, and the prematurely grey hair, and that unutterably weary look in off-guard moments. But what was so superior about him?

That was just one of the many questions Reece couldn't answer. He knew that a G-Prime's authority was immediate, absolute and unquestioned. At will he could call on and command the entire weight and striking power of the whole of Galactopol, as and when he deemed necessary. That was something the greenest rookie knew, right from his first training days. But how—how did any man qualify for that kind of authority? And how did Krager make it?

The man himself came back up the ladder, handed over a plastic bulb, settled into his seat with his own and just sat there staring into nowhere. Like that, he wore a slightly bewildered look, the expression of a man who doesn't quite know what it's all about and doubts if he ever will know. On the spur of the moment, Reece took a bold chance.

"A question," he said. "Shut me up if it's none of my business, but I'm curious. Just what is so damned important about Bully Hawkins?"

Krager didn't even look round. "You had the data, in the signal?"



"Of course. All right, he's a bad boy and we'll get him. But why you? Why a G-Prime?"

"Why not?"

"Because," Reece let a little of his irritation through and leaned over to pat the 'bloodhound.' "This beautiful thing can out-think and out-guess any man that ever was. It can handle a thousand times more data, all simultaneously, than a thousand men. Wrap it up in a phrase, it finds things and points the ship to them. A guide. But I wouldn't dream of using it, say, to take me down into a landing approach at an air-port. And why not? Just because it would be like using a hydrogen-bomb to break eggs. So why a G-Prime to catch an ordinary renegade bandit?"

"You think a lot of that machine, don't you?" Krager evaded the other question. "You depend on machines a lot, eh?"

"Of course I do," Reece retorted. "So long as they do my work for me, why not? Machines are keeping both of us alive, right now. They got us here and will get us back home. Where would we be without them?"

"How long have you been a G-officer, Reece?"

"Ten years."

"Would you class yourself as a good officer?"

"That's not for me to say. I've first-class status. I've taken every course, every class and every examination I could get to. I try to know all there is about my job and do it as efficiently as I can." Reece kept his tone level, wondering just what was the point of this sudden switch in emphasis.

"So, you use machinery wherever possible and you see nothing wrong in that. Ever strike you, Reece, that you could be classed as a kind of machine yourself? A machine designed for a specific function, to execute the law?"

"I suppose you *could* think like that, if you wanted to."

"But you don't?"

"I certainly don't," Reece spoke more sharply than he meant. Krager the legend was losing the power to awe. "I think of machines and devices as extensions of myself, but I'm in no danger of confusing myself with them. I know there are people who do, but that's their problem. It doesn't bother me. A cave-man with a club in his hand wasn't any less a man, he was more."

"A philosopher, too, eh?"

"I think a little, in my spare moments, yes!"



The trace-and-track computer pinged gently, saving Reece from more flagrant disrespect. A trial pattern came up on the tube-face. He gave it careful attention.

"What's it say this time?" Krager asked.

"Practically next door. Hold on to your false teeth, I'm setting up for jump in five seconds, soon as I feed in the course . . ."

Reece sat back, letting the padded grips hold him safe. His mind was more confused than ever. Either Krager was acting a part—and why should he do that?—or the G-Prime legend was merely myth. Any competent first-year man could read a scope-pattern as readily as capital print. And sane people had given up being afraid of machinery centuries ago, hadn't they? Sure, there were still many who shivered, neurotically, at the prospect of brain-machines ruling the world and reducing humans to slavery. But one felt sorry for such people, because they just didn't know the score, because they were projecting their own warped urges into the sublimely indifferent environment. They couldn't help it, presumably. But a G-Prime shouldn't—couldn't be as stupid as that, surely?

Trips clicked over, kicking reality into a boiling chaos of instability just for a few seconds, then they fell out again, slamming the ship into real space once more.

Krager coughed painfully and swore. "Damn all short hops," he said, with feeling. "Never can get used to them. Tear your guts out. How is it, now?"

Reece scanned the rippling signal and put up a thumb.

"One more should do it. We'll be breathing down his neck . . ." he rapidly set up the new data and hit the switches. This was strictly routine. Krager was nothing more than a passenger, and a strangely inexperienced one at that. Or was he after all acting a part? Pretending to be stupid, to see whether Reece really knew his stuff or not? That idea was intriguing for a moment, then Reece dismissed it as fanciful. Competence was written into his record for anyone to see. Fumblers didn't get to be first-class, he told himself realistically. But, came the counter-argument, stupid didn't get to be G-Primes either. So there had to be a catch in it somewhere. Could it be that Krager was just sitting back, coasting through the routine work, saving himself for the moment of glory, so that he could step in and grab all the credit? Could it be that?



Reece fastened on that notion and weighed it alongside what he knew. 'You could be classed as a kind of machine, Reece . . .' The words echoed and he smiled, wryly. One thing about a machine, it doesn't seek personal glory. And that could be the way one got to be G-Prime, by relentlessly grabbing for every possible moment of prestige, by pushing, bragging and making a brave show. In his ten years of service, Reece had never seen himself as anything more than competent and satisfied to turn in a good job. Oh, in silly moments he had toyed with the fantasy of being a supremo, of being G-Prime, with all that prestige and power. But it had never been more than the fancy of an idle moment. What sane man would want to carry all that on his back? And have to run the rat-race of trying to live up to it?

Again the trips clicked and thumped, nausea came and went and there was the sharp shock of stopping. But this time there was no moment of peace to give time to shudder off the reaction. As the ship burst into real space, alarms screamed frantically, automatic relays smashed home, taking command of the ship, throwing it around and away, blasting it out of the mighty clutch of a close-by sun-sized mass. The main-drive thundered into full-throated thrust, grinding the two passengers deep down into their padded seats. Straining savagely against multiplied weight, Reece fought his ton-heavy arms out to grip and take charge of the controls, to over-ride the blind purpose of the automatics and to gentle down the runaway motors into purposeful effort. Gradually, the murderous weight slackened, the raucous alarm cut out and he was able to pay attention to his guidance system. Flickering tell-tales confirmed what he had already guessed. He shut off the 'bloodhound.'

Krager drew breath with a great groan and sat forward, red-faced.

"What happened?"

"We twisted out a shade too close to a sun. We're in a planetary system, a strange one. Instruments don't recognise it at all. Which means it's uninhabited."

"Ah!" Krager nodded. "That makes sense. Looks like Bully Hawkins has gone to ground. Let's see, now. I used to know how to work one of these things, get an energy-trace on him," he leaned forward and screwed up his face as he fiddled with a set of verniers. Reece hung on to his controls, steadily



reducing the main drive to rational power. After a few mumbles, Krager gave a tongue-click of satisfaction and a trace grew on the main guidance-screen.

"That's him," he said, unnecessarily. "Reads fourth planet out, and he's still there."

Reece nodded wryly and nursed the controls to the point where the trace could be fed into the course-automatic. It took over and he settled back, sighing with relief.

Passing a practised eye over his instruments, he said, "We should make orbit in about an hour. And that will be where the easy part stops and the real work starts." As Krager looked puzzled, he elaborated. "This makes your point about machines. They can only get you so far. Then you have to get out and walk."

"Oh. Yes. See what you mean. A pity we don't have a machine that will go down there and get him, isn't it?"

"But we do," Reece said, dryly. "We have two. You and me."

When the ship spun into its tight orbit, Reece switched on the scanner-complex and waited for the incoming stream of data to be resolved into meaning. He had used the hour's delay to goad himself into a perverse frame of mind. If Krager was really putting up some kind of bluff, this was the time to call it—now when the going was due to get stickier. Tell-tales swept and steadied and one screen showed a brief blip of power that grew and faded in coincidence with a definite point down there. He jockeyed the controls carefully and the blip came back.

"That's our man," he said. "His ship, anyway. He's lying about a third of a revolution into the dark side. And the indicators are that this is a wilderness-jungle planet, plenty hot but with no immediate atmospheric hazards at any rate." He waited for comment, but none came. He stifled sudden irritation, kept his tone level.

"So what do I do now? What are your instructions?"

"Oh!" Krager seemed surprised by the question. "I don't know that I have any instructions, in that sense." He smiled suddenly and the whole cast of his face changed, taking Reece completely by surprise. "Look," he said. "Why not just go ahead and do whatever you'd do if you were on your own, eh?"

'That is exactly what I have been doing all along,' Reece thought, but he kept silent. Shrugging, he nudged the ship



into a better fix on that trace down there, lined up a dish-antenna on the hull and deliberately depressed a button three times. A keen ear might have detected a momentary falter in the subdued hum of the machinery of the ship, but nothing more as a megawatt beam of invisible ions stabbed down at that grounded ship, fusing and wrecking its every electronic circuit. The major machinery would still function. Bully Hawkins would still have light, air and food. And shelter. But his ship was now blind, deaf and paralysed. 'Machines cancel each other out,' Reece mused, as he fondled his controls again. 'Now it's up to the men,' and he began the exacting task of making groundfall.

Putting down on a strange surface, with nothing to go by but the ship's instruments, was onerous and delicate work, enough to keep him thoroughly busy for the next half-hour. He was glad to hear the solid thud of shockfeet meeting ground and relieved to see all his instruments sag back to ground-zero. So thoroughly had he been engrossed that it was not until he cancelled his board that he realised his attempt to outbluff Krager had failed. The mystery of the G-Prime's behaviour was still a mystery. If it had ever been one.

He examined the scanner-complex again, now that they were on the surface, but there was little additional data to worry about.

"Warm out there," he said. "Breathable, though. And just a shade under earth-normal gravity. Should be showing daylight in about six hours. If I'm still on my own, I go by the book. First law of survival. Eat when you can, sleep when you can, don't make hard plans until you can see how the land lies. Is that agreeable to you?"

"You sound as if you're expecting me to raise some objection," Krager murmured. "As if you have something on your mind, Reece. This is no time for that kind of thing. We have a job to do and to do right. If there's anything about this operation that doesn't sit right with you, maybe we ought to thrash it out right now, while we have the chance?"

'Bluff called,' Reece thought. Then all at once it struck him, just what he was doing. Familiarity had bred contempt. The superman glamour of G-Prime had eroded, leaving cynicism. He was about to argue with and offer destructive criticism to a superior officer. This man, Krager, could be an enemy. By a carefully chosen word, a hint in the right quarter, he could



utterly destroy Reece as a Galactopol operator, could finish him with the service. In that moment, Reece had another surprise from within. Throughout his ten years he had accepted the discipline along with the honour and had been proud to wear the grey. He had accepted, along with almost everyone else, that a G-man was of the elite. Now, all in a flash, he realised that his unquestioning acceptance had been for certain taken-for-granted standards. And if those standards were just myths, then he didn't give a damn for the service, or what it stood for. And that included Krager, the whole concept of G-Prime, or any question of his future.

It was a moment of truth that came and went between one heart-beat and the next, yet it profoundly changed his whole attitude, even while the echo of Krager's question still hung in the air.

"Talk?" he said. "Yes, all right. Maybe it is time we settled a few points."

"Fine!" Krager spun his seat round. "You go fix some food, while I make a progress-report and transmit it."

Reece needed the twenty minutes it took him to break out food packs and process them, to clarify his unease. Now that he was being put to the question, it wasn't easy to say just what was troubling him. He couldn't very well accuse Krager of failing to live up to some glamorous fiction. He had no genuine grounds for wondering why a G-Prime should bother himself with a simple and straightforward man-hunt, even. There was little he could fasten on except the general concept of 'efficiency'; that Krager showed all the signs of being a rank incompetent; that he, Reece, could have done this job just as well, possibly better, by himself. And that, for some reason, led his mind back to their previous words about machinery. Which, in turn, led to other things.

He watched Krager eating, studying him as if he had never seen him before, and there was more in his mind, now, than just the matter of a G-Prime and senior officers. This could be the breakdown of a whole outlook on life. Krager finished up, crumpled his paper tray and tossed it into the waste-converter.

"Now," he invited. "What's on your mind?"

"Efficiency, mostly. And mechanisms." Reece spoke slowly picking his words with care. "If you think of the law which we are pledged to serve, as a machine, a giant machine..."



“ And us as cogs ? Yes, it’s a useful analogy. But it happens not to be true. Law, any law, is an expression of the needs and opinions of the society generating it. And a society, any society, is made up of people, of individuals like you and me. All different.”

“ I’ve heard that one before,” Reece retorted. “ It’s a fallacy. If everyone is different from everyone else, then everyone is equally right or wrong. And that makes ‘ law ’ meaningless and law-officers redundant. Doesn’t it ?”

“ Sounds to me as if you’ve just contradicted yourself.”

“ Oh, no, I haven’t. All I’ve done is challenged your idea of law and equality. Or society, whichever you like. You can’t have the general and the particular in the same breath. Something has got to go.”

“ I see,” Krager leaned back, half-shutting his eyes. “ That’s interesting. You can have individual rights, or you can have rule of law, but not both. You’re wearing the uniform, Reece, and you have a good record. I take it you have made your choice. You’re all for the law. You fall down and worship the machine, is that it ?”

“ That’s about what I’d expected, from you,” Reece made no attempt to hide his contempt now. “ That’s why I don’t care for this kind of mission. I’ve heard a lot of romance about G-Primes, but never met one before. Now that I have, I can’t say I’m ennobled by the experience.”

Krager smiled, thinly. “ You’re entitled to your opinion, of course. It won’t lose me any sleep, but I’d be curious to know how you arrived at it. Or are you just rejecting me because I’m an individual, and not a machine-slave ?”

“ Because you can’t think !” Reece snapped. “ I’d expect that stuff about worshipping machines from a moron, or a fanatic, but not from anybody sane. Look, any time you make a decision, you make it on facts, data, observations and experience. But you, just like anybody else, will be influenced by your own, built-in personal values. You can’t avoid them. Most of the time you don’t even know what they are, because they are subconscious. But a machine, properly designed and equipped, can handle ten thousand times as much data as any man, and process it a lot more efficiently. And it has no personal axe to grind, no glory to win.”

“ As I just said,” Krager kept his thin smile, “ you’re a machine-slave. You’ve sold out your human birthright for a bunch of circuits.”



"I'll try again. You might just get it, if I keep on." Reece was coldly savage, now. "See now, just as soon as you know exactly what you want to do, you can design a machine to do it faster and better. Just as soon as you've got all the relevant data on a problem, you no longer have a problem but a process and you can design a machine to do *that* for you too. Faster and better. Call that worship if you like. I call it science, and sanity."

"I would be tempted to call it insubordination," Krager said, mildly. "You have a good record, Reece. On paper, you're a good officer. In the flesh, you're beginning to open my eyes a bit."

"Open them a bit more, why don't you? And your ears. I'll tell you about worship, if that's what you're stuck on. Man has always itched to bow down before some kind of a god. It might be a thunderbolt, a wind, a tree, a smoking mountain, or a carved stone, a shaped hunk of metal—or some lofty abstraction. Gods come in all shapes and sizes, but they have this much in common. They serve a purpose and demand a sacrifice."

"You're quite the little thinker, aren't you?"

"Sneer away. That's a part of the picture too. A god, Krager, has to be able to intervene, to act contrary to observable fact, to be non-rational. That's the purpose of a god, as a defence against reality for those who just aren't big enough to face it. And that function has its price, the sacrifice that has to be made. It demands the surrender of reason. *That's* worship, Krager. The act of switching off the forebrain and believing that natural law is about to be abrogated in your favour. Or you can go one better and believe that you are superior to the law. You can actually believe yourself a god. That's you, Krager. And it's not new, either. It happened in ancient Rome, and a thousand times since."

"You've said quite enough," the G-Prime's face hardened. "More than enough. I shan't forget this, Reece."

"I wouldn't want you to. But there's more. You claim to despise machines. You sneer at them and me. That's just because you're afraid of them. Because they work strictly on facts, on logic, on reason. They decide and act *from* facts, not *against* them. That particular type of stupidity calls for a man. A man small enough to believe himself a god and above the law." Reece became suddenly calm, now that he had unburdened. "You know . . . I begin to wonder just what



Bully Hawkins has done, to bring you down from your throne to hunt him out."

"Stop right there!" Krager snapped. There was acid in his tone and a chill on his face. "You've said your piece, and I've listened. You must realise, of course, that this is the end of the line for you, as a G-officer. I'm not sure that I oughtn't to clap you in irons right now."

"You might have fun trying it," Reece retorted. "All by yourself. But don't worry. My oath stays good until we complete this mission. But once we get Bully Hawkins back to civilization, you can have my status-symbols and welcome. They don't mean a damn thing to me any more."

Later, in the darkness, with Krager's gentle breathing almost lost in the background murmur of unsleeping machinery, Reece had time to search his soul, to wonder at the sudden inner explosion that had shattered ten years of devoted service in twice as many minutes. It wasn't true that he now despised Galactopol and all that it stood for. That was ridiculous. He was honest enough to admit to himself that he was going to miss the life, with its sense of mission, its unspoken pride, and the honour of playing a good part in this modern world. So why had he done it? What lurking insanity had prompted him to such folly?

He turned uneasily on his narrow couch and struggled to know himself. What was Krager? A symbol, the embodied essence of the spirit of Galactopol. Law, justice and humanity, idealised. Ideals were beyond reach, naturally, but they offered something to look up to, something to aim at. Myths, yes, but dissect the myth, strip away the aura, and you should still have left a hero-figure, a man of stature, someone worthy of respect and admiration. But Krager was none of these. If he was typical of the best that Galactopol could throw up, then the whole concept was false. Or was it? Reece smiled to himself, but he was glad of the dark now, for there was no humour in that smile. He had found his answer. He had seen a treasured legend reduced to life-size and the romance gone sour. The fault was not in Galactopol, but in himself, for being a romantic. He sighed. The damage was done and there was no way of putting the clock back, nor any sense in regretting it. He turned over and went off to sleep almost at once.



Any thorough field-training tends to build an alarm-clock into the mind, but Reece's must have been set a few minutes slow, for he awoke to find that Krager had already prepared a snap meal and was busy checking his equipment.

"Nothing much that's new over last night," he said, laconically. "It's hot and will get hotter. Insects by the million. But no large predators, apart from the two-legged one we're seeking. Class-3 kit ought to be enough to meet the demand."

"Be with you in five minutes." Reece came awake and up off his bunk in a hurry, but Krager waved him back.

"You'll stay right here."

"Oh, now look!" Reece protested. "Just because we don't see eye to eye, there's no need to be stiff-necked about this."

"You think I can't handle this alone?"

"I didn't say that. Sure you can. So could I, if I had to. But there isn't any need. Only a mug would give a killer an even break."

"More of your thinking?" Krager sneered, and Reece, getting the sleep out of his eyes, noticed a great change in the G-Prime since last night. He was tense, almost jittery, as he moved about the tiny compartment. His hands shook as he checked the set-switches in his cap, clipped a needle-gun into each sleeve and buttoned down the power-packs in breast-pockets. It was obvious that he was nerving himself for what he had chosen to do, and that argument would be futile.

Ready at last, Krager repeated his order. "You stay here, Reece, and keep listening-watch. All right?"

"You're the boss," Reece shrugged, and watched him go. Not a backward glance, a handshake, good luck—nothing! Just up to the main hatch, down the gangway, out into that green and yellow jungle and gone. Reece swallowed the nasty taste in his mouth, took up the meal-pack and coffee-bulb and went up to the control-room intercom. In a pathetic way, Krager was beginning to make sense. Perhaps this was something a G-Prime had to do, every so often, to keep up his stock. Action in the field. Bully Hawkins, taken single-handed. Alone I did it, with William J. Reece, operator first-class, in reserve and witness. Reece took a mouthful of coffee, but the wry taste lingered. What a hell of a way to keep a reputation. Still, if that was what Krager was up to, it wouldn't hurt to help him out.



The auxiliary intercom board was warmed up now. Making fine adjustments, he was able to be 'with' Krager out there, through the buddy-circuits built into his uniform cap. That innocent-looking headgear carried two-way radio, monocular T.V., infra-red snoop-scope, direction-finder, radar, voice-amplification and hearing aids, and no self-respecting G-man would consider himself dressed without it. But all that stuff was aid, not weapons. All Krager had in that line were his needle-guns. Anaesthetic—if you hit a man in the right place with enough of them.

Bring 'em back alive, Reece thought, wryly. Get Hawkins alive, that was what it said in the signal. But Krager was doing it the hard way. If he had been doing it, Reece would have gone with a laser-beamer, at least. You hit a man anywhere with one of those and he stayed hit. But, on his own, he wouldn't have gone out at all. He would have sat tight and waited for Hawkins to get his fill of helplessness. He couldn't run off anywhere, not in that ship. He moved a finger to fine-focus the picture in the screen. It showed a jogging view of rank vegetation, massive tree-boles, looping vines, huge unhealthy-looking flowers, and a steady, lumpy rain of insects of all shapes and sizes.

"Reading you," he said, into the mike. "The way you're going, you'll be on top of him in about ten minutes." He shot another glance at the distance between Krager's trace and the steady blip that was the crippled ship. From the speaker came a background of twitters and squeaks and steady breathing. A giant bole swam into view and slid aside.

Krager said, "Hear you. I'm breaking into a clearing. Can see the top of the radio-antenna of his ship from here. Hot as hell. I reckon I'll climb a tree and give him a hail. If he has any sense at all, he'll be glad to be rescued."

'He didn't get as far as this by being stupid,' Reece thought. The view in the scope swayed and tilted as Krager climbed. Soon it was showing intermittent glimpses of the gleaming hull of the helpless ship, away out over the tossing tangle of tree-tops. Then the picture steadied. From the speaker came the echo of a tinnily magnified voice.

"Haw . . . kins. Bully . . . Haw . . . kins . . . Coming . . . to . . . get . . . you . . ." All at once the picture slid and spun, sideways and down, to focus on a figure, small and doll-like, down there at the foot of the tree. A man, in a cloak of black



and red, staring up. Even at that distance his squinting grin was vividly white in his dark face, and his voice was a throaty roar.

"No need to shout, G-man. I've been watching you ten minutes . . ."

Then Reece chilled as he saw that diminutive figure raise a hand and aim something which glittered in the barred sunlight. There was a spitting flash, the picture leaped crazily sideways, the speaker gave out a whip-like crack and then the whole board went silent. Nothing! Reece slammed the panel with the heel of his hand, urgently.

"Krager? Krager, can you hear me?" he called, even while he knew there wasn't going to be any answer. In that split second, everything was changed. What had been stupid conceit and childish ostentation was now desperately urgent and critical. Reece whipped away from the useless intercom, dived for his combat-suit and buckled himself into it with ice-cold speed, his mind racing, weighing and estimating probabilities, chances, courses of action.

Write off Krager. Count him dead. Never mind the consequences, the report, the stink there would be over the loss of a G-Prime and the doubting faces there would be to greet the story. Time to worry about that later.

Take out Krager, put in Hawkins. Mark up several points plus. Add in the strange weapon. Reece had seen it for barely a second, but long enough to identify it by type as a solid-slug projection model, powered by explosives. Crude and old-fashioned, but immune to electronic jiggery and quite effectively lethal. Reece clipped a beamer across his chest, felt the weight of it, and realised that Hawkins had the edge on him in weapons. He added the score again and the answer was still bleak. There were three possible choices. Go get him. Wait him out. Bail out and go for help. On second thoughts, all at lightening speed, cancel two and three. Krager might still be alive. So there was nothing else for it but to go out there and get Hawkins quickly. Krager too, if possible. Which was exactly what his immediate instincts had told him to do, but it was a comfort to have the solid backing of reason.

On the run, pausing only to set a small delay-switch, he went down the gangway and headlong into the tangled undergrowth. At his back, as that delay switch clicked over, the openly inviting gangway became heavily charged. It was a



standard precaution. Reece had no intention of letting Hawkins get past him, but just in case he did, it would get him precisely nowhere.

Within the first ten yards, he was spouting sweat from every pore and writhing under the attack of a thousand voracious insects. Spine-bushes, dangling creepers, aerial roots, patches of bog and slippery mud, the looming tree-boles, all conspired to make his passage difficult. He spared a moment to consign Krager to perdition and Hawkins along with him, then savagely ironed out all personal feelings. This was a job and it would take all his concentration. Hearing-aids on and set to filter out the higher frequencies, his T.V. monocle giving him a bright point that was the crippled ship ahead, he plunged forward, all senses tinglingly alert.

The froth of unrelated ideas boiled at the back of his mind, waiting their turn. Heads would roll for this. One of them his own, no doubt. He would be blamed. Even if Krager wasn't dead, even if he survived and told the plain unvarnished truth, that it was all his own idea to go out bald-headed after a highly dangerous quarry, there would still be those prepared to say that it was the gesture of a big man tempering the blast to an inferior, a generous move, rebounding to Krager's glory. It was a racket, Reece thought, cynically. Once you had that kind of name, you couldn't go wrong. But it had all the unfairness of life in it, too. Now, when he had made up his mind to quit the service, out of disdain, it was going to be made to look as if he were running away from a black mark.

By guess he had come about half way to where Krager had flopped when a faint sound, over to his left, pulled him up short. Moving again, and in a slow circle, he shoved through bushes, evaded the eager spines of a thorn, paused to listen, went ahead again cautiously. Now he heard more cracklings and a smothered curse. He bore left again, went on. This must be Hawkins, leaving Krager for dead and making for the law-ship. And, since he couldn't have any working electronics, he must be travelling by guess, or backtracking Krager. Reece turned himself, steadily, getting an orientation on his own ship by the rapid pulse of a beacon-signal in either ear. Then he listened to the noises the other man was making and frowned. Mark up more credits to Hawkins for woodcraft. He was almost exactly on course.



Reece drew a hot breath, shook sweat from his eyes and set himself to overtake the fugitive, moving as silently as he could. Ten minutes of slipping, sliding, slithering and hard breathing won him a brief glimpse of that red and black cloak and it wasn't nearly as visible as he would have expected, in this green and yellow wilderness. But it was a sighting. He unlimbered the beamer from where it had been pounding against his chest, cradled it in the crook of his right arm and strove to come up level with Hawkins. It was far from easy. The desperado was making very good time. Hot minutes went by, each one taking its toll in sweat. Reece drove himself. All he wanted was one clear view, a chance to draw a bead—and for Hawkins to see what he was up against. No sane man would argue with a beamer.

He touched his cap again and the beacon signal was strong now. The ship was close. Over the cloying scent of decaying vegetation there still lingered the charred smell of last night's landing. Hawkins would have that scent. He must know there wasn't far to go. Broad-jumping a slime-patch, Reece squirmed by a huge tree-trunk, ducked under a great spray of flowers and almost fell into a small clearing. There, dead ahead, was Hawkins. He hoisted the beamer into the ready-to-fire position with the ease of long and diligent training.

"Hawkins!" he called, crisply. "Stop right there . . ." As fast as a striking snake, the cloaked man whirled and fired. Reece saw the flash, felt a smashing hammer-blow in his shoulder that kicked him backwards and over, on his back in a spine-bush. Then came the whip-crack report. Sick-dazed, but sane enough to lie quite still, he heard that whip-crack twice more, and the angry-wasp buzz of slugs slicing through bushes ominously close. And then a throaty defiant shout.

"Two of you, hah? Well, you won't bother me no more, G-men. I can see your ship, now. I'm leaving . . ." Reece heard him move away and got his head up just in time to see that flamboyant cloak disappear between two giant tree-trunks. He wobbled to his feet, unsteady but whole, feeling only half a man. The micro-mesh vanadium-steel lining of his suit had stopped the slug, but had passed on the impact-energy. He felt as if he had been kicked in the shoulder by a particularly enthusiastic mule. Juggling the beamer into his left hand, he ran, heavily and unsteadily, in the track of Hawkins. There was no sensation in his right side at all as he blundered into a tree and staggered through the gap. Before



he could get his balance, another slug slammed against his leg, knocking it out from under him. He went down and lay flat, biting on the exquisite agony that tore at his nerves.

Keeping as still as a dead man, he squinted through eyelashes, to see Hawkins, now running, sideways like a crab, with his head snatching to and fro, aiming for the foot of the gangway, but reluctant to look away from where Reece was sprawled out. Never once did he drop the muzzle of that deadly weapon he was using with such telling effect. Reece held his breath, feeling the waves of pain throb up from his ankle, to join with and augment the returning sensations from his battered shoulder, but there was only one purpose in his mind, one objective. Hawkins. Of course, Krager had done it all wrong, right from the start, but it was unthinkable that this man, with nothing but an archaic explosive weapon, should make rings around a trained Galactopol officer.

He was getting close to that gangway now. Reece drew breath, and tensed, gathering all the resources he had left. He saw Hawkins discard his crab-like method and turn to run the last few steps in confidence. He levered himself to his knees, struggling with the beamer. Hawkins laid hold of the gangway rail, and wrenched up on his toes, an anguished screech of shock bubbling from his throat. In that helpless moment, the weapon in his other hand jerked and stammered into staccato activity, spraying smoke, fire and slugs at random. In the middle of that nightmare barrage, Reece heaved himself to his feet and shambled forward, levelling the beamer. He saw Hawkins wrench himself free of the pulse-jerking current and swing round, half-dazed but still venomous. The hand-weapon came up and Reece's imagination supplied the slamming shock of more slugs, but they didn't come. There were none. The thing was empty. He saw Hawkins jerk it futilely and then fling it away. And then he saw Hawkins snarl, and crouch, and come forward.

Reece could see him clearly, now. A big bear-like man, his hard-lined face set in a defiant sneer, even now in the face of death. Reece levelled the beamer, his finger brushing the firing stud.

"Give up, Bully," he said. "I'm taking you in, alive."

"Not you, nor six like you," Hawkins spat. "Go on, lawman, shoot. You won't get me otherwise."



"Give up, damn you. You haven't a chance!"

"You or me, lawman. You'll have to kill me . . ."

Hawkins came steadily on. "Why the hell don't you shoot?"

"Because my orders are to take you alive and that's how it's going to be." Reece let the beamer sag, unhooked the strap, threw the weapon behind him. Hawkins faltered, staring incredulously.

"You're crazy, man. You'll never take me unarmed!"

"I can try. If not me, there'll be others . . ."

All at once, Hawkins sprang, like an animal, without warning. It was the stunned shoulder which saved Reece. Automatically compensating for it, he swerved left instead of right, caught Hawkins wrong-footed, brought his left arm up, around and down, in a savage chop to the throat. Following through with all his weight, he smashed his elbow into Hawkins's face, saw him stagger back and down to one knee, dazed for just a moment. That moment was all Reece needed. The rest was drill, a Karate routine that he could have done in his sleep. Regaining his balance, he kicked the stunned man flat on his face and knelt on him, squirming his sleeve to extrude the tip-end of a cord from the sheath that lay the full length of his arm. With care, he dabbed that end on to the bare skin of Hawkins's wrist. Powerful adhesive took hold. One long heave and a twist and both wrists were securely fast. There was no known way of getting rid of that bond, short of surgery or the sacrifice of several square inches of flesh and skin. Hawkins was safe.

Reece gave himself the lovely luxury of a completely boneless sprawl on the hot moist turf. He had need of it, just to regain physical power, but he would need much more than that before he would be able to understand his own actions. He had just stood up, face to face with a mad-dog killer, a man who richly deserved to be shot on sight, and who would have killed in his turn, given a chance—and had given him a fair fight. Why? Because 'orders' said to get him alive. Heroism?

"I must have been crazy," he breathed. "What was I trying to prove, and to whom? That kind of grandstand play is strictly for an audience—who am I kidding?" Nonetheless, there was a small warm glow, deep down. He felt good, because he had done it 'right,' and it didn't matter that no-one else would ever know. *He* would know. Then he remembered Krager, groaned, and sat up. And there was Krager,



coming from the trees, bare-headed and bloody, none too steady on his feet, but grinning like a madman.

"Handy gadget, that gangway circuit," he said.

"You were watching?"

"Saw the whole thing. A fine professional job, Reece." There was something different about Krager. For all his obvious unsteadiness and the caked blood smearing his face, he seemed suffused with force. For the first time in their acquaintance, he looked to Reece like a man in charge, an authority. It was in his expression, the light in his eyes, in the way he held himself. All at once, he was a big man. But his grin was impish. "Come on," he said, lightly, "let's get him inboard and put away, patch up some of this damage and then I've got some talking to do."

Fifteen minutes later, with Hawkins safely in the miniature brig, both men showered and in clean gear, Reece finished taping a patch to Krager's skull and snapped the lid shut on the medical kit.

"You were lucky," he said. "A headache. One inch lower and you wouldn't have felt a thing, not ever, any more."

"Feels fine," Krager explored the patch with gentle fingers. "This is nothing to the headache I've got coming up now." He got up, went across to his 'personal' box, drew out a slim envelope and came back and sat down holding it.

"Let's keep the record straight," he said, quietly. "Hawkins is genuine. A badly wanted man, just as it says in the signals and getting him was a first-priority operation, successfully completed."

"I don't understand. Why would I think anything else?"

"Because Hawkins has done time and though he doesn't know it he has a tracker circuit tattooed across his shoulders. No need to explain that to you, is there?" Reece whistled. That circuit, once implanted, could be 'found' by the appropriate gadgetry and could be activated remotely by a radio-pulse. At will, you could make it itch, or burn, or even paralyse the man who carried it. Eyes narrowed, Reece saw Krager produce the tiny box that would have put a stop to Hawkins at any time.

"So what the hell were you trying to do?" he demanded. "Get us both killed?"

"Damn near did, didn't I?" Krager chuckled, but the amusement lasted only a moment. "No—as I said, Hawkins







“No need to answer right away. Think it over, while I crank up this can and get us ready to depart for home.”

Reece, secure in his shock-seat, watched Krager handling the controls. It was as if he had never seen this man before. There was a sureness, an authority, a stature about him. Machines and men. Men like Krager, willing to risk his life, just to be sure that he had the right man. The Law was a machine of a kind. If you trusted a machine and went partners with it—then the machine had to be able to trust you, too. Absolute integrity.

“I’m not that good . . .”

“Nobody is,” Krager smiled. “That’s one thing we all have to face.”

“You think I can do it. You gambled your life on it.”

“So . . .?”

“I’ll try,” Reece said, astonished at himself. Krager smiled again.

“That’s the right answer, Reece. Just so long as you hold fast to that idea, that it will be a constant challenge, that you’ll never quite be worthy, but you’ll keep right on trying, you’ll do all right. Absolute power is a hell of a load to carry, but it is a hell of an inspiration, too.”

“Is this all there is to it? No ceremony, nothing?”

“This is just the start,” Krager chuckled. “Hang on to your breath, I’m going to lift on. I have a lot of chair-borne relaxing to catch up on and you have some very strenuous training to come. You know, for a while, back there, I thought we were never going to make it . . .”

john rackham

***‘gone away—no known address’***

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*this was the age of the ideal society,  
the age of the ultimate civilisation  
now that the welfare state was  
fully established no human being in  
the world need ever experience danger,  
anxiety or stress*

# breakdown

by hilary bailey

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“Swine,” said the small, bespectacled man, peering myopically up at the big man.

“What did you say?” the big man said threateningly, putting his glass down on the wet bar.

The small man flinched, hesitated and repeated desperately, “You swine !”

The big man moved closer along the bar. He looked down at the little man menacingly. “Say that again,” he said.

The barman, immaculately-coated, swayed gracefully up the bar. Opening his eyes widely at the big man, he piped, “Now, now, gentlemen, we don’t want any trouble, do we ?”

“Keep out of this or you may get hurt,” the big man threatened. With a slight shudder the barman moved back down the bar and began to polish glasses.

“Now then, friend,” the big man continued, “what were you calling me before we was interrupted ?”

The little man answered by swinging the bottle he had just picked up back-handed against the wall, and bringing the jagged stump towards the big man’s face. With a cry of rage, the big man seized his wrist. The little man groaned and dropped the bottle end. As the barman crouched behind the



bar, staring at the fight with terrified and astonished eyes, the two men swung to and fro.

Bottles crashed to the ground as they slid on the beery floor, groaning.

Standing under the shade of some nearby trees, Jenny and Robert Mallieson watched the fight through the expanse of glass which stood in lieu of one wall of the pub.

Around them, the healthy, brightly-dressed people who had gathered by the pub murmured their appreciation as the big man and the little man grappled with one another.

Robert took his eyes off the scene for long enough to glance around the Neurodram Park. The tall fence which marked its boundary was almost invisible in the heat haze. Inside was an expanse of fresh green sward, dotted here and there by trees and by various low buildings, some of them refreshment cafes for the visitors, but most of them places where neurodramas similar to this one took place. Also, there were one or two entrances to the underground parts of the park, where an extensive range of neurodram environments were simulated.

Jenny gazed up at her husband with that familiar, if somewhat stupid expression she often wore. "Who do you think will win?" she asked.

"Well, if it goes on long enough, obviously the little man hasn't got a chance," he said, smiling at her, "but that's not really the point. The little man's probably a masochist who picks fights so that he can be beaten and humiliated. The big man just wants to see blood all over the place—he has sadistic impulses."

"What about the barman? And why are they fighting in that horrible old place?" demanded Jenny.

"The barman—well, he's probably some kind of pervert who's been cured, but who gets attacks of nostalgia for his old life. And probably they all yearn for the old days when people used to meet for drinks in a place like that."

They watched in silence for a while. Someone on the fringes of the group was taking bets on what the neurodram participants' neuroses would be revealed as when the drama was over and they reverted to their everyday selves.

"Have you ever asked for a neurodram?" Jenny enquired.

"I did once, but I was turned down as a C3 case and by the time my turn came up I didn't need it any more."



“ Oh,” said Jenny, letting the subject drop.

Robert glanced at her with one of those sudden flashes of insight which, at the wrong moment, can wreck homes, start fights and cause the gutters to run red. He pushed the thought away—but just the same, Jenny’s father had been an inventor, and her mother had been a poetess.

He turned his attention back to the scene in the pub. The two men were rolling on the floor now, struggling. The little man had gained a desperate, though temporary advantage, and was biting the big man in the cheek. The big man roared with pain, rolled over in the dust, and, on top of the little man, began to pound at his head with a huge fist.

The crowd leaned forward interestedly.

Robert glanced at his watch. “ I’d like something to eat,” he said. “ How about going to that cafe over there ?”

Jenny nodded, though she was very slow to avert her eyes and move her body away from the pub with the transparent wall. They passed chatting couples and playing children—a visit to Neurodram Park was becoming increasingly a family outing these days—and after a short walk arrived at the low, decorated awnings of the cafe.

Robert chose a table in the shade and studied the menu attached to the order mike. While he pressed the ‘ open ’ key and spoke his order, Jenny unconcernedly drew a glass of fizzy orangeade from the dispenser.

“ I suppose they anaesthetise them before it begins,” she remarked, “ or it would give them pain.”

“ Oh no,” Robert told her. “ The pain is partly what they’re after. Of course, the moment it’s all over a doctor comes and cures them.”

Jenny looked apalled. “ You don’t mean to say they want *pain* !” she said.

“ Well, some people do. It’s like your uncle Alex—”

“ Do you really have to—”

“ All I was saying was that when your uncle Alex went for a neurodram they put him in a cellar with only one grating high in the wall, with two cripples and a schizophrenic as cell-companions, and then slowly flooded the cell with water. He had to get them and himself out, before they were all drowned. Your uncle was unusual ; he only wanted responsibility and to be in charge of other people weaker than he was. These two wanted pain and struggle. And the barman, I should think, wants to watch and join in without actually doing any fighting.”



Robert smiled and turned to his own thoughts. The neatness of the therapy delighted him. The neurodram was, as he had often mused to himself, the perfect answer to any ills which might arise in the future of the well-regulated machine of society—nipped them in the bud, in fact.

This was the age of the ideal society, the age, as the government policy handbooks proclaimed, of the ultimate civilisation. Now that the Welfare State was fully established no human being in the world need ever experience danger, anxiety, or stress. There was no room left for anything but the most civilised behaviour on the part of world citizens.

But once the physical welfare of people was taken care of, another necessity had arisen—psychological welfare. Now that human society was universally uniform, the psychologists were able to see into the human mind more clearly, and they had discovered that below the threshold of behaviour and conscious thought, primitive urges brewed. Formerly these had found a natural outlet in the aggressions of a competitive culture ; but now, with the Welfare State in its second generation, it was found that they were growing stronger, all unknown to the people harbouring them, and causing a sense of unease, discontent and unhappiness.

And so the neurodram had been devised as a remedy. The principle of it was quite simple, though the actual technique was complex and had required a lot of research. Ultrasonic transmitters beamed specific vibrations at the neurodram participants, with the effect of interfering with their brain-wave frequencies so as to short-circuit their normal civilised personalities and allowing the 'submerged' personalities to take over. Thus, under controlled conditions, they gave vent to brutal, repressed urges.

It was an effective catharsis. Citizens recommended for neurodram sessions found themselves to be completely different people for a short time. Usually they enjoyed what in most cases turned out to be a bloody free-for-all, and then, before any real damage could be done, the ultrasonics switched themselves off and they returned to sanity, all discontent washed out of their systems.

Even people in whom the disorder had not gone far enough to require the treatment received the mild therapy they needed by watching the exploits of others in Neurodram Park. With



this method of producing a psychological state of satisfaction, Robert saw no reason why the present Welfare State should not last for thousands of years. Already, its inception had made possible the final step in the building of the Ideal Welfare State—Automated Government. The pattern was now stamped out for the future, and worked automatically. Nothing could interfere with it.

“I suppose you’re right,” Jenny said, interrupting his reverie. “Still, it’ll be a good thing for everyone when these vestiges of animal instincts are finally expended and we can create without the need for artificial scenes devised to sublimate them without harm to the community.”

Robert, who could have continued the quotation, and given the page reference of the textbook it came out of, if need be, nodded wearily, thinking that her twenty years of state education had not solved one vital problem. While filling her mind with facts, removing subject blocks and emotional impediments to learning, it had never managed to instil the vital mechanism which fuses fact to fact and produces ideas.

Still, she was someone to talk to, even if she didn’t really understand what he was saying. He wasn’t wishing for a change. Change was one thing that was impossible nowadays, so the government comfortingly assured everyone.

His face bloody, the little man escaped from the big man’s clutch and scuttled to the far end of the bar, squawking. Growling, his heavy jaw working in an ugly sneer, the big man came after him, reaching out with a bear-like embrace.

The little man shivered and gurgled, pressing himself against the far wall.

Suddenly the ultrasonics turned off, and the atmosphere in the pub went abruptly ‘dead,’ deprived of the inaudible vibrations which had been working through their skulls and the bones of their ears.

At once, the little man switched personalities. He straightened up, a dapper little man now from the World Supply Bureau. And the man across from him, he knew, was a mild-mannered statistician.

His face pained him, but he ignored it. He held out his hand. “A good session,” he said to his partner. “Thanks for coming in with me.”

The big man did not take the proffered hand. His jaw continued to work, sagging intermittently.



“ Oh, it was, was it !” he said in a gravelly, aggressive and oddly petulant voice. “ Well, I’m going to carry on !”

The little man sensed danger. He backed against the wall again. Noises of real fear came from him as those bear-like arms reached out. Soon he was screaming.

“ Well,” Robert told Jenny, “ it shouldn’t be too long before these animal savageries are actually eradicated from the organism. After all, people in their sane civilised personalities couldn’t possibly do the things they do in a neurodram. Yet hundreds of years ago they really used to happen ! Right out in public—in the streets, in public buildings, houses, you just wouldn’t believe it !” He chuckled inwardly at the astonished alarm which had overtaken her features. “ A few more generations of careful education, assisted by the neurodram catharsis, should breed it out altogether.”

Robert’s meal arrived and he ate slowly and in silence, listening with half an ear to Jenny’s household chatter about the home, about the new house-interiors she was planning for next winter, about relatives and about the baby the Eugenics Council had allocated them in two years time. It was empty, uninteresting and interspersed with shallowly-understood psycho-social jargon which women seemed to pick up so easily. Just the same, it was sort of soothing, and Robert felt very pleasantly disposed towards his wife.

A motherly woman in purple came in and sat down at the next table when he was half-way through his meal. After a few minutes, she smiled at Robert admiringly. “ A proper little homebody, isn’t she ? She must make you very comfortable.”

“ Oh, yes,” said Robert, “ she’s got everything organised. We call her the Automated Government of Bletchley Road.”

“ Don’t talk to me about the A.G.,” said the woman. “ I mean, I know everything is worked out to contribute to the maximum happiness of every living creature on Earth—”

“—*considering impartially the claims of all sections, interests and pursuits alike,*” Robert quoted to himself.

“ But just the same,” the woman went on, “ why they had to reduce the Child Production Ratio to one in every five on the very day my daughter got married, I don’t know. I’ll be dead before I see my second grandchild, I know that. And where have all the new Food Masters gone—I’ll tell you—China. Meanwhile I’m muddling along with a Food Master that’s two



years old if it's a day. Mind you, I'm all for Automated Government. I've heard from my grandmother about the bad old days, when governments were all out for themselves. What I say is, keep things healthy—and I *do* think the neurodrams are doing a wonderful job!" She leaned forward enthusiastically, her face alight with the middle-aged woman's love of gossip. "Do you know, I've just been watching the most thrilling neurodram! There was this big man, standing on the bar in one of those old . . . er . . . pubs, seizing bottles off the shelf and throwing them down on this little fellow. The poor little chap was practically unconscious, just lying on the floor!"

"Oh, is it still going on?" Jenny said. "We were just watching that."

"Yes. And would you believe it, the barman ran out to pull the little one up, and he got hit with a bottle too! I could have sworn he was a non-participant. Ah well, that's the beauty of these . . ."

"Are you a neurodram fan?" Robert asked.

"Oh yes, I love them. My *Line* is really Weaving, with Local Opinion Polling as an *Active Subsidiary*, but whenever I get tired of them there's nothing more relaxing than a good neurodram. What *Line* are you in?"

"History Research as an Active, and Harmony as a Subsidiary."

"Oh, an intellectual. I'll bet you know all about neurodrams, then,"

In the pub, the barman had returned to his former position, crouched in the corner of the bar, and was holding a blood-stained handkerchief up to a cut in his head, looking pale and moaning faintly.

The small man was leaning against the far wall of the pub, bruised and gasping. The big man was standing with his back to the bar, drinking large gulps of whisky out of a bottle and trying to staunch the blood running from his nose with a sodden barcloth. He pulled the cloth away from his face for long enough to gasp at the little man: "You just wait. I'll pull your arms off for that."

"I've had enough of you," sobbed the little man wearily, and he ran full tilt, his head down, at his adversary. He hit him in the stomach with his head. The big man groaned and doubled up, but retained enough strength to grasp the little



man's legs and pull them from under him. The little man landed on the floor with a sickening thump. In a moment he was up with a short piece of glass in his hand. He raised it and ran at the big man.

"This is a fight and a half," said a young girl gaily to her boy friend. "I've never seen one that's lasted so long. I thought it was only scheduled for half an hour. Most people can satisfy themselves with a little bit of a dust-up."

"Yes, they must be really in need of the neurodram," the boy-friend said gravely. "Have you ever had one?"

"Yes. Just after my mother got married again I was left all by myself, and must have got unconsciously frustrated. They put me in a nursery with lots of young babies—oh, they were sweet. They all had lovely little plastynylon suits and hats on. Then huge spiders as big as dogs came and tried to eat them! I had to fight them off with a machette. Then I went home and there was a lady from nearby ready to give me a hot cup of cocoa and put me to bed—oh, I did feel better afterwards. I haven't needed another session yet after that experience, I can tell you! I don't know where we'd be without the neurodram. Back in the jungle, most likely . . . Ever had it yourself?"

"I almost did once. I kept on getting dreams about being a—what's the word?—dictator. Then perhaps the next night I'd be a slave. Or maybe I'd be the captain of a ship—in the old days before they were automated—and it would founder or something like that. Anyway, I only came into the C3 class and by the time my turn came up the dreams had stopped, and the psycho-techs said it seemed to be cured."

"Probably a manifestation of suppressed sexual urges," the girl said expertly.

"Maybe," said the young man doubtfully. He didn't mention that only a week ago he had dreamed he was organising a group of men to cut down a tree with an electric saw. Thinking it over the next morning, he put it down to something he had read before going to bed. But today his confidence was shaken—he had dreamed the night before of being a twentieth century pilot in an air-battle.

"Anyway," he said brightly, "my check-up comes in a month's time."

Dusk was falling and it was becoming chilly. Jenny tugged at Robert's sleeve. "Are you coming home, Robert?" she asked.



He nodded. "We'll walk back past the pub, though. They'll have posted up the post-session analyses of their neuroses, and I'd like to see them."

"Oh, all right," Jenny said reluctantly, and pointedly turned on the thermoheater of her coat.

The woman in purple fussed with her handbag. "Might as well come with you. Three's not a crowd these days, is it?"

"No," said Robert placidly. He deliberately stopped himself from having any anti-social feeling.

The trees cast long shadows when they reached the spot. To their profound surprise, the session in the pub was still in progress. The interior, smeared with blood and cluttered with jagged broken glass, presented a scene of butchery which was drastic enough to shock them all. At the moment, the big man was banging the head of the little one against the corner of the bar. All over the field the audience could hear his savage breathing (someone had turned up the volume of the external speakers in the interim) and the sound of the head hitting wood coupled with the little man's groans. Both of them seemed to be in a state of exhaustion. The big man, himself nearly collapsing, went on banging the little man's round head against the bar, methodically, automatically. Every time his head hit the wood, the big man groaned, again, louder and louder.

The crowd was still there, too, watching in intrigued expectancy, completely silent.

The woman in purple glanced at her watch. "My it is going on for a long time," she remarked. "They're usually all over by now."

"Yes," Robert said, puzzled, "they are."

Now the little man was sitting on the floor, leaning against the wall holding his head. The big man was standing over him with a pint mug poised in his hand.

A groaning wheeze came from the little man.

"All right! You're the better man. You licked me and I give in. It's the end of the fight."

"That's what you think!" gasped the big man. "Not on your bloody life it isn't, mate." And he smashed the tankard into the little man's face. Blood poured from the new cuts. He stepped back to admire the effect. With a sobbing snarl, the little man heaved himself to his feet. He lumbered forward a few steps and fell down.

The audience gasped.



Suddenly a figure leaped up like a jack-in-the-box and stood, a bottle in either hand, poised like a dancer on the bar. It was the barman.

Uttering a great cry he leaped off the bar, and on to the big man. He smashed first one bottle, then the other one over the big man's head. The big man groaned and flopped down.

The barman heaved up the big man and dragged him backwards so that he was lying down near the bar. He jumped over the bar again. Then he pushed up two buckets, jumped back himself and leaped back in to the field of battle.

Over the little man he tipped one bucket of water. Over the big man he tipped the other.

The little man did not revive. The big man groaned, blood and water running down from his face on to his stained and dusty clothes.

Wearily the big man got up, staggering to the bar, and knocking the top off a gin bottle, took a swig. The big man and the barman stood swaying, staring at each other. The big man breathed deeply in, turned with energy and picked up a chair.

The barman yelled desperately.

The big man hurled the chair and the barman received it full in the face. With a snarl, he groped for the chair, picked it up by one leg and ran at his adversary.

The fight continued, grappling, grasping, slugging and slashing, trampling carelessly over the body of the little man. It was not long before the barman had the big man pinioned to the floor and was battering at his head with his fists.

The audience stirred. Then a voice rang out. "Look ! The light's off !"

Robert's eyes darted to a grille set high in the wall inside the pub. The pilot light above the grille, which should have been on, was dead. The ultrasonic beamer was switched off.

"The beamer's off ! They're not getting any ultrasonics ! It must have been off for hours !"

Robert was too astonished and bewildered to speak. Then he heard the urgent sound of a horn, and a low, cream-coloured streamlined shape came hurtling over the sward and shouldered its way through the crowd. On its sides were painted the letters ND.



About a dozen uniformed men leaped out, ND emblazoned on their tunics.

The neurodram staff had arrived.

Robert only had time for the thought that the looks on their faces were far more worried and tense than anyone's in this age had a right to be. Before he could make anything of this, they had opened a secret door in the pub, poured inside, and were slipping and slithering on the bloody floor. In less than a minute they had overpowered the three fighting men, shot them full of sedatives, and dragged them out of the pub, across the grass and into the waiting van.

The ND monicar drove off, leaving the paralysed crowd without a word of explanation. They stood, hushed, rooted to the spot, as if they were all plugged in to the same silence.

It seemed to last for a long time. Finally, the motherly woman in purple, as if unaware of the embarrassed strain, spoke up.

"Well, I never! And do you know, that's the third time I've seen that happen in the past fortnight!"

hilary bailey

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*it was one thing to be entombed in a satellite  
doomed to circle the earth for ever—  
but quite another to unexpectedly return  
and find one self a mythical hero.*

# forty years on

by e. r. james

---

“Get out of that bed and on to this trolley!” urged the green-smocked orderly.

Greg Dormer hadn't seen him before and didn't like his tone or the way he had pushed in. “What for?”

“Don't play dumb. You want to take off out of this place, don't you?”

Another green-smocked man hurried into the private ward. “What's keeping you?” He gestured urgently. “Look Dormer, the police are taking advantage of your weakness to have you kept here. Get wise. They'll hound you as long as you're on Earth. Give us a chance to look after you. We've arranged your passage to Mars and there's no extradition from there.”

“What in the stars are you talking about?”

A third man put his head around the door. “It's all off. They've had our spaceport wagon shifted from the back entrance. And I've just glimpsed Inspector Whitelaw himself in the doctor's office. It's certain the place is thick with police. Thirstin said to avoid an open clash.”

The first comer leaned across the bed, whispering. “See you again, Dormer. Maybe it's just as well you didn't try to come with us this time. Keep your mouth shut. Remember the Thirstin Company is ready to back you.”

They left.



Greg heard them in the passage being stopped and questioned. But they hadn't actually done anything . . . He relaxed, frowning to himself.

A man in a blue suit came into the little ward and showed a silvery badge. "One of us will stay with you all the time from now on, Mr. Dormer."

Slight pressure on Greg's palm made his fingers close. He glanced up into the narrowing eyes of a real hospital orderly who was helping him into the wheelchair.

The man whispered tensely, "A girl paid me to give you that. Said you're to look at it later."

"What are you saying?" rapped the policeman.

The orderly straightened. "Just telling Mr. Dormer he's looking better."

"Speak up then," the policeman appeared convinced.

The orderly pushed Greg's chair up to the ward's window wall.

Greg slipped the packet into his dressing gown pocket. He stared out at the alarmingly vast cityscape of 2050 A.D.

The orderly's soft shoes whispered away. The door clicked open. Curiously slithering footsteps entered. A firm sonorous voice announced, "I am from the Spaceman's Rehabilitation Institute."

A spruce but ageing man stood just inside the doorway. Outside another plain-clothes man compressed his lips but nodded.

As the door closed, shutting out the two guards, the newcomer advanced, peering through old fashioned horn-rimmed glasses at Greg. "Do you remember meeting me when I represented a client against your corporation?"

"I think so. It's Mr. Heron, isn't it?"

"Dr. Heron," corrected the lawyer. "Doctor of Law." He frowned in annoyance. "You know, I've always prided myself on my memory for faces, but . . . well, it is such a long time—"

"For you it is!"

"Quite so. Not for you, of course."

They studied each other.

"Sit down, Dr. Heron," urged Greg, "and excuse my not getting up. My muscles have all but atrophied."

"I'm sure they must have, without medical care as you were." Heron drew up a chair. "You are quite different from your old photographs."



“Emaciated?” Greg smiled bitterly, feeling the tension of skin over his cheekbones, as he had done when he had been first revived, away out on the other side of the sun, in the humming interior of the police patrolship. “By the way, I hope you realise I have no means of paying you? What few possessions I had were sold years ago.”

“Money is not too important to the Spacemen’s Rehabilitation Institute.” Heron pursed his lips. “Although you will have enough later on, I think. The Asteroid Mining Corporation is richer by far than when you were working for them. Perhaps they can be made to pay you for the forty years you spent sealed up unconscious in that little lifeboat. Forty year’s salary plus compound interest. It should not be difficult to establish that you were technically still employed by them. Would you like to begin by telling me what actually happened out there in space those four decades ago?” He took out a tiny recorder.

Greg shrugged. “Why not? It’s still fresh in my mind, you understand, just as though it happened only a month ago.”

“A good point.” Heron nodded. “To you it actually is only a month of mental time ago.”

“Yes . . .” Greg lifted his thin hands to cover the disturbing hollows into which his eyes had receded. “Well, the short haul ship *Rand* was bringing uranium ore to the depot on Ceres from a small asteroid where there was a freak concentration of the stuff. As soon as she started slowing, her radio communication went. Then she glowed! No one else was able to handle anything as big as the *Rand* so nobody said much when I climbed into a heavy suit and took a lifeboat—”

“You weren’t ordered to go?” interposed Heron.

Greg looked up. “No. How could anyone order a man to go out to a ship which was obviously full of uranium that had settled into critical mass and was damned close to being an almighty explosion?”

Heron shrugged.

“Well,” continued Greg, “under stress a man does a lot of things automatically, and I don’t suppose you expect me to recall everything. My brain alternated between a sort of frozen numbness and a boiling turmoil of thought. I never actually came to any logical conclusions. I just did things because they seemed to be the only things to do.”



“The *Rand* was getting so close to Ceres that it might shatter the little planet when it blew. The depot must have been getting a hot bath of radiation each time the little planet turned. I went into the ship fast. Captain Hark and his mate had been cooked where they sat. I cursed that cargo for shifting every bit as sincerely as I had blessed it a few hours before, when I’d thought it was going to pay us all a fat bonus. Everything was one shake away from Hell. I set the controls to fire the ship off at a tangent, and got out into my little buggy. I’d foreseen not being able to get back to the protection of Base. I hoped that if the *Rand* fissioned she’d hit me with nothing worse than radiation. I strapped in, opened a vein in my arm, clamped on the intravenous feeding, set the refrigeration and took the knockout drops. And the next thing I knew was a month ago when they woke me up to tell me I’d been found after forty years of orbiting in that damned little lifeboat. Forty years!” He bit his lip.

Blood trickled down his chin. Breath whistled through his nose and between his clenched teeth. He beat his fists in his lap. A hand on his shoulder made him start to his feet.

He stood, swaying, staring down into the lawyer’s eyes behind their horn-rimmed glasses. “Sorry,” he gasped, “but I haven’t got used to being a ghost. They tell me my mother and father died years ago. And . . . and . . .” His voice broke.

The lawyer nodded. “I’m beginning to understand your point of view,” he assured Greg. “This simply is not the world you left in 2010 A.D. I respect your feelings. Perhaps it will be best if I leave you for today. I’ve something on which to work. Perhaps you will get better compensation than you think. I’ll see you again.”

He pressed Greg’s hand.

As he went out, the policeman came back in, stared hard at Greg and sat down as before.

Greg sank into the wheelchair. He leaned into its form-hugging embrace and dredged up a sigh.

The policeman’s stiff uniform rustled. “You all right, Mr. Dormer?”

“Oh, sure,” muttered Greg, “I’m fine. I’m back in my home city but everyone I remember has had their lives—” He twisted around. “How old are you?”

“Twenty-four—”



“ I’m twenty-three. Or sixty-three ! It seems just about a month ago that I was in a marvellous job and I had . . . everything planned out.” His lips twisted. “ And suddenly everything and *everyone* I knew turned to ashes and corruption overnight. Ugh !” He shuddered.

The ward’s door opened. The policeman was saying a string of yessirs.

Greg lifted his head. The door was closing after the policeman and a burly, uniformed man was striding towards the window.

“ I am Chief Inspector Whitelaw. Do you mind if I sit down ?”

“ Please yourself.”

Whitelaw perched on the edge of the chair as though he might spring forward at any moment. His hard eyes seemed to be trying to penetrate Greg’s very thoughts. The hand he lifted to smooth an old scar that ran into his iron grey hair was heavily veined and muscular. His voice was quiet but full of implacable undertones. “ You would be pleased to have a visit from your old lawyer.” It was half a question.

Greg shrugged, and looked out of the big window at the world into which fate had thrust him.

He addressed himself to that futuristic world as much as to the police inspector. “ That man was the first real contact I’ve had with the past I knew.”

“ You sound as though it frightened you.”

“ It did !” Greg turned. “ Tell me : why am I being kept under guard like this ?”

“ Haven’t they told you ? It’s for your own protection. It’s rare for a man to become a legend in his own lifetime. What you did is history. When I myself was a boy, you were my hero, too. It is one of the disappointments of my life that I failed to get into Space to follow in your footsteps on the stars . . .”

“ Is that all ?”

“ Is it, Mr. Dormer ? Perhaps I should ask you that ?”

The two men stared searchingly at each other.

Whitelaw leaned forward. “ As I gained higher posts in the force, I had access to information not available to everyone. It is commonly believed, for instance, that the *Rand* blew up. Romances have been written of your exploit imagining that the blast stripped the radio aerial from your tiny lifeboat and



hurled it into an orbit too far from the spacelanes for any ship to detect you. But . . . although Ceres is too small an asteroid to have a useful atmosphere, it does attract dust, and at the time of the incident there is no doubt that setting up the depot and its very operation increased the haze of particles around it—so that these would have been turned into an aurora brighter than that made by the sun itself, if there had been an explosion. They were illuminated, but eyewitnesses would not commit themselves as to the extent of the brilliance . . .

“And then there was, at that time, another mining company somewhat precariously established about a quarter of a million miles away. The field manager at their depot stated he knew of your corporation’s lucky strike. He had had nothing to compare with it. The asteroids his men had prospected were of little value, at that time. He had spent a great part of his day listening enviously to the *Rand’s* radio conversations with Ceres and was watching through a high-powered telescope during the last stage of the approach. The flash he saw seemed to him nothing greater than rocket engines at full stretch . . .”

“Then it did not blow up?”

“Apparently not.”

Silence weighed heavily in the ward.

“There is,” said Whitelaw, “no doubt that your lifeboat was struck by a powerful force. Calculations made and checked by computers when fed with the data of the lifeboat’s orbital path around the sun came up with the answer that the *Rand’s* engines could have produced a push strong enough to be that force. And the lifeboat’s skin, although pitted by the years of flight around the sun, showed no evidence of having had to withstand any radiation stronger than sunlight. Finally your radio aerial had not been blown off. You never pressed the button to erect it.”

“*Never pressed the button?*” repeated Greg. And then he lifted a shaking hand to his mouth, and leaned forward so that his face and the older seeming face of the inspector were closer than before. “You’re trying to do something to me.”

“Am I?”

“You—” Greg’s hand half covered his mouth. “You’re suggesting that I deliberately put that little ship and its valuable but dangerous cargo into an orbit only I can be sure of finding, aren’t you?”







When you go to bed suck  
the tablet. At midnight  
break the phial. Fumes  
will knock out the guard  
but not affect you.  
Open the window and wait.

His fingers closed over them. He stared out of the window. Thirty or forty feet below glittered the green leaves of the beeches, themselves another thirty feet high.

His eyes stared through the leaves into infinity, and his head sank despondently into his scarecrow shoulders. He shook his head, muttering in bewilderment.

“No . . . it's not her writing. And yet—”

“What's that you're saying?” The guard's clothes rustled. “You all right, Mr. Dormer?” He padded nearer.

Greg turned. “All right?” he said bitterly. He glared at the policeman's suspicious face. “You—you know I've lost a world—a world that's outgrown me and passed away—and you have the gall to ask that? You think about it. Yes, you might even be able to put yourself in my place. What does a young man dream about? You may even have as much to lose as I have lost!” He turned to the window.

The policeman presently shuffled back to his seat.

At eight o'clock, the orderly brought a hot drink and insisted Greg have it. He gulped it down. He let himself be helped into bed and did not move when the night guard came on duty.

In the gathering darkness, he sucked the tablet. As a clock somewhere chimed midnight, he broke the phial.

He waited ten minutes and then slid out of bed. The guard was hunched down in his chair.

Greg crossed on unsteady feet to the window and opened one of its large panes. He peered out. The trees were still. The subdued roar of the city seemed further off than its myriad lights.

He looked up at the stars. Two of them moved towards him, a green and a white. A red one winked above them. An oval shadow loomed up and there was a whistling sound. A tiny light glimmered on a human face almost level with his, so close he might almost touch it. A slender white hand beckoned.



He climbed up into the window opening and, panting with exertion and trembling with agitation, he stumbled into the flying machine that hovered against the wall of the building. He bumped into the back of a seat and felt himself pulled. He sank into cushions.

The floor of the unfamiliar flying machine pressed gently against his feet and the dark wall of the building that had been his prison slid away and down into the gloom.

He held on to the arms of his seat, wide-eyed in the darkness.

A soft, treble voice murmured, "Welcome to Earth, Mr. Dormer. They wouldn't let us see you, so we thought you might like to come to us."

"Who are you?"

"Members of your fan club."

"My what!"

"Your fan club. There are hundreds of thousands of us, here, and on Mars and everywhere else that human beings have gone. Most of us are young, like you, and we want to do brave things like the ones you did."

"You're kidding!" Greg narrowed his eyes as the cabin glowed with increasing light. His eyes widened at the young woman of about twenty years of age who was dividing her attention between him and the controls of the flying egg. She turned suddenly, smiling.

"No, I'm not kidding. You're a hero come to life to us . . ."

He shrank from her bright, eager face, his eyes flicking from her soft, ash-blond hair to her trim figure. He struggled to speak.

She stared in amazement. "Are you all right?"

"You make me remember—" He choked. "What are you? Do you know what you are doing? This isn't a game! Don't you realise you're getting on the wrong side of the law?"

"The law may not always be right," she murmured. "Policemen can only do what they are told to do. Nobody tells us what to do. People are taught at school nowadays to think for themselves. We try to keep on doing just that. If you were a criminal, we wouldn't be in this. I'm the elected secretary of the Dormers, but every one of our group wanted to fly this birdegg to get you out of that place." She leaned close to him and put her smooth little hand on his arm.



He shrank back. "There are many kinds of criminals." One of his emaciated hands lifted and his fingers touched her hand. "You don't know what you are risking!" he croaked. "To—to me . . . it seems as though it was only a month ago that I was . . . out there in the Asteroid Belt—and there was no girl within millions of miles. We enjoyed our work, but—I—we dreamed of the time when we could live full lives. We were—we wanted—" His hands covered his face.

She pressed his arm. "Let me take you to meet the others. There are plenty of girls, perhaps no better than they should be, to make a fuss of you—"

"No! You don't understand." Bolt upright, he hesitated. "There is something you could do. Somehow I can't explain. Would you be willing to help me without me telling you what we were doing? No! Don't answer without thinking what I'm asking. There can be no profit in it for you; perhaps only trouble for helping me."

"There's nothing to think about," she replied sincerely. "You think what you want done while I tell the others our plan's worked. They'll be waiting." She began dialling on the dashboard telephone.

"Dormer Club 97614," came the answer.

She glanced excitedly at Greg. "Alice here. Got him. He needs help. Stand by."

"That's starry!" A tense background of chatter was cut short by a whispered "Hush."

Greg licked his lips. "I want you to take me to 146, Lunar Drive."

"I don't know it," said Alice. "Can anyone help?"

"Yes—and no," said another voice. "It's in the old town. Or rather was. It's been demolished."

"Demolished! Forty years gone . . ." groaned Greg.

The voice continued, "If you're trying to trace someone, perhaps our Founder can help. Anyway, wait while I call him. He'll want to know what's happening."

"He owns this birdegg," explained Alice.

Greg frowned at her. His hands twisted uncontrollably.

The voice said, "He wants you to go to his office. He's waiting for you. We're all to go. Be seeing you."

"That all right?" asked Alice.

Greg shrugged. "Who cares? Perhaps it's just as well that address is demolished. After all this time, it's not much



use trying to find . . . someone who's bound to look like my grandmother."

"Oh!" said Alice.

He shifted uneasily.

Embarrassed, she turned to the controls. The birdegg slipped breathtakingly sideways through the darkness. The city lights grew brighter and taller and were suddenly all around them as they hurtled between vast buildings, still with many lighted windows.

A skyscraper loomed ahead against the stars. A lighted platform gaped to meet them. The birdegg bounced lightly on it. Alice leaned across Greg and opened the door. He got out automatically. While she followed, he glanced back at the city.

Interconnected buildings made a spectacular complex of light patterns. Surface traffic threaded ways over bridges between lower levels. Higher up flying machines danced like many coloured fireflies. Several of these were crowding down on to the landing platform, disgorging young men and women.

He stared at the girls, then averted his face.

Alice took his arm.

He stumbled alongside her into the lighted passage along which an ageing but spruce man came with curiously slithering footsteps to meet them.

Greg stopped dead. "Dr. Heron!"

"Don't be alarmed, Mr. Dormer," said Heron. But the eyes behind his old-fashioned glasses were anxious and uncertain. "If you remember, I did say I would see you again." He took Greg's other arm.

They entered a large, magnificently appointed office. The three men who had tried to take Greg out of the hospital stood to one side and behind the desk in the centre of the deep carpet sat an old man whose wrinkled face twitched so badly that his agitation was more apparent than his welcome.

"Sit down, Mr. Dormer. I am—"

A door opened to Greg's left. An efficient looking woman said, calmly enough, "The police are downstairs, Mr. Thirstin."

"So soon?" The old man turned slowly to regard the woman. "Have they a warrant?"



"No, Mr. Thirstin."

"Then ask them to wait. I will let you know when I am ready to see them."

"Yes, Mr. Thirstin. Without a flicker of surprise the woman withdrew.

Greg felt himself urged towards a chair just in front of the desk. The old man leaned across and reached out a boney hand. "Welcome, Mr. Dormer. I was in space, myself . . . when I was younger. I have nothing but admiration for spacemen."

There was a murmur of approbation from the club members behind Greg.

He pressed the old, wrinkled fingers.

Alice said, "Mr. Thirstin came back to Earth soon after you disappeared, and started the Dormers, and set up funds to help spacemen and their dependents."

"That is so," said Thirstin. "I tried to do what was right, even though I . . . am not perfect by any means. In a way, Mr. Dormer, we are judging each other right now." He hesitated, his white hair trembling with what might have been more than a slight palsy of age. His faded eyes met Greg's, and then their regard dropped to look at something on the polished top of the desk.

Greg looked down. A plaque of wood supported a sizeable strip of varnished alloy on which was etched a single word.

*RAND*

Greg's jaw dropped. His eyes widened. "Now I remember where I headed that ship . . ."

"So you really had forgotten," nodded Thirstin. "I confess I sent my young men to you in case you intended to blackmail us—but it took a sincere young girl to make you escape the police. In fact, you are an honest man." Thirstin stiffened his scrawny, bowed shoulders under their elegant coat. "I am the one who was not honest. Your Corporation was rich. They could afford to lose one cargo. But I was faced with bankruptcy, just because I needed a few thousand credits to go on working my own prospecting ships . . . and nothing could be done for your fellow Captain and his mate, apart from burying them. Space is vast ; crime was easy to cover up in those early days."



The atmosphere in the room was such that the very clock on the wall seemed to have stopped. Greg and the girl, the Dormers and the others stood like waxworks.

Thirstin's voice sounded hoarsely. "When the *Rand* came by, it was a bigger temptation that I could resist. At first I think I did tell my men that we were after it for salvage, but that rich-yield cargo-well, none of us could resist it. And we even made a real strike of our own not long afterwards so that there was no trouble in accounting for the ore. Although by then it was too late to tell the truth . . .

"The others—all dead by now—seemed to forget how our success had begun, but I didn't. I used a quarter of all profits to form the Dormers and to help spacemen who lost their nerve . . . and to provide for the general and special needs of the dependents of men who did not come back from that vastness between the planets."

He reached out a shaking hand and pressed twice on a button, and turned to look at the door at which his secretary had appeared a few minutes before.

A young woman ran in. Her cherry lips parted. "Greg!" Her eyes shone.

Greg was on his feet without knowing he had moved.

He stumbled forward, reaching out his arms.

"Your girl did not want to live, when she thought you had died out there," said Thirstin's quavering voice. "But I persuaded her to let me pay so that she could be put into a long sleep such as you were under in that tiny lifeboat . . ."

Greg and the girl did not seem to hear him.

He smiled, and nodded to the secretary hovering discreetly in the open doorway. "You may ask Inspector Whitelaw to come up, now. Tell him that his investigation is over. I am ready to confess to what he has suspected for years."

His wrinkled face smoothed out into a puckish mask and he added, very softly, to Heron. "But you are not to tell him that, but for the rehabilitation fund which I thought right to put under your charge all those years ago, he would never have been able even to sit the entrance examination for the police when he came out of space a broken man."



longevity, even near immortality,  
could be a disturbing thing,  
but if one's time-scale is also  
affected, the result could be  
disastrous

# project 13013

by bill spencer

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“These are our special pets,” Bruce Forbes said, tapping the glass specimen cages inside which long-legged insects flitted noiselessly. “Some of them are already a fortnight old.”

There was a note of satisfaction in the burly, white-coated scientist's voice as he spoke. He looked at the young woman standing beside him in the brightly-lit laboratory, to make sure she was getting the point.

She wasn't.

“They've survived, already, for a *whole fortnight*,” Forbes repeated, audibly underscoring the words for her benefit.

The girl was not catching on very quickly.

“Normally, of course, *Ephemera danica* lives out its sub-imago and imago phases, and dies, within twenty-four hours. These specimens have already exceeded their normal adult life-span ten times and more.”

A hint of interest appeared on the girl's pale, beautiful face.

“On the same scale, a human being would live for several hundred years,” Forbes went on. “Perhaps a thousand years.”

“But these are only insects,” said the girl doubtfully. “And who would want to be senile for hundreds of years. I'd hate . . .”



“ . . . you are jumping to conclusions,” Forbes interrupted, wagging his forefinger reprovingly. “ Come and look at our other small friends over here.”

He led her over to another group of glass cages.

There was a faint squeaking and rustling as the white mice ran over the sawdust-covered floors. Forbes tapped on the glass panels, and the little animals responded alertly, their sensitive whiskers quivering. Their coats looked glossy with health.

“ These specimens are all over two years old—and they’re still fighting fit. A normal mouse would be completely senile at this age, but these fellows are in the pink. Still babies, in fact.”

The girl began to warm to the subject.

“ So I wouldn’t ever be senile, if I took your drug ?”

“ Not for the first few hundred years—we hope !

“ Of course, we haven’t tried it on humans yet,” Forbes continued, his face suddenly serious. “ For one thing, we didn’t have enough of it. A question of milligrams per kilogram of body weight, you know. An elephant would need a great deal : a man needs a fair amount. And of course we had to test it on animals first. Normal safety measure.”

“ But how do you know it will react on men in the same way as on animals ?”

“ We don’t,” said Forbes briefly.

There was a clatter from behind the maze of glass tubes that towered over the main lab bench in the middle of the big room. John Carlson, who was Forbes’ colleague on Project 13013, emerged from behind the tangle of apparatus, rubbing his hands together.

“ Everything seems to be ready,” Carlson said.

He glanced for the first time at the girl who had just been sent over to help them. Elizabeth Jones. She was new to Biochemistry Division. A remarkably pretty girl, he thought. He caught himself staring at her with more than ordinary appreciation. But just now they had important work to do.

Forbes padded over and switched on a couple of thermostats, checking his watch.

“ How’s your shorthand ? I hope your fast,” he said, smiling at the girl.

Elizabeth Jones blushed : “ I’ll do my best.”







The phone babbled something faintly, and Forbes put the receiver down.

"He'll be right over," he said.

Carlson peeled off his white lab coat and rolled up his left shirtsleeve. Then he remained standing, holding the hypodermic a little tense.

"I think this is all terribly exciting," said Elizabeth, sitting forward on the very edge of her chair.

Carlson looked at her without replying, his gaze rather abstracted. Then his eye went to the green-gold liquid, with its faint pinkish tinge, in the hypodermic.

Looking at the mysteriously potent liquid, Carlson suddenly became conscious of the fact, in all its improbability, that they were the lineal heirs of the ancient alchemists. Here they were, not with spirits and alembics and sulphurous fumes, but with pyrex and micro-organisms, brewing a modern equivalent of the Elixir itself.

The whole room took on an air of unreality for him. The lab, so familiar to him normally, seemed to be slipping through an unseen dimension into an unrecognised strangeness. He looked at the others. They appeared not to notice anything unusual. But for him, they were all actors in some archetypal drama. Forbes, the girl and himself were waiting only for the entrance of a fourth character in order to play out the play and reach the denouement.

Dr. Traves came in, soft-footed.

He was a big, cheerful man, older than either Carlson or Forbes.

"So you're all ready I see." He nodded to the girl. "Good morning, Miss Jones."

"We tossed," said Forbes, getting the record straight, "and John, lucky blighter, won."

"Good for you, John," said Dr. Traves. "You've signed the usual form, of course, saying that you are acting entirely on your own responsibility?"

"Yes."

"Splendid. Well, shall we proceed?"

Forbes said: "I'll dictate some notes as we go along. Are you ready with your pad, Miss Jones? Good."

He consulted his watch.

"Twelve twenty-five. J. Carlson is now about to inject two ml. of the filtrate into his left arm."



Carlson glanced at the three other people in the room, looked out of the window at the sky, and then slowly raised his right arm with the hypodermic and plunged the needle into a vein.

The girl gave a shrill little scream of surprise as Carlson crumpled at the knees and slumped to the floor.

Ocean-like, the time wave engulfed him, and swept him along on its swiftly moving crest. He felt a sense of vertigo as he was carried irresistibly forward, and familiar sensations were left behind. He was powerless in the grip of overwhelming forces, with as little control over the direction and speed of his going as a matchstick in a fast-flowing torrent.

For a time, the sensation was almost pleasant. He let the surge sweep him along. He was relieved of the need to make any decision.

But time was running away so swiftly. The immense future was rushing straight into the past, through an infinitesimal present in which he could not grasp what was happening. His grip on reality was lost. Millions of events were slipping past him, like snowflakes in a blizzard. He felt the urge to call a halt.

He fought to control the riding surge of the time wave. He struggled to isolate himself from it, to slow it down, watch it, stop it.

He wrestled with it.

Slowly the time surge yielded to his efforts. Groups of events shot past, unrelated packages, driftwood in the torrent. He strove to grasp at them, to recognise them for what they were—as a passenger in an express train tries to read the names of stations as he flashes through them in quick succession.

Then he was mastering it. Like a TV set that has lost the picture in a fast-moving blur of images, and then begins to lock on to the sequence again, his mind began to lock on to the tempo of events.

When he finally adjusted, he found himself lying comfortably on a grassy bank, amid the sights and sounds of a warm summer's day. He was lying on his right side, looking towards a river a few yards away. The water rippled gently in a little sandy bay, lapping cleanly against the few stones at the edge.

A bright-coloured butterfly fluttered across the river, its movements showing the curious mixture of randomness and purposiveness which the flight of butterflies has. Now it



dipped erratically towards the surface, so that it seemed certain to be engulfed. Now it rose strongly. It reached the river bank and finally, as though by accident, settled on a clump of yellow flowers and began to sip the nectar.

From where Carlson lay, resting his head on one hand, the tall flowers appeared to be poised tremulously against the sky, which was a deep burning blue. Compact clouds, snowy in their brilliance, moved majestically across his field of vision. The breeze was warm. Carlson found himself sighing with contentment.

There was a slight movement behind his back and Carlson turned and saw, without surprise that a girl in a white summer blouse and shorts was lying close to him. Elizabeth. She smiled at him, a slow warm smile. Slowly she raised her arms and put her hands behind her head. Her soft brown eyes looked into his, with a quiet humorous warmth in them, without challenge.

A delicious indolence spread through Carlson's limbs as he lay looking at Elizabeth. He knew she wanted him to kiss her. He knew he was going to kiss her, but the whole essence of the situation lay in savouring the moment.

The girl closed her eyes.

Snapping a stalk of grass, ripe with feathery seed-heads, he leaned over and held it close to her ear. Very delicately he began to tickle the tip of her pretty ear.

With her eyes still shut, the girl flicked at the tickling grass stalk with her hand.

Without consciously thinking about it, Carlson found himself contemplating the diamond ring—his ring—on the third finger of Elizabeth's slender hand.

Now the time-scale shifted again, and the blur of images began to run through his brain once more. Time was spinning before him as though the sun's diurnal journey across the sky was speeding up—accelerating so immensely that hours and days passed in tiny fractions of a second.

Carlson's brain reeled as he tried to follow the succession of incidents crowded together, as the days and years flashed past him. It was no use. Time was slipping from him as swiftly as sand runs through the fingers. It was escaping pointlessly. The enormously condensed future was plunging headlong into the past. His life was slipping away.



So this was the longevity they'd been striving for. This was what they'd been working towards with so many painstaking experiments. Now the results were in his grasp, the whole effort had become pointless and meaningless. What was the use of living for two hundred years, for five hundred years, if time slipped past so quickly?

Carlson felt a definite tinge of disappointment, even of resentment, as the years spiraled past him. He made another tremendous effort to keep pace with the flight of time. His dazzled, dazed mind strove to keep track of the rush of events.

Then, quite suddenly, he found the pace was slowing. He was getting in phase with it again . . .

Elizabeth's long fingers touched the keys of the electronic piano. Carlson, relaxing on the couch, looked idly at her still-slim back as she sat upright, concentrating on her playing. Now her small beautiful head bent forward a little over the keys. Her pale blue dress, plunging from the shoulders in a wide vee, left delicate shoulder blades exposed. He watched without passion as the fine bones moved under her golden skin.

Near the grand piano, reflected in its polished deep-toned wood, was a vase of flowers, roses of palest honey-cream that were perfect in their poised stillness. Beyond, he looked through open french windows to a garden which was lit with the warm sunlight. Beneath the lyric notes of the piano he was vaguely conscious of the laughter of their children playing out in the garden. And beyond this again, the ripple of small background noises, the buzz and twitter of high summer out of doors.

His wife, he noticed then, had changed the rhythm of her playing. Now an elegaic mood flowed from the great piano. A sense of pleading tenderness, of desire mingled with regret, of muted hope, spoke in the massive chords and engulfed Carlson in a rhythmic sea of sound. He rose on it in spirit, and his gaze took in the total awareness of the room, of Elizabeth, the blue dress, the honeyed roses, and the golden light streaming beyond the windows.

There was a fullness, a completion, in what Carlson saw which swelled up and enveloped him in warm flames of emotion. Beyond emotion, the music and the sight blended into a texture of total symphony in which Carlson was both the creator and the absorbed listener.



When Elizabeth finished playing, Carlson was hardly aware of it. She stood up, and came over to him on the couch. Her shimmering dress, with its full skirt, rustled, touching his hands. Carlson looking up, found that his eyes were blinded with tears. To hide his emotion he got up and walked quickly to the window, looking out with his back to Elizabeth. His mind was numbed by the fullness of experience, of overwhelming beauty. Outside, summer ticked away its seconds of eagerness and ripeness.

The time wheel was spinning again, and Carlson did not know how fast or for how long it spun. The blurring gripped him again, and flung him spiralling through uncounted epochs. He was too weak now to fight against the onslaught of events.

He tried to ride with the rush of events, to let time carry him wherever it wished. Alongside the churning of situation and image, he was aware that he no longer cared whether time passed him by or not.

So it was with surprise that Carlson noted, after an unchronicled lapse of years, that the wheel was slowing to a halt once more, the images were flickering back into focus.

He was old now—very old, with a weather-beaten wisdom that had survived several centuries. He sat nodding in a wicker chair in the garden, shaded from the too-direct rays of the sun by big ancient trees which were yet younger than he was.

His eyes, after countless years, had begun to glaze over. His head trembled slightly, and his hands were thin and frail, almost translucent.

Still it was pleasant to be alive. There were flowers in the garden, their colours glowing even more vividly to his bleared eyesight as though they shone through a faintly shimmering haze. His ears, still keen, alerted to the ringing song of birds in the trees, and to the high-pitched, excited voices of children, coming from behind a wattle fence.

The children bounded into view now, a boy and a girl, their bodies shimmering in the strong sunlight beyond his patch of shade.

They ignored him, an old man nodding in his chair, and went on with their game, absorbed in some elaborate make-believe. Why should they trouble about an old man who sat as



impassively in his chair as an ancient tree deep-rooted in the earth? But it made him happy to see them playing.

The children were shouting excitedly, and bursting into peals of laughter. Now they found a gardener's hose connected to a water tap. The boy pursued the girl with it, squirting her with a shimmering spray, that sometimes, Carlson noted, had the iridescence of the rainbow.

The girl, panting, got her foot on the hose and managed to cut off the supply of water. Then, suddenly releasing the pent-up pressure, she neatly arranged that the boy too, should be drenched.

With a shout he sprang at her. She dashed off agile as an eel, round the wattle fence, with the boy shouting in pursuit.

Long after the children had disappeared, Carlson still sat musing in the sun, under the whispering trees. The brightness from the sky fell in vibrant, glistening waves.

Were they, he wondered, his great-great-grandchildren or his great-great-great-grandchildren? The question, forming itself slowly in Carlson's brain, made him feel faintly tired. So he dismissed it. It was unimportant, whether in fact they were related to him at all. Or were they a neighbour's children, invading through a gap in the ancient, imperfect hedge? Their identity did not matter. And his identity was also unimportant.

Who was he? He had almost forgotten. As pointless to try and analyse the question, as to analyse the liquid notes of bird song which fell through the air and splashed against his ear-drums, yielding their sweetness.

He was alive.

What was a lifetime? Even a lifetime of a thousand years? The million-fold throb of events, the endless repetition of situation and response, boiled down to—what? To nothing at all?

Not quite to nothing. Held in the vast web of confusion and contradiction were these few mirror-like moments. These moments when time held its breath.

A sense of the total significance of existence hovered tremulously at the edge of his mind. Gently he moved his mind up towards it, to envelop it, but it escaped edgeways. Yet when he did not look at it directly, the intuition, the total meaning, was there.



He, John Carlson—if he were still John Carlson—had lived through the immeasurable march of years. Through unnumbered summers. And now it was time to die.

To die without regret, for what was there more to experience?

Perhaps in other worlds, on other planes or planets, diving through dimensions . . . the slide of frequencies . . .

The multi-stranded web of existence had unravelled and unravelled itself before his eyes many times. He felt unable to evaluate, unable to enthuse, unable to comment, even. Existence *was*. That was all. Or was it?

The shimmering texture of reality began to shift before his mind's eye. The universe, the cosmic systems, suns, nebulae, interstellar dust, novae, all tilted sideways. Reeling edgeways, they began to slip from his mind. He fought to hold on to the edge of the system. It had become paper-thin, a disk of glass with painful edges that threatened to cut his gripping consciousness. The cosmic systems were blips of light on the surface of the glass, brief scintillations that winked and went out. Fireflies.

Then he was in the tunnel. Long and dark. But at the far end, there was the consciousness of light. With difficulty, he knew he could reach the light. He *would* reach it. He began to move, in a dreamlike struggle, towards the remote but attainable luminosity. He was on his way . . .

Nodding thus, in his chair, musing amid his unthinkable memories, John Carlson's head fell forward on his chest in a dreamless, mindless sleep.

The three looked down at Carlson's body. Forbes, the girl, Doc Traves, united in an episode of grisly suddenness. Their faces were strained, incredulous, in the stark light of the laboratory. It could not happen so quickly . . . and yet it *had* happened.

Doc Traves let go of the limp, inert wrist of the man lying on the floor—the man who had been speaking to them a few moments before.

“He's gone . . .”

“Incredible . . .”

“How awful . . .”

Only a few seconds ago, Carlson had been speaking to them, warm, alive, breathing, looking at them. And now . . .



In the shattered hypodermic at Carlson's side, a few drops of green-gold liquid still clung to the inside of the glass.

The drug they had worked so painstakingly to develop—how could it kill so quickly?

Forbes brain, mercifully frozen by shock, failed to grasp the irony of the situation. The promise of length of days—what had it become? An agent of sudden annihilation for Carlson.

Under the cold hard reality of the light in the laboratory, devoted to the establishing and analysis of facts—here was a fact:

Carlson was dead, within seconds.

bill spencer

## the literary line-up

As forecast last month, Colin Kapp's magnificent new novel commences next month as a three-part serial. Now titled "The Dark Mind," it concerns one, Ivan Dalroi, a somewhat tough character with a chip on his shoulder against authority in general and Failways Terminal in particular. Failways is one of the three major power groups running the country, against whom Dalroi commences a one-man hate campaign in an attempt to even early scores against his oppressors. Pressures, however, pile up against him from all sides, not the least being the intrusion of the Black Knights, secret agents of the Government who, for some unknown reason, state that Dalroi is a Very Special Person.

With everything stacked against him, Dalroi cannot possibly win. Neither can he be killed! Dalroi is, indeed, *a very special person*—and the reasons unfold in one of the most powerful stories we have ever published.

Story ratings for No. 130 were:

- |    |                                   |                   |
|----|-----------------------------------|-------------------|
| 1. | Window on the Moon, Part 2 ... .. | E. C. Tubb        |
| 2. | I, The Judge ... ..               | R. W. Mackelworth |
| 3. | The Under-Privileged ... ..       | Brian W. Aldiss   |
| 4. | Confession ... ..                 | John Rackham      |
| 5. | The Jaywalkers ... ..             | Russ Markham      |



*one of the statements we made recently in Italy, was that we were always prepared to consider science fiction stories by continental writers—the story which follows is our first from Italy*

# yutzy brown

by pino puggioni

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The room in which I found myself was large and airy. If it were not for the heavy impending silence which pervaded every corner, it could not be said that I was inside the Courts of Justice of Planetown awaiting the results of the case against me.

Naturally, from my point of view, I didn't think the fault was entirely mine. My planet, Deneb, was still considered to be a colony of Earth and we still feel ourselves to be Earthlings.

Actually, Earthly civilisation was a little different than that of Deneb, above all in the abundance of electric machines, which were made great use of. During the first hearing, I learned from my lawyer that the relationship between machine and man was a very normal one, slightly in favour of the former regarding its exactness of judgment in every field. Every now and then, however, when someone succeeded in proving the contrary, there followed a "democratization" with judicial and technical consequences which I had not grasped at all well.

The Denebian spaceship roared on to the astroport of York Town. The morning was wonderful and everything seemed to be smiling. To tell the truth, the T.G.L. (Trans-Galactic-Lines), the Company that ran the spacial navigation lines,



owned about fifteen astroports scattered all over the Earth. So they landed their own spaceships coming from sidereal space, where the meteorological conditions were at their best and most conducive for the tourist trade. Of course, these things were not known to all common mortals, but I, as a journalist and writer knew them well.

When I left the spaceship I was very excited.

There is an excellent saying that "those who live in fantasy are not moved in the face of reality." But I was very happy. It is always a reason for pride for a "colonial" to be able to visit Earth. If then like me, he has won a Literary prize and if he goes to Earth to be presented to the Director of the greatest editorial house of the Three Systems, the Intergalaxy Inc., then everything is just marvellous !

The book I had written, fruit of a good five years hard work, had been acclaimed by the Denebian critics. So now, fortified by this recognition, I prepared to meet the person who would perhaps help me to become famous.

I boarded a heliplane at once and had it take me to the nearest hotel. I had no time to lose. I was burned by an impatience like one of those strange fires I had seen on Ariel IV.

The hotel I registered at seemed to me to be a wonderful construction. I had never seen anything like it on Deneb. I felt like one of those prospectors of a millenium long passed, coming down into a city after long months of isolation in savage places. I felt almost ridiculous.

I had a wonderful bath with cool perfumed vapour which helped relax the nerves and tone the muscles. An electronic massage completed the work leaving me almost a "smilodon." I shall have to remind someone to import some electronic masseuse to Deneb. Just think ! You place yourself in the middle of the room and a myriad electronic impulses find you, massage you and tone you up completely. Most efficient ! The depilatory lotion completed the operation, and the three-dimensional-viso, a kind of televised mirror, projected a material pseudo-image of me into the centre of the room. I could do no less than be satisfied with the result. I dressed in my best tunic and a pair of Venusian boots.

All this may seem to be just nonsense but try for a moment putting yourself in my shoes. Since I was at University I had dreamed of becoming a writer. I had started as a journalist



and then after having familiarised myself with general literature, I began to write a book. I had visited all the wild regions of Deneb—gigantic forests filled with animals undreamed of by the Terrestrial mind, deserts where one could only move about with a heliplane because of the roughness of the country.

I had studied everything in the System of Deneb. Customs, dress, flora and fauna, then I had left my position with the newspaper and dedicated myself entirely to my work. I told the story of the life of a vagabond of space. His discoveries, his existence, the strange adventures that befell him, his struggles, his loves, the nature and the psychology of a "colonial." Above all, I had described Deneb—and a little of myself.

The cultural circles of Deneb had been enthusiastic about my work. I had received the prize in St:St. (Sterling Standard) and a letter of introduction to the great editorial house of the Three Systems. Just as I was ready to leave for the Earth, I lovingly picked up the manuscript I had brought with me and with a certain pride read the title. *The Denebian*, by Yutzy Brown.

I felt a sense of joy in reading my name and the title of my book. I made a booking on the stratoplane for Planetown, Earth's magnificent administrative capital, and then took a heliplane towards the stratoport of the city. An hour and twenty minutes later I was in front of the huge palace of Intergalaxy Inc. I confess my legs shook a little at the thought that in a short while I would know the person who decided the good and bad of contemporary literature.

I found some courage and went in. There was no need to ask my way because on lighted panels in the entrance hall were all the indications necessary. Management : Floor II, Lift IV. One couldn't ask for anything clearer than that. I went up and gave my letter of introduction to a most elegantly dressed young woman. I was rather impressed.

The girl took my letter and visiting card. "YUTZY BROWN—Writer and Journalist." Those cards had been my weakness before leaving. So what ! A little vanity never goes amiss.

Then the letter and the card were slipped through a slot in the table at which the secretary sat. Immediately a green light glowed on a metal door and the secretary motioned me to



enter. Not a word was exchanged between us. The room I found myself in was well furnished and had a certain refinement. There were big armchairs in Garuck skin. A magnificent pealth wood desk and a great deal of metal furniture. There must have been some electronic machines too, judging by the panels that I saw on the right of the desk. Right in front of an armchair there was placed an instrument varnished red, all glittering with chromium. I believe I was the only thing out of place in that magnificent study. A hard resounding voice brusquely snatched me from my reflections.

“Please sit down, Mr. Brown.”

I jumped backwards. I must say I felt silly, but that voice in a completely empty room had a strange effect on me. I answered weakly. “Excuse me. I’m waiting for the Director of Intergalaxy, Inc.”

The voice continued without any inflection whatever.

“Perhaps, Mr. Brown, you will find the custom a little strange, but you are speaking with the co-ordinated mind of Intergalaxy, Inc. Let us speak with the Director.”

At that moment everything became clear to me. I realised that my request had not been understood at all ! With all the patience I had learned to use in the jungles of Ulian, on Deneb II, I tried to be more explicit.

“I must speak with the Director of Intergalaxy, and if this is you, I don’t understand why you are using a microphone. Is it possible that there are germs on Deneb as yet undiscovered, and so lethal to Earthlings that they must constrict themselves to speaking at a distance with a Denebian ?”

I began to get angry. The voice did not change its expression.

“If you really want to find an interpreter, Mr. Brown, please sit down in that armchair placed in front of the red machine. It is I, R.R.221. Let us discuss your problem at once.”

Among the many eccentric things I had seen in my few hours on Earth, this undoubtedly was the strangest. But in all good faith I sat down in the armchair indicated and waited. There was no point in talking as I did not yet know what was expected of me. To the devil with terrestrial publishers, if they were so strange !

“Mr. Yutzy Brown, from the expression on your face I can imagine your dismay at finding yourself in front of a machine



with directional functions, in a publishers as complex as ours. I will try to explain to you the motive for this.

“Criticism, according to the outmoded criterion, was inherited by some individuals who used it in a totally subjective manner. Being a machine, all these presuppositions do not make sense to me. If a book is good, it is good. I cannot bear hidden grudges, nor petty jealousies. I have nothing of God in me. My judgments are not based on the theory that “I am better than you because . . .” or “This idea is original but . . .” I don’t create false idols with erratic judgments. My judgments are analytically exact. For these reasons I am installed in this position.”

“But,” I objected, “isn’t it a little unusual that a machine, however evolutionary, has such a pre-eminent position?”

“I note that on Deneb you do not have much in the way of modern direction. Nowadays, the men who preside over various human activities are exceptional, but even they are in some ways tied to the judgment of the machine. There isn’t anything better than the final decisions of an electronic brain. But this is not the place to discuss social administrative politics. Let us rather talk about your book.”

Mention of the book brought me back with a jolt to the purpose of my visit. I drew the manuscript from the envelope in which I had put it. There was a *click* and a huge robot emerged from a metal door. R.R.212 introduced it to me.

“This is A.C.1., Android Co-ordinator. It helps me to do the things I am unable to do alone. Its function is purely manual and you can consign your manuscript to it immediately.”

I handed the manuscript to A.C.1., mentally preparing myself to leave. Surely I would have R.R.212’s judgment by tomorrow?

I saw A.C. approach the machine, open a compartment, put my manuscript in it, close it and then it took itself to a corner of the room where it remained immobile.

A few seconds passed. Then, as I was about to speak, the machine said, “I have analysed your book, Mr. Brown, and the results prove it to be less than mediocre.”

More seconds passed in perfect silence. At first I was stunned. Then, I understood. In one moment that accursed machine had nullified all my dreams and brought to nothing many years of hard work.



I spoke, my voice shaking and showing something of my agitation. "But how can you possibly make a decision so quickly? A few seconds and you have judged my whole book! As quickly as that! How is it possible?"

"My dear friend," answered the infernal thing. "Is it so astonishing that we have in fact been able to judge your work in so short a time? It is an extremely simple thing! We reduce your book into a series of forty-two algebraical equations. The percentage of those that have not given an exact solution exceeds 9.5 . . . As such, your book has not the amount of logic which would interest the public. From our point of view—and believe me Mr. Brown, it is an excellent point of view—your book doesn't represent good business."

I began to speak with extreme decision to that half-rusted mass of wheels whose reasoning was that which only a human element could give. I remembered that old piece of mechanical rubbish what was "pathos." What were the sentiments of the soul and all those stupid things that make a series of words into a well written book.

After a little more than ten minutes I was flung out of the door by A.C. with my manuscript in my hand together with the sheet on which were transcribed the forty-two horrible equations. Those that hadn't a solution were marked in red. I threw the stupid equations as far away from me as I could.

I was furious! Alone on Earth, millions of miles from Deneb and treated like the first shorn lamb who had the shining idea to write a thesis on "The Toilet of Noble Animals."

I walked slowly through the crowded streets. If I had had enough money I would have left immediately, but just at that particular moment I decided to find a modest hotel and look for a job which would give me a little money and then return to Deneb.

I soon found a hotel which suited me. I cancelled the room I had in York Town and instructed them to send my luggage to my new address. Then, I went out into the streets again, looking for some inspiration which would help me out of this mess. I walked here and there, not staying long in any one place. I just walked.

Then, lured by the subtle fascination of printed paper, I stopped in front of a book shop. In the window I saw some beautiful glossy editions. In one corner ran a series of books which brought back to memory my bitter defeat by Intergalaxy Inc.



I still couldn't believe the reason for all that had happened. I think that, more than anything, it was the absolute lack of faith I had in R.R.212's judgment that drove me to enter the shop. I bought the least expensive among the books that interested me. I felt that my sub-conscious was working on some particularly good idea for me, and I was seized by a new excitement after my recent depression. In my mind the strange and rather mad idea that had been teasing me began to mature.

I didn't eat. I couldn't. I needed all the powers of concentration I had. I must not make a mistake. I lay stretched out on my bed all night, thinking, thinking . . .

The morning after, though tired and harrassed by a sleepless night, I arose almost smiling. I would show R.R.212 who Yutzy Brown was ! So much for a stupid machine that permitted itself to make judgments so mathematically incorrect !

I poured over the book I had bought for a long time before finding the thing that instinct had tried to suggest to me. On some paper I copied a few "odds and ends" and prepared myself for a second round with R.R.212.

I went to the office of Intergalaxy Inc. as I did the day before.

The same very elegant secretary received me, but this time there were interminable procedures before I was allowed to enter the office from where, a few hours earlier, I had been so ignobly thrown out.

"I hope, Mr. Yutzy Brown," said R.R.212, addressing me in its usual imperturbable voice, "that you have a logical motive for your visit. I have very little time to give you."

"In the very few hours since our last meeting," I began in an inspired tone, "I have reflected very much and I must confess that the theory of mathematical logics applied to literature in general, has completely conquered me. Your electronic mind can very well understand the evolution of my thoughts without any effort. I must affirm that yesterday, new literary horizons were opened up for me. Rather, I now think I am ahead of the times in applying new theories to Modern Literature."

I continued, "I believe, in fact, that if a book can be reduced to a series of analytical equations, one can also do the contrary. So I have turned the problem around. I would ask you to look over these three works—I beg your pardon—the three series of equations which I wrote last night."



So saying, I drew out the three sheets of paper on which I had transcribed three series of forty-eight equations, copied from the book I bought the evening before. There followed a long silence.

R.R.212 was surely thinking and rejecting millions of responses in search of the right one ! Then it began to speak. The voice wasn't any different than usual, but it did have a metallic ring about it that I hadn't noticed before. Its electronic valves must have been more excited than usual.

"Mr. Yutzy Brown, I have searched in my cybernetic memory for something which has an affinity to a similar event. I have found none. I have been designed to function with absolute autonomy and since your proposal is extremely logical, I have decided to consider your idea." It continued by saying, "If the result is satisfactory we shall have opened a new road in the field of literature. Give your equations to A.C. . . ."

Trembling a little, I handed the sheets of paper to A.C., who had in the meantime approached and stood waiting. A.C. put the equations in the compartment that had swallowed my manuscript the day before.

Interminably long seconds passed. Then R.R.212 resumed in a higher tone.

"Equations exact to a millionth ! The percentage of errors committed is 0.00001 . . . I can translate the equations into literary expression, Mr. Yutzy Brown ! Within an hour they will be ready for the press. I have already given orders that 25,000 Sterling Standard be consigned to you. What do you suggest for a title ?"

Quite frankly, I was completely staggered by the result. Never could I have hoped for so much, even in my wildest dreams.

"You think of it," I stammered. "Find any title to suit the book. It doesn't matter much."

After a few minutes I found myself outside the offices of Intergalaxy Inc., with the pocket of my tunic bulging with 25,000 Sterling Standard.

I passed the day in complete bliss. I offered a drink to all those I met. I felt exhilarated and my morale reached the stars. I went to bed very late and at once fell leadenly into a deep, dreamless sleep. I think I didn't know I was completely drunk.



A bomb exploded in my head. Then another and yet another. I awoke suddenly, infuriated. Someone was beating on the door of my room. Still in my pants I went to open it, sending them all to the devil. I would have to change this accursed hotel where one couldn't even sleep, as soon as possible.

A man dressed in the red tunic of the police stood in front of me.

"Mr. Yutzy Brown of Deneb?" he enquired politely.

"Yes," I answered. "What the devil do you want at this hour of the morning?"

"Mr. Brown," replied the man imperturbably, "I must conduct you to the Courts of Justice. The High Court is examining some very grave charges against you. Will you please follow me?"

I was almost expecting something like this to happen. I dressed myself quickly and followed the policeman. The High Court of Justice is an enormous austere building situated on the outskirts of the city. Inside there reigned an atmosphere which forced one to think seriously about one's case.

The Terrestrial constitution does not permit a person to be present at the hearing of his own case because the judges are so completely impartial that all proof of innocence and guilt is examined and analysed with extreme objectiveness. A lawyer is the only means of communication between the accused and the judges.

And so this was why I am here, in this room, impatiently awaiting the results of my case. I was accused of a *technical-scientific swindle* to the damage of Intergalaxy Inc. My lawyer explained to me how I had got myself into a situation from which I would have great difficulty getting out.

The accusation was so serious that the High Court itself was occupied with the case!

In one corner of the room was the proof of my crime. With secret anxiety I leafed through the book I had bought two evenings ago for 30 cent. of St:St. *Elements of Algebra for Institutes of Mental Re-education*.

For one who was not good at mathematics, I would have thought that this was the most likely text to use in order to understand something about analytical equations.

The other three books were my "books" written in the new system. From the titles, the contents could easily be imagined.



“TRULLA LERO LA” “3 IRHOOLA 3” “GUL  
GLU TA.”

I read a page of the transformation R.R.212 had made and understood why I had irritated them at Intergalaxy Inc.

“. . . the glugu ta, zebabi with the colodolled of trucuta. If an apok makes the gulub, trila ta con ula ula, zon . . .”

The whole book ran like this. That was the literary result of the mathematical equations prepared for the mentally deficient.

Just then my lawyer, Rod Knudson, entered. He looked at me strangely and then began.

“Mr. Yutzy Brown, your guilt has been demonstrated extensively by the arguments presented to the Court. As a consequence of your “find,” Intergalaxy Inc. has had to give up R.R.212 and A.C. with a loss of several million Sterling Standard. Naturally, your books have been withdrawn from circulation. The High Court has found you guilty, applying, under the circumstances, the First Article of the Social Constitution.

“You, having demonstrated the incongruity and grossly illogical logic of R.R.212, have been nominated director of Intergalaxy Inc., with a strong recommendation for the Presidency of all Information Services.”

They had applied the law of Democratization ! I had made the directional functions of the electronic brain R.R.212 look ridiculous.

I sighed, preparing myself to undertake my new position.

**pino puggioni**





into the mysterious barrenland travel  
two intrepid explorers, impelled by  
numerous desires, not the least being  
curiosity, while within the forbidden  
territory a small group of humans  
fight a losing battle against  
incalculable odds

# to conquer chaos

by john brunner

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conclusion

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foreword

*The barrenland lay on the face of the world like an ulcer, nearly round, more than three hundred miles in circumference, and had been there so long that people thought it had always existed. Away from its edge, the countryside had formerly been nearly as vacant as the barrenland itself, but, with the passage of generations, humanity had crept back until now a dozen settlements big enough to be called villages existed practically on the boundary line in a feudal state of existence. The price of living there was the necessity of contending with things that wandered out of the barrenland and killed or spread unknown diseases before being killed or dying of unknown causes.*

*Into this area comes Grand Duke Paul of Esberg with an army of 2000 men to investigate the legends of the barrenland. One of his scouts is attacked by a thing, which he manages to kill, but his own injuries eventually cause him to die, hastened by a mysterious green mould which apparently feeds on his blood. The Duke sends a picked body of men under the command of*



*Jervis Yanderman, a member of his general staff, to investigate the dead monster and find any local village where his army can obtain supplies and information about the barrenland.*

*Skirting the barrenland, Yanderman and his party come in sight of the township of Lagwich, meeting a young soap-maker named Idle Conrad on the outskirts. Conrad is something of an outcast, being a dreamer who sees strange visions, but he leads them towards the town, where Waygan the horn-blower humiliates him publicly and conducts Yanderman to the elders himself. The party are lodged in the town and learn much about living in the vicinity of the barrenland, including seeing the skeleton of a man-like creature which had once stumbled into their domain.*

*Yanderman sends a messenger back to the Duke to bring up the rest of the army, while Conrad, after several further humiliating scenes, returns to his soap-making outside the town walls—only to find that a thing has smashed his implements and lies sleeping beneath a nearby hill. Desperate for some recognition, he traps and kills the thing and runs back to the town to bring witnesses, but during his absence, Yanderman's messengers find the body and carry it off to the Duke. When Conrad returns, the evidence of his victory has disappeared.*

*Duke Paul suddenly contracts the deadly green mould disease, but before he dies he commits his campaign into Yanderman's hands—this is to enter the barrenland and find where the things come from and if there are any human beings there. The Duke's death is the signal for his army to revolt (largely against superstition) and Conrad eventually finds Yanderman in the ruins of the encampment, wounded but alive. They decide to enter the barrenland on their own.*

*Meanwhile, inside the barrenland itself, a group of people live in the decaying remnants of the Station where the things are hatched. Their very existence depends upon keeping the things at bay with devices depending upon a dwindling power source. Nestamay, grand-daughter of the head of the group, is constantly involved with Jasper, one of the few eligible males in her gene group, whom she detests and whose petty scheming involves the group in a life-and-death struggle for survival.*

*While they are trying to solve their immediate problems, Yanderman and Conrad enter the barrenland and after several days' travel suddenly sight a huge dome in the distance with human beings moving about nearby. Suddenly, from an opening in the dome, a huge thing emerges and is being driven by some invisible force straight towards the rocks where they are hiding.*



## seventeen

That day began like any other for Nestamay, although an hour earlier than most, for it would again be her turn to keep overnight watch after sunset, and shortly after midday she would have to try and catch up on her sleep ; that apart, everything was as usual.

Washed, and having attended to baby Dan's vegetable-like needs, she fetched their day's rations and prepared a quick breakfast. She hardly spoke to Grandfather—indeed, since that unexpected cracking of his self-control which had followed her accusations against Jasper, he seemed deliberately to have hardened the shell around himself again, and spent more time than ever in silent anxious musing.

Their frugal meal was almost over when there was a bang on the door of the hovel—patched together like the rest of the building from salvaged scrap. The caller didn't wait for an invitation to enter, but stepped in at once.

It was Keefe, a burly man with only one eye, the other having been lost years ago to a newly-hatched *thing*. He carried a large cracked plastic dish in which rested a clump of soil containing a sickly plant.

"Sorry to disturb you, Maxall," he said. "We found this out towards the East Brokes—or rather my kid found it. She doesn't think she's seen one like it before, and nor do I."

Grandfather grunted. "It could happen," he said sceptically. "Let's have a look at it." He reached out a casual hand and took the dish.

Rubbing his hands, Keefe waited. It was logical that he should bring a problem of this kind to Grandfather, Nestamay knew—nobody else had so much information so clearly memorised. But it was obvious he didn't like the chore. If only Grandfather didn't have this gift of making even grown, knowledgeable men feel like ignorant children—

"Nestamay!" Grandfather's sharp voice broke into her meditation. "Get me my microscope, will you?"

Nestamay jumped to her feet and went to the row of shelves at the back of the hovel on which were kept the few serviceable scientific instruments their family had culled from the mess below the dome. She took down the microscope gingerly and bore it to the old man wrapped in its antirust cloth.

"Is it something new?" Keefe ventured.



"D'you think I'd be bothering with the microscope if I was sure?" Grandfather retorted, picking off a sample leaf and sliding it into place under the objective.

Keefe rolled his eye as though seeking strength from above, then caught Nestamay's attention and gave her a grin which he probably intended to be sympathetic. But the girl had a sudden attack of family loyalty and tossed her hair haughtily.

"Hah!" Grandfather said a moment later. He put aside the leaf and held out a hand towards Nestamay. When she didn't immediately understand the gesture, she snapped his fingers. "Knife, you little fool!" he exclaimed. "Do I have to tell you every time what it is I want?"

Flushing, Nestamay fetched the knife. Maybe she shouldn't have made such an unfriendly response to Keefe after all, she thought. Grandfather could be incredibly maddening. Sulkingly, she dropped back to her seat.

His age no handicap to his deft fingers, Grandfather sectioned the stem of the plant and selected a tiny roundel to examine with the microscope. Adjusting the focus minutely, he addressed Keefe.

"Out towards the East Brokes, you said?"

"That's right. The way the *thing* went after we kicked it out of Channel Nine the other night. I thought it might have come through on the *thing's* hoof, perhaps—in a lump of mud." He hesitated. "That is, if it *is* something new."

"It's new," Grandfather confirmed, leaning back with a sigh. "Either that, or else an unreported life-stage of some plant we already know. But that's improbable—it's a matter of years since we had the last stranger, and any variant form would have been spotted before this."

Nestamay bent to the plastic dish and stared at the innocent-looking plant in it. Rather commonplace—quite small as yet, standing a mere four or five inches high, with dark green stems and curious little red thorns. But she knew better than to voice such a reaction. The first—and last—time she had doubted the necessity of keeping a check on any and every intrusive plant, Grandfather had taken her by the ear and marched her around the dome to the point from which the pullulating miniature jungle within the Station could be most clearly seen. There he had stopped. He had said, "Once *those* were harmless-looking seeds!"



That was one lesson of Grandfather's which she had never needed to revise.

"What ought we to do about it, then?" Keefe inquired.

"Nestamay, what are your assigned duties this morning?" Grandfather said, turning.

"Uh—well, it's my watch-night tonight. So I'm on half-day general assistance."

"Perfect. Keefe, get this plant of yours out on a stand at the mouth of Channel Nine—oh, about two o'clock of the dome. Nestamay, make the rounds of the community. Everyone is to have a sight of this plant within the next hour. I mean *everyone*, down to and including toddling children. But particularly I want to make sure that there's no infection in the hydroponic trays, so call there first. All free-day worker adults are to report to Keefe and study the plant and conduct a ground-search for any further specimens. Begin on the trail of the East Brokes *thing*, and work outwards in a fan-pattern. Send that little girl with the good sketching talent here to me so she can draw the anomalous micro-features and we can file them for reference, and tell her that she'll be wanted to draw the *thing in vivo* as well."

Nestamay nodded. "That's—uh—Danianel you want to do the sketching, right?"

"Yes. Well, don't just sit there! Get moving!"

When they heard the news, most people sighed and shrugged and accepted the necessity of doing as Grandfather ordered. There were a few half-hearted objections, naturally; Egrin, sweating as always in the humid environment demanded by the hydroponic trays, wiped his face and snarled, "If the old fool thinks I could have overlooked a strange plant in my own trays he must be crazy!" But even he, after boiling off his annoyance, went compliantly to study the specimen and memorise its characteristics for future reference.

It wasn't until she had completed her round of the community that Nestamay realised she had not yet located and spoken to Jasper.

Frowning, she wondered where she could have missed him. She had called at his family's hovel, she had notified the chief of the party with which he usually worked . . . Where could he have got to?

She went in search of one of his kinfolk, and found his mother returning from her dutiful trip to inspect the plant and listen to Keefe.



"Where's Jasper?" Nestamay demanded. "I haven't told him yet."

"It's his free-day," Jasper's mother countered.

"So?" Nestamay was impatient. "I know that—I've spoken with people from his working party. But Grandfather said I was to tell absolutely everyone, and I particularly don't want to leave out Jasper because—"

"I know why not!" his mother rasped. "If I'd known our genes were going to tie him down to the choice of you for a mate, I'd have chosen differently myself!"

"Tie him down!" Nestamay blazed. "What about him making Danianel skip her watch the other night? What's tying him down there? I'm not—I'd as soon live single!"

"You've got no right to spread these foul-mouthed stories about my son!"

"A good way to stop them spreading would be to stop him behaving the way he does," Nestamay said, and marched away before the flabbergasted woman could reply.

She felt rather pleased with herself for ending the argument with such a telling phrase. As a result, it was some minutes before she realised she still hadn't found Jasper. And if she didn't manage to find him and send him off to join the party scouting in the East Brokes direction for more of the intruding plants, there was bound to be someone who would leak the information back to Grandfather and earn her a bawling-out.

He couldn't possibly be around the far side of the dome in this secret love-nest of his, could he? Nestamay paused, a frown furrowing her young brow. If so, he was there on his own—all the eligible girls of the community were accounted for and had gone to report to Keefe.

Even so, she would have to check that possibility.

She took a firm grip on herself and went around the dome, her mind full of thoughts of Jasper as he related to her future. The past day or two a possible solution had suggested itself to her. Even if the community dared not risk losing Jasper's genetic lines, or blending them with anyone else's but her own, did that necessarily imply that she had to live with Jasper as his permanent mate? Couldn't she mother two children by him and continue to live with Grandfather, and then have her own home when Grandfather died? It was against custom and precedent, but it was possible Grandfather might give his consent—after all, the community was approaching a really



desperate pass, and old-fashioned ways of organising such things might have to be sacrificed anyway . . .

“Why it’s Nestamay ! I didn’t know it was your free-day!”

The mocking words recalled her to the present. She spun to see Jasper emerging from a dark hole among the tangle of ruined machinery and collapsed dome-struts which marked this side of the Station.

“It isn’t my free-day,” Nestamay said after a pause. “I wish you’d told somebody where you were going ! I’ve had to hunt all over the place for you.”

A broad smile spread across Jasper’s face. “Well, well ! What happened ? Did Danianel give you such glowing reports of this little hideaway of mine that you couldn’t resist having a look at it—is that it ?”

He moved towards her. Automatically she took a step back.

“Stop it !” she rapped. “Listen ! I have to tell you to go and see Keefe around the dome near Channel Nine. He found a new plant. All free-day workers have to report to make a search for it.”

“What ?” Jasper’s smile vanished. “On a free-day ? Who says so ?”

“Here and now *I* say so !” Nestamay exclaimed.

“Oh ! It’s your old fool of a Grandfather again, I suppose !” Jasper wiped his lips with the back of his hand. “Well, I’m not going to turn out and sweat over bare ground all day for his sake ! Let him look for the damned plants himself !”

“You won’t get away with that,” Nestamay warned. “The order says for everyone to go, including you.”

“I didn’t get the order,” Jasper said bluntly. He waved at the dome. “Nobody in sight, is there ? Nobody except us ! You can say you told me as much as you like, and I’ll say you gave up looking before you found me. How’s your beloved grandfather going to like that, hey ?” The smile oozed back.

“But I tell you what !” he went on, before the dismayed girl could think of a foolproof answer. “I will go—on one small condition. That’s if you come in there with me for—oh, an hour or so, not more. Then if anybody asks what took you so long, I’ll be quite honest—I’ll say I was in there and you didn’t know where exactly to find me and it took a long time to track me down. There, how’s that for a bargain ? Afterwards I’ll show up like a good boy for this damned search-party, and you’ll get a pat on the head from your grandfather for devotion to duty.”



He put his hand out to take her arm and lead her inside the dome to his vaunted secret lair.

Abruptly, at his touch, a flood of rage and loathing boiled up in Nestamay. She had tumbled with all the other children of her age-group, boys and girls alike, in their crude wrestling games, and had often overcome opponents older and heavier than herself. On becoming a nominal adult she was supposed to have put all that behind her, but the grip of Jasper's hand seemed to trigger a reflex response. She hardly knew what she was doing, she was so furious, but seconds later Jasper was cartwheeling over her back, taken totally by surprise, and sliding on his face in the dust.

Panicking, she jumped away, thinking he would fling himself on her and seek revenge. But he didn't do so. Panting, getting slowly to hands and knees with a huge graze-mark bleeding down his cheek, he fixed her with coldly cruel eyes.

"You'll be sorry for that, Nestamay," he whispered. "I warn you—you'll wish you were dead before I finish getting even with you for this!"

There was something in his look and his voice which made him seem suddenly inhuman. Nestamay repressed a desire to scream, spun on the spot and took to her heels.

## e i g h t e e n

She was still too shaken to think clearly when she found herself outside her home a few minutes later. She had never seen such a savage look on anyone's face in all her young life. It was as though a newly-hatched *thing* had taken human form. The shock had made her physically giddy.

Little by little she forced herself back to a state of comparative calm. She grew aware that Grandfather's irascible voice could be heard within the hovel, ordering Danianel to hurry with her sketching and get out to join the search party under Keefe.

Taking a firm grip on herself, she thrust open the door and blurted out the news.

"Grandfather, Jasper refuses to report for the search party! He said he wouldn't admit that I'd found him and told him your instructions unless I—I went with him for an hour first."



Daniel, a slight, quite pretty girl a little older than Nestamay, looked up startled from the eyepiece of the microscope. Several sheets of neatly executed drawings were piled up alongside the instrument.

"Go with you?" Grandfather said frostily. "Where to? I suppose I don't have to ask what for!"

"I don't know where exactly," Nestamay muttered. "He has this hideaway inside the dome. Ask Daniel—she's been there!"

"What do you mean?" Daniel demanded indignantly, cheeks colouring. Nestamay ignored her.

"Please, Grandfather, you must help me!" she exclaimed. "I—I had to beat him off, and I hurt him, I guess, and he said I'd wish I was dead before he finished getting even."

Grandfather pulled himself to his feet. "You stay here and finish that drawing, Daniel," he rapped. "I'm getting tired of young Jasper, and I think it's about time he was told to behave himself."

Immensely relieved, Nestamay fell in behind him as he set off with long strides to the place where Keefe was assembling the search party.

But as they rounded the dome he checked and put up a hand to shade his eyes. "I thought you said Jasper had refused to join the party!" he snapped. "Look there!" He flung out an arm.

It was definitely Jasper, meekly listening with everyone else to Keefe's exposition.

"I—I swear he told me he wouldn't do it on his free-day," Nestamay gulped. "Please go and ask him how he came by the graze on his face, at least!"

"Now see here, child," Grandfather said, turning to face her. "I know you dislike Jasper—I know you hate the idea of having him as a mate. But we've been over all that, and I've explained why it's got to be that way and there's no alternative. Are you deliberately trying to incite me against him?"

Nestamay went slowly white. Between clenched teeth she forced out, "Go and ask him how he hurt his *face*!"

"He's turned out for the search," Grandfather answered curtly. "That's as I ordered. Leave it at that."

"Don't you care about him trying to rape me?" Nestamay blazed. "Doesn't it matter to you? Doesn't it matter any more than sending my father out to his death in the desert?"



You and your talk about being able to show pride when we finally meet other people again—oh, how I hope you'll be dead before then so I won't weep with shame to hear you say you're human too! You're not! You're a machine—you're a *thing!*'

With all her force she slapped him stingingly across the face, and turned to flee.

Terror at what she had done haunted her the rest of the day. She dared not go home when she should have done—at noon, to try and sleep before keeping the night watch. Instead she cowered alone in a concealed nook on the far side of the dome, shivering uncontrollably and sometimes giving way to dry-eyed sobs.

Only one coherent thought filled her mind during the slow-passing hours. She hadn't reached the decision consciously, but rather by an instinctive leap.

She was not going to stay and endure Jasper's revenge, whatever form it took. If he caught up with her and tried to attack her physically—which she thought unlikely, for he had always seemed a coward—she would use her knife on him this time. But in the more probable case that he resorted to some subtler and crueller indirect attack, she was going to leave the Station as her father had done—to walk away into the desert and take her chance of dying of thirst or hunger.

There was no one to whom she could turn. If even Grandfather thought she was blackening Jasper to get out of living with him, she might as well be dead already.

And there was nothing she could do to forestall Jasper, either. How he would go about getting even with her she could not guess, but the most likely way was simply by a series of petty persecutions kept up over months, becoming intolerable as they accumulated. If the community had liked her family such a plan would not have worked, but Grandfather had been overbearing and domineering for years, and while everyone had to respect his vast knowledge nobody actually liked him. And this reaction extended now to include herself.

By late afternoon she was immensely thirsty. Wondering if she could get to water without anyone seeing her, she peered out of her refuge. A group of weary searchers returning from their hunt around the Station was passing, heading southwards around the dome. She ducked back out of sight, but not before she had recognised Jasper among them. He was too



far distant for her to see his expression, but a mere glimpse of him was enough to make her tremble again.

She was glad he hadn't been looking in her direction. In a little while now Grandfather would be looking for her—it was, after all, her night to keep watch in the office ; that hadn't changed. But people would hardly take to the idea of being sent out to hunt for her in the dark.

And there were footsteps close by.

She froze, wondering what she would do if she was discovered by chance ; the possibility had scarcely crossed her mind. But whoever the footsteps belonged to wasn't looking for anybody. The angle of the sound changed constantly, approaching the side of the dome, then entering it and continuing, blurred now, inside.

It couldn't be Jasper. Could it ?

Yet—who else would venture so confidently into the Station from this side with darkness near ?

With extreme caution Nestamay craned past a large rusty machine at the back of her own hiding-place and tried to confirm her suspicion. But it was useless ; in the long-shadowed evening gloom under the dome all details blended.

Then the footsteps were returning, and she ducked again. Straining her ears, she heard a muttered sentence.

“ That'll fix the bitch ! ”

Beyond any doubt, that was Jasper. She let her hand fall to the handle of her hatchet. Where was he going now ? Out of the dome to rejoin the returning search party, or straight to the north, back to the clustered hovels ?

North, and without a pause. She saw his shadow stride past a few seconds later and heard him begin to hum, apparently very pleased with himself. What could he have done to “fix” her ? Rigged a trap of some kind, perhaps ? Nestamay frowned intently, attempting to turn familiar routes within the dome back to front, so as to determine whether Jasper had been able to reach any of the mazy paths up to the office in the short time he had spent inside. She failed to decide ; it was a problem she had never tackled before—relating this unfrequented side of the Station to the safe paths within it. The answer, however, came of its own accord, and only minutes later.

It took the form of a tremendous crash, followed by grinding and tearing noises. Nestamay leapt to her feet. Was that the result of Jasper's visit—the springing of some sort of deadfall



trap aimed at her, but operated by someone else or of its own accord ?

The idea had barely framed itself in her mind before she realised it was false. For the grinding and tearing noises continued, and a fresh sound joined them : an animal bellowing.

That left only one explanation. A *thing* had just hatched inside the dome—and as the alarm hadn't sounded to signal the random operation of the mysterious process responsible, that meant Jasper must have disconnected it !

Everything else driven out of her mind, Nestamay broke from her hiding-place and raced in search of someone—anyone—to warn. It didn't matter now about escaping into the desert, or avoiding Jasper. He had done something completely unforgiveable, thinking perhaps that the odds were against a *thing* appearing in the short time before Nestamay was due to begin her watch and hoping that she might find herself trapped inside the Station with an unsignalled monster.

Surely even Grandfather couldn't stomach a crime like this !

Panting, she came in earshot of the returned search party gathering at the south side of the dome. She shrieked at them as loudly as she could.

"There's a *thing* just hatched ! Big—inside the dome still !"

Keefe, at the centre of the group listening to reports of the day's search, turned his one eye on her in amazement.

"There's been no alarm !" he snapped.

"It's not working," Nestamay gasped. "Jasper turned it off."

"What ?" An incredulous chorus greeted the assertion. "But that isn't possible !"

"Well, maybe he broke it !" Nestamay snapped. "But the *thing* is there and the alarm didn't work and Jasper was in the dome a short while ago. Get around and spread the word !"

She took to her heels again, heading north in search of Grandfather.

Long before she located him, the *thing* in the dome had proved its existence beyond doubt. It was the most monstrous to be spawned by the incomprehensible forces of the Station in living memory. Fully twenty feet tall, it was recognisable as animal only because it moved and roared ; that apart, it was a confused tangle of long grasping tentacles set so thickly on its body it was impossible to see its underlying shape. It was



immensely strong, too. From its point of origin in the zone of the dome, made inaccessible by the tangled alien vegetation, it had headed straight for the exterior, breaking or throwing aside whatever was in its way. By the time Nestamay saw it, it was already out in the open, and a huge sagging gash in the dome wall marked its point of emergence. Even if they had had the alarm to warn them, there would have been no question of herding this into one of the dome's exit channels and tormenting it with the electrofence—it was simply too big!

Frantically men came running from all directions, some of them carrying heatbeams, some with hatchets or other makeshift weapons, only to stop irresolutely on seeing how vast this *thing* really was. Towering over them, it seemed that not even a heatbeam on full power could possibly do more than madden it.

A frightened man swung around and saw Grandfather approaching, behind Nestamay. In a scream like a child's, he demanded to be told what to do. Grandfather, taking in the size of the monster, paled, and Nestamay felt a pang of spiteful amusement.

"Heatbeams!" Grandfather shouted at last, and Keefe caught the order. He had already anticipated it; he was manhandling one of the bulky projectors with its trailing umbilical cord of insulated cable. Now he supplemented it.

"Get between it and the dome! Drive it away!" he yelled.

Grim-faced men moved to obey. Down came a lashing tentacle, sweeping clear an area twenty feet in radius around the *thing* and caught at the cord of one of the heatbeams. It snapped like thread. The man bearing the useless weapon shouted and tried to run; he stumbled. The tentacle cracked across his back like a whip, and he lay still.

"Don't stand looking—do something!" Grandfather bellowed.

Keefe was already doing it. He had used the distraction of the past few seconds to get his beam set up between the *thing* and the hole in the dome. Now he switched the power on.

The *thing's* narrowest, topmost tentacles blackened instantly. It howled. It lashed out. The heat increased inversely with the square root of the tentacles' distance from the projector and four tentacles at once shrivelled to ash. Another projector started up, blazing away their accumulated power at something like a megawatt in three minutes.







## n i n e t e e n

To Conrad, seeing the towering monster approach, it had been for an instant as though the rest of the universe had ceased to exist. All his childhood terror of *things* from the barrenland leapt up to dominate his mind. Here was that terror incarnate, howling and flailing its uncountable limbs. The dome, the people, the outside world ceased to matter. There was only Conrad and the raging menace.

Then Yanderman spoke softly beside him. "Aim carefully, boy. Aim at the underside. At this range your slug will strike high rather than low."

*Aim? Slug?* With a start Conrad remembered. He had been given a gun salvaged from Duke Paul's camp, an eternity and an infinity ago. Gasping, thinking the monster was almost on him, he flung down his other equipment and jammed the gun's stock to his shoulder as Yanderman had told him.

"Work the bolt and cock the gun," Yanderman whispered. With a handful of thumbs Conrad managed it, a full second after Yanderman. He closed one eye and squinted along the barrel. Underside? What underside did a *thing* like that have? It was nothing but a seething mass of—

"Now!" Yanderman barked, and more by reflex than anything else Conrad fired. The two shots sounded very slightly apart, but it wasn't the combined noise that startled Conrad; it was the way the gun had hit back at him, bruising his shoulder.

"Hold it tighter this time," Yanderman instructed, as coolly as if the oncoming *thing* had been a harmless bit of game. "Work the bolt now. Aim again."

The second time was much better. The two shots were simultaneous. The *thing* uttered a pain-crazed scream and seemed to lose control of its numerous legs. It swayed and lowered some of its tentacles, revealing huge smears of bluish-grey ichor on the front of its body.

"We're getting it!" Conrad yelled, and without waiting for Yanderman's order fired again. A moment later, having taken more care with his aiming, Yanderman let go his own third shot.

And the *thing* gave a bubbling moan and fell sidelong to the ground.



Conrad jumped up, clutching his gun in both hands, to stare at the dying monster, and would have gone rashly forward had not Yanderman caught his arm.

"It may take a long time to die!" he warned. "Keep well clear of those tentacles. See what I mean?"

As though to illustrate the lesson, a lashing limb had whined through the air and cracked whipwise to the ground at least thirty feet from the prostrate body. Conrad shivered and took a reflex step back.

"Don't worry—I doubt if it's in a fit state to come after us," Yanderman murmured. "All we have to worry about now is the reception committee. I just hope they weren't saving this *thing* for some special purpose!"

Conrad blanched. Yanderman sounded appallingly serious, though it was hard to imagine what purpose a *thing* like this could possibly be wanted for. Nonetheless, it was true that the people who had come in pursuit from the dome at the foot of the slope and who now had seen the two newcomers were approaching with some wariness, pausing as they came on to retrieve javelins and arrows expended on the fleeing monster.

"Wait for them to react first," Yanderman recommended. It was a strain on Conrad, but he complied.

The reaction was a peculiar one. Instead of coming close at once, or even calling out a greeting, the dome people halted the other side of the dying *thing*, out of reach of its tentacles and stared up the slope. There was some discussion among themselves in tones too low for Conrad to catch, while still more people moved from the direction of the dome to join them.

"Ah—I see," Yanderman said with a nod. "Waiting for a—a leader of some kind, I imagine. See the old man, the one with grey hair, being helped along by another man and a girl?" He pointed. Conrad did see the trio he was referring to.

The guess was correct. It was the old man himself who broke the spell after a moment's quick consultation with two or three other mature men of the group. He put his hands to his mouth and called out.

"We are the descendants of Station Repair and Maintenance Crews A through G!" he shouted, his voice cracking a little. "Who are you?"

Yanderman called back. "Jervis Yanderman of Esberg, and—uh—Conrad Lagwich! I hope we did right to kill this *thing* you drove towards us!"



Conrad gave him a respectful glance. He had barely managed to follow the old man's pronunciation, let alone make sense of the words he used. He whispered, "What did he say they were?"

Surprised, Yanderman glanced at him. "Don't you—? Oh, of course not. That was something I dug out of you in trance, which you don't remember consciously. I'll explain later."

"Come forward and be welcome!" the old man shouted. "It's a long time since we saw anyone from the outside world!"

"How long?" Yanderman asked. There was a pause for consultation. When the answer came, Conrad could hardly believe it.

"About four hundred and sixty years, we think!"

Now some of the old man's more venturesome companions were cautiously closing on the collapsed monster. A last tentacle twitched and a young man with an axe dived to the ground to avoid it, while one of his companions, wielding a single-edged sword, slashed it in two. The severed part seemed to have a life of its own and writhed for minutes, making Conrad's scalp crawl.

He tried to concentrate on the people instead. They were all, without exception, thin and wiry and most of them were heavily tanned. Their clothing was various; some of them wore jerseys and pants of dark but clean-looking material, while others wore only a kind of kilt supplemented with belts and other body-harness. They were staring at him with just as much curiosity as he was exhibiting, but not at all uncivilly. It was as though they had been waiting personally for this moment—waiting four hundred and sixty years.

With gravity, the old man bowed to Yanderman and then put out his hand. "Do you—do you have any news of my son?" he said after a pause.

"Your son?" Yanderman said slowly. He looked around the silent group of isolates. "Was it your son who set out to cross the barrenland and reach the outside world? About—twelve years ago?"

"Yes."

"Then I am afraid—he is dead. The journey was too much for him. But it was because we found his remains that we set out in search of you." Yanderman phrased the half-truth instantly.



The old man winced and put his hand on the arm of the girl beside him for support. He said, "So! Still, if his death served to bring you here, that's a reward." He coughed, a dust-dry noise. "Well, no matter now. I myself am Maxall—Chief Engineer, I suppose one would say if one kept up the ancient forms. Ah—Keefe, crew boss Maintenance," he went on, indicating the one-eyed man who had helped him out from the vicinity of the dome. "Egrin, crew boss Hydroponics—oh, and my granddaughter Nestamay here."

The girl at his side shook back her long hair and smiled, and Conrad felt suddenly faint.

He had seen that face before. He had copied that face, struggling to make it more like Idris's, as he carved his fine white block of soap the day of Yanderman's arrival in Lagwich, the day his life was turned topsy-turvy for good and all.

But he had no chance to utter the words that boiled up in his mind. Nestamay was looking at him with frank physical interest and he realised abruptly that among these lean, almost starved-looking people, he was as much taller than the average as Duke Paul's troops had been in Lagwich. Moreover, the days when he had been Idle Conrad, the dirty soap-maker, were past. Now he was Conrad the explorer of the barrenland, Conrad the gifted visionary who could remember the secrets of the past, Conrad the killer of monsters!

Well . . . a monster, anyway. Nobody could question this second one.

The girl was smiling broadly now and there was no doubt what was pleasing to her. Conrad smiled back, hoping the expression wouldn't spread into an idiot grin. He cut it short and tried to look purposeful instead, as Yanderman did.

"Maxall," Keefe was saying, "we can't stand out here till sunset, you know. There's business to attend to—a little matter of an alarm which should have gone off and didn't."

"Yes!" Nestamay took her eyes off Conrad for the first time in some while and turned to her grandfather. "Now you don't need to swallow Jasper's dreadful behaviour any longer!"

The old man sighed and nodded. He spoke to Yanderman in terms of courtly apology.

"It's quite true—we must see why the alarm which usually warns us of the advent of a dangerous *thing* failed to operate this time. You must be tired and hungry after your magnificent journey and as soon as we've settled this urgent question we'll place ourselves at your disposal. If you'll come with us . . .?"



The curious but largely silent group fell in behind the old man and Yanderman and made their way towards the dome. Nestamay stepped to Conrad's side.

"Hello !" she said.

"Ah—er—hello !" Conrad echoed. "Ah—er—ah—oh yes ! It was—uh—your father, wasn't it, who tried to contact the outside world ? He must have been a brave man."

*Not a good choice of subject.* The girl's face clouded. She said after a pause, "Not brave. Desperate. You two are the brave ones. You weren't driven to it, were you ?" She paused. "It must have been a terrible journey."

"No, it wasn't as bad as we thought," Conrad said, wishing he could convey that he wasn't being modest, only speaking the plain truth. "We had a compass, you see, which perhaps your father didn't have, and Yanderman made a map of all the streams and rivers so we didn't have to carry our own water all the time—eight hours was the longest we had to spend away from water."

"A map ?" Nestamay sounded astonished. "Where did you get a map ?"

"Yanderman made it up."

"But from what ?" she persisted.

"Well—" Conrad was about to explain, when he realised the party had halted facing the dome. He heard Yanderman.

"You mean the *thing* just tore clear through the dome to the outside ?" he was demanding, his eyes on the enormous gash the *thing* had left. Conrad glossed the words : why, this must be the place where the *things* originated, as Yanderman had suspected ! And yet here were all these people . . .

"Ohhhh !" Nestamay's fingers were suddenly tight on his arm ; with the other hand she was pointing into the darkness under the dome. Something moved there—another monster ? No, a human shape. A human shape beginning to scream as it emerged into the open. There was a wave of shock and terror tangible about them.

"Jasper !" she whispered. "It is—it is !"

How she recognised him, Conrad could not tell. For his head and shoulders were completely covered with a glistening black jelly-like mass, at which his hands clawed hopelessly while his voice grew weak with shrieking.

For a long second nothing moved except the condemned Jasper. Then Grandfather Maxall stirred and spoke.



“ Kill him,” he said in a voice like death itself.

“ No ! No ! ” A woman came running from the fringe of the group, clawing at the old man with crazed violence. “ No, you can’t kill my son ! ”

“ If you would rather watch him die as the seeds grow on his body,” the old man said, and let the rest hang in the air. The woman paid no attention, but clung to him and cried for mercy.

There was no mercy. There could be none. Again, Maxall gave the order, and this time a white-faced Keefe obeyed it. He took a javelin from a bystander, aimed carefully, and flung it. It sank into the black jelly about where the boy’s throat must be. Black-smearred hands reached up to it, failed in the attempt, and fell back as the life leaked out of his body.

“ Burn the corpse ! ” Keefe said harshly, and two young men moved to pick up a heatbeam projector. Jasper’s mother had released Maxall by now, and was kneeling with her face to the dust, yelling curses.

“ What—what happened ? ” Conrad whispered to Nestamay. In a cold voice she answered.

“ Because of something I did—or wouldn’t do—he tried to take his revenge by turning off the alarm which warns us of a *thing* hatching. It was meant to scare me during my night’s watch. Only a *thing* came through before he expected. While all the rest of us were out chasing it away and meeting you, he must have come back to try and cover up what he’d done—re-connect the alarm, I imagine. But in his haste, he . . . ”

“ He what ? ” Conrad prompted from a dry throat.

“ The black stuff,” Nestamay said. “ It’s the seed-mass of one of those plants there. We have a working party out every day to cut back or burn off such seed-masses on the outside where we can get at them and they might get at us. But inside the dome there are huge areas where we can’t venture in, and the seed-masses grow there, too. That’s why we can’t get rid of the vegetation permanently. And you see they—well, in some fashion they’re sensitive to movement near them. They burst over *things* that go too close. I’ve seen it happen to *things*. I never saw it happen to a person before and I hope I never see it again ! ”

She gave a fierce shudder. “ They say it doesn’t kill you,” she finished. “ You just die and it takes a long, long time.”

Conrad swallowed hard. By now the searing heatbeam had reduced the miserable corpse of Jasper to a blackened smear



and calcined bones and Maxall was turning to Yanderman again. He was standing noticeably straighter, as though a weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

"One of the dangers of our existence," he said. "Though nothing compared to what you've faced to come to us. I'll send my assistant Keefe to make certain the alarm is functioning, and perhaps we can enjoy a short rest after the day's turmoil."

Yanderman spoke only with an effort. He said, "We faced dangers, as you put it, for a matter of days to get to you. If you've had to endure this kind of thing for four and a half centuries, all I can say is that my friend and I had the better bargain!"

## t w e n t y

Hoping that nobody was paying attention to him and sure at least that Nestamay wasn't, because her grandfather had sent her to fetch another jug of the curious fruit-flavoured concoction these people had instead of beer, Conrad leaned back in the corner of the Maxall hovel. It wasn't much of a building compared with the solid stone-and-timber work of Lagwich, but it had one thing in its favour, which it had taken him a long time to track down. The air was cleaner than in a Lagwich house. Partly it was due to the absence of cooking smells, but mostly, he thought, it was because the people had fresh clothing two or three times a week.

He'd been given a suit of the same kind and found it very comfortable. But he didn't pretend to follow the explanation he'd been given about the source of the garments, any more than he was pretending now to follow the conversation between Yanderman, Maxall, Keefe and Egrin.

It seemed the local people would never run out of questions—how big is the barrenland, how long did it take you to get across, where is Lagwich and how big, where is Esberg and how big, are there any other barrenlands, how many people are there in the world . . .? It was about there that Conrad decided to lean back and shut his eyes. He drowsed.

"More to drink, Conrad?"

He snapped back to awareness. Nestamay was offering him the jug and in bending forward also a remarkable view of her young bosom. Remembering he was an explorer, Conrad



viewed. A few seconds later, however, the sound of his name spoken by Yanderman made him turn guiltily and say, "Ah—yes?"

But Yanderman wasn't addressing him. He was explaining the way they had compiled the map to spare themselves the need to carry water and Grandfather Maxall was shaking his head apparently at the fact that his son had overlooked this possibility.

Did that imply that somebody here had the same gift as himself? Conrad leaned forward and paid attention. The answer was no, but there were salvaged scraps of drawings and diagrams from which at least some information about water could have been extracted, although in every other respect they had been rendered obsolete by the creation of the barrenland.

"You had access to similar maps?" Maxall suggested. Yanderman shook his head and explained about Conrad's gift, and there were wondering comments all round. Keefe was the most eager to learn more on this subject and asked Yanderman directly for a demonstration of trance.

"I think my friend is rather tired," Yanderman countered, and earned Conrad's lasting gratitude for his understanding.

"I'm so sorry!" Grandfather Maxall said. "Why, here we've been plying you with endless questions, and you're exhausted! We can show you to beds for the night at once if you wish."

Conrad felt a stir of hope. But Yanderman wasn't satisfied. He said, "I'd rather ask you a few questions first, if you don't mind. You realise, much of what we've learned from visions experienced by Conrad here, and by Granny Jassy and others at Esberg, was completely irrelevant, and since we had no idea what might be significant we've never made much sense out of it. To start with: what *is* the barrenland?"

"A quarantine area," Maxall answered promptly. "The term is traditional, though we usually call it the bare ground."

"What was it for?"

"It was meant to isolate the Station from the rest of the world."

"How was it—? No, that's irrelevant at the moment." Yanderman rubbed his chin; he had sprouted a fair beard since he last saw a razor, and it was irritating him. "All right: what's this place—the Station, as you call it?"



"A . . ." Grandfather Maxall hesitated. "Again, I have to use a traditional name. You see, a lot of things we know, we don't understand. We have the same problem as you—sorting out the useful from the useless information and I imagine a lot of information which was once useful has been forgotten because the situation altered. So I think I can best define the Station by reading a passage of the traditional lore to you. Nestamay, give me the locked case!"

The girl hurried to fetch it. Sorting through the various charts and drawings in it, Grandfather Maxall came eventually to a piece of paper yellowed and fragile with age. He peered short-sightedly at it.

"If I stumble in my reading, it's because I haven't studied this passage for a long time," he excused himself. "I meant to go over it with Nestamay, but somehow . . . Well, here it is. It begins with a broken sentence, by the way. See if you can make sense of it with your extra data."

He cleared his throat. ". . . result of many years of research and development on many different planets. That's the broken sentence. It goes on.

"It's capacity is being continually expanded. Indeed, it will continue to expand to match the growing volume of interstellar traffic for the foreseeable future. No other information-processing system would be capable of coping. Only the organochemic cortex has saved interstellar traffic from being overwhelmed by its own complexity. It is predicted that in a century's time organochemic cortexes will be handling fifty times the present traffic safely and without error.

"The organochemic cortex combines the reliability of inorganic cortexes with the flexibility and self-programming ability of the human brain. Terminal Station 'A' is the first, but it will not for long be the only, interstellar transit station to be completely supervised by an organochemic cortex."

He put the paper aside, looking hopefully at Yanderman. "Have you learned anything from these memories of the past which will help you to clarify that?"

Yanderman shook his head. "All I gathered was that, first, this place was a transit station—right? In other words, you could really walk to other worlds from here, something which I'd dismissed as absurd. And second, the organochemic cortex—whatever that might be—was very important."



“It’s not absurd, this walking to other worlds story,” Keefe put in. “After all, that mechanism is one of the ones still functioning.”

Both Conrad and Yanderman looked at him in bewilderment.

“So you finally decided to agree with me !” Grandfather Maxall roared, slapping his knee. Keefe looked uncomfortable, and explained to the puzzled newcomers.

“We say, out of habit, that the *things* ‘hatch’ in the Station. Maxall has always said that wasn’t right—they must come from somewhere else, where they have others of their own kind to breed with. That much figures. And things like the ovens, the power accumulators, the clothing-dispensers — they certainly have gone on working all this time without much help from us.”

“What’s more, though we don’t know what the organo-chemic cortex is, exactly,” Maxall put in, “we know where it is. You saw that dense mass of dangerous vegetation which fills up a great deal of the dome? Of course you did. And you probably wondered why we don’t just go in with heatbeams and burn it out. Well, the reason is that according to tradition the cortex is located somewhere under the plants and without it, we’d freeze, starve and go naked because it too is still working and maintaining the services which support us.”

He gulped down his drink and held out his mug for more. Nestamay hesitated before pouring for him. She said, “Grandfather—doesn’t this mean that we can change that?”

“How so?” Maxall blinked at her.

“Why, if it’s been proved possible to cross the barrenland, can’t we stop worrying about the risk of putting the Station out of action? Can’t we make plans to evacuate to the outside world and then try and burn our way into the dome and—?”

She let the last words trail away.

“That’s not what we’re here for !” the old man snapped. “We are here to maintain and *repair* the Station ! In other words, it’s not up to us to wreck it just to prevent a few more lousy *things* breaking through and terrorising us ! And now we’re in contact with the outside again, we have grounds for hope.”



Cheeks crimson, Nestamay muttered something about fetching more drink and slipped out of the hovel again. Conrad stared after her musingly.

"Hmmm . . ." Yanderman said at length. "Now you said the barrenland was a quarantine area. What against?"

"I'll have to refer to something else I don't properly understand," Maxall said. He sorted through his case of documents again. "This is apparently an official decree. It's headed 'Bureau of Traffic' and 'Bureau of Public Health,' and it says: 'As of the receipt of this notice Terminal Station A and routes serviced therefrom are to cease operation. Immediate Class One-Plus quarantine restrictions are placed on all stations subject to recent traffic from areas known to be foci of *encephalosis dureri*.' Legend says this was a kind of contagious madness, by the way," he added. On Yanderman's curt nod—*yes, I know*—he resumed.

"Terminal Station A is declared subject to absolute quarantine exclusive only of repair and maintenance technicians who must sign a voluntary release before entering the banned zone."

"That clears up a lot of problems I had after listening to you, Conrad," Yanderman said, turning. Then: "Conrad!"

With a start, Conrad looked round. "I'm sorry! I was trying to work out—Yanderman please explain this. If my visions come from the distant past, how is it that I could have seen Nestamay in them? So clearly that when I tried carving a girl's head out of soap the day you came to Lagwich, I made it look like her instead of like Idris, as I intended?"

"A family resemblance," Yanderman said curtly, and went back to his discussion with Maxall.

## t w e n t y - o n e

Hours later, when he and Yanderman had been left to rest in the hovel—its usual occupants having insisted on moving to another—the superficial glibness of that explanation was still irritating Conrad. It refused stubbornly to let him yield to the sleep his exhaustion craved.

Giving up at last, he rolled on his side and looked in Yanderman's direction. It was far too dark to see him even in outline. A southing breeze turned momentarily to a stiff wind and rattled a few grains of sand on the hovel wall.



“Conrad?” Yanderman said. On receiving a grunted response, he went on, “How do you feel after our—ah—epic trip?”

“Not so very different,” Conrad admitted. “It turned out so much easier than I expected, it all feels unreal. And the people here, too—so ordinary in so many ways. You’d expect them to make much more fuss than they’ve done, after over four hundred years in isolation.”

“I know.” Sounds suggested that Yanderman was rolling on his back to look upwards at the low ceiling. “I think there are two reasons why our arrival passed off so calmly. For one thing, there are no precedents. Your people at Lagwich, mine in Esberg—we’ve developed a set of habits for meeting strangers. A marrying expedition comes and you put on your best clothes and bake celebration bread and clean house and so on ; well, all that has just gone with the wind here. And the second reason, it seems to me, is that the pattern of life here is such a tightly-knit one there’s no slack. Some of the demands of the existence you and I know are taken off their shoulders by the ancient machines : they’d have no opening for a soap-maker, for instance, because they have a device which takes in soiled clothing and delivers fresh.

“And some of the food is automatically produced—I want to investigate that tomorrow. But even so, nine-tenths of their waking time is taken up in meeting the demands of their predicament. Every single day a twenty-man working party is occupied in keeping the vegetation under control, Maxall says. Yesterday the discovery of an alien plant seeded from the hoof of a recently arrived *thing* meant that those people who should have had a day to rest up had to go out and scour the barrenland for any other specimens. That’s how the plants we saw on the way got where they are, obviously. I’m amazed they haven’t caved in under this pressure long ago—especially as they have no proper weapons !”

“No weapons?” Conrad echoed in astonishment. “But how about the things they used to burn Jasper’s body—the heatbeams ? Those looked like weapons to me !”

“Maxall says they weren’t intended for such use. They were converted, a long time ago, from devices meant for welding or smelting metal. They’ve been indispensable, but they consume immense quantities of power which can only be replaced through solar batteries—collecting sunlight and storing it—



and they burn out rapidly. Besides, they're cumbersome. You saw how awkward they are to handle."

"There's something else," Conrad said after a pause. "I mean another reason why they didn't go crazy with joy on seeing us. They're frightened."

There was a further pause, considerably longer. At last Yanderman said, "You're no fool, Conrad. Have you any idea why?"

Encouraged, Conrad said musingly, "When I first realised I thought it must be the shock of what happened to Jasper. Nestamay explained why he had to be killed at once, and it sounded horrible. But then I thought maybe it was going on before that. As I understood it, they have this alarm which signals the arrival of a *thing*, and Jasper turned it off. If you've been used all your life to being warned of danger it must be pretty upsetting to know one time there was no warning."

"Ye-es," Yanderman agreed. "But I think it's even deeper than that. They had no warning about us, did they? There was no alarm to signal our arrival."

Conrad started. "Do they think *we're* dangerous?"

"Try and put yourself in their position. All your life, and during the lifetimes of several of your ancestors, existence at this place they call the Station has had a rigid form, an embracing discipline. You've never seen a stranger apart from a newborn infant. Though your traditional lore talks matter-of-factly about transport to other worlds, you've never been out of sight of this monstrous dome here. There is only one random factor in your existence: *things* appear every now and then. Maxall says the incidence is about once in two to three days. It used to be much higher, and smaller creatures as well as large ones came through, some of them in swarms which took a month or more to dispose of completely. According to him, one of his own ancestors put a stop to this, but at the cost of losing a great deal of the area under the dome to the creeping plants. It was the lesser of two evils. Several irreplaceable specialists, including men who really understood the traditional lore, had been killed within a single year. You were dozing when we discussed this, I believe."

Shamefacedly Conrad admitted that was possible. He said, "You mean they're frightened of us not because we threaten them but simply because our arrival upsets the—uh—the situation they've adjusted to?"



“Precisely. Add one more thing, too. Here they’ve been isolated for centuries, charged with a specific task. As a result of losing those irreplaceable men I mentioned, and for various other reasons, they’ve been driven to the verge of admitting failure. They just don’t know what they’re doing any more ! All their energy goes in keeping the problem under control. They never advance towards a solution of it. And now our own intrusion shows them that all this time the world has been going on outside ; things have changed incredibly. Maybe, by this time, their dedication isn’t relevant any more. Maybe it will turn out that everything they’ve sweated and slaved for is useless.”

“I thought they were being very polite to us,” Conrad muttered. “It seemed like an effort.”

Yanderman gave a dry, rustling laugh.

“But—” Conrad fumbled for the words. “But haven’t they had anyone here who could do what I can do ? I mean, have these visions of the past ?”

“Apparently not. Maxall was explaining to me that the community is now reduced to a mere handful of heavily-inbred genetic lines. This boy who endangered everyone by turning off the alarm had only been spared punishment previously because he represented the sole survivor of a particular line and the only possible mate for Maxall’s granddaughter. A recessive imbecility has already appeared in the Maxall family ; the old man was terrified that if Nestamay had children by any other man this recessive would reappear in them. And a community like this can’t afford to feed unproductive people.”

“What’s this got to do with—?”

“With your gift ? Simply that it’s a rarity and probably due to some factor of inheritance. In this community, the genes endowing people with it aren’t present in anybody’s makeup.”

“I see.” Conrad hesitated. An idea had just struck him which seemed almost presumptuous, but he had to voice it anyway. “Yanderman is it going to be possible to put my gift to use here ? I mean—I mean . . .” His voice trailed away.

“I don’t know,” Yanderman said. “That’s what I’ve been banking on, naturally, ever since I heard those extracts from the ancient lore which Maxall read to us. There are clues in there which may lead us through the tangled maze of your



visualised images to an eventual solution. It would help tremendously if you could gain full waking access to your visions, but I doubt if you'll ever achieve it. I know Granny Jassy had been trying for nearly fifty years without succeeding."

"Why not?" That was indeed what Conrad had been thinking of; Yanderman's off hand dismissal of the chance was a blow.

"Hmmm . . . You're asking a difficult question for this time of the night, boy! I'm not sure I understand it fully myself, but I'll do my best. You've got at your visions most of your life by sitting and relaxing and then letting your attention settle on nothing in particular, right? A patch of sunlight on the ground, maybe, or a white pebble, or the tip of your forefinger—anything like that."

"Did I tell you that?"

"No." Yanderman chuckled. "I didn't even have to ask you. Am I right?"

Conrad shivered. "Y-yes. Absolutely right. Is that the way everyone manages it?"

"Most people do. It's autohypnosis. Instead of a crystal ball on a chain, I could use my fingertip to make you go into trance. The—no, I'm wandering from the point. I was going to say that when you return from self-induced trance you have difficulty capturing the memories of your visions because so many of the things in them don't connect with ordinary life—right? If you tried to recount them afterwards, you probably had to leave out a great deal because you couldn't make sense of it."

"That's so," Conrad confirmed.

"Which probably suggested that you'd had a mere dream. In dreams, logic doesn't operate, and they're just as hard to explain afterwards. Now imagine me questioning you during trance. I can't see or hear what you're experiencing. I have to put broad general questions and you describe what you can. But what you're seeing may not refer to anything you or I ever saw in waking life. For all I know, indeed, you may have had a vision already in which you saw this Station when it was in full operation—Granny Jassy might have had one, or anybody! But because it connected with what I've always until now believed to be sheer superstition, the tale of walking to other worlds, I'd have avoided putting the right questions to you. Can you follow me, or am I so tired I'm muddling you?"



“ I think I’m following all right. But this reminds me of what I meant to say at the beginning. This girl Nestamay—”

“ Who is very interested in you, I notice.”

“ If she hadn’t anyone else to choose except the one who got himself killed it’s hardly surprising !” Conrad snapped. “ Let me finish !”

“ I’m sorry,” Yanderman murmured.

“ I’ve seen her in a vision. I tried to tell you earlier, but you said it was a family resemblance. It isn’t ! The more I think about it the more I’m sure. And I tell you something else I’ve remembered.” Conrad half-sat up and turned on one elbow, staring fiercely into the darkness.

“ It must be ten years or more since I bothered with a vision of the barrenland for any length of time. Did I tell you I had visions of the barrenland as well as of the area before it was barren ?”

“ No, but I’m not surprised. Go on.” Yanderman sounded interested.

Conrad took a deep breath. “ Well, I’d almost forgotten that I didn’t always prefer to concentrate on the visions of the distant past. I suppose it must have been after I got interested in girls that I settled for that. There are always lots of people in the—uh—the pre-barrenland visions.

“ But I did sometimes have visions of the barrenland just being the way it is, with a few people in it here and there. I think I might have got caught up with these after Nestamay’s father came to Lagwich and was taken for a devil. I’d had all the kid’s grandiose dreams of becoming a famous *thing*-killer like Waygan the hornman, the father of the present one. It was probably with the idea of killing devils instead of *things* that I thought about the barrenland at all. I kept at it on and off for a year or two, and then lost interest.

“ It wasn’t till I realised Nestamay reminded me of something that the memory came back. I didn’t recognise her at once for two reasons, I guess : first, I was trying to recall a person, and in fact it was my soap-carving I was thinking of, and second, she’s changed.”

“ Family resemblance is still more likely.”

“ No ! She’s changed. As though—oh, like growing up. In fact, that’s precisely it ! My soap-carving looked like Nestamay as she would have been when she was a little girl, in spite of my trying to make it look like Idris nowadays. What’s



more—" He checked with a strangled sound, and then resumed in a near-shout of frantic excitement.

"I've got it! That was why I stopped bothering about visions of the barrenland! It was because in them I saw ordinary people instead of the fearsome devils I was after, to kill! I didn't care about little girls and folk who looked like just anybody!"

He dropped his voice again to an awe-hushed whisper, and finished, "Yanderman, I feel I'm beginning to remember all sorts of crazy things!"

"A sensation that you've been here before? That you've seen this place already?"

"Exactly!" Conrad was almost bouncing with excitement.

"It's an illusion," Yanderman said, the words almost stifled by a healthy yawn. "It's very common. It generally passes off in an hour or two at longest."

"But—!"

"Conrad, life begins here very early in the morning," Yanderman interrupted. "I think we ought to go to sleep, or when they show us over the Station in the morning we won't understand anything we see."

"It's *not* an illusion," muttered Conrad obstinately. But Yanderman didn't answer, except by rolling noisily over on his makeshift bed and yawning again even louder.

## twenty-two

Twelve hours later Conrad sat moodily in the hot sun, a piece of unsalvaged scrap of indeterminate purpose serving as a stool, and tossed pebbles from hand to hand.

It wasn't that he had meant to be rude to Nestamay, he explained furiously to himself. It was just—

Well, over there, for example: Yanderman talking intently to Maxall, being fluent and knowledgeable about things of which he had no direct experience, making a tremendous impression on the old man as he had already done on Keefe, Egrin and all the others. It wasn't *fair*. The clues and hints he was drawing on were taken from him, Conrad, the one with gift of seeing into the past—and Conrad himself couldn't make use of them.

Yanderman's explanation of why not was very convincing. It was perfectly true that his visions had always had a dream-



like quality which rendered them difficult to recapture. But being right on that score didn't make him right on everything !

With a rebellious expression Conrad tossed away his pebbles into a patch of dust.

Why should his feeling of having seen all this before be a mere illusion ? Yanderman was willing enough to accept that his visions of the barrenland before it was barren corresponded to a past reality ; wasn't there room in a span of four and a half centuries for a whole lot of true visions ? The more he thought about it, the more Conrad came to the conclusion that he really had visualised parts of this area around the so-called Station in that brief period following the arrival of the "devil" —Nestamay's father—at Lagwich. He hadn't been interested in things like that for long. The other visions, those in which he dreamed of a prosperous and fertile land-scape populated by marvellous people with astonishing powers offered a more attractive contrast to the boredom and depression of reality.

The haunting, disquieting sensation of almost remembering had come and gone during the whole of this morning. Every now and again it had become acute—when Maxall was showing them the device which maintained their clothing, for example, and again when he showed off the solar power accumulators and the heatbeams which had drained them yesterday.

It was terrifying, Conrad reflected in passing, how narrow a margin these people had between survival and extinction. A single *think* as big and dangerous as yesterday's not only did extensive damage—a working party had been busy since dawn assessing the results of the *thing's* blind passage to the outside from its point of emergence inside the dome—but also wasted their stored power so that everything depending on it failed. Today was bright and sunny, so the recharging would proceed quickly. But on an overcast day it would be fearful, having to wait and watch the power supplies creep back to a useful level, knowing that at any moment the alarm might signal a vicious monster and the heatbeams were temporarily out of service—

*Wait a second.*

Conrad turned and stared towards the broken whaleback of the gigantic dome. He didn't know much about the storage or use of this hard-to-conceive energy ; in Lagwich, things like cornmills and looms were driven by inefficient single-cylinder steam-engines, but that was about the most advanced machinery



he had ever come in direct contact with. Nonetheless, out of the mist of half-memory which this place evoked in his mind a few vague concepts were beginning to emerge.

It seemed logical that if everything else which still operated here at the Station, like the clothing machine, the ovens, and the heatbeams, required a supply of power, then the mysterious, capricious entity supposed to be screened by the dome and the impenetrable jungle of alien vegetation would require power also. Where was it coming from? Presumably, from the same source—the solar accumulators. The . . . the production . . . no, the *transport* of things from their own worlds (Conrad was struggling now) must involve effort of some sort. Was this a fact he had recalled from a scene in one of his visions, or a simple exercise in deduction? He couldn't decide, but there was a feeling of rightness about the idea.

He glanced round, half-intending to go at once to Yanderman and put the suggestion to him. But Yanderman and Maxall, lost in discussion, were strolling away from him and around the curve of the dome.

Conrad hesitated. Then he made up his mind. Until last night's conversation with Yanderman he had been half-afraid of the offhand manner in which the older man could put him in touch, as it were, with his incomprehensible visions. He had assumed there was something almost magical about the crystal ball Yanderman employed. But if it was true that the tip of a finger would have served equally well, and if it was also true that sitting relaxed and staring fixedly at a mere pebble on the ground was a path into trance, why should he not attempt it himself? Not this time as a simple escape from boredom and misery, but with a deliberate purpose: to recapture the elusive visions now plaguing him with the sensation of having been here before.

Conrad took a deep breath. He shifted his position on his uncomfortable perch and looked along the vast curve of the dome, trying to get it straight in his mind what aspects seemed most familiar. He had only one incontestable point of recollection so far: the resemblance between Nestamay and his little carving. Was there anything else which struck him?

The dome itself? He couldn't be sure. And its most remarkable single feature—the tangle of unhealthy-looking vegetation spreading over the nearby ground and swarming up through gashes in the roof—had been so imprinted on his mind



yesterday when the pitiable Jasper had emerged from it as a condemned victim that there was little point in trying to separate direct experience from apparent memory.

Beyond that screen of leaves and stems, though, there was this half-godlike, half-demonic master of the Station's fate : the organochemic cortex. What must it be like ? Something which thought, presumably, after a fashion of its own. In his commonest visions he had encountered machines endowed not only with mobility but even with the ability to make decisions, designed to save their masters the trouble of attending to repetitive tasks varying only in minor detail. Conrad had no idea how such a machine could be arranged, yet it was comparatively easy to accept the concept if one had already agreed that it was possible to walk to other worlds. And even the knowledgeable Yanderman had been forced to give in on that score.

So—the heart of the problem. Conrad stared with aching eyes at the masking foliage, hardly seeing that members of the daily working party were approaching from the southern side, spotting the deadly blackish forms of the plant's seed-masses and either reaching up with long poles to smash them or trying to burn them with the feeble power available to the heatbeams.

The thinking machine hidden in there . . . what must it be like ? Anything like an ordinary human brain ? Why not ? Consider the long poles with which that working party was destroying the seed-masses. You want to reach something further away than you can grasp it, so you pick up a stick ; your arm is a little like a stick, long and straight, so what you're doing is making your arm longer. You want to go somewhere faster than you can walk ; you get on a horse, which has four legs to your two and is stronger into the bargain. You start by looking for something which already does the same job, but more efficiently. If it comes to the job of thinking, why not start with the human brain as a pattern ? Nothing else would be handy which was better at the job . . .

Conrad gasped. For one ultimately shocking instant he had had the impression that he was no longer here, sitting on a chunk of scrap and staring at the dome, but in the dome and aware of looking at Conrad, and at Yanderman, and at Maxall, and at Nestamay and Keefe and Egrin and everybody and at the same time aware of what he was seeing and what Yanderman was seeing and Maxall and Nestamay and Keefe and



Egrin and not only that but aware of things in the dome and *beyond* the dome not in any ordinary direction but as though the interior of the dome had become the mouth of an infinity of tunnels—help me!—reaching to an infinity of hells—*help me!*—through which a lost soul wandered—HELP ME!

HELP ME!

HELP ME!

HELP ME!

The moment wasn't over. The moment was as infinite as that countless cluster of tunnels-through-nowhere, stretching forward and dominating his thinking as though a mould had been placed on his mind and squeezed tight for an infinitesimal quantum of time, leaving him helplessly altered. Subjectively it was like being tossed leafwise on a torrential river, battered by waves of concepts and impressions and deafened by a shriek saying HELP ME! HELP ME! HELP ME!

Conrad moaned and clutched his temples, crazily fearing the blasting of the mental imagery now overwhelming him might smash physically out through the thin bones of his skull, smearing him black to his shoulders as Jasper had been smeared condemning him to death in torment or death in the next second. The moan welled up and took the form of the inaudible scream echoing around his head. He was on his feet, swaying and his throat was raw as he gave words to the mental message.

"Help me! Help me! *He-e-elp me!*"

But before the startled members of the nearby working party could reach him, he had fallen headlong—not into unconsciousness, but into a kind of hall of mirrors of delusion, in which the mirrors were whole human personalities, myriad in number, between which the blinding images reflected, reflected, reflected, and at eternally long last began to seem familiar, recognisable, interpretable into words.

His eyes snapped open. He was lying on the rough bed where he had spent last night. Above him a curiously misshapen and discoloured form with pinkish bars crossing it—a hand holding a cloth. Nestamay's hand holding a wet cloth with which she had been wiping his fever-hot face. She saw him come to himself and bit her lower lip in a seeming frenzy of worry.

"He's awake," she said after a pause.



The room swirled. Conrad found himself sitting up, not having formulated the intention, and was looking past the girl at her grandfather and Yanderman, who had been studying more of the old man's treasured documents and now turned like two sections of a single unit to look and frame questions. There was no time for questions. There was only urgent action.

"Conrad! Are you—?" Yanderman began.

"Listen!" Conrad exclaimed. "I have it now, but we've got to be quick." He was scrambling up from the bed, twisting into a kneeling position facing them. "Do you hear me? I know what's wrong and I know what has to be done! Maxall, you have to cut the power off—I mean . . . Well, stop it getting to the cortex but not completely, just hold it down to a sort of trickle and—"

He stopped, aware that he wasn't making sense to his listeners. A bead of sweat ran down his face like an insect.

"Get a grip on yourself, Conrad," Yanderman advised, moving close in an effort at reassurance. "You've had some kind of a shock, and—"

"I know, I know!" Conrad clutched at his arm. "It's because I've seen what's got to be done! You were wrong about the visions people like me get—they're not memories, they're *messages*, and I've had a message that tells me what to do! We've got to cut back the power to the cortex!"

"But this is impossible!" Maxall snapped. "We depend on it—it runs everything. If we cut off its power we starve, we freeze, we're done for."

"But you've got to *cut back* the power. Not shut it off, just keep it low. Ohhh!" Conrad's frantic words dissolved in a moan of desperation. "Look, is a madman crazy when he's asleep?"

"What?" Yanderman jerked his head.

"Is a madman crazy when he's asleep? I don't think so. And he's not dead either, so it's not killing him to make him sleep." Conrad stared up at the low ceiling. "I almost have it all, you see, but I'm still—still arranging it. I think there's a way of ensuring that only a trickle of power gets to the cortex, enough to keep the automatic things going, like the heating and food-making, but not enough to—Oh, no *wonder* you don't understand." He slapped his thigh. "The most important thing is what I haven't said."



“Look, this—this thinking machine inside the dome. It’s laid out like a human brain. There’s a level which attends to routine matters, comparable to breathing and this never stops or goes wrong and uses only a little power. But there’s another level, responsible for big decisions, which uses all the power it can get and when the power is low is—is unconscious.

“And on this level the cortex has been hopelessly insane, with brief lucid intervals, for four hundred and sixty years, ever since it was infected with the disease against which the barrenland was created . . .”

### t w e n t y - t h r e e

There was a stunned silence. Maxall broke it, shifting his weight with a scuffling sound as he spoke.

“How do you know? I mean—how do you *think* you know?”

Conrad felt an overwhelming wave of relief. He closed his eyes and leaned back against the wall of the hovel.

“I’ll try and tell you—but it’s got to be quick, because there isn’t much time. It’s sunny today and the stored power is building up rapidly. My head’s full of pictures which I scarcely understand, all jammed in together in a single instant . . .” He pressed his fingers hard against his forehead. In a slow, effortful voice, with many hesitations, repetitions and gropings for words, he pieced out the explanation which had come to him.

First: the nature of his visions, and Granny Jassy’s, and all others similar. They were not extraphysical recollections of the past. They were received messages, or signals.

And the burden of the messages was simple: *Help me!*

In a time when the world was covered with cities of up to tens of millions of people, and not this world only but others, circling other stars, there had come a point at which the sheer numbers wishing to walk to other worlds—restless, bored with their long lives, hungry for the sights, sounds, sensations of alien environments—threatened to outstrip the capacity of the available equipment handling the incredible traffic. The means used, in itself, was so complex it had always had to be managed at second-hand—not by individual persons, but by massive thinking machines. And the machines were inadequate.



Hence the development of the organochemic cortex : to all intents, a manufactured brain, with a personality, the gift of consciousness, all the discrimination of a human genius combined with the tireless reliability of an insensitive machine.

Such a cortex was installed at Terminal Station A, the largest centre for interstellar transport on the planet. From the three-mile dome arching above the Station it was possible to walk to any of a thousand distant worlds.

And back.

And from one such distant world somebody came back bearing in the cerebrospinal fluid of his body the virus of a disease named in the traditional lore of the Station as *encephalosis dureri*, which incubated and brought insanity.

No plague had ever before been transmitted on the scale of this one. Within days of the first outbreak it was on a hundred different worlds ; within weeks, it had reached every planet known to mankind. As though one had emptied a bucket of sand into a precisely-tuned engine, the sophisticated complex of interstellar society ground to a halt.

Stripped of their sanity, people died—in accidents, in fires, by famine or explosion or a myriad other disasters. In the midst of primal chaos, the very few who were naturally immune stood as long as possible against the searing blast of the collapse, until they too were overwhelmed.

The ancestors of those now living at the centre of the barren-land had been a group of such natural immunes, sent to try and restore to working order this largest of all interstellar transit points.

They came and started work under the impression that what had gone wrong was the simple consequence of a madman's interference—some diseased mind among the Station's human staff, they believed, had altered control settings or distorted the instructions given to the organochemic cortex. At that time, the cortex operated everything in the Station area : not just the actual process of transportation, but every service provided for the convenience of travellers.

The cortex knew better, and could not explain.

There was something so completely human about the despair Conrad had sensed that it had overcome him ; it was as if he himself had been in the tormenting plight which the manufactured organochemic brain had endured uncounted times since the onset of the contagious madness. Which was to



know that it was going insane, and to be able to do nothing about it.

The cortex was powered by the same source as the rest of the Station—the original emergency power supply, switched on to keep the cortex functioning after the disaster. When the stored power was low, as for instance after expenditure on the use of heatbeams, the cortex was practically unconscious. As the power built up again, its level of activity rose to a kind of incipient awareness. In this condition, it was sufficiently conscious to realise that when the power reached maximum the sleeping layers of its personality would arouse—and be insane because in the nutrient fluid bathing the entire artificial organism the viruses were still multiplying.

They were not like ordinary viruses. In some manner they made false connections between brain cells; the energy available at a synapse was a sort of stimulus to them. As it were, they caused innumerable short circuits and hence random patterns of response.

The effect on the cortex was to bring into operation an overload device intended primarily to limit the number of simultaneous traffic problems it was coping with. By that time it was no longer able to reason; it sought to expend energy and hurl itself into unconsciousness again for a period of recuperation.

And the way of expending energy which came most readily to the rescue was to initiate an interstellar transportation process.

From worlds once colonised by human beings, where now the native fauna roamed among ruins abandoned by disease-crazed savages, the insane artificial brain brought anything which blundered into a transportation terminal. It had just sufficient discrimination left, at this stage of its madness, to select for objects resembling its vanished human masters in mass—plus or minus a factor of about ten—and mobility.

The operation concluded, and signalled to the community of the Station here by an alarm which one of the immune technicians had rigged up after the very first such happening, the cortex relapsed into its torpid state.

And the cycle resumed, varying in length each time according to how much energy had been used up through other channels like the electrofences and heatbeams, which in turn naturally depended on the ferocity or docility of the *thing* from an alien planet snatched at by the desperate cortex.



Vegetation too, had come through in the form of seeds or suckers transported with the animals, and not long after the original disaster had spread to form a jungle-like screen around the site of the cortex, into which unprotected men dared not venture, and which they dared not destroy randomly for fear of wrecking the cortex as well.

When perhaps as much as two centuries had gone by in this vicious circle, the cortex began to recover a little—self-adjusting it was able to cope to a strictly limited extent with the harm the viruses caused. By that time, however, the people trapped at the centre of the barrenland had suffered the loss of so much information and so many irreplaceable personnel that the best they could do was hold the ground they had gained; they could not advance.

What to do? The cortex was no longer equipped to communicate verbally—it had once been provided with vodors, but a massive monster had smashed the equipment as it stampeded from the arrival area.

Helpless, dumb, the cortex faced the recurrent cycle of insanity in full awareness, and the mere intensity of its longing for a return to the orderly past began to solve its problem.

This was where Conrad, even though he had experienced the actuality, began to lose his grip on the slippery concepts. It seemed, he thought, that there were—perhaps had always been—people slightly sensitive to the thoughts of others. At some time, somewhere, a person so gifted thought with longing of the happier past of which legends had survived, and responded to the neural currents—subliminally faint—generated by the organochemic cortex. Its maximum power consumption was on the machine level; its signals might be as strong as a radio's.

Relaxed, in an autohypnotic state, someone like Granny Jassy or Conrad could tap the very thought-stream of the cortex in its lucid moments. Pictures of the past mingled with pictures of the present, but the present was hateful and discoloured by frustration, whereas the cortex was yearning for the past, and so little attention was paid to the available knowledge that people survived in the barrenland. Conrad had opened his mind to impressions of that sort because he was thinking of growing up to kill devils like the one which had come to Lagwich, and had glimpsed Nestamay's likeness and later dredged it from his subconscious; however, like most



people, he abandoned pursuit of barrenland images and preferred to seek visions of the distant past.

But today, within a shorter distance of the point of origin of the signals than anyone else with his gift had ever reached, he had happened to turn his maximum concentration on the idea of the organochemic cortex at precisely the moment when it realised the mounting power level made its return to insanity imminent.

As though a bolt of lightning had flashed between his mind and the artificial brain, the truth had stormed in and taken possession of him.

He stopped talking. There was much more that he hadn't said, but his sense of urgency was growing. He looked at his hearers. Nestamay withdrawn into a corner, was staring at him with round-eyed wonder. Yanderman, his forehead etched with a deep frown, was biting the back of his knuckles and wrestling with the facts Conrad had offered. Maxall had his head forward and his fingers buried in the thick hair on the back of his scalp.

"It makes a kind of sense," Yanderman ventured at last. He glanced at Maxall.

"But why *him*?" the old man groaned. "He was never here before! I know you told me he was right about water in the desert and helped you to find your way here—" He checked, raising his head.

"Now explain that!" he challenged. "You've said that these—these visions of yours are messages from the cortex here; well, how is it that the cortex happened to think about the location of water so conveniently for you? Hey?"

Sickly, Conrad realised the old man was looking for any excuse to avoid believing the story he'd heard. It was too great a blow to his vanity to accept that a total stranger could cut through the fog of mystery which had baffled him a lifetime long, and his ancestors before him.

"It has a *total* awareness!" he exclaimed. "It's not limited the way you and I are. It's got usable senses still—it can see outside the dome, for instance. And not just that. If it sees you, it automatically pictures to itself what you can see from your point of view—and the same applies to all the other people around it. Similarly, when it remembers the past, it remembers in a way which is much fuller and more comprehensive than we can manage. It remembers everything







But he caught at memory, rigid as an iron-bar, and found something less than confidence but more than mere hope. He drew a deep breath and glanced at Yanderman.

"Everything's ready," Yanderman confirmed. He hesitated, then drew closer to Conrad and added in a voice not meant to be overheard, "Are you sure you know what you're doing?"

"You seemed pretty confident that I was right when you decided to cross the barrenland on the strength of what I could tell you."

"So if you're wrong I can take the blame. I see." Yanderman's cynical words were belied a moment later by a wry smile. He clapped Conrad on the shoulder and turned to pick up the awkward bulk of one of the heatbeam projectors. Keefe had instructed him in its use, with the warning that below a certain power level it would cease to operate altogether; this fitted with Conrad's idea of a kind of idling condition of the organo-chemic cortex.

There was no longer any reason for delay. He squared his shoulders and walked towards the huge rent in the side of the dome left by the monster of yesterday afternoon. He would have liked to have his gun with him—it had dealt with that monster in a reassuringly efficient manner—but the most important aid inside the gloomy dome was sure to be a handlight, and he would need his other hand free.

Already the twining stems of the alien plants were reaching out across the gap the *thing* had torn in their tangled masses. Cautiously Conrad turned the beam of his handlight upwards, in case there were any of the deadly black clusters of seeds nearby. He could see none, and the pseudo-leaves with their toothed edges which were everywhere on the ground had been crushed and ripped by the passing *thing*. It was safe to proceed.

The twilight of the dome interior closed around him. This was not one of the long-ago reclaimed areas, through which even young girls could safely pass at night on their way to keep watch in the office. The office was an improvisation, like the alarm Jasper had disconnected and then, at the cost of his life, wired up again. Presumably the repair team had been already unable to get to the cortex itself, and had needed a remote base of operations.

But Conrad had to go to the cortex, or at least to a point very close. It was a minor miracle disguised as a disaster, the fact that yesterday's intruder had been so big and had cut such a clear swathe through the jungle.



He kept moving. Behind him, circumspectly, Yanderman and Keefe followed, and then others of the Station community, their voices hushed as though they were afraid of waking a lurking monster, but commenting continually on the nature of the plants now revealed to view.

A hundred yards from the exterior, Conrad paused and turned his handlight upwards. Among the screening tangle of creepers it was just possible to pick out a huge curved structural member which might formerly have supported a walkway.

"We'll have to get up there," he whispered, copying without meaning to the hushed tones of his companions. "Can someone burn a way through the plants?"

Yanderman came up beside him, swinging his heatbeam to the ready. Just before activating it, he paused to ask, "You're sure it won't do any harm?"

"The cortex is over there," Conrad said, pointing directly towards the centre of the dome. "Don't ask how I know."

Reassured, Yanderman activated the beam. A few seconds sufficed to crisp the trailing fronds into ash, and a sickly stench drifted up. Through wisps of smoke Conrad's handlight shone on a spiral stairway leading upward.

It rang under his boots as he climbed.

Then the way was along the distorted back of the curved girder he had seen from the ground. All around, strange forgotten machines peered from swathes of strong-scented foliage; huge fungi in rainbow colours posed proudly on the ruins of man's labour. Twice something animal slithered away from the inquired beam of light, and Conrad shivered and had to force himself not to think of any danger other than that of the mounting power level in the cortex.

Down next, to a once-level platform a hundred yards square, where the heatbeam had to be used to clear a path a second time. Here there were metal frames, rust-pitted, that might have been furniture—flat tables, skeletal chairs, overturned in the course of the centuries by the feeble pull of the omnipresent creepers.

"We're getting near," he whispered. "I can feel it!"

"Then keep moving!" Yanderman rasped. "We can't use the heatbeam indefinitely, you know!"

Conrad nodded and crossed the tilting floor of the platform to another winding stair at the other side. No, not a stair this time—a spiralling ramp which he half-expected to move as he stepped on it. But it would not have moved since the



Station was switched to emergency power four and a half centuries ago.

The going was slippery with decaying vegetation now. Rather than exhaust the heatbeam here where there were no threatening seed-masses, Conrad called for hatchets and sticks to slash at the creepers. With agonising slowness they ascended the ramp.

"There," he breathed when they reached the top, and flung out his arm.

Before them, discernible among the close-set creepers and fungi, was the upper surface of a huge once-shiny sphere, poised on a support which they could not see for leaves. In the beam of the handlight it still had a dull lustre, pitted now with centuries of corrosion. It was more than a man's height in diameter. Once it had been protected by a curved glass superstructure, but the glass had fallen in shards long since and crunched under their feet as they approached.

"This?" Yanderman demanded.

Conrad gave a weary nod. "It's inside the metal ball. Now all we have to do is locate the power controls and adjust them. There's a switch, and it's not far away. Everybody hunt around here!" he added, raising his voice and gesturing largely. "A switch—a red switch on a white board somewhere nearby!"

The others looked blankly about them.

"How are we going to find it in this tangle?" Keefe demanded of Conrad. "I take it we can't burn the plants back without risking damage to the switch!"

"I'm afraid not," Conrad muttered. "But it's not far away, I'm sure of that." He raised his own hatchet and began to chop at the obscuring creepers. Within minutes he had laid bare a strange man-tall device of convoluted crystal on a white stone base. But that wasn't what he wanted.

Someone else discovered an array of rusty metal wheels in a circular frame which, on being touched, ground into movement for a few seconds and emitted a teeth-rasping hum. Again, a patch of creeper was cleared to reveal a human skeleton clutching an untarnished bar of metal with a knob at the end.

"Is that a tool of some sort?" Yanderman speculated, and drew Conrad's attention.

It could be! Conrad called everyone together in the vicinity of the skeleton, and set to work with redoubled urgency.



When long minutes had passed without result, it occurred to Conrad that the man might have run, in the grip of madness, far from where he had been working. In sudden anger at his own stupidity he stepped back and hurled his hatchet to the floor.

There was a hollow boom.

Conrad stood for an instant like a statue. Then he was on hands and knees levering at the metal plates under him. His fingertips located a small depression in one of the plates, and Yanderman, peering closely at it, asked for the tool found in the skeleton's grasp. It fitted the depression exactly, and when twisted caused the plate to rise on smooth counter-weights . . . exposing a white board bearing a row of red switches.

Almost crying with relief, Conrad wiped his face ; his skin was clammy with the sweat of tension.

"All right," Yanderman said. "Which of these is the one?"

Conrad half-extended his arm, then drew it back. Paling, his eyes riveted on the switches, he whispered, "I—I don't know. It could be any of them!"

Keefe made a strangled noise. The others exchanged glances of alarm.

"But we must find out!" Conrad exploded, and reached for the first switch. He had pushed it home before anyone could stop him.

There was a grinding sound. They looked up. Huge metal panels were swinging down towards them from the direction of the roof, ringing as they struck aside thick branches of creeper. A slow, tired-sounding voice spoke out of nowhere.

"Emergency transit operation due. Remain still."

Convulsively Conrad forced the switch to its old position. The voice stopped. The metal panels hung like folded bats' wings in the gloom above. The air seemed to congeal with tension.

"Try the one at the opposite end," Yanderman muttered. Conrad complied.

At once there was another voice, equally slow, equally tired. But this one said, "Emergency power reduction now in force. All travelways are now unpowered. All inessential services are withdrawn. No transits are possible until the system is fully restored."

There was grinding sound, and afterwards silence.

"Did you hear that?" Conrad whispered, getting to his feet. "Did it say what I thought it said?"



Yanderman nodded, his face set in a mask of awe. "It said something about emergency power reduction, and no transits being possible."

"No transits!" Keefe echoed, almost shaking with excitement. "Does that mean no more monsters?"

"It must!" Conrad blurted.

And at that very instant the alarm which gave them warning of the arrival of such a monster blared deafeningly.

Somebody screamed. At once there was a panicky rush from the platform. Only Conrad, Yanderman and Keefe stood their ground: Keefe from sheer astonishment, Yanderman in much the same predicament but lifting his heatbeam as though determined to face any monster that might appear, and Conrad because he could not believe he had been wrong.

One or two of the fleeing men paused to hurl curses at him. Then they were gone, and there was a fearful hush.

"A—a fault in the system?" Yanderman suggested from a leather-dry throat.

"There can't be a fault! Or a mistake!" Conrad passed his hand over his face dizzily, his mind churning with crazy images of Nestamay and Idris, Yanderman and Maxall, Lagwich and the sterile desert of the barrenland.

"Where do the *things* appear, do you know?" Keefe barked. "We do at least have a heatbeam! We might be able to trap it!"

"There, somewhere." Conrad pointed past the bulky sphere of the cortex. "We ought to be able to see the—uh—the arrival area there."

"I'll make sure!" Yanderman snapped, and hoisted the heatbeam, resting it on the curious twisted crystal structure Conrad had found. A sweep with the beam, and another, cleaved the masking creepers and laid bare a path downwards to a dim hollow space hundreds of feet on a side; like a needle hunting a splinter, the beam of Conrad's handlight stabbed the opening into the gloom.

"Nothing," he breathed after a minute's silence. "The alarm must have been—"

"No, look there," Yanderman whispered. "To the left. Isn't something moving among the plants?"

Conrad's heart hammered. Yes, plainly to be seen in the beam of the handlight something was moving. The leaves



swayed wildly, as though the *thing* were about to emerge into view.

"Use the heatbeam !" Keefe begged. Yanderman nodded and pressed the activating switch.

And the beam died in the same instant as it began.

"No more power," Yanderman said emptily. "Now what will they do? Without heatbeams, if it gets to the exterior of the dome . . ." He let the words trail away, gazing accusingly at Conrad, who felt sick with horror and shame at what he had brought about.

So this was the inevitable fate of Conrad, visionary, brave explorer of the barrenland, best soapmaker in Lagwich, unraveller of the mystery of the Station . . . He closed his eyes, his mind reeling as it had done under the impact of the signal from the organochemic cortex.

It wasn't for a long time that he realised his companions had begun to make noises. They were laughing—or weeping? Which? Or both together! Yes!

He snapped his eyes open and stared at them. They were embracing each other, making meaningless, hysterical sounds, waving, dancing up and down, trying to sing. Uncomprehending, Conrad turned from them to the slanting hole cut by the last flicker of the heatbeam into the heart of what he had taken to be the arrival area.

And there he saw the *thing* for which the alarm had sounded.

A man.

A man in strange shiny garments, his head covered with a crystal helmet, his gauntleted hands stretched out as though in acclamation of a miracle—reaching up towards him, Conrad, standing on the platform beside the looming shell of the cortex.

And shouting.

"Earth! Earth! We've got through! We reached Earth again!"

And not one man only, but another, and another, and another pouring from the concealment of the alien plants, to stand in a shouting group and laugh and cry and wave at the laughing, crying, waving Conrad and his companions on the platform above.

After four and a half centuries he, Conrad, had unwittingly opened the way, and the isolated children of Earth had found it possible to return.

john brunner







compare favourably with all but the Chandlers and Simenons of the detective story. He was also concerned to remind his readers that adult fiction deals with *feeling* not science, and no writer or school of writers remaining totally inept at the re-creation of human feelings can ever be very good at any level. I avoid the word 'literature' to escape that semantic red-herring fished up by Brian Aldiss.

Take the novels and stories of Arthur C. Clarke—if we apply the criteria that lie behind Mr. Moorcock's comments to these writings, we can see that where he is moved by *feelings* about technology, or where he is dealing with characters who are reacting emotionally to the complex technical worlds created in his s-f, the writing is alive and achieves an imaginative quality all too rare, but when he tries to portray some of the more commonplace aspects of life, like sexual love or religious feeling, his style degenerates into mawkish cliché, thus revealing his inherent limitations as a writer.

Looked at another way the mainstream critic might legitimately say that Clarke is essentially trivial, in that he deals with only one facet and that the least important, of human experience, namely man's immediate material environment. Of course, he generates excitement through the story line and the element of adventure, but one expects that even in children's books! This will be seen to be true even of stories like *Childhood's End* or *The City and the Stars*.

However, if a writer wants to deal with adult themes, sooner or later, and probably sooner, sex is bound to raise its beautiful head. This seems to me to be as true for s-f as it is for any other kind of fiction—despite what Kingsley Amis has to say in *New Maps of Hell* and elsewhere. That s-f has been pretty feeble up to the present may be the result of a variety of causes. Perhaps the writers are merely men with a limited range of feelings; perhaps the s-f attitude of mind leaves the writer relatively disinterested in the nuances of human relationships which are the stuff of novels concerned with sex.

This would make sense if a writer's inspiration rose from the feeling that man is an essentially unimportant creature caught up in an implacable universe of impersonal forces which he seeks to comprehend and master—but we do not want to start re-roasting the old chestnut of definition again! Look at what an embarrassing hash H. G. Wells makes of the Weena sections



of *The Time Machine*, in other respects one of the really fine imaginative creations of the late nineteenth century. Or could it be that current editorial prejudices and fears have built up a complex situation in which the s-f writer feels that he can only treat sexual relationship in a Lower Thirds, or Novel-of-Violence tone ?

Then again, we are constantly reminded that s-f is popular fiction, so the author must consider his market. There has been, I believe, a little amateur market research into the subject of s-f readership. For what it is worth, this does not seem to have indicated a particularly low mental level on the part of the purchaser ! Not much is known about the increasing readership of s-f in hardback. One can only judge by one's friends and acquaintances—I know of several addicts, not fans, in the upper strata of academic life, and a host of younger people, male and female, who are quite happy with Amis, Wain or Golding, or Kerouac, Mailer and Salinger, not to mention 'established' major novelists of considerable difficulty.

These are the people who, on the whole, read s-f in hardback and library editions. They could cope with more subtlety, I think ! They are certainly disillusioned when they meet some of the worst s-f has to offer, and I am constantly asked by students why the regular readers of s-f, who after all buy the stuff and provide the author with a living, have been so dreadfully uncritical in the past. They make pretty short shift of that last-ditch defence about 'entertainment' too ! My *impression* is that the quality of readership is improving : the great question is, can the quality of writing improve sufficiently rapidly to meet the demand ?

It seems to me that the ethics of editorial policy are important here. These were hinted at in Harry Harrison's talk and began to show with a good deal more edge in the discussion which followed. Mr. Carnell hotly defended the editor's right to interfere ! However, it was clear that he interfered much less than his American counterparts, and not without prior consultation. In later, personal discussion, he agreed that he would not alter a story without the author's consent, but pointed out that there are too many young writers who seem to labour under the delusion that a 'bit of spice' will make a story sell. One can see that editorial integrity (or something like that) ought not to allow salacious incident and dialogue



stuck on to a story from the lowest possible motives to appear in print. This is good.

Mr. Carnell also argued that a good editor has his finger on the pulse of the market, so to speak. This may or may not be true: suppose however, that the market is changing more rapidly than the editor's reactions? Such a difference of opinion about general editorial policy is obviously inevitable, but Mr. Campbell would agree, I think, that no editor is justified in making deletions, and, even worse, alterations, without at least showing them to the writer first. It is one thing to return a story marked either *Delete* or *Rewrite*, and quite another for an editor to perform the operation himself!

Surely this is a matter of principle. It is immaterial whether it is a word or a paragraph. If a writer has written a serious work of art, it *must* be presumed that he knew what he was saying, how he was saying it, and that this is how he intended it to be read. A standard academic joke is that the first and last stanzas of the *Ode to a Skylark* can be read alone without impairing the message very much, or you can read the stanzas in any order that takes your fancy without altering the logic of the thing . . . this is not usually taken to be a point in favour of the formal excellence of the poem (despite the effusions of some so-called modern novelists!).

Furthermore, it is not, as far as I know, the general habit in mainstream fiction for authors to be treated in this cavalier fashion. The only conclusion to be drawn is that s-f is *not* considered to be serious writing by many of the gentlemen who publish it. They are reducing their writers to the level of hack journalism.

An editor, perhaps, would argue that I am making too much out of this, but the authors I have spoken to seem to feel quite strongly about the matter. A situation which allows an author's work to be tampered with without reference cannot be healthy, and apart from the implicit lack of respect for what he might be trying to do, it suggests another and more insidious pressure. A writer must come to feel that unless he adopts a particular style, or restricts himself to a certain range of experiences, his work has little chance of being accepted, at least by the magazines.

Perhaps the almost total lack of experimental work in s-f is partly the result of this Tzarism on the part of the editors. I wonder if Brian Aldiss' *Minor Operation* would have come out



in quite the same way if he had felt less restricted as to tone, style, story line etc? Of course, it is greatly to Mr. Carnell's credit that this was published in *New Worlds Science Fiction*—after all, Aldiss himself says it is not s-f.

This again is surely a sign of the times. The dividing lines between s-f and mainstream writing are becoming more and more blurred—a development which threatens a variety of dangers to the well-being of s-f which it is not my place to discuss here. The two facts which seem to me supremely relevant within the terms of this editorial are firstly that, if s-f is in the throes of maturing from puberty to adulthood, it is to be hoped that editors—of magazines especially—can develop sufficient respect for what they publish to refrain from puerile tampering with texts, and secondly that they will become increasingly willing to encourage more experiment in form and approach. It would be a sad thing if the creative initiative were to pass from the magazines to the field of hardback publishing: this *could* happen.

There are very few s-f stories (at least that I know of) which have any more to offer in the way of formal construction than the good old, well-tryed twist ending, or the ancient who-done-it? story line. Presumably this is what the editors have decided the market requires.

There are signs, however, that the old order is changing—heaven knows, there is plenty of room for improvement. How long, I wonder, before we have an s-f stream-of-consciousness novel? How long before some contemporary s-f writer (let it be Aldiss!) notices that H. G. Wells' early novels have more affinities with Kafka than, say, Heinlein? Who knows, there may even be lurking in the background a potential s-f dramatist who has seen the s-f elements in the plays of Ionesco, Durrenmatt and Pinter. Signs of the times which, alas, will not please everyone, and very soon I shall be accused yet again of trying to make s-f respectable . . . which is, perhaps, a suitable point at which to end.

**g. h. doherty**



# book reviews

by leslie flood

british—hardcover

*Piece de resistance* of the month is **Cat's Cradle** the eagerly awaited new novel by Kurt Vonnegut (Gollancz, 18/-). Barely using the sole s-f device which merits its uneasy science fiction tag (a discovery of an isotope of ice which threatens to freeze solid the oceans of the earth at normal temperatures) Mr. Vonnegut maintains his extraordinarily high literary standards (and economy of writing—a Vonnegut phrase will convey as much as several pages by a lesser author) in a thoroughly entertaining novel of serio-comic shenanigans involving a dictatorship somewhere in the West Indies, and a new religion, Boknonism, cunningly contrived and intrinsically serious. Recommended.

Brian Aldiss is allowed the privilege of introducing his own new short story collection **The Airs of Earth** (Faber 18/-) and manages to include in his homily on the s-f writer's lot some trite observations, a couple of dubious points of argument, and a built-in defensive mechanism calculated to disarm criticism. He really need not worry too much, for his work is a very good example of the most valid point made in his preface—that science fiction must not only succeed by ordinary literary standards but must have that extra something that lifts it *above* (my italics) the level of other fiction. In other words an imagined setting or concept conceived with much skill and effort and without benefit of previous human experience or scientific usage and yet reasonably extrapolated from these.

Qualitatively erratic and erotic as usual, most of these eight stories are representative of Aldiss' versatility and keen imagination, and the longer stories especially are very readable; "Basis for Negotiation" as a study of the practical value of expediency versus political idealism affecting a Britain neutral at the onset of East-West nuclear conflict, and "A Kind of



Artistry" and "The Game of God" both of which combine high adventure with complex human relationships (at least to a degree attainable in stories of this length). A similar intent in "O Moon of My Delight" fails because its trite sex plot gains nothing by its s-f transference. Again I thought "Shards" to be quite brilliant in its projection of the mental processes of fish creatures surgically treated for espionage, but the psychological impact of "How to be a Soldier" left me cold. Still, the faultless "Old Hundredth" is a beautifully written, evocative flight of fancy which, being penned for the centenary issue of *New Worlds Science Fiction* reminds that most of these stories first appeared in these pages, although now altered to some extent. Full marks to the publishers, by the way, for an excellent and unusual dustjacket by Escher.

Frederik Pohl, anthologist, tries a gimmick in **The Expert Dreamers** (Gollancz, 18/-) but the experiment is generally unsuccessful. The point of selection is that all the stories should be written by scientists. This is not quite as ludicrous as would first appear, for such reliable and established authors as Isaac Asimov (chemist) with "Lenny"—a robot with a mother-fixation on Dr. Susan Calvin, George O. Smith using his communications expertise on "Amateur in Chancery," and Chandler Davis (mathematician) with a witty "Adrift on the Policy Level" are all scientists in their own right. Then again some of the scientific experts have made only infrequent and pseudonymous excursions in the fiction field—such as William Morrison (biochemist Joseph Samachson) whose "A Feast of Demons" (similar to Maxwell's but applied to human metabolism) is about the best in the book; Philip Latham (astronomer R. S. Richardson) whose "To Explain Mrs. Thompson" is infuriatingly but inevitably unexplained; and Lee Gregor (physicist Milton Rothman) does an excellent study of high-gravity conditions in "Heavy planet." Even Robert Willey (rocket expert Willy Ley) gets some teutonic action into "The Invasion" and Body Ellanby (husband and wife team of geneticists Drs. L. and W. C. Boyd) manage a human touch in "Chain Reaction." But, oh dear, when the out-and-out profs., try their hands at fiction—George Gamow, Fred Hoyle, Norbert Weiner, Leo Szilard, W. Grey Walter, etc.—some of the results are, to say the least, rather odd and less than entertaining.

The ubiquitous doctor Asimov on the other hand plays it very safely in a large and well-produced anthology, **The Hugo Winners** (Dobson, 18/-). "Hugos" are the awards given at



most American science fiction world conventions for various categories in the field, including "best" novelettes and short stories of the year, and it is from these that the editor has chosen five long and three short story prize winners. The good doctor, himself shamefully defrauded of being a prize winner, gains sweet revenge by triumphing as the editor of this unique collection, and he writes wittily and well in his introduction and in the thumbnail sketches prefacing each story. Inevitably most of these have been purloined previously for hard cover collections of one sort or another. Arthur C. Clarke's "The Star" crops up once more, and it was not too long ago that I was praising Daniel Keyes' "Flowers for Algernon." In fact the only one first time out of a magazine is Poul Anderson's "The Longest Voyage," an other-world adventure he does so well.

Among other worthy appearances are the genial Eric Frank Russell's "Allamagoosea" the wonderfully comic space-ship inventory error and Walter Miller's poignant drama of human actors losing out against robotic doll replicas, "The Darfsteller." The two oldtime greats, Murray Leinster and Clifford Simak, still turning out competent and entertaining yarns like "Exploration Team" and "The Big Front Yard." All rounded off by two fantastic short stories, a satanically amusing Robert Bloch special, "The Hill Bound Train," and Avram Davidson's strange fable of the bicycle repair shop, "Or All the Seas with Oysters." A good addition to the book shelf, and excellent value for the money.

Finally, of all the post-atomic holocaust novels that I have read, Derek Ingre's **Pig On A Lead** (Faber 21/-) is surely the strangest and most sickeningly desolate, both spiritually and physically. Two men, one a foul-mouthed ex-stoker, the other a crazed amnesiac, roam the stricken land of England, together with a young boy raised in this awful environment. They live off tinned food, practice unnatural sex, and their deranged speech is a vile mockery of the English language. This Joycean dialogue is most difficult to read, and, unlike Joyce, not rewarding anyway, whilst the boy's chronicling style, influenced by the weird trio's portable library of the *Pilgrim's Progress*, *Fanny Hill* and the Bible, is a travesty of the scriptures. For dubious titillation a demented woman and a female swine suffer in the degradations. If the moral of all this is that man's self-destruction is a result of forsaking God, then the point is well taken. There can be nothing more God-forsaken than this pitiful band of survivors.

leslie flood



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