

january 1964

18th year of publication

3/-

NEW

volume 46

WORDSWORTH

SCIENCE  
FICTION

# Dilemma with Three Horns

donald malcolm

---

john baxter

---

p. f. woods

---

ernest hill

---

colin kapp

---

no. 138

# **Still London's Leading SCIENCE FICTION CENTRE**

---

**SO MANY TITLES WE CANNOT LIST THEM  
NEW TITLES ADDED EVERY WEEK**

---

**Call at :**

**THE NEWPORT BOOK STORE**

**20a NEWPORT COURT**

**CHARING CROSS ROAD, W.C.2.**

**Telephone : WHI 3579, Ex. 1**

**OPEN ALL DAY SATURDAY**

## **SCIENCE FICTION REVIEW**

**contains cogent and timely reviews of science  
fiction books, magazines, and paperbacks.  
For a free sample copy write to our British  
agent,**

**Kenneth F. Slater**

**FANTAST (MEDWAY) LIMITED**

**75 Norfolk Street**

**Wisbech, Cambs., England**

**or to the publisher :**

**Science Fiction Review**

**Box 1568**

**San Diego, California 92112, USA**



# SCIENCE FICTION

january 1964

volume 46

no. 138

## CONTENTS

### short stories :

dilemma with three horns	donald malcolm	4
the last generation	ernest hill	35
the countenance	p. f. woods	47
toys	john baxter	64

### serial :

the dark mind	colin kapp	73
conclusion		

### features :

guest editorial	john brunner	2
the literary line-up		63
survey request		126
book reviews	john carnell	128

---

EDITOR : JOHN CARNELL

---

## THREE SHILLINGS

### Subscription Rates

12 issues 40/- North American, 12 issues \$7.00

Published on the last Friday of each month by

NOVA PUBLICATIONS LTD.,

7 Grape Street, Holborn, London, W.C.2

Telephone : TEMple Bar 3373

Sole distributors in Australia : Gordon & Gotch (Australia) Ltd.

In New Zealand : Messrs. P. B. Fisher, 564 Colombo Street, Christchurch, N.Z.

The entire contents of this magazine are Copyright 1963 by Nova Publications Ltd. and must not be reproduced or translated without the written consent of the Publisher.

All characters in these stories are purely fictitious and any resemblance to living persons is entirely coincidental. No responsibility is accepted for material submitted for publication but every care will be taken to avoid loss or damage. Return postage must be included with all MSS.

### guest editorial

*John Brunner's last editorial was in January, 1962, when he discussed sources of plot material. This time he takes the specific subject of political innovation within the framework of the s-f story and gives it a thorough airing.*

# on political attitudes in s - f

by john brunner

---

I've recently been studying the script of a Third Programme discussion on s-f, broadcast last year, in which James Blish, Kingsley Amis, John Bowen and Robert Conquest examined—among such other points as character and event, and implied morality—a few of the political attitudes found in contemporary stories.

The script was loaned to me by a friend who not only has made a detailed study of Soviet s-f but also knows personally several of the leading Soviet writers. According to him, s-f in Russia is showing signs of developing along lines much influenced by the Western tradition—becoming more recognisable and more acceptable to s-f readers elsewhere.

As anyone will have noted, however, having seen Brian Aldiss's account of the First Festival of the Science Fiction Film, or almost any volume of Russian s-f, or a critical review of the



same, a heavy load of preconception lies on stories from "over there," due—obviously—to the prophetic content of the Marxist philosophy accepted by the writers. It's as though they were working within the framework of a Heinlein-type "future history."

On the other hand . . . when I was asked to do an analysis of current SF from an international viewpoint for *Aspect* early in 1963, I felt bound to point out that an equally heavy burden of preconception lies on most Western s-f. Suppose you write a story set in the twenty-fifth century about a private corporation mining the asteroids, you're making an assumption about the development of economic systems which is (thanks to our present ideological conflicts) of its nature political. At the height of the Cold War a few years ago, it was common to find in a typical issue of an American magazine at least one story about a semi-political event—mostly, I'm afraid, on rather a naive level. (Some of the best authors in the field succumbed to this tempting oversimplification.)

Slightly ahead of the reduction of tension in international affairs, however, we did begin to see stories which took seriously not just the superficialities of this continuing crisis, such as the weaponry and tactics of a hypothetical third war or the nature of atomic doom, but the underlying forces which compel men into situations which in their periods of normal rational reflection they regard with unmitigated horror. To cite a single, brilliant example, I'd name Poul Anderson's *Kings Who Die*, a superb fictional interpretation of the theme developed by Lewis F. Richardson in his trail-blazing work *Statistics of Deadly Quarrels*.

From such considerations as I've outlined have stemmed the remarks that follow. I make no secret of the fact that I have political views of my own, but I hope and believe they don't derive from any dogmatic foundation; I've tried to construct them out of raw material like tolerance and optimism.

And this is by and large true of most authors in s-f who have in recent years tackled essentially political stories. Take Heinlein, for example. Although he has views which many of his readers find unacceptable (the concept of government-by-veteran which figures in *Starship Troopers* is perhaps the most conspicuous, and the distrust of democracy—echoing Kipling's science fiction—voiced in *Glory Road* runs a close second), he is capable of writing stories built around social systems that flatly contradict each other.

*On Earth the scientific margin between life and death is infinitely small—a slight change in temperature or increase in solar radiation could destroy humanity. Given the same conditions on an alien world, plus a heavier gravity and a sun becoming unstable, and the problem becomes almost insoluble.*

# dilemma with three horns

by donald malcolm

---

The sward of short, tough dull-green grass sloped down to the cliff-edge at just the right angle to afford Harry Gardner, lying on his back, his hands behind his balding head, a magnificent view of Palmyra's startlingly cobalt, sun-silvered ocean. Out towards the sweeping horizon an agitation of mists, a salmon pink and palest emerald green, pearl-mauve and brilliant topaz yellow, obscured the timeless merging of sea and sky. Here and there, radiant bursts of diaphanous gold blossomed and were gone, like transient flowers. The ebon cliff, like a glittering, exposed coal-face, tumbled with precipitate breathlessness to the rock-littered, rose-coloured sand hundreds of feet below.

Under the pull of gravity, almost twice that of the Earth, the waters moved with a turgid reluctance, like a vast vat of molten glass, its colours restless and ever-changing. Palmyra's star, riding the bleached blue sky like a burning god, was sending out flares, fantastic plumes, too bright for colour, that were visible even at the blaze of noon.



And the flares, according to Andy Douglas, P.E.T. 31's radio expert, were blanketing absolutely all communications to and from *Starfire*, the mother ship, some three light-years away. They had been out of touch for two planetary days, about fifty-six hours Earth time.

An argumentative host of stubby sea-birds, the exact green-gold hue of oil, rose in ungainly flight from the creamy surf and were soon lost in the first whisperings of boiling mist. Gardner inhaled deeply of the warm, tangy air. By nature and inclination, he was a lazy man. Five weeks under the doubled drag of gravity had done nothing to imbue him with a zest for work. Admittedly, in his primary capacity as the Team's senior archaeologist, he had nothing to do on the uninhabited fourth planet of the system. But, as Bo Carlson, the head man on the geological staff, was never slow to point out, he was, in his secondary function a very competent rock-hound. So dutifully, each day, equipped with a bag and a hammer, he stalked unsuspecting rocks, chipping samples in between frequent rests.

Tipping the scales a shade on the right side of fifteen stone, since he'd arrived on the dense world, Gardner had felt like the unfortunate victim of a capricious curse straight out of ancient mythology, that of being doomed forever to carry around twice his allotted poundage.

He decided to stir himself and sat up. He gasped at the sudden pain in the centre of his spine and his back arched. As quickly as it had come, the sensation receded, leaving a feeling of relief that was out of all proportion to his brief suffering.

Apprehensively, his layman's fingers prodded his back. What he expected to find, he wasn't sure. He failed to encounter any bump or cavity and he was about to dismiss the incident when he remembered that his back had ached vaguely and continually for almost two weeks.

The increased gravity was to blame, of course, he told himself, chewing on a knuckle.

Or was it? It could be something more serious than a simple backache. Only one man could set his mind at rest, and that was Doc Whitehead.

He stood up and swayed dangerously. A chill of fear cooled his body as, momentarily a double star dominated the sky.

His vision cleared. The sluggish swell of the sea far below seemed to mesmerise him and he forced himself to turn and start climbing the rise.

By the time he reached the edge of the wide plateau that stretched away from the top of the rise, he felt better, if a bit puffed with the exertion. His round, fleshy face shone like a full moon. A hot, light breeze, coming off the sea, ruffled what remained of his unruly, coarse black hair, and helped to cool him.

The attraction of the view made him pause. The mists on the southern horizon were writhing like the multiple coils of a serpent under the stabs of the tortured star's radiation, and here and there, phantom glimpses of the world's rim appeared and were gone with ephemeral swiftness. To the west, a fantastic mountain range humped, like the clenched knuckles of a giant's hands, deep blue-black despite the presence of day. A haze of thin cloud formed an obscuration of delicate pearl in the east.

Going to the battered jeep, he took his lunch pack and coffee out of the back, then sat down in the shade of the vehicle and leaned against it in a comfortable position.

As he chewed vigorously on the rough bread and thick lumps of red cheese, he reflected upon this latest assignment.

The fourteen planets in the system were a bleak lot, with the exception of Palmyra, fifth out from the star, and one of the four planets in the solar ecosphere.

The system itself was abnormally compact, just over one thousand million miles in radius, with Palmyra patrolling an almost circular orbit ninety-one million miles out.

There were enough peculiarities in the system, apart from the overcrowding problem, to keep Team 31's Astronomical Staff happy till the stars froze over.

In size, the eleven inner planets were within a range varying only two or three per cent, the average diameter hovering around the 7500-mile mark. Gas giants, a feature of every solar system so far discovered except the unique binary star with the single planet A.P.Y., were conspicuously absent. The three worlds at the outer edges of the system were about four times the size of the others.

The system was a collection of over-sized marbles composed of barren dark grey or black rock, as if the planetary crusts had been scoured clean off at some remote time in the past. The third, fourth and fifth planets had equatorial girdles of fugitive vegetation—stunted trees and grasses—but only Palmyra had any bird or animal life, with nothing of a high order.

Palmyra was shared almost equally by land and sea, the former predominating slightly. No one land area was significantly larger



than the others and the distribution tended towards the equatorial and south polar regions. There was virtually no land at the other pole, giving the planet a bottom-heavy appearance.

Gardner finished his lunch. As he swung himself into the jeep, his back was again caught in a vice of pain which, after it had passed, left him clawing for air like a winded sprinter. He rested his forehead on the wheel, then, when he had recovered a little, he drove back to Base.

After the Preliminary Survey had run a jaundiced eye over Palmyra (the other worlds were too obviously untenable), Team 31 of the Preliminary Exploration Service, under its Leader, Matthew Brady, had followed up.

The chosen location of the Base was on the northern shore at the eastern end of a thin land bridge connecting two Greenland-sized masses situated wholly below the equator.

A group of trees, huddled together like conspiring dwarfs, screened his approach to the camp, and he came upon the familiar square-U configuration of huts and workshops quite suddenly.

For various reasons, Brady hadn't elected to site the Base camp near any of the three rivers which joined the sea on the northern shore. Instead, there was a series of fresh-water springs, thought to be part of a large river that rose and disappeared underground in the western mountains. Here, beside the tingling, diamond-bright pools, Brady had set up house.

Even from a distance, Gardner could sense that something was afoot. Men were gathered in urgent knots of discussion. Circling behind the Admin hut and down the side of the perimeter fence—like the Roman legions of old, Teams took no unnecessary chances—he reached the gate, which was manned by a brown-faced, tropical drilled Marine, who, with furtive ease, palmed a cigarette butt.

"What's up?" he asked, grinning pointedly at the soldier, as the gate was opened.

"I don't know, Dr. Gardner, but something has them worried." He flicked a clear-eyed glance towards the Admin hut. Brady and the whole Astronomical Staff were just emerging. "They've been in there a couple of hours."

"In *this* heat?" Gardner watched with sharpened interest, his aching back forgotten. No one spent that long indoors during the day on Palmyra, except for a very important reason.

Kurt Lemnitz, who had fallen heir to Archer's job upon the latter's move to Roy (Galactic) Enterprises, was making a point to Brady, waving his large hands about like signal flags. He was a tall, strongly-built man, with hard, commanding features.

Brady was to be seen looking up quizzically at the towering man, rubbing his potato-shaped nose, and pondering. Then, coming to a decision, he asked Lemnitz something and the astronomer nodded vehemently.

With that, Brady went back into Admin while the star-gazing fraternity (most if not all, of whom couldn't tell the name of one star from the next) followed Kurt like a well-trained team to their laboratory.

Shrugging, Gardner commented to the young Marine, "I suppose they'll tell us in their own sweet time." As he turned right into the vehicle rank, he called over his shoulder, "Has communication with *Starfire* been renewed, yet?"

"Not that I know of," the Marine replied, closing the gate and taking up his stance. Expertly, he disposed of his cigarette butt.

"I'm not particularly bothered," Gardner remarked complacently, stepping out of the jeep and removing his few possessions. "I haven't any urgent results to send. In fact," he amended wryly, grinning, "I haven't any results to send, period." He sauntered slowly to his quarters, whistling shrilly off-key a snatch of *Pal, Can You Spare a Credit*?

As if by way of reminder, Gardner's spine twinged painfully as he was passing Doc Whitehead's surgery. Holding himself stiffly, he pushed the half-open door wide and went in.

Doc, his girth bulging out of shirt and shorts, straightened up, the pincers in his hand gripping a fearsome-looking tooth, just extracted from the sickly-faced young technician in the chair. He was doing his level best to hold the tears in check.

"Rinse out," Doc advised him sympathetically, disposing of the offending tooth and starting to wash his hands.

"Oh, hello, Harry," he greeted, drying his hands briskly. "Take a seat. I shan't be a minute."

Harry sat down gingerly. "What's the big conference about, Doc? I heard about it when I returned just now."

The patient dried his mouth and opened it in readiness for the plug, which Doc inserted deftly with the tweezers, saying, "Eat on the other side for a couple of days. If you have any more trouble, come back right away. I don't want infection setting in. Off you go."



As the technician left, he answered Gardner's question. "The place has been jumping with rumours all morning, Harry, but nothing you could get your teeth into—" He broke off, and grinned at his pun. "Kurt knows—all the Astronomical Staff do—what it is and we'll have to wait until Matt sees fit to tell us."

He sat the extracted tooth on a table and hit it a few times with a stone he used as a paper weight.

Gardner stared at him as if he had suddenly gone mad.

"I used to do that when I was a boy," the doctor explained, hitting the molar again heartily. "It was my revenge for all the pain and misery they had caused me. I would smash them with a hammer into powder, then blow it away."

"Funny," the archaeologist remarked, "teeth decay while we're alive and yet they are the last things to survive us long after death. You dig up an ancient graveyard and what do you find : teeth. And a few items more valuable, of course !"

Doc completed his little ritual, then Gardner asked, "As a matter of interest, Doc, is there any basis of truth in the hypothesis that, by about three thousand A.D., give or take a few hundred years, the human race won't have teeth ?"

Doc scratched his paunch. "It's probably true, Harry. One of the recent *Journals* I saw carried a note about a number of children who failed to develop teeth at all, while many cases are on record of children not growing the full quota of thirty-two in adulthood. It can be traced to dietary changes over the years ; too many soft foods. Teeth are for tearing, breaking, chewing. Nature isn't long in discarding a tool that no longer serves a useful purpose. Incidentally, this trend is even more evident with domestic dogs and cats. Now—apart from idle curiosity—what brought you in here, Harry ?"

Gardner said, "It's my back."

"What's wrong with it ?" Doc was immediately the professional, listening to his patient. He looked a picture of kindness, patience, skill and understanding.

"Ever since I came here, weeks ago, it's been sore. To-day I suffered three severe attacks of pain."

"Pull your shirt up, lie on the table," Doc directed. "What else ?" he asked, as Gardner complied, groaning softly.

"Dizziness after the second attack."

"Where was the pain ?" Doc's fingers probed systematically, gently.

"About the centre of my spine." His voice rose as Doc found the spot. "Right there," he said through his teeth.

Finishing his examination, Doc told him to tuck his shirt in. Gardner returned to the chair and sat silently while Doc leafed through his medical history.

He closed the folder and filed it away. "You have no record of back trouble of any kind, Harry." He scratched idly. "Have you been doing any strenuous digging?"

Gardner shook his head.

"Did you strain it stretching for something?"

"No."

Doc was perplexed. "It might be a chill—"

His tone caused Gardner to say, "But you don't think it is, do you?"

"I don't know," Doc admitted worriedly. He thought for a moment, then went on firmly, "I'll put you in the picture as far as I know it. I've had a number of the men in here with back complaints, similar to your own. And I've had it, too."

"You?" Gardner sat clicking the nails of his thumbs and index fingers. "Physician, heal thyself."

Doc pulled a face. "If I knew what to heal . . . Anyway, only one man has had back trouble in the past. The one connecting thread is that the affected people are all, like ourselves, in the heavy-weight class."

"Gravity." The word shot out like a dog from a trap.

"Probably," Doc agreed, measuring the word, "but I think it's only a cause, not an effect. The knowledge doesn't help any. I can't do anything for you at present Harry. The symptoms—if they're all there—are too obscure. Don't exert yourself, and rest."

The archaeologist laughed heartily. "Now, if that advice had come from Bo Carlson, I would have thought you were being sarcastic!"

"Oh, yes," Doc replied, "I believe Bo's had a few hard words to say about you. Do you deserve them?"

Gardner stopped at the door, and chuckled, "Every last one. I should've stayed at home and been a bed-tester. Actually, things aren't quite *that* bad." He ran a hand over his polished dome. "We've arrived, independently, at the conclusion that most of the surface of this planet is bedrock. Quick hops to some of the others seem to show that this condition holds good throughout the whole system. Something very odd happened here a long time ago."

The P.A. speaker cleared its throat and Team Leader Brady said, "Attention all personnel. There will be a meeting in the mess



hall to-day at 15.00 hours. No one is excused. This is important. Thank you."

They exchanged glances. "We don't have long to wait, now, do we, Harry?"

The intervening two hours were frayed and tense. The men abandoned all pretence of working and lounged around in the shade, conversing in low tones. Three jeeps, a truck and a helicopter returned at intervals, bringing in parties engaged in field research. Lieutenant Cutter, as brisk and efficient as a computer, and the new Sergeant of Marines, were checking in the arrivals.

Behind a tenuous veil of very high cloud, the star continued to talk soundlessly with bright tongues of flaring light.

Gardner, who had found, pacified and finally mollified, Carlson, accompanied the geologist to the mess hall. It was already three-quarters full and they found space at the back and sat next to Doc. Brady, small beside the bulk of Kurt Lemnitz, who was deep in conversation with an astronomer, up on the platform.

Cutter's Marines could be heard calling in the stragglers.

The atmosphere, thick with smoke, was as brittle as an icicle.

Just after three, when everyone was packed in, Brady signalled for silence. He rubbed his nose, and began, "Dr. Lemnitz has come to me with serious news. I'll leave him to tell you."

He glanced at Kurt, who stood up and leaned on his knuckles on the table-top.

"Thank you, Team Leader." He surveyed the ranks of expectant, apprehensive faces before him. "My first item of news is already known to you, namely, that we are cut off from all communication with our mothership, *Starfire*.

"The cause of this is common knowledge : particles from solar flares playing merry hell with the ionized layers of the atmosphere."

He smoothed down his thick, wavy hair, whose precise middle parting ran white between the dark brown hair, and continued, "Unfortunately, the flares are responsible for more than loss of radio. The energy of the Van Allen belts has been raised to an extremely abnormal intensity somewhere in the eight hundred to a thousand Roentgen range."

This was greeted by whistles of surprise and he waited until the sudden rash of whispering had abated.

"That isn't all. This planet," Kurt Lemnitz told them, "is literally enveloped in this intense field. The strong magnetic forces have attracted high concentrations of particles over the poles and these have merged with the lower belt to form a sphere. For the time being, we are trapped on Palmyra."

This statement provoked further discussion and a junior chemist stood up to ask, "Surely the intensity and the coverage of the radiation will die down when the solar flares perish? It's not necessary that we leave right now." Kurt's stony stare made him add, "Is it?"

Lemnitz slid his eyes to Brady's expressionless face, then he looked at his colleagues in the front row before answering heavily, "I would say it is."

The swell of voices couldn't be quelled this time until they realised that they hadn't heard why it was so imperative to leave.

"We have detected a very slight, but nevertheless significant, rise in the temperature of this system's star."

Those who were well enough versed in astronomy to know the dreadful implications of Lemnitz's words were stunned with shock as the remainder were soon to be.

"What does that mean?"

Kurt answered the questioner. "If the temperature rise holds steady and levels out, nothing. However, if the amount of radiation received by each square centimetre of this planet increases by as little as one tenth of one per cent, it will be as if it had never known the rolling of oceans and the rush of winds. All life will be snuffed out."

There wasn't a sound in the hall. They sat as if congealed into a collection of waxwork dummies. It seemed to each individual as if he had suddenly grown cold, that the shadow of death had touched him personally and passed on. Many instinctively raised their eyes skywards, where the great burning sword of Damocles waited to obliterate all trace of their existence.

The astronomer sat down, watching their reactions.

Someone asked, "Does that mean that the star is a variable?"

Lemnitz flexed his big hands. "I'd be evading the question if I told you that practically all stars are variables to a greater or a lesser degree. Yes, it probably means that it is a variable. What kind of variable, we have no way of telling in such a comparatively short space of time. It might be a Cepheid—a pulsating star somewhere in the F6-G8 spectral range, a period anything up to forty-five days and a temperature variation which

could be as much as a thousand degrees—or it might be an RV Tauri star, somewhat similar to a Cepheid, falling into the F to K range of spectral types, with a maximum period of a hundred and forty-six days. There are, of course, as yet undiscovered types of stars. This might be one of them.”

This final statement served to chill the silence to absolute zero.

Then Lieutenant Cutter spoke up from the back of the room. “Stated briefly, Team Leader, we have the choice of remaining here and dying or going through the radiation and dying?”

“That’s it concisely, Lieutenant,” Brady replied reluctantly, rubbing his nose. “A rather fatal Hobson’s choice.”

“Is it certain, Doctor Lemnitz,” Cutter pressed on, “that the star’s temperature is going to continue to rise?”

Lemnitz smoothed his thick waves before answering, “I think a continued rise is inevitable. The fact that we have detected a rise at all indicates that the star is a variable of some sort and even the most innocuous types, when they start acting up, have a temperature variation inimical to human life.”

A voice asked hopefully, “The increased reading couldn’t be due to instrument failure, could it?”

Kurt resisted the impulse to be sarcastic. He shook his head. “Sorry, that was the first thing we thought of and we checked exhaustively.”

Brady said, “Standard procedure will ensure that contact will be made with *Starfire* shortly. Then we’ll stand a better chance of working out a way of getting off planet with our skins intact.”

“But radio communications’ out, sir,” someone objected.

“Agreed; we’ll relay information physically by space probes.”

Another question was raised. Doc, who had been listening intently, let his attention wander. He glanced at Harry Gardner, busily clicking his fingernails like knitting needles. Doc’s mind was immediately alert. The man on Gardner’s right was smoking and his cigarette, unheeded, was touching the archaeologist’s bare arm. And he didn’t appear to feel it.

Doc said softly, “Harry—”

His companion inclined towards him, while keeping his gaze on the platform. The cigarette brushed along the exposed arm, causing Gardner to look down. He saw the ash and a fierce red splotch. Not understanding, he turned to Doc.

“I’ve been burned and yet I don’t feel any pain. What does it mean?”

Doc gripped his left arm, to help stave off panic and shock. “I’ll explain after the meeting.”



Retaining his hold, he heard Brady close the meeting with the promise to keep them informed of anything important.

The assembled men shuffled out of the hall and Doc propelled Gardner to the surgery.

When they were seated and Doc started to treat the burn, he said bluntly, "I'm not going to hide anything from you, Harry, I think—I'm almost certain—that you have syringomyelia."

Gardner simply looked worried and puzzled and Doc explained, "It's a chronic disease of the spinal cord, brought on in this instance by a combination of your weight and the double gravity of the planet. The latter has caused irregular cavities in your spinal cord, and these are pressing on surrounding nerves."

"How does that explain this?" Gardner moved his bandaged arm.

"It's the initial symptom: loss of sensation. A victim becomes insensitive to pain in parts of the limbs and the fingers, although the sense of touch isn't lost. Also, heat and cold cease to affect him in those areas. Various small muscles in the arms and legs begin to atrophy."

"Is there a cure?" Gardner's round face was pale. He was clicking his nails furiously and made no attempt to stop.

"X-ray therapy, or, in severe cases, an operation to relieve pressure. And neither of these courses is open to me."

They didn't speak for a time.

"Will it kill me?" The question was direct and couldn't be avoided.

"In time, yes."

Gardner laughed mirthlessly. "We don't have much of that, do we." He rose to leave.

Doc said quietly, "You're not going any further than the nearest bed. From now on you're a menace to yourself. Get your clothes off and in between the sheets with you. I'll have to see Matt right away."

"This'll really make his day," Gardner chuckled, a spark of his old humour re-kindling, as he peeled off his shirt.

Doc went to the door of the little ward and poked his head in. "Bert," he said to his medical orderly, who was attending to an accident case, "another patient for you. Syringomyelia." He added meaningfully, "And expect more."

Bert nodded and began to prepare a bed.

Harry, naked except for his underpants, stood threading his fingers through the forest of dark, twisted hair on his chest.

"What now?" he asked.

"I want you to lie flat on your back, Harry. Don't move about any more than you have to. Bert will be here to help you."

As he stepped into the sunlight, the first warning stab of pain seared his back.

The short walk to Admin was excruciating, but he forced himself to hold his bulk erect. The men were going to be alarmed soon enough without seeing him like a half-shut knife. He made the step and leaned for a surreptitious moment against the rail, puffing like an old steam engine with a faulty boiler valve and pretending that he was taking in the view.

Entering the tiny square with the three doors leading off it, he knocked on the one on the left, and entered.

Brady, a pencil half-way into his mouth, was listening worriedly as Kurt Lemnitz, perched precariously on the edge of the desk, clarified a point for the log and the report.

"Got it now, Matt?" Kurt asked, glancing at the newcomer. Andy Douglas was huddled in a corner, patiently twiddling knobs on the transmitter/receiver and having no success.

Brady rubbed his nose and nodded, then said dispiritedly, "Hello, Doc. Grab a seat somewhere." Doc took his usual specially-strengthened one and sat down on it as if it were made of merangue.

Uncoiling himself, Kurt said, "I'll go and see to the preparation of a messenger rocket. I think it would be wise to have it in orbit as soon as possible."

"I'd like you to stay for a few minutes, Kurt," Doc interjected heavily.

His funereal tone drew three wondering glances.

"I've something very important to report, Matt, and I think you'll agree that it should go into the report."

The astronomer sat down again.

Doc ran a speculative eye over his big frame and asked abruptly, "Have you had any trouble with your back since you arrived, Kurt?"

Lemnitz was caught off his mental balance by the oblique query. He rubbed his palms over his brown, scarred, kneecaps. "I have, yes, now that you mention it, Doc." He shrugged deprecatingly. "But astronomers are used to backaches, so—?"

"I thought you would have had trouble," Doc replied, scratching his paunch with a half-hearted finger. "Every heavy

man in Team 31 has been affected. And it's going to be serious. I think Harry Gardner has syringomyelia."

"Go on, Doc," Brady urged wearily, caressing his bulbous nose. "I've already been partially doped with astronomical science. You might as well complete the dose." He looked as sorry for himself as a puppy that had just been bowled over by a kitten.

Doc grinned sympathetically, realising the responsibilities that roosted like vultures, pecking at his friend's sanity. He knew that Team 31 was already in what appeared to be a hopeless position and he was about to snatch away the straw they were all clutching at.

"I might as well give you the whole picture." He settled himself more comfortably and the others took the hint. "Syringomyelia is a disease that takes the form of congenital malformation, stemming from neurological causes." He paused after this sentence, to gauge how his audience—for that's what they had become—was taking it. All three had their heads down, as if this attitude might aid their understanding.

"The disease cannot be detected at birth, despite the great advances in medicine, and it seldom manifests itself until late middle age."

Lemnitz's heavy lips quirked, but he gave no other sign that he possibly qualified.

Doc studied the arrow-straight middle parting in the astronomer's hair as he continued, "Briefly, it's a lesion—*cavity* might convey a clearer concept to you—in the spinal cord, impinging almost directly on the medulla, or marrow."

He stole a glance at Andy, and repressed a grin. The likeable radio man was going under for the third time, but struggling bravely against the torrent of unfamiliar terms. Matt and Kurt were still with him, although beginning to show signs of bafflement.

He went on: "Over the years, the cavity gradually, but remorselessly, expands. Then the disease starts to destroy sensory fibres which carry messages of pain and heat, thus depriving the victim of warning when he is burned. That's what happened to Harry to-day. He was burned on the arm by a cigarette and he didn't even realise it. He's already complained of pain in the back. Bells began to ring after the burning incident."

Brady asked thoughtfully, "Is that the extent of the disease?"



"I wish it were," Doc dashed his hopes, such as they were. "Numbness is only the first effect. Atrophy follows, affecting, eventually, the whole limb. Blebs develop and become ulcers, Fractures and dislocations can happen anytime. The victim can also suffer from scoliosis—lateral curvature of the spine—and kypho-scoliosis, which is backward curvature of the cord."

They were staring at him now in horrified fascination, unable to blot out the dreadful recital.

"Next, amyotrophy—muscular atrophy—will destroy the entire right side. He can also get syringobulbia, atrophy of the tongue, causing partial use of the vocal chords ; cystitis—"

"Enough, enough !" Brady ordered harshly, his voice stinging like a cat o' nine tails. "You've made your point, Doc." He sucked in his cheeks. "All that can happen to one human being? It makes me realise how lucky I am to have my health."

Kurt asked in a subdued tone, "What's the cure ? If any ?"

"I'm glad you added those last two words, Kurt," Doc rejoined scraping the back of his hand across his chin. "Put briefly, the main types of treatment are electricity, massage, and deep X-ray, and we're definitely not equipped for the last item. Intricate surgery is required before X-ray can be really effective."

"Which means virtually that we're entirely helpless ?"

Doc looked at Brady and kept on looking.

The Team Leader swore with vicious frustration, grinding his knuckles into his palm until it hurt. Visibly, he took control of himself, glanced around as if he might apologise, then saw by the expressions on their drawn faces that he had vocalised their own thoughts.

"Let's review the whole mess from the beginning," Brady suggested. "We're in danger from three sources. One : the star is liable to blow its top anytime. Directly related to this is our second item : the envelope of radiation englobing the planet is so intense that it would mean certain, if lingering, death to attempt to go through it. Three : the onset of the disease caused—am I right ?—by the abnormal gravity of this planet."

Doc nodded, and amplified, "I think the disease will run a swift and deadly gamut because of the gravity. In fact," he went on casually, flexing his fingers, "my right arm is beginning to feel slightly numb already."

The undramatic delivery of this statement served only to underline the horror of the situation.

"God !" Kurt breathed softly, "a dilemma with three horns!"

He sat hunched, like a man trying to curl in on himself.

There was a Styx-like silence in the room. Doc broke it, saying, "I'd better return to the hut, Matt." He turned to Kurt Lemnitz. "I wouldn't waste any time putting that message rocket into orbit, Kurt. Every minute is going to be precious from now on. I needn't remind you that I'm the only doctor on the Team. And I have the first traces of the disease." With that he went out, willing a ramrod stiffness into his back, despite the pain.

The astronomer lumbered to his feet like an ungainly circus bear and stood rasping his palms up and down his thighs with savage jerks.

"I'll write a concise report of our predicament and send it to you as soon as it's ready," Brady promised, watching through the window as Doc progressed towards his hut and disappeared inside.

"I've a better idea," Kurt volunteered. "Record your report and we'll send the spool up. They can collect it and play it back."

"Won't the radiation spoil it?" Andy asked, glancing around from the bank of dials and knobs.

"Not if we take sufficient precaution to shield it, and with such a small parcel, there's no problem. If only we could parcel men up so easily—" He dismissed the thought as Brady voiced his agreement.

Lemnitz hurried out and strode to the stores, ignoring the questioning glances and outright pleas for information from the scattered groups of uneasy personnel. He hated doing it, but there was nothing he could say that would hold out any hope at this juncture. It was a case of wait and see. And pray. Odd he should think of that, he reflected sardonically. He'd never been one for that sort of thing. Early in life, he'd looked out at the awful splendour that was the Universe. Whether it was the product of chaos or design, he neither knew nor cared. He saw star beyond star, galaxy beyond galaxy, and science became his cold, logical god. A demanding god, knowing nothing of fear or love, only unremitting labour. When in trouble, most men ran back to God, as erring children to their fathers, but not he. Not he. He paused at the door of the hut, deeply disturbed. It was probably a bit late to start praying now, although the chaplain would no doubt dispute his conclusion. He smiled to himself.

His Chief Technician, who rejoiced in the resounding handle of Patrick Walter Quinn Shaw, and unaccountably nicknamed "Irish," looked up from his bench and pushed the dismantled

spectroscope aside. "What's the news?" he asked, in an accent that conjured up for Kurt, when he was in his cups, visions of shamrock syrup stirred with a shillelagh.

"Plenty," he told the handsome, bright-eyed Irishman, "so you can stop combing those darlin' black locks of yours and give me a hand with this message probe capsule." Grinning, Shaw pocketed his comb.

Between them, they manhandled the red-painted, five-foot cone on to the bench. "What's this for?" Irish wanted to know.

"We're back to the days of carrier pigeons," Lemnitz explained, examining the interior to his satisfaction. "The radio's no use, so the idea is to send a probe into orbit, where, we hope, if they haven't forgotten procedure, it will be picked up."

"Then we have to wait until they send one back, and so on. We'll all be fried right through from front to back by the time that's over."

"Makes a twist on Irish stew." Kurt grinned, noting Shaw's slim shape as he added, "Cheer up, Irish, at least you won't catch syringomyelia." He moved up one of the aisles between the storage racks, seeking a lead-lined container for carrying radio-active samples, found one, and brought it back.

"Syringowhat? Sounds like fruit blight."

"No, more serious and dangerous than that," Kurt answered soberly. "It's human blight." As he experimented to see if the container would fit inside the capsule, he recounted what Doc had told Matt, Andy and himself. "But not a word of this to anyone, Irish. Better let Team Leader Brady spread the glad tidings."

The astronomer wheeled a bogie alongside the bench. "Come on, let's get the capsule out to the rocket."

It was a very subdued Patrick Walter Quinn Shaw who lent a hand.

The three message rockets, solid fuel, were kept under cover at the very rear of the Base. They collected a considerable crowd on the way. Lemnitz had to endure a barrage of questions, about the star's temperature, the radiation belt, and listen to a dozen hair-brained schemes for enabling them to escape. For a malicious moment, he had the impulse to scream at them that the situation was even more hopeless than they knew. Then an excruciating twist of pain in his back reminded him that his own chances were even less and he held his peace. He wouldn't find a safety valve that way.



Andy caught up with them as they reached the rockets. "Here's the tape," he said unnecessarily.

"Thanks, Andy." While the onlookers gathered round in a loose circle, he put the tape in the container, transferred the container to the capsule and sealed it securely.

Next, he supervised the attaching of the capsule to the trunk of the rocket and Irish checked it out. Willing hands helped to erect the seventeen foot vehicle on the inclined launcher. It lay like a stab of petrified flame. Everyone retired to a safe distance. Lemnitz and Shaw backed off together, the astronomer holding the simple control box that would fire the rocket by radio signal, the technician paying out the thin cable, which stretched out like a sleepy snake.

Sunlight ran in harsh line the full length of the rocket, as if daring it to challenge the sky.

Lemnitz pressed the button. Amid noise and smoke, the probe shot out of the launcher like a scalded cat, hammered like a nail into the blue and was soon lost to sight. The breeze distorted and dissipated the smoke trail and the men drifted back to camp, disconsolate as spectators locked out from a cup final.

Lemnitz and Shaw were still standing by the launcher when Chaplain Macauley strolled up and joined them with the remark, "Another message to the angels, Kurt?"

The astronomer took the ironic dig in good part and answered the sparse, shrewd chaplain, "A little more down-to-earth than that, Chaplain Macauley."

Macauley was a servant of God, space-age style. In his neatly pressed shirt and shorts, apart from being fussily smarter, he looked no different from other Base personnel. His official badge of office was small motif based on Durer's etching, "Praying Hands," and worn on the left epaulette. By advanced hypno-teaching methods, he had been instructed in the esoteric fundamentals of every major religion on Earth. He could administer to each man according to his spiritual needs with knowledge, sincerity and conviction and was as adept at celebrating mass as he was at finding, unerringly, the direction of Mecca. Macauley was puissant in his pursuit of the atheist, the backslider and the downright un-Godly. Macauley never gave up.

He said in his slow, bantering tones, "You noticed there's a service to-night, Kurt? Everyone's invited."

Lemnitz countered lightly, "Now what would I find there, Chaplain?" There was no sneer in his question.

Macauley cocked his head in characteristic manner, so that his face was in shadow. He'd been chipping away industriously at the astronomer ever since they'd met and his instinct told him that he had detected the first tiny cracks in Lemnitz's facade. It was, basically, very simple. Ultimately, when a man came face to face with realities which he couldn't rationalise or otherwise wish away, it was comforting to have something bigger than himself to run to. That was Macauley's ace in the hole. But he never produced it ; rather, he let those in need find it for themselves. His real job started with that revelation.

He said provokingly, "The trouble with you, Kurt, is that you're a cynic."

"Cynicism is merely the window of truth with the venetian blinds open." The three men had started to stroll back to camp, Macauley in between the two taller men.

"Now that's very good, Kurt," Macauley smiled, cocking his head. "I must remember it."

"Just for that, Chaplain," Lemnitz retorted, "I *will* attend your service ! What do you think of that ?"

If he expected to take the wind out of Macauley's sails, he was disappointed. Macauley was very good at waiting.

He looked up at the big man. "I'm thinking that the very essence of life is its beautiful uncertainty. See you both tonight."

Both men cast admiring glances after the retreating figure, before going their separate ways.

Lemnitz called in to see Doc. "How's Harry ?"

Doc said, "Just the same, Kurt. I've given him a sedative. Complete rest will do him good. How are you feeling ?"

Lemnitz leaned against the doorway, conscious of the heat of the star on his neck and shoulders. "My back's painful, but there's no numbness, yet—"

Doc, who was raking for something among the papers on his desk, jerked his head up as he heard the choked off intake of breath. He moved round the desk quickly and followed the direction of Kurt's bemused stare. There was an ugly crimson blister on the inside of his right wrist. He held the hand tightly, as if trying to will the creeping numbness away. "I don't even know how or when it happened," he said pathetically.

"Come on, Kurt," Doc said gently, taking him by his left arm, "off to bed. Bert," he called to his phlegmatic orderly, "another one."

He held on as Kurt tried to pull away, protesting, "I must get back, Doc, I'm needed—"

"Right now you're going to bed, even if Bert and I have to put you there by force. All right?"

The big astronomer resigned himself and went quietly, while Doc reported to Matt.

Brady rubbed absently at his nose, then said, "The only step that occurs to me is this, Doc: check your medical records and weed out the heavyweights. Your experience will enable you to set an arbitrary weight figure. Then isolate them right away."

"I was thinking along the same lines, Matt, but you'd have to give out some explanation and you might not think the time's ripe for that."

His friend made a gesture of agreement and admitted, "I don't want to hammer the last nail home just yet. I'm hoping against hope that the brains aboard *Starfire* might come up with a solution. But it looks as if the decision's made for me, doesn't it. You sort out the likely victims and I'll fill their cup of woe via the P.A."

Doc was half-way through his list when the speaker in his hut gave a guttural croak and Brady said, "Pay attention everyone. Here are two important announcements. One: there has been a slight rise in the amount of radiation being received, but the Astronomical Staff assure me that the critical point is still some way off. Two: it is evident that some of you have been suffering from pains in the back since you came here. Doc is preparing a list of men he wants to see in Medical and I'll announce these names as soon as they are available. That is all. Thank you."

Doc completed his list, comprising fifteen names in all, and took it to Matt, who put out the call.

Turning from the mike, he said, "I notice that your name isn't on the list, Doc. Why not?"

"Because I'm the only man capable of helping to alleviate the trouble, even a little, so I must stay in control."

Their eyes locked in a steady gaze. "And if I order you to bed, what then?"

"I'll put *your* name on the list!" Doc replied promptly, his eyes twinkling.

"*Touche*," Brady conceded defeat, and they both laughed. Brady never seriously tried to flex his official muscles where Doc was concerned. The medical man had a finely tuned innate sense of what was right and what wasn't. This time, though, Brady



had an unhappy feeling. Doc was heavier than most of Team 31's heavyweights and the disease was, therefore, bound to affect him quicker and more seriously, once it really took hold. He'd have to warn Bert to keep him posted of any evidence of trouble with Doc.

That evening, by six, Doc had his fifteen patients hospitalised in two huts, and as comfortable as possible. Not all of them displayed the symptoms of numbness, yet, but Doc knew that it was only a matter of time. It was better to have them where they would be in no danger of receiving accidental cuts or burns. Bert was fussing about them like an indulgent hen, at the same time keeping a surreptitious eye on Doc, who, suspecting that Brady might have him watched, endeavoured to subjugate his own pain. He found work an ideal antidote.

Meanwhile, the rest of the personnel made a pretence of working, and kept one eye on the threatening star and an ear open for the sound that would announce the decent of a probe from *Starfire*.

Brady, with the normal duties of running a Preliminary Exploration Team virtually suspended, found himself spending most of his time in one or other of the hospital huts, talking to the patients, discussing the situation with Doc and Macauley, helping Bert, and listening for the probe. A fine rain began to fall about eleven, adding to the gloom. Chaplain Macauley went to turn in just about that time.

"Has it occurred to you, that, for one reason or another, our probe might not have been successful, Matt?" Doc asked, as they relaxed over a midnight cup of coffee.

Matt blinked and rubbed his nose. His expression was weary and thoughtful. His lips nibbled at the rim of his cup. "In this job, Doc, one has to think of everything, while not necessarily dragging each item out into the daylight for inspection. One lets all the unwanted thoughts stay put out of sight, hoping that they will never translate into horrible reality."

He rose and stared through the rain-kissed glass at the silent night, held at bay by the lights burning in every hut. "Yes, I have considered that our rocket might not make orbit, or suffer some other fate. However, they're on top of their jobs aboard *Starfire* and they'll be in contact, sooner or later."

"Let's hope it's very much sooner," Doc said, suddenly breathless as a spasm of pain stabbed him in the back. Brady looked sharply at Doc, but his expression revealed no hint of the pain that he felt.

The hours passed reluctantly until about two in the morning, when the rain ceased and gave way to intermittent clouds and the ghostly glow of radiation, drowning the stars.

The first murmurings of a distant rocket motor reached waiting ears about an hour later and there was a spontaneous eruption from the huts into the enclosed muddy area. Some of the men were in their pyjama trousers only, but most were fully dressed. Bleary, stinging eyes searched the sky in the general direction of the sound, then one of the Marines spotted a tongue of flame, and yelled wildly, "There she is !"

There was ragged cheering and Brady had to restrain his men from rushing out to meet the rapidly dropping probe, which had blossomed a palely glowing braking parachute. The recovery team truck lurched out of the gate and headed for the rear of the camp and arrived at the landing spot just as the capsule touched down and heeled over in a flurry of metallic mesh.

No time was wasted as the team hoisted the container on to the truck and returned to Base. Eager people kept getting in the way, until, rather brusquely, Brady ordered them back. The capsule was opened and the tape removed from the container inside and handed to Brady.

"This will be relayed over the P.A. right away, men, so stand by," Brady announced, waving the tape aloft.

Everyone was indoors again by the time the message from *Starfire* started to come through.

"Captain Krishna Rang, commanding survey ship *Starfire* : To : Team Leader Matthew Brady, commanding P.E.T. 31 on planet Palmyra. Your message probe No. 1 recovered from orbit. Our computers are running all available data on the stellar problem. First results indicate that, if the present rate of rise is maintained, the critical point will not be reached for at least three Earth days. If the fluctuation is temporary, the temperature should level out in two days. Now, your medical problem. The medical people have wracked their brains into train oil, but haven't come up with anything so far. H.Q. are working on all three problems. As soon as anything new turns up, it will be relayed to you. You won't be able to see us in orbit because of the intense radiation, but we are there, thinking of you and praying hard. Good luck."

Brady followed up, adjuring the men to go to bed and catch up on some sleep, but very few felt inclined to follow his advice. The shredded remnants of the night fluttered towards dawn with sessions of half-hearted card schools for those who hadn't the

energy for anything else, and furious brain-storming by those who had. Both lots were equally snappish and irritable by morning.

Dawn boiled up out of a cloud-shrouded horizon with an angry yellow-white radiance. The star, sprouting prominences and flares like horns, bounced into a clear sky like the Devil's hand-ball, bright and venomous. Breakfast was an apprehensive meal.

Ultra-perceptive now to everything happening around camp, everyone stopped eating as Bert loped in, stopped at Brady's table and bent down and whispered urgently in the Team Leader's ear. Brady was on his feet while Bert was still talking and he streaked out like a comet trailing Bert as a tail.

Someone near the door looked to see where Brady went, and told the assembled men, "He's gone into Doc's place."

Brady found his friend wallowing like a stranded walrus on a bed, his face pinched and grey, his eyes dull above dark pouches. His hand wandered out, groping for Brady's, found it, and held on tightly. "Not much of a doctor, am I?" he croaked, clearing his throat. "Can't even stay on my feet." He moistened his lips. Brady had no need to ask if he was in pain. Releasing Doc's hand, he drew Bert aside. "Can't you give him something, Bert? He's obviously in a bad way."

The orderly grunted, "He won't let me near him with anything resembling a needle sir! He could flatten me with one swipe."

Brady scratched his chin, then the fierce light of battle flashed in his eyes. "We'll see about that. Get the hypodermic, Bert."

Outside there was the first muted roar of an incoming rocket.

"I have it ready," the orderly replied, pushing it towards Brady, who, his attention diverted, was taken aback. Gingerly he took the hypodermic. He had never used one before, but he was willing to learn. The needle gleamed at him, daring him to go ahead. But Brady shared the common phobia concerning needles and his resolve failed him. "Er, Bert," he decided, giving the instrument back to the orderly, "I'll hold him, *you* stick him." Between them, they managed to put Doc under for a few hours.

"That's that," Brady rubbed his nose with satisfaction, then added hastily as he noticed Bert's injured air, "and I'm sure you'll be able to take care of everything till Doc wakens up." He made himself scarce while Bert was still thinking it over.



He went to the Admin hut to await the contents of the latest probe. They were brought by Eddie Novotny, Team 31's saturnine bio-chemist ; it was a small parcel, held in his neat, well-kept hands.

"Something to cheer you up, Matt," he said, removing his glasses.

"Great, Eddie. I certainly need it. What is it, whisky in pill form?"

The bio-chemist's very white teeth, the effect heightened by the rich tan of his face, flashed in a grin. "Bad as that, Matt? No, it's drugs of some sort." The sunlight streaming through the window turned his iron-grey hair the colour of metallic silver as he leaned over and handed the parcel to Brady.

He lost no time in opening it and removing a securely packed box and tape. Brady gave the tape to Eddie, asking him to put it on the machine, while he had a look at the ampoules. Captain Rang's voice said, "Hello, Matt. The enclosed ampoules will interest you. You'll no doubt remember your stay on A.P.Y. and how the natives used the flowers to induce a state of suspended animation?"

Both men perked up.

"The geniuses aboard *Starfire* have succeeded in putting the extract of the flowers in ampoule form, ready for injections."

There followed some technical information and instructions, which Eddie noted.

When the tape had finished, Eddie said, "We can put our patients to sleep until we get out of this mess."

"If we get out of it," Brady amended, examining an ampoule against the light.

"I just love optimists," Eddie reproved, shining his glasses, and replacing them, slightly askew. He was smiling faintly.

"Point taken, Eddie," Matt conceded, a bit shame-faced. He asked, "Could you supervise the giving of the shots? You'll find Bert a very willing helper." His mouth quirked mischievously.

Eddie, who had stood up, paused and looked hard at him, but Brady assumed an innocent expression, and, mystified, the bio-chemist went out, muttering, "At least I've restored your sense of humour."

"Amen to that," Brady echoed solemnly.

The remainder of that day passed uneventfully. All the patients were injected with the S.A. serum. There was no change in the amount of radiation being received and everyone breathed more

easily. No more messages came in from *Starfire*. And they weren't any nearer to a solution of all their problems.

Aboard *Starfire*, a very select and important meeting was taking place. The people present were Captain Rang ; Andrew White, Chief Engineer in charge of the huge hyperspace drive units that flung the ship across the gulfs between the stars ; and two mathematicians, Preston Manson and Ted Duke, both specialists in space-time theory.

"Gentlemen," Captain Rang began, piercing and lighting a cigar, "you are aware of the troubles faced by Team 31 on the planet below. Briefly, my Astronomical Staff, backed by the computer, think that the output of radiation from the star is going to rise, and rise very severely. The symptoms are ominous. Also, we can do no more for those men affected by the disease. S.A. serum has been sent down. It will at least make the end easier, should it come." He tapped ash into an orifice in the desk-top. "It would appear that there is only one solution to the problem : they must get off the planet."

"But surely that's no solution at all, sir," Manson objected, bending over to retrieve the pencil that had fallen from behind his ear as he shook his thin head in protest. "They'd be deep fried before you could say 'Einstein'."

Rang pursed his lips, elevating the cigar, and glanced at the mathematician, who, though only forty, had a sour, wrinkled face, and looked like an animated crab apple. "True," Rang replied, removing the cigar, "at first sight. What I want to know is this: what would happen if a ship took off from the surface and before reaching the inner edge of the radiation, jumped into hyperspace?"

This audacious suggestion caught them all off balance, then White blurted out in his usual manner, "They'd be reduced to spacedust in an instant, sir. So much energy released in close proximity to a planetary mass would be fatal." He smoothed out his bushy eyebrows, and looked unhappy at the thought of anyone even contemplating such an action.

The Captain, his dark, handsome face expressionless, merely drew on his cigar, and transferred his attention to the meditative Duke, whose bright, alert eyes, mirror to the brain behind them, hadn't left Rang's face since he first started speaking. "Dr. Duke, what do you think?"

Duke produced an empty pipe and stuck it in his rather large, humorous mouth. With computer-like efficiency, Duke had been balancing equations and data, rejecting and substituting. "It might just work, sir," he said around the pipe, measuring his words. He drew a pad towards him, did some quick scribbling then pushed the pad over to Manson, who'd been engaged in some figure work himself. Manson scanned the notes quickly and nodded emphatic agreement, his deeply-creased brow, like a well-preserved piece of old leather, wrinkling even more. "There is a chance, sir," he confirmed, "but it's a very long shot."

Rang executed the cigar stump and said, "That's better than no chance at all. Mr. White, please arrange to have our largest hyper-space pinnacle sent down to the planet. In the meantime, despatch a message probe, telling them our plan. Dr. Manson, Dr. Duke, I want you to calculate a set of co-ordinates, taking into account the exceptionally peculiar circumstances obtaining in this case. I'll see to the necessary computer clearance and an open line with H.Q., in case you should require assistance."

"It may take some time, sir," Manson warned Rang, glancing at his colleague for confirmation. Duke agreed.

"Don't let it take too long, gentlemen. There isn't a lot of time to play with. Please report directly to me when everything is ready. Thank you."

The three men departed, White shaking his head ruefully, the mathematicians deep in discussion about the exciting possibilities of taking the plunge from close-off planet.

At ten that evening, the third message probe landed on Palmyra. When the tape was brought in, Brady played it over privately, then relayed it to the men. The plan astounded everyone, despite the faint hope that it held out.

The star had set earlier that evening amid thunderously calm clouds and milk-white skies, as if to underline the possibility that to-morrow might be, for the men, the final sunrise. The radiation enveloping the planet gave the night a glowing movement and life of its own. Just after midnight, the horizon to the west brightened fleetingly, but no one noticed.

The last dawn came quietly; the sky was bleached and restrained, dominated by the star, burning with hellish malevolence.

Ronnie Coleman, who had taken charge of the Astronomical Staff when Kurt Lemnitz had been put into Bert's care, took readings and didn't like what he saw. It could only be a matter of hours until the needle swung into the red.



The pinnacle, resembling a vastly overgrown barracuda, came in a few minutes after eight, its hastily rigged splayed shock absorbers keeping it on an even keel.

The astronomers and the engineers took over the navigation cabin and the engine room, while all the other fit men helped to move patients aboard. Captain Rang's message gave strict instructions that all equipment and personal belongings were to be abandoned. The pinnacle wasn't built to carry 120 men, let alone anything else. An exception was made for a pair of the green-gold sea birds which had adopted the cook as their friend and provider. No one knew if they were going to live beyond the next few hours, but the general morale was raised to a jaunty level by the sign hanging crazily from the cookhouse door.

It read : FRYING TO-NIGHT.

By ten-thirty, all was ready and Brady gave the signal. The pinnacle rose steadily till it reached the limit set, 2000 miles.

Before activating the hyperspace drive, Brady looked wordlessly at Chaplain Macauley, who stood up, but didn't speak. Words were a luxury. He held up his hands and they bowed their heads, each finding the solace of God in his own way.

The button was pressed. The powerful generators whined and the sound rapidly passed into the ultrasonic.

The pinnacle seemed to flicker, like the flame of a candle, reluctant to go out, then it disappeared from normal space.

The point of re-entry had been set beyond the confines of the system, at one thousand, one hundred million miles and *Starfire* was waiting in the region. Jump time was a fraction over one second.

But the pinnacle failed to appear.

Rang didn't betray his worry by pacing the deck. His face assumed a strange immobility, as if death might be imminent. Manson and Duke recognised the signs and kept silent. "It seems that the experiment was a failure after all," he said at length. Crossing to the console, the Captain flicked a switch and demanded "Communications, Captain speaking. Any signal on the special frequency?"

"None, sir," the Communication Officer replied. "We're maintaining a strict watch."

Next, Rang checked with the observatory, only to receive the same answer.

The pinnacle's transmitter had an effective range of a light year. If the signal hadn't been detected, there was only one conclusion.

While the mathematicians sat silently, Rang ordered that the probes be left in orbit around Palmyra outside the radiation globe, be activated by radio and sent into orbits which would take them to the two thousand mile level to find out if the pinnacle hadn't yet hypered out, or to record the remains of the explosion of a ship carrying hyperspace engines. The probes drew a blank on both quests. All of which left the men aboard *Starfire* with no more questions to ask, save one.

The pinnacle wasn't on the planet. It hadn't exploded in space. It hadn't kept its rendezvous beyond the edge of the system.

So where was it ?

The by-now familiar twisting sensation, like pain inverted, of a short hop through hyperspace was over. Someone was heard to remark that he felt as if he'd been turned through one dimension too many.

"Let me know when you spot *Starfire*," Brady asked Ronnie Coleman who was using the pinnacle's telescope. They were broadcasting an automatic May Day signal.

"I don't think we'll have to bother looking for *Starfire*, Chief." He sounded as if he was talking with his mouth full. Brady moved quickly to his side. Coleman was staring in fascination through the instrument, muttering to himself something about the Inferno. Brady elbowed him aside and applied his eye to the telescope. He drew back as if he'd been bitten by a snake, then looked again. Slowly, he straightened up. Their glances met and slid away. Brady managed to say at last, "What does it mean ?"

This by-play was missed by the rest of the men, who were talking loudly in their relief at still being alive. Coleman cleared a vision port and they gazed out again, hardly able to believe their senses.

Two thousand miles below was a scene of magnificent desolation. Looming large was the bulk of Palmyra, most of the disc in sunlight. But it was not the Palmyra they had known, such a short time ago. The atmosphere had been completely stripped away, like a wrapper, leaving every detail hard and clear. The contours had changed beyond recognition. Where the oceans should have rolled, there lay exposed sea beds, like pale scars against the land areas.

There were fantastic juxtapositions of seared yellows and deep, almost black, purples ; bright, inexplicable scarlets and dull, oppressive greys and siennas, relieved by random slashes of green and orange.

Off to the left, at the edge of vision, was a parody of the star that had so recently flamed with malevolent splendour. The disc appeared to be slightly shrunken and not so bright as previously. Great hungry fingers of glowing particles still clutched at space, no longer black, but suffused with an insubstantial pearly light.

By this time, the other members of Team 31 were crowding to the vision ports, marvelling and puzzling at the scene that man's eyes had never beheld in half a million years of existence.

Brady's first action, after the initial numbness had receded a little, was to ensure that the pinnacle's May Day signal was actually operating.

Then everyone gathered round to hear what Ronnie Coleman had to say.

"You've just seen what happens when a star flexs its muscles," he said. "There must have been a rise in temperature of something like a thousand degrees, to account for the searing the planet took."

There was a murmur and someone objected that they wouldn't be here if that were the case.

"But we are here," Coleman retorted, emphasising the last word. "And I would judge—I can't say for sure, without checking and using instruments and computers—that the catastrophe took place at least a week ago !"

His voice was drowned out in an incredulous storm of protest.

"Quiet ! Quiet !" Brady yelled, at last restoring order. "Go on, Ronnie." He held his tone steady.

"Let's view the facts we have. One : we were in orbit two thousand miles above the surface of the planet. Two : at this altitude, the pinnacle was sent in to hyperdrive. Three : conditions were still normal when this event took place." He continued to check the points off on his fingers. "Four : when we next look out of the vision ports, instead of the *Starfire*, lying a thousand million miles out at the edge of the system, what do we see ? The planet, still two thousand miles below, and the star in space, as usual. But with a very significant difference."

There was absolute silence in the pinnacle now. Their faces had been, as it were, wiped clean of all expression. They were



prepared to take what Coleman had to tell them. After all, they were still alive, and the chances of that had been slim.

Coleman went on, "We haven't moved from orbit and yet we weren't annihilated, as we should have been. Why? If we didn't move through hyperspace, then we must have moved through another dimension—*time*!"

At this point, wildly excited words burst around their heads from the receiver. "*Starfire* here! Is that Team 31? Please answer! Where the hell have you been? Are you safe? Answer! We've been searching for you for eight days."

Brady went to the radio and said over Andy's shoulder, "We're safe and still in orbit round Palmyra."

The operator said hurriedly, "I'd better put you through to Captain Rang. And welcome home . . . wherever you've been."

"It should be whenever," Brady replied cryptically, as Rang came on, to ask the questions Brady had just answered. He did so again, adding soberly, "Dr. Coleman has given us an explanation, but it's too involved to discuss now."

"Very well, Matt. Wait in orbit and we'll pick you up shortly."

About three minutes later, the two-mile long *Starfire* appeared in normal space, some hundred thousand miles off. Brady took the pinnacle alongside and into the bay.

His first concern was for the disease-stricken men and he saw them safely in bed in the ship's hospital before reporting, with Coleman, to Captain Rang, who greeted them like men who had indeed returned from the dead.

The others present, White, the Chief Engineer, Overdrive Units, and the two mathematicians, Ted Duke and Preston Manson, stared, and muttered their welcomes as if they couldn't quite believe in the existence of the newcomers. White, in particular, was flabbergasted, and kept glancing obliquely at them. Grinning, Brady offered a hand. "Here, Andrew, pinch it and convince yourself it's real. I did the same myself."

"We had given you up for dead," Rang said, when they were seated. "When you failed to appear, then to answer our signals for a whole week, we were beginning to accept the reality that you were gone forever. We knew that you couldn't be in the vicinity of the star after its spectacular flare-up. The temperature, at its peak, was 970 degrees above normal," he added for Coleman's benefit. "It was thought that perhaps something had gone wrong with your overdrive and that you'd ended up somewhere out of

communication range. I speak for every member of the crew when I say how relieved I am that you are safe."

"Thank you, sir," Brady said, rubbing his nose. "I'll leave the explanations to Dr. Coleman. It might sound slightly less impossible—or should it be improbable—coming from him. Even yet, I find myself thinking that it's something that I imagined."

Rang smiled. "Go ahead, Dr. Coleman," he invited, reaching for a cigar.

"Briefly, sir, from all the facts available, there seems to me to be only one explanation: we travelled forward in time."

If he thought he could shock Rang, he was disappointed. The Captain merely raised his eyebrows; his extensive scientific training and experience prepared him for anything.

Andrew White looked out from under his voluminous eyebrows. "You'll be wanting us to believe in fairies, next." But his remark carried no conviction.

Manson and Duke, who had produced notebooks, pencils and autocalcs, began muttering busily through each others' calculations oblivious to the company. After five minutes, Duke removed his unlit pipe from his humorous mouth and pointed it like a gun at his colleague. He said matter-of-factly, "Substitution in the 43rd equation of the tenth series?"

Manson's crabbed face creased into a triumphant smile. "Wrong! The 44th equation—" Both men burst out laughing, then begged to be excused. "If I may Captain?" Manson asked permission to go on. Rang nodded and mathematician explained, "It's not only possible, Andrew, it's been right under our noses ever since the principles of motion in hyperspace were applied in practice. Time travel is complementary to hyperspace travel, requiring a different application of the same forces. Whether it can be accomplished without the presence of a planetary mass remains to be calculated."

"If time travel is to be possible from the surface of a planet—I'm thinking now in terms of personal movement—then the mass of the planet will have to be reckoned with."

Duke, his pipe poised like a conductor's baton, answered Rang's comments. "Only a series of rigidly controlled experiments will give us the answers. And I wouldn't mind being able to see ahead now!"

"I think," Rang smiled disarmingly at White, as he dropped his cigar into the desk orifice, and stood up, "that we're back to the fairies again."

The engineer drew his brows down, but joined in the laughter.

Rang went on, "As you know, gentlemen, this present tour of duty of the *Starfire* is almost completed. For the time being, we are returning to Meroe, to hospitalise the sick, and to give us all a rest. Then we are heading out farther than man has ever ventured before, except in imagination : to the very edge of our Galaxy. Good-night, gentlemen."

Pensively, Brady made his way to the hospital quarters. He knew, as they all did, that the journeyings of *Starfire* and of her sister-ships were not undertaken with the exploration of Earth-type planets as an end in itself, but as a means to a greater end. Valuable knowledge was added to mankind's store with each planet visited and each problem met and solved, or unsolved, as in some cases. Man must forever be seeking onward and outward. And there were other galaxies.

The people in hospital were still under sedation, so he wandered up to the observation dome. It was unoccupied. Still, eternal, starlight filtered into the dome. Behind, lay the vast, star-encrusted shield of the Milky Way, terrifying in its beauty, transcendent in its very existence.

And ahead ?

The spiral arm which nurtured the Sun was tapering off into the almost endless darkness. There waited reality in its starkest aspect. There, however briefly, man might approach and begin to comprehend the mystery of creation and set his philosophy on a practical footing.

Brady took a final look before he left the dome. They had come a long way, seen and endured a lot. But he felt that the last challenge would dwarf the rest.

What, he wondered, lay out there, beyond the reach of storms?

**donald malcolm**



*God decreed that the end of the Universe would come at a certain time and events moved towards that final cataclysm—but one member of the last generation alive on Earth had the temerity to question this decision.*

# the last generation

by ernest hill

---

To Galgan the words rasping from floor to platform and from platform back to floor were like the twittering of starlings in the throes of their annual mass neurosis. Speaker followed speaker, little clenched fists threshed in the air, vituperation, abuse, condemnatory epithets spat hysterically from delegate to delegate. The chairman's tiny arms windmilled and gyrated, now threateningly at the conference, now despairingly at the platform. Fear, Galgan thought, had lost none of its ancient ability to stir the latent baseness even in this, the Last Generation.

He adjusted his head-rest, sinking the great weight of his skull more comfortably into the woven softness of its padding. Why should one fear? What after all, was annihilation? Individual members of each generation had aged and died, playing their part in the eternal cycle since men evolved, back in the mists of time. From the First Generation men had died, singly and individually. Why should the knowledge that all would die together awake this atavistic manifestation of mass psychosis? It had been known for long enough. The Last Generation was the Last Generation and that was that.

He focussed on the higher plane of pure mathematics and was actually on the point of fading into the Contemplative when he was brought back to the Temporal by an awareness of sudden

silence. He turned his head-rest on the desk pivot to left and right. All the head-rests were swivelled in his direction. Even the Guardians had generated enough momentary concentration to fix him with their dull, uncomprehending, unblinking stares. He swivelled back to the platform.

"You had left us, I believe, Galgan." The chairman's piping tremolo trembled with a testy vibrant of admonition. So, someone had singled him out for question. He had long ago ceased to focus on the individual twanging in the piping chorus. A question no doubt required an answer. But to what purpose?

"I would like to propose," he projected, his tremolo husky with the disuse of years, "that this meeting adjourn and that the delegates find solace in more profitable contemplation."

The twittering broke forth again with renewed elemental sibilance. A hundred tremolos focussed on to a single Communal that even Galgan, the Ancient, could not quite dissociate from the Contemplative.

"Answer the question !"

It ebbed and flowed, stuttered and tweeted like the fluttering of a communal epiglottis.

"I did not hear the question," he brusked, wearily, "but I can guess its nature. You ask me what you should do."

The tweeting focussed again in the communal chant.

"What shall we do ? What shall we do ?"

What should they do, he reflected, these degenerates of the Last Generation, now he alone was left of the Penultimates. The Penultimates had known no more than they, but had had the dignity to direct their Contemplation away from the unanswerable. Their lives had been serene, ordered, uncluttered by the disorientating influences of hope—accepting with resignation the advent of the Ultimate. But then, they had been the Penultimates they had not been personally and directly affected like these, of the Last Generation. When he spoke, his tremolo was husky with a nearness to compassion.

"It is the year One, and the Twelfth Month," he husked, "Nothing can alter that. For 100,000 years, mankind has descended the immutable scale. 100,000 years is a long time and we have progressed, somewhat. We have achieved some little wisdom, though to what purpose now, I do not know. The years have slipped away, and, as was inevitable, we have reached the end. Now, unreasoningly, atavistically, we are afraid. We are unaccustomed to fear. It did not reach us until the year Ten.

"As the years descended, we accepted the Ultimate, its inevitability, pre-orientated the Communal Contemplative. Now individual fear has destroyed the faculty in you, the Last Generation. Without the Contemplative you are ill-equipped for the Reasoning. Do not try, my friends ! Think how fear has destroyed the balance of the psyche. A little fear in the year Ten, still more in Nine, geometrically progressive, it has brought you to this, this twittering inanity. Concentrate ! Seek again the Contemplative ! The Ultimate is the Ultimate."

Such was the prestige of Galgan, the last of the Penultimates, that his words penetrated even to the Guardians and for a while, a silence reigned. Almost the Communal Contemplative was achieved.

"You are right, Galgan," the strained tremolo of the chairman tweeted at length, commanding the attention due to the platform. "But the Contemplative is lost to us. It is hard to await the end with the Reasoning only. Action would be some solace if we had Directive."

The twittering began again here and there in the assembly but was quickly silenced as Galgan focussed the Vocal.

"Directive ?" he brusked. "Seek Directive where I shall seek it. With God."

Clamour threatened. Twitterings, bruskings, shuffling of midget feet, creaking of head-rests. But it was silenced again as the chairman raised his great head from its rest and sprittled fixation. Nevertheless, he voiced the Communal when he replied, "What can God do, or know ? Your generation and a thousand generations before have taken the question to God, have sought Directive. And to what purpose ? God speaks as God has always spoken. In riddles. The language, perhaps, of a forgotten age of saints. I do not know. But of this, I am convinced. If God had known the answer to the Ultimate, he would long ago have spoken it. Will not the Ultimate destroy God too ?" The Delegate on Galgan's left beat his tiny hands together. It was, thought Galgan, like the flapping of wings when the bird is caged.

"God is not immortal," sired the delegate, "God is not omniscient. God is the Fraud of the Ancients."

As usual, when Establishment was challenged, the Guardians took up the accustomed lilting,

"God endures even unto the Last Generation."



"God created the First Generation . . ." They were silenced testily by the chairman's fixation.

"I cannot believe that God created the First Generation," he twanged, "I believe it is much more probable that the First Generation created God." It was the old argument, of course, and an unprofitable speculation on this, the 25th day of the twelfth month, year One. Galgan rose, settling his head comfortably on the shoulder-rest.

"Nevertheless," he replied, "I am going to God. Maybe God has not known until now the answer. But God, I think, evolves. He may deduce before the ultimate is Absolute. If he does not, our theorising into the nature of his being will likewise prove fruitless."

He moved slowly and cautiously down the centre aisle, his reed-like legs supporting with difficulty the cumbrous, swaying weight of the giant head, balanced precariously on the superstructure of the shoulder-rests. Nevertheless he back-motioned testily the Guardians who sought to aid his passage and alone tottered from the assembly hall toward the House of God.

For 500 years Galgan had walked alone, contemptuous of the Guardians, their small-headedness, their barren-mindedness, their inbred subservient conformity. The Penultimates, it is true, had used them in their declining years. There were few of his ancient colleagues had dared move far alone once their 200 years of agile life had passed. Where were they now? All, one after the other, Guardian or no Guardian, had finally stumbled, cracked and inevitably concussed. None had lived to see their 300th year. They might just as well, he contemplated, have been the Last Generation themselves. Their individual ultimates in sum total a communal. A communal less one. Galgan the Ancient.

The House of God was, like all the buildings attributed to the First Generation, solid, majestic, enduring. The glittering composition of its ancient blocks untarnished by the winds of the millennia. How it had been raised, by whom, or of what materials Galgan had never conjectured. Speculation on the Material was outside the function of the Contemplative. A vague sense of awe occasionally crossed the Atavistic, emotional, never amounting to a comparison. The First Generation was the First Generation as the Ultimate was the Ultimate. He did not confuse the Reasoning with the Contemplative, still less with the Atavistic.

The monuments of the First Generation supplied the essentials of life. Clothing, food, instructions on the Communal Contemplative, books, they emerged endlessly from the depths of the monumental chasms, where none might enter. To those still harbouring a religious element in the Atavistic, it was the work of God. God had made the First Generation and the monuments and they brought forth abundance. God had once been praised and worshipped and all generations had believed in his omniscient omnipotence, Grossheads and Guardians alike. That had long ago dwindled as the years decreased and the Ultimate came nearer. The Reasoning had questioned an omnipotence that was powerless to avert the Ultimate. 'God speaks in riddles,' the atheistic Grosshead had tweeted. It was true of course, Galgan reflected as he entered, tottering unsteadily through the great doors that silently opened at his approach. God spoke in riddles.

Inside, it was dusky, silent. Heavy it seemed with the aura of the millennia. The two white-coated acolytes stood silently at each side of the chancel arch, for what purpose Galgan neither knew nor conjectured. White coated acolytes had stood by God since the First Generation and that was enough.

The hundred eyes of God glowed in the dusk. Someone was already in oblation. It was well, thought Galgan. He settled in a pew at the rear of the temple and began to focus the Reasoning abstractly adjusting the head-rest. God evolves, he had reasoned. All else evolves, God must also evolve. His head-rest swivelled to the supplicant. He would listen to the word of God and apply the Reasoning, obtain data and retire into the Contemplative. The supplicant was a young Grosshead on his knees before the oblatory panel. Perfunctorily, he gave the customary oblation.

"God who created the First Generation, who brings forth abundance from the monuments, who built all things—hear me!"

God, as usual did not reply. The hundred eyes glowed with a filmy incandescence, but the Voice was silent, awaiting the formal statement of the proposition. Galgan listened with a vacant Reasoning, applying focus. It was the old story. A young Grosshead in the throes of the Atavistic. A sex constant for a young girl evincing sex preponderance for a Guardian. The female Atavistic turned now and then to the Guardians, ignoring in them the absence of the Contemplative, the stunted Reasoning, the ugly primordial small head. The focus concentrated alone on the more powerful body. It was understandable.

To the Contemplative, the only function of the body was to support the head and the Guardians had little enough of that to support. But to the Atavistic, the sex concentration was paramount and body structure generated a primitive fixation in the Atavistic. Fortunately, cross-breeding was impossible. Millennia ago, there had been a tabu along with so many others, now obsolete tabus. The different body sizes now precluded this possibility. Nevertheless, the sex-preponderance manifested itself occasionally. The statement of proposition ended as customary with the plaintively tweeted, "What shall I do?"

Galgan waited. There was a slight rustle known as the Breath of God and then the answer. The customary riddles of God. "State genetic antecedents of female and of endomorph." Senseless, meaningless clangour.

"I do not know how to interpret your riddles," the suppliant tweeted. "I must remove the Guardian."

God rustled and clattered one of the vexatious couplets that the atheists most despised.

"Weapons and violence are tabu  
Only God protects the true,"

"I cannot understand you," tweeted the Grosshead. "Neither the Contemplative nor the Reasoning can focus. What are weapons? What is violence?" The answer came.

"Violence and weapons are tabu."

The young Grosshead rose unsteadily to his feet.

"Can I part the girl from the Guardian," he brusked. The answer was the same.

"State genetic antecedents of female and of endomorph." The Grosshead tottered from the temple. Convinced, thought Galgan, that God, though present in the hundred eyes, was no more than the Fraud of the Ancients. He rose slowly and tottered to the panel. Twitching the oblatory button, he knelt with difficulty before the head-rest. The hundred eyes awoke regarding him. First he convinced himself as to the Presence of God. His Reasoning was swift, he knew, almost as instantaneous as his own.

"Square root 44944," he brusked, omitting the oblation. The reply clattered. "21."

" $\frac{4}{5} P \pm \sqrt{10 + \frac{16}{25} P^2}$ ."  
"6.552 or - 1.526."

The calculations were simple, of course, but the answers had been quick, not instantaneous, as his own would have been,



but swift enough to prove the Reasoning and Presence of God. Suddenly he brusked the reason for the invocation.

“The Ultimate is due in five days from now. How to avert ?”  
The customary jingle clanged in reply.

“The Ultimate is Ultimate

“Never seek to question it.”

“That is all very well,” Galgan brusked, reverence having no preponderance in his Atavistic.

“For 100,000 years, I imagine, you have given that reply. Do you know the nature of the Ultimate ?”

The rustling Breath of God seemed longer than usual. It was almost as if God hesitated or stumbled in a divine perplexity. At length the answer clanged :

“God knows all things that men have ever known.”

“I am prepared to believe you,” Galgan said. “100,000 is a very long time. But is your knowledge now the same as it was in the First Generation ? Have you not added to it ? Have you not evolved ?”

This time it was evident that God was troubled, even hesitant. He rustled, there were stumbling sounds as of words half begun, liased with fractured syllables. Finally there was a sound reminiscent of an indrawn, tremulous sigh. Finally he replied. “God evolves when activated. Not in quiescence.”

The words were strange to Galgan, but their significance impinged upon the Reasoning. God evolved only when the oblatory button was pressed during an invocation. Not otherwise. This would constitute an evolution of but a small farction of 100,000 years. Nevertheless it was something. God had been thought omniscient and an evolving omniscience was still a factor to be reckoned with.

“What is the nature of the Ultimate ?”

“The Ultimate is Ultimate,

Never seek to question it.”

“You have evolved beyond that sort of nonsense,” Galgan brusked, “If you know its nature—speak ! It is soon upon us both.”

There was a long silence and then a quiet voice, almost, it seemed, like the phenomenon of music, that quaint stirring of the atavistic at sunset.

“The galaxies of anti-matter are approaching the galaxies of matter.”

“Elucidate !” brusked Galgan.

"Before the First Generation was, the speed of their approach was charted. The year, the hour, the moment was set, known, and constant. In six days it is upon us. Matter will meet with anti-matter."

"I do not understand the meaning of matter, nor of anti-matter," Galgan replied, "nor can I understand how anything could have been known before the First Generation. But let that pass. Tell me what its effect will be."

"As the force fields impinge, the universe will dissolve in one giant conflagration. Nothing will emerge from the confrontation of matter with anti-matter but a gaseous cloud, filling the void. Finally, as each inversely charged particle cancels out, nothing will remain but eternal emptiness, even as it was in the beginning and shall be unto the end." There was a pause and then a different voice, far away and more atavistically musical, spoke with an infinite sadness :

"The sun shall be darkened and moon shall not give her light. The stars that are in heaven shall fall and the powers that are in heaven shall be shaken."

There was no fear in the Atavistic of Galgan. He did not understand the terminology but the sequence was clear in the Contemplative and a flow emerged. In the beginning was eternal emptiness and from this emerged a temporal state, ultimately destroying itself and returning to the eternal."

"This is paradox," he mused, "eternity is indivisible."

"There is only the Temporal," God replied, "which is itself eternal. It evolves from nothing and returns to nothing eternally."

"You mean that the whole process will repeat itself?"

"Not as you conceive," God replied. "It is a single process, but is itself, eternal. Eternity is a concept of a finite mind and has no meaning. The space-time continuum is, in effect circular. The beginning is also the end."

The philosophy of God, Galgan thought, was obscure and he had no desire to pursue the contemplation further. He returned to the Reasoning.

"How can the Ultimate be averted?"

"The Ultimate is Ultimate

"Never seek to . . ." The jingle faded and was replaced by a sudden brusque epithet.

"Space-shift!"

Galgan was startled. There was a great monument, miles in diameter that seemed to have no entrance and no purpose, since it provided none of the necessities of life, neither food, nor heat,

nor books, nor clothing. Traditionally, it was known as the Space-shift Centre. To even approach it, had once been more than ordinarily tabu.

"What is Space-shift?" he asked.

"The Ancients before the First Generation studied the movement of space and time. It was known that the entire universe could be moved down the continuum. A vast amount of data was collated, the necessary equipment built and housed in the Space-shift Centre. Generation after Generation worked on the project, but to no purpose. The final formula eluded them—eluded God. It was announced that the formula was insoluble. Space-shift was abandoned and the years calculated to the last second of the Ultimate. The calendar was fixed—the year was 100,000."

Galgan focussed only on the essential factor.

"No formula is insoluble," he brusked. The hundred eyes of God regarded him, absorbing, it seemed, a new concept.

"Man has developed the Contemplative—can man now solve the insoluble?"

"Give me the data," Galgan demanded.

There was a long silence. When the voice of God at last reverberated it was no longer a clanger but a Grosshead voice that brusked:

"Take note!" For a moment Galgan was puzzled. Note? Then he remembered, the Guardians took notes on the rare occasions when information was imparted to them. His Atavistic was offended.

"I do not take notes," he brusked, "I focus." God seemed more humble.

"The data would fill 20,000 pages, but I will give it to you. You do not need to know to what the symbols refer. All factors are reproduceable in the Space-shift Centre. The problem revolves solely around the solution to the proposition I shall expound."

"Proceed!" Galgan focussed reception.

The twenty-fifth day of the Twelfth month passed. God recited with unerring exactitude the data stored in the divine memory and unspoken for 100,000 years. Galgan sat unmoving. It was the tenth hour on the twenty-sixth day that the proposition ended. Galgan, the knowledge of the Ancients now stored in the cortex of his vast brain, relaxed reception.

"It will take some days," he tweeted. "But it is soluble." God, as if unbalanced by the incidence of hope, stuttered, rustled, whistled in an odd undulating rhythm and finally tweeted:



"There are but five days left."

"I cannot hurry the Contemplative," Galgan replied, "We must hope." He had been about to add, "And pray," but the absurdity of this impinged upon the reasoning. God must now pray to him rather than he to God.

"I will focus the Contemplative," he said, "and return when the solution has resolved itself."

It was 20 hours on the 31st day when Galgan faded into the Temporal. The hundred eyes of God still glowed with translucent animation since he was still held in oblation by Galgan's presence.

"I have the solution," Galgan tweeted wearily. "It is surprisingly simple. The whole has resolved itself into a simple formula :  $Gg + P \sqrt{v - i} = SS$ .

It would seem a paradox, even sacrilegious to infer that God might also be subject to the Atavistic, but when he clanged, it seemed that the Voice was rasping with an emotion worthy of a Guardian.

"Mount the Episcopal Chair !" he ordered. "There is little time."

The Episcopal Chair before the face of God was untouchable, tabu and holy. Galgan did not hesitate. Weak from kneeling before the oblatory head-rest, he raised himself only with difficulty but with focus on determination. Slowly, unsteadily, he tottered to the Chair. Outraged, the acolytes advanced, only to halt, confused and discomfited by the clangour of the wrath of God. Trembling awkwardly, Galgan mounted the chair.

"Press button marked 'SS'" God ordered. A cavity opened and at the speed of thought, the Episcopal Chair hurtled into the Bowels of God, through and under the temple, coming silently and easily to rest in the Space-shift Centre. A little bemused by the unaccustomed acceleration and deceleration, Galgan saw swimming before him a giant panel, almost a replica of the Face of God. It seemed that, if not omniscient, God was at least omnipresent for his voice clanged from somewhere above :

"Quickly—the Gravitational Panel—far left !" Galgan was about to dismount from the chair.

"Do not dismount—press button marked 'G'." The chair slewed silently and swiftly to the vast panel.

"The dial marked 'G'—turn pointer slowly to 'max'."

"What is a dial ?" Galgan asked.

"The letter 'G'—look for the letter 'G'." Galgan's eyes travelled slowly over the panel. Unaccustomed to reason

temporally, he at length noticed a round object carrying the symbol 'G.' "I see it," he husked.

"Turn it !" God boomed.

Galgan reflected. A person turned when changing direction, a bookleaf turned—but how this round contrivance ? He attempted to turn it as the page of book, but it was rigid.

"Circular !" God ordered. His tiny hand could not span the surface, but the meaning of the order registered in the Reasoning. The dial was still rigid. One hand on each side, and exerting all his strength, he moved it a single degree. A red light glowed and a faint whirring sound came from somewhere above. A glass window shone like the full moon in the ninth month and within, a quivering sinusoidal loop rose and fell above and below a black horizon.

"Eat !" God ordered. "You have capsules."

He had not thought of eating, but, minute as his stomach was, it required some nourishment to maintain the constant energising of the cortex. He swallowed two capsules and returned to the dial. An hour passed. With frequent rests between each movement he finally completed his task. The pointer stood at 'max.' The sinusoidal loop danced with a fluorescent brilliance and the whirring from above was the murmur of a million wings. It was the twenty-first hour. A million light years away down the continuum, a cluster of stars vanished and space was as empty as if they had never been.

"Little g," God boomed. Down below was another round contrivance marked with the symbol -g-.

"Pull out to the full !" God commanded. Galgan strove with all his might. Little g remained immovable.

"Hold g with left hand firmly. Press button marked 'Retract,' with right !"

The Episcopal Chair shot backwards with the speed of thought and Galgan was once more in the House of God. He pressed SS and was again before the panel in Space-shift. Little g was withdrawn. P was simple. A button similar to the oblatory button in the House of God or the controls of the Episcopal Chair. The air was now filled with the insect humming. The entire vast building seemed alive and the ground beneath Galgan's feet seemed to throb with an odd, peristaltic surge.

The great effort had been too much for Galgan. Slowly, like a sunflower stem tired of its summer burden, his legs bent and his head sank forward on to the rest and his eyes closed in sleep. An

hour passed. Two hours. A mere thousand light years away star clusters swirled into vaporous clouds, turning red, gold, green, blue and finally grey—colourless, non-existent.

The void extended. Into the dreamless coma of the sleeping Grosshead the thunderous clangour of God at last pervaded. The warning mechanism of the Atavistic triggered and Galgan awoke.

“v . the velocity panel—press button marked ‘v’.” He was there, swivelled by the motion of the Episcopal Chair.

“The keys ! The square root keys ! Press ‘v’ and the square root key !” ‘v’ was another dial, less rigid than the first. In half an hour he had turned it to its full extent and the search for the square root key began. He found it finally along with a dozen others with odd and unknown symbols protruding from a lower shelf. It was easily depressed, but the result was startling. The whole building, panels, Chair, roof, seemed to fade as if they were no longer there, or only partly extant, like a memory felt but eluding the visual. The Voice of God was far away, echoing from another plane or strata of existence. Another time it may have been, where the voice was no longer a sound wave on the present air, but a ripple on the lake of memories.

Fortunately he had the hang of the thing now and only one symbol remained. ‘i’ and the minus key, which he had already seen along with the square root protuberance. He found it after much concentration due to the blurring of the visual, or at least found where it partly was or had been, rocking with the peristaltic surge which seemed now to encompass the Universe as if time itself were breathing.

At 2359 hours on 31st of the twelfth month of the year One, Galgan, depressed the final key and Space-shift was actuated. The End became the Beginning and the Beginning, the End. The Universe slid into the area of Prime Cause. Space-shift was complete.

Space-shift was also universal. Into the area of Prime Cause streamed the universe of Matter together with the Universe of Anti-matter. Instantaneously all matter disintegrated, Galgan, God, the sun, the moon and a billion stars were as if they had never been. Only in the empty universe was the Word. ‘Heaven and Earth may pass away, but my words shall not pass away.’

Was this the End ? No. This was the area of Prime Cause and was the beginning.

**ernest hill**



*There may be some things which the mind of man cannot comprehend without losing his reason. In some circumstances, it would be best not to know at all.*

# the countenance

by p. f. woods

---

Brian came into the main lounge of the big passenger ship lost in thought. The abstract, worried look on his face contrasted noticeably with the assured, well-educated men and women around him.

Brian himself was only vaguely aware of the difference ; that is, he never thought about it. He, too, was supposed to have received a good education, but it had made no mark on him. Even in those fields where his main interest lay he had scored badly. As for the social and moral aspects of an upbringing, he literally seemed to have heard nothing about the notions which so tacitly form human custom. Society was an institution which he had not yet joined.

It would be hard to define what was the origin and centre of Brian's own thoughts. It was as if the mind was first an unqualified intelligence, which society, like a magnetic field, forced into its own configuration as soon as a human being entered its presence. But Brian, by being non-magnetic, was exempt. Whatever the nature of his mind was, it was not something that had developed, but was an original condition, harking from before the time when the mind fell into the state of living with other average human beings. Brian had not entirely fallen.

This was not to say that his mind was undeveloped, or that other people's minds had ever been in the original state. Some

of them seemed to have formed within society itself. What it did mean was that relative to other minds, his made its way under its own steam. Faltering though they might be, his thoughts were aligned to a vaster application than were ordinary thoughts. In the lounge of the great starship, he was like a visitor to a distant land.

He was not sure why he had entered the lounge. He had some dim idea of seeing if there was a model of the ship's lay-out there. Chiefly, it was because he had nothing to do.

He plodded across the floor, his feet silent on the plush carpet, and paused halfway across. His mild, blue-eyed gaze took in the huge room. A number of passengers were seated on couches and at tables, talking, reading, and doing the desultory things people occupy themselves with when they are forced to spend their days waiting. Brian had not mixed with them much, and it would have been difficult for him to do so. He had found that they did not like someone who took so little notice of them.

He noticed that three tall, cloaked scientocrat officers were just leaving. Brian's gaze lingered on them. As he turned away, one of the passengers caught his attention.

The man was large-boned and fair-haired. He was reading a technical magazine at a low table.

It took Brian several seconds to be sure. Then he hurried over.

He said : " Mercer."

The man looked up, blankly at first. Gradually, a look of recognition and astonishment came over his features.

" Brian !" he said.

He stood up. The two inspected one another surreptitiously, surprised at the familiarity of each other's face after an absence of ten years.

Brian's grin became sheepish. He shrugged his shoulders self-consciously, aware of how the other was regarding him and making a reckoning of the teenager he had once known—as indeed Brian himself was doing. It was an odd sensation, like being confronted with an outside view of his own life he had lost grip of.

Each wished to question the other, but it was awkward at first to make a start. " I'm looking for the lay-out model of the ship." Brian said. " Are you coming ?"

The other gestured enthusiastically. " I've already seen it. It's over here."

They spent about ten minutes studying the stereoscopic schema. Brian peered through the bioscopes, following corridors, hallways, engine rooms and power leads, while Mercer chattered expertly about the design. As always, he was excited by technicalities and already, after a previous brief intense examination, he knew the functioning of the starship inside out. More than the actual schema, he was aware of the principles on which it was founded. In those ten minutes his brilliant exposition gave Brian a competent knowledge of the ship which by himself would have taken a fumbling hour.

Brian regarded Mercer as a phenomenon. He took all the advantages of society, but wasn't fooled by it. At the same time, he was willing to take a place in it. It was this, his willingness to compromise, that made him different to Brian.

Brian was glad to see that though he was approaching the end of his third decade, he was still essentially the same person. He had not undergone the frightening metamorphosis which betrays the shallowness of most people.

They left the lay-out and found a table in the further part of the lounge. Here, they talked of various matters. Chemistry (Mercer's subject), physics, astro-physics, and micro-physics. All the time their conversation veered nearer to philosophical considerations and the intriguing question of why things exist.

It was their schoolboy discussions, all over again.

"What do you think about it all now?" Mercer asked presently. "Have you come to any further conclusions?"

Brian didn't answer. The question was too sudden for him. He shrugged his shoulders, slightly embarrassed.

Mercer had not really expected an answer, but he had felt compelled to ask. After all, that was what probably held them together, and if the interest was neglected now, it might never be repaired again.

"Where are you bound for?" he asked conversationally, when Brian's eyes did not lift from the table-top.

"I've got a job on Drone VII. Computer clerk." He smiled wryly.

"I've got a job there, too." Mercer decided not to press the point that his was permanent, well-paid and professional. "I never thought you were much given to travelling to get work."

"No . . . I've lived a static sort of life so far. Only now and then becoming an aberrant and weirdy kid!" He grinned, and



glanced around him. "It's only for seven months, then they pay my fare back." He grinned again. "They'll go to any expense to get labour out there."

Mercer nodded, following his own thoughts. He remembered that when Brian had been a fourteen-year old boy he had started going around with a preoccupied air, as though working out some grave and fundamental problem. As it happened, this was the case, for the enquiry into philosophy and science had for him taken a sudden turn, from being abstract and speculative, into something immediate, personal and urgent.

How was anything known? Only in terms of something else. And how was that something else understood? Only in further terms. And so on, along the chain, until the unknown was reckoned in terms of the unknown. The end result of all reasoning was still ignorance.

This could make a joke of the philosopher. Just the same, the yearnings of the human mind could not be abandoned. Brian had turned all his attention to the problem of finding out whether the mind could surmount its obstacle.

He had always been uncommunicative about this aspect of things. Mercer wanted to know, without overtly prying, whether any progress had ever been made.

"Things haven't gone too well for me," Brian suddenly admitted in a serious tone. "It's pretty tedious to have to make a living. As for other things, well . . ."

Mercer waited.

"So what?" Brian continued in a burst of exasperation. "All that happens is that you die in the end, and that's that."

"Yes." Mercer could think of no other reply.

"Come on," Brian said after a moment, "let's go and look at the vision screens."

He stood up. Mercer followed him out of the lounge, across a plush foyer, and through to the vision room.

Here, on television screens, passengers could see the depths of space through which the giant starship was passing. The six screens showed fore, aft, and the four quarters, and were oval-shaped, each about three feet down the long axis.

The vision room was like a picture gallery. The screens were spaced on the walls like paintings, and it was impossible to gain an overall impression. Each screen had to be viewed separately.

The starship was travelling near the edge of the galaxy, and the pictures were awesome enough. One showed what seemed to be a huge rift in the stars, really a region of obscuring gas and dust. Another showed a clearer view of the blazing galactic lens. Yet another pointed beyond the rim, into darkness. This screen was little more than a dark blank, with a few dim points of light.

It thrilled Brian to think that these scenes were being relayed from outside the hull, but beautiful as they were, they were only images. He had seen the same, many times, in cinemas and on television on Earth.

"This is worth seeing."

"Yes."

Brian leaned towards Mercer confidentially. "There's something that bothers me. All these interstellar vessels have unbroken hulls. There are no direct vision ports to the outside. Why?"

Mercer thought about it for a moment. "I suppose it's more convenient. When I was on Kaddan II I went beneath the Sulphur Sea in one of those big submarines. There were no vision ports on that, either."

"Under ten thousand atmospheres I wouldn't want there to be any. There are no engineering problems like that in space."

"I suppose it's just convenience," repeated Mercer.

"There's more to it than that. Nobody's allowed to look outside. Not even the crew. All observations are made indirectly by externally mounted instruments. Yet just you try to find out why! There must be some kind of official phobia about space, or something."

"What difference does it make?" Mercer said. "Perception is indirect anyway. You record the outside world with your sense organs and then present the recordings somewhere inside your brain, just like television. These screens are the internal end of the ship's senses."

"It's still funny," Brian muttered stubbornly.

"Well it's no use complaining. There's bound to be a reason. It's a matter of design."

Brian gave up the argument. Mercer, he realised, was solidly trained scientifically. He had faith that the starship moved implacably through the void with all its affairs perfectly arranged. Mentally he was dominated by the fateful Declaration of Moscow issued by the Final Comintern of 2150 A.D.

The Comintern, from which present civilisation had sprung, had based science firmly on the Control of Nature by Man.

Brian recognised the achievements of Scientocratic Communism established at that time, and which had governed Earth ever since. But he often wondered about that particular item of doctrine, even though it had such a firm hold on the public mind. He wondered how seriously it was taken by the Inner Scientocrats themselves, two centuries later.

They left the vision room and wandered through the corridors for half an hour or so. Then Mercer announced his decision to go to bed.

"I've found it's best to have regular habits," he explained.

Brian nodded blankly. They arranged to meet next morning in the lounge, since they would probably miss one another at breakfast.

Brian himself did not go to his room straight away. He did not have the will to keep to a time-table, and besides, he had something on his mind. He went walking through the corridors, rooms and galleries of the huge ship. The passenger section was extensive, stretching practically from hull to hull, ending aft at the Engine Section, and giving out for'ard to the equally sacrosanct parts which housed the scientocrat crew quarters.

Idly, he thought about Mercer. He had noticed that the mannerisms of boyhood had only slightly altered in form. He had the same expressions, the same ways of utterance. It was odd how it all survived in a man now much older.

He soon left behind the more populated parts of the ship. Towards the hull, the corridors of the passenger section did not end abruptly; they assumed the character of tunnels, with few intersections. Cabins, reading rooms and restaurants were left behind.

The lighting became functional and austere. Stained wood and pastel plastic gave way to plated steel. The tunnel was punctuated at intervals by telephones and panels of instruments whose meters Brian only dimly understood. More rarely, there were sections of the tunnel wall apparently designed to open up by the simple operation of a clasp: lockers containing some kind of stores or apparatus.

All this was standard equipment on an interstellar vessel. Brian was near the periphery of the ship, and he understood that these tunnels were usually visited only by crew members.



His excitement mounted as he realised that he was approaching nearer and nearer to the ultimate void. He was passing through the outer wrappings which wound protectively round the passenger compartments. Perhaps only feet separated him from the final hull plating. And that was only inches away from—absolute nothing.

Was it true that no one of any rank was allowed to look into space? Or was it permitted to Scientocrats, as he suspected? Did they monopolise the sight of the outer void?

He stopped. There was no sound in the stillness of the steel corridors. The constantly acting drive, a thousand feet away, was noiseless. But he gazed along the confines of the tunnel, trying to recover in his mind the whole of his experience of life.

He hadn't formulated exactly why he had come on this trip, or why he was exploring these corridors now. There seemed no need, since there was no one to tell it to.

But the history of it was long. Though it was important to him, it was difficult to explain this importance to anyone else, even Mercer. He felt that the possibility of a fundamental experience lay beyond the curving enclosure of those steel walls.

Long ago, his attempts to think objectively had brought him up against a strange fact. It was not only human thinking that was subjective. *Sight itself was subjective.*

On Earth, the horizon set a boundary on vision which was never broken, even by gazing into the night sky. In addition, space was divided up and apportioned into a close-pressed multiplicity of objects: buildings, trees, people, hills, cloud and sky. The variegated and bounded environment seemed to occlude vision, distort it.

Brian was aware of this firm imprisonment of his consciousness. All his efforts to free perception from the objects around him had been of no avail. Only by peering into the uncluttered gulf beyond all worlds, in his belief, would his life come to a satisfactory conclusion.

At first, it had only been a stray thought. Then he had discovered the injunction against seeing beyond the hull of a starship. The strange ruling had endowed his notion with mystery. It was forbidden knowledge, promising to reveal unguessed secrets.

Perhaps it was fanciful, perhaps poetic, but it had a compelling effect on him.

He stepped forward again. Any time now, he should be hard up against the outer hull, which as far as most people knew, consisted of unbroken sheeting.

But Brian was banking on the principle that no system in a starship would be built without safety factors. The possibility of breakdown must be taken into account.

Abruptly, the tunnel turned a sharp angle and came to an end after running up a short, steep incline. The termination was crudely engineered ; a roof curved overhead at an awkward angle, symmetrical with the rest of the construction, and reached down to within two feet of the floor.

It was clearly a larger wall which the tunnel had run into. Staring down from the roof, just above head-height, a heavy disk-plate stood out an inch and a half from the surrounding surface, studded with bolt-heads and painted over.

This was it. Brian placed first his cheek, then his ear against the roof-wall. The outer hull—or at least an inner lamination of it.

Reaching up, he tried to turn one of the bolt-heads. Naturally, it was quite immovable.

As he turned to go back the way he had come, he heard footsteps.

Freezing, he listened. They weren't as near as he had thought at first—but they were quite near. He darted forward, back round the bend, then listened again. They became louder.

About twenty yards down the corridor, a figure appeared from an intersecting tunnel, crossed the corridor, then disappeared on the other side. Slowly, the footsteps faded away.

He hadn't been seen, but it did show that the starship's outer layers were not altogether deserted. He needed to be careful.

Quickly, he regained the populated parts of the ship and made his way to his own cabin. There, in a state of nervous exhaustion, he went to bed and immediately fell straight to sleep.

Brian met Mercer again in the main lounge the next day. When Mercer walked in, he was already waiting there, sitting quietly and watching the people around him.

Superficially, he seemed more cheerful, but talked less. It did not take Mercer long to realise that the apparent good humour was more nerves than anything else. Underneath, Brian was just as subdued, but something had been added. Usually, he gave the impression of purposelessness ; today, he had tapped his inner resources and seemed to be going about something.

Mercer found the phenomenon vaguely sinister.

He followed Brian's line of talk cautiously, almost unwillingly. It seemed inconsequential at first, but its very oddness told Mercer that his friend was clumsily trying to lead up to some subject he was reluctant to approach directly.

Mercer could not help smiling to himself. He had no idea what the matter was, but if he knew Brian it was bound to be something that could not possibly be approached indirectly. When the subject was finally broached, it would jar even more on the casual talk than if it had been offered as an opening gambit.

Eventually it came. Brian coughed.

"There's something very interesting about these starships," he said in a tone different from before.

"Yes?" Mercer said, glad to take the bait. "What's that?"

Brian leaned forward, and seemed to be searching for words.

"Have you ever wondered," he said in a low voice, "why interstellar ships are always officered by Scientocrats?"

Mercer considered the unexpected, though perfectly reasonable, question.

At that moment three technical crew officers happened to pass by, and he watched them speculatively. Tall, austere, aloof, they swept by without seeming to notice anything of their surroundings. On the fronts of their white shirts and the backs of their yellow cloaks was emblazoned the prime scientific diagram: three vectors interlocked with three others, portraying the structure of space and matter.

Slowly, he said, "No."

"I have. Why should they be? Spaceships aren't so difficult to handle. Much more complicated jobs are left to common technicians like yourself. Why are the precious Scientocrats forced into such a menial business?"

"I don't know."

Still speaking low, Brian continued: "I know something not many people do. These Scientocrats have to visit the Innermost Chamber before they are given command of their first ship and receive some kind of information."

Mercer looked at him in mild astonishment. "What is it?"

"That's what I'd like to know."

"You make it sound very mysterious."

"I don't think so. But it must be something real. To keep it from public knowledge, it must be something . . ." He sought for a word.



"Deep?" Mercer suggested.

"If you like. At any rate, it must be highly unusual. I think it's something to do with why these ships have no direct outside view."

"Why?"

"Doesn't it strike you as strange that tens of thousands of people take journeys on these marvellous, safe ships, without ever getting a glimpse of space?"

"You mean out there is something—different—"

"Different." Brian joined him on the last word.

"Not what we thought. Hmm." Mercer sat back, his face puckered pensively. Brian could see in that face the sixteen year old boy suddenly confronted by a new scientific puzzle.

"It might be something political," Mercer surmised. "Perhaps another space-travelling race is hostile. The government could well decide to keep quiet about that, and leave passengers in the dark if they should have to or attack. For that matter there might be a space battle going on right now and we wouldn't know about it."

"Unless we were hit. Even then, there are the television screens."

"Television screens can be switched off. I agree, though, I'm just bantering. Don't the screens invalidate your argument, though? You can look outside on those at any time."

"It's not the same. It's only a picture, not the real thing. Like looking at a photograph. That's what gave me an idea of what it is."

"Something psychological?" Mercer asked, quick to pick up Brian's train of thought. "Yes, that could be it. Perhaps it makes people neurotic to have a window on the universe."

"That's the sort of angle." Brian's blue eyes shone. "A psychological effect, which ordinary people aren't able to take. So the Scientocrats protect them even from their own curiosity. The Scientocrats know, of course, but they're men of outstanding calibre who can be trusted and won't crack up."

Mercer's face cleared. "I think you've hit the nail on the head," he said in a pleased tone.

"Let's not jump to conclusions. The point is, *I think I can take it*. I won't go nuts. It won't do me any harm, it would do me good. I'm that sort of person."

Mercer laughed. "Now go and tell that to the captain."

"He'd really co-operate, wouldn't he?"

He leaned back. "I went for a walk towards the hull last night. I was working on a supposition. That is, the hull can't be *completely sealed*. It's always possible that the external instrumentation could break down, and in that case they'd have to take sightings through the hull, either in person or by pointing cameras through an aperture. So there must be such an aperture which can be opened in case of emergency.

"Well, there is an aperture. I've found it."

Mercer felt vaguely out of his depth. "What did you see?"

"The cover's bolted down."

He hesitated. "There's a wrench in my luggage."

"Whew!" This time Mercer was surprised. "You've really thought this thing out, haven't you?"

"Not really. Just call it fortuitous. But I need a look-out. Now if we go along there tonight you can keep watch while I get the bolts off."

"Hey, hold it!" Mercer was aghast. "You can't do that!"

"Why?"

"It's not allowed! The regulations are very strict. You can't mess about with the equipment of a starship!"

Brian was motionless for a bare second. Then he relaxed, laughing.

"Okay," he said, letting the matter drop. "What are you planning to do this afternoon?"

"I might go to the cinema."

The ship's cinema was the equal in size of any on Earth, and had a well-stocked library. It played a large part in the lives of most passengers during the months' long voyages.

Seated in the darkness of the cinema, Brian fell into a contemplative mood.

Full-coloured, three-dimensional images moved across the screen. The show was a romance-adventure taking place in Southern America. Brian enjoyed it.

Even so, he felt annoyed with himself. It was ridiculous, to be gliding through interstellar space, and yet still to be engrossed in the sights and scenes to be found on Earth! Really, he supposed, the ship was a part of Earth. It was a carefully enclosed piece of the Earth environment, designed to transport passengers in perfect comfort without their ever feeling that they had left their world.

When they landed at their destination, the illusion was maintained. A planet was still a planet, no matter how weird or colourful

and so it resembled Earth. The change of location did nothing to disturb their psychology. The important thing was, that they should not experience anything of another scale.

Brian felt the unreality of it. He sensed that the scientocracy found it necessary to assist in this imprisonment of the psyche, which he sought to escape.

The film ended. People rose from their seats, moved up the aisles, into the foyer, and formed chattering, laughing groups.

But for Brian the film show had not ended.

All of life took place on a cinema screen. That was what it consisted of. Everything around him, the scenes, the talk, the laughter, the walls of the ship, was an image thrown on a screen, no more substantial than a picture.

In this mood, the solidity of everything vanished for Brian. He even doubted the reality of matter. After all, how could substantiality be proved? Only by opposing one mass by another mass. A body literally did not exist until it interacted with another body.

The whole world of matter subsisted only relatively, sustaining itself by means of internal supports. It was a system of logic, consistent with itself but meaningless elsewhere.

Seen from outside, none of it existed.

Though on a grand scale, it was rather like the artificial society he saw disporting around him, whose members subsidised one another in the superficiality of their attitudes, opinions and chatter. It had no external existence. Take away that mutual support, and the fabric of their lives would vanish.

These thoughts and ideas obsessed Brian so much that, from an ordinary point of view, he doubted if he could be considered sane. But he wouldn't let go of it. He kept reminding himself of the 20th Century philosopher, Martin Heidegger's, question: 'Why does anything exist, and not just nothing?' This summed up exactly his own thoughts about the matter.

Under his feet, over his head, on either side of him, was absolute nothing.

None of these philosophisings were overtly connected with his desire to look outside. As far as that went, he simply had an itch to do it. The very fact that he was forbidden convinced him that it was worthwhile. So without theorising about it, he wanted to go to work with that wrench.

They left the cinema, but didn't go immediately back to the lounge. Brian kept Mercer talking, and headed him casually in

the other direction, walking aimlessly as their fashion had been years ago.

Once they passed a Scientocrat officer. Brian felt the guilty weight of the wrench which he had hung inside his jacket.

After about half an hour he stopped. "Do you know where you are?" he said.

Mercer looked around him, recalling the design of the ship which he had memorised. The corridor was smaller than average, deserted, and without doors. He had automatically noticed the change in the paint a few hundred feet back, when the corridor had switched from the luxurious to the utilitarian.

"We must be near the periphery," he said uneasily.

Brian went a little further and motioned him to follow with a wave of his hand. "Come on."

Mercer became nervous. "Count me out," he said, shaking his head.

"I just want to show you something."

Hesitantly, Mercer followed until they came to the final turning. Brian waited for him to catch up.

"There it is, look," he whispered. "Now just stand here and tell me if anybody comes."

Mercer backed away. "Oh, no!"

Brian chuckled light-heartedly and touched his elbow. "For the good of science, eh, old man?" He proceeded to the end of the tunnel and left Mercer standing there.

Mercer felt ridiculous. He was being forced willy-nilly into passive assistance!

At the cover-plate, Brian measured the wrench against the first bolt, adjusted the grip, and applied leverage. Reluctantly, after a lot of effort, the bolt began to turn. Paint cracked and flaked.

The first bolt came out.

Calmly he went to work on the others. It took him about ten minutes to get them all out. At the end of that time the plate was held in place only by the layers of paint joining it to the wall.

Swiftly he used a pocket-knife to cut through the paint on the perimeter of the cover, until the plate moved in his hands.

Carefully, he eased it away.

Behind it was a recess about three feet deep, ending in a perfectly transparent blister which apparently projected above the hull. He gripped the edge of the opening.



All his guesses had been correct.

The first hint of that darkness sent a shudder throughout his whole body. Awkwardly he pulled himself into the recess and crawled towards the window blister, until he was up against the cool, nearly invisible plastic.

He looked into space.

The first direction he looked, he saw the stunning expanse of the galactic spiral edge-on, sheer corruscations of immense light. He *saw* the size of it, as clearly as he could have seen the size of his own hand. The spread of stars just went up, and up, and up. Here already was something so vast as to be incommensurable even with the Earth itself, so vast as to be senseless. His consciousness reeled in the first two seconds he looked at it. But even that was not what he had come for, and he turned his head to look the other way.

This direction lay beyond the galaxy. There was nothing there forever, except a few dim glimmers of other galaxies which weren't noticed, except to accentuate the void and endlessness.

He saw at last what had so long been the subject of his search : limitless emptiness.

As he gazed, all his attention was swept into the vacuum of the awful view. From that moment he was doomed. His whole being was drawn into the empty vastness by forced attention raised to the *n*th degree.

The first stage was catatonia ; even that was brief. His personality was being sucked into galactic space. Within a minute, his body died.

Mercer waited fretfully at the turning of the corridor. Brian had been gone some time.

He peeped along the tunnel to where the aperture was. He could see Brian's legs poking out. For several minutes, his friend had been completely motionless and silent.

" Brian," he called softly. " How much longer ?"

No answer.

" Brian." Then loudly, " Brian !"

Still no response. Mercer sensed that something was wrong. He stepped quickly up the tunnel and touched Brian's leg.

It shifted limply under the pressure of his hand, and Brian made no sign that he had felt the touch. Mercer caught his breath, and wondered what to do.

Just a few more inches, and he too would have been able to peer along the recess, and out into space. But he didn't. He backed

away, in spite of the urge tugging at his mind. Soon he was running—down the tunnels, through the corridors, looking frantically for a Scientocrat officer. When he found one, he blurted out his story.

Within five mintes, he was leading a rescue party in the direction of the aperture. At least, in his ignorance he thought it was a rescue party.

He was quite mistaken.

The way the operation was tackled exploded one theory of Brian's. Scientocrats were *not* allowed to look into space. The officers who removed his body from the recess and bolted the cover back in place wore all-metal helmets with television eyes which connected to a screen inside. The body was quite dead.

Martin watched in a state of horror from the turning of the corridor. Disconsolately he followed in the wake of the stretcher as Brian's corpse was carried away.

Head down, with his hands folded on his desk, Captain Brode meditated sombrely. He was thinking of what his passenger Brian Denver had done. He was thinking of *why* he had done it.

Like any other ship's captain, he couldn't help having occasional thoughts of *out there*. No Scientocrat was ever more aware of how little man could do, for all his science, to hold his own when faced with the naked universe.

More than ever he felt the abstraction, the separation from the common folk which Scientocratic Communism had thrust upon him; a separation which he sometimes regretted, but now that it was done could not avoid.

He shook his head. Just what *had* the experience been like for his dead passenger?

The face of God is like unto a countenance vast and terrible.

Someone knocked on the door of his office. He pressed a button, and the panel slid open.

Mercer Stone stood on the threshold.

"Come in, Mr. Stone," he said without preamble. "Please sit down."

Mercer entered and took the proffered chair. Surreptitiously he made a study of the captain's heavy-boned, sturdy face while the officer spent some moments placing some papers in a drawer.

Brode looked up. "Well, what can I do for you, Mr. Stone?"

"I would have thought that was obvious, Captain. I want to know why my friend died."

"He died because he broke ship's regulations," Brode answered heavily.

"I know that," Mercer said shortly, though the strain of the interview was already beginning to grow in him. "In the circumstances, I hardly care about that."

"Yes, of course." Brode placed his hands on his desk and dropped his gaze. Mercer saw that he was genuinely sympathetic.

Brode said: "You have had a very lucky escape."

Mercer turned several degrees paler than he already was. "Escape—from what?"

Brode debated within himself, uncertain and disturbed. Was he going to have to tell Stone what he himself had learned only after fifteen years of special education under constant surveillance? He felt that the fellow had some right to it, and he had already checked his Citizen Dependency Rating. And yet . . .

He rose.

"Are you sure you want to know?" he asked, trying to drive the question home.

"No," said Mercer after a moment. "I feel torn. But after that . . ." He tailed off.

"If you insist, I will admit you into the secret, since you already know part of it."

Mercer nodded.

Captain Brode turned and took a heavy, black leather-bound volume from a shelf: the Table of Physical Constants. Letting Mercer see the gold-lettered title, he placed it on the desk.

Understanding, Mercer placed his hand upon it.

"Do you swear by All that exists to communicate to no person what you are about to learn?" the captain intoned.

"I so swear."

The captain replaced the book on its shelf. He turned to face Stone again, feeling slightly embarrassed about what he had to say.

"The simple fact is," he began, "that any man who looks into space immediately dies."

Since the hideous event at the aperture, Mercer had been feeling his mental world begin to revolve upside-down. Now he felt a premonition of something that was the complete inversion of the world-picture he had always carried with him. He tried to look straight into the captain's steady, comforting face.

"But how?"

"That is the part you do not know. In fact, it only is known partly. We think it is because he sees the universe too nakedly, too incomprehensibly vast. He loses himself in it, and his

consciousness is whisked away into space like a fly would be if we opened the main port.

"As for the technicality of it, we're not sure. Probably he loses his point of reference."

"No one ever came to harm in interplanetary flights," Mercer pointed out.

Brode nodded. "For some reason it doesn't happen inside a solar system. Something to do with the sun : it provides a mental anchor. That's what I meant by a point of reference. Once you get out there—make no mistake, there's nothing to hang on to. You're lost. Nowhere to go, and if there were anywhere, nowhere to start from."

There went the second half of Brian's theory, Mercer thought. The ruling was not a jealous monopoly on the part of the Scientocrats. It was a sacred trust. "It frightens me," he muttered.

Captain Brode looked hard at the pale, worried face of Mercer Stone. "Space does it," he said. "There's too much of it out there. It would swallow us all, swallow any number, without making any difference. It's the worst possible way to die."

He turned away. His voice dropped. "But you know, I don't think it's worth dying any other way."

p. f. woods

## the literary line-up

Next month sees the opening instalment of a new James White serial specially written for this magazine. "Open Prison" will probably go down in science fiction history as the Trojan Horse escape story of the genre. Well written, of course ; tremendously exciting, naturally, it portrays the efforts of a whole planetload of technician prisoners-of-war to break out of captivity against impossible odds. Apart from their environment, they also have to fight against the gnawing doubts within themselves.

Story ratings for No. 133 were :

1.	The Lonely City	-	-	-	-	-	Lee Harding
2.	To Conquer Chaos (Part 1)	-	-	-	-	-	John Brunner
3.	The Disposal Unit Man	-	-	-	-	-	David Alexander
4.	The Shtarman	-	-	-	-	-	John Ashcroft
5.	Natural Defence	-	-	-	-	-	P. F. Woods
6.	Foreign Body	-	-	-	-	-	David Rome



*The future is in the hands of the  
children, and the manner in which  
their minds are moulded will set  
the pattern for the history  
of the human race*

# t o y s

by john baxter

---

The address I was looking for was somewhere down in the maze of ancient buildings and twisting lanes that huddles at the Sydney end of the bridge, overshadowed by the disdainful pylons. It's called The Rocks—I've never discovered why. The historians probably have a neat explanation, complete with footnotes and old references, but I doubt that it is the right one. Even a young country must have its secret places, and The Rocks is ours. If there are explanations and histories, they won't be found in the records of any university, but in the minds of the old men who sun themselves before the crumbling terrace houses and the cats that roam through the shabby lanes.

After spending most of the morning fruitlessly asking directions and referring to a useless road map, I finally found Windermere Street, a poky little thoroughfare that sloped steeply down towards the harbour and petered out into a flight of slimy steps. I extracted the piece of paper on which Myra had written the address. "J. Kraus, Windermere Street," she had scrawled in her flamboyant hand. Then, by way of directions, "Trn. left at Quay—up hill abt. hundred yds. Hanging sign." Well, this was Windermere Street, and there was no lack of hanging signs, but none of them seemed to bear the name Kraus.

I walked slowly along the narrow footpath, looking up at them. Kaufman, Janciewicz, Heincke, Zybalski . . . a dozen nationalities were crowded into the little street. As cheap tailors, bakers of the more exotic loaves, dealers in old furniture, they scratched out a meagre existence, buying from and selling to one another in an endless circle that was futile rather than vicious. I wondered what had drawn these weary refugees to such a dismal spot. Perhaps they found in these narrow climbing streets some echo of remembered homes in Hamburg, Vienna, Prague. With a little imagination the lanes could become cobbled, the warm Australian sun take on a touch of bitter cold, the raucous cries of the street children soften into talk that was gentler, more familiar. Then they could lean back and dream of the old days.

I had looked vainly on both sides of Windermere Street and was about to give up when the insistent squeaking of a sign just above my head attracted my attention. In the old Gothic script, so ornate and involuted that it seemed to speak in a German accent, it was inscribed "Bootmaker." I'd already looked at the sign and mentally crossed the place off my list, but now that I was closer, I could see a further description below the first. "Toys also," it read, almost apologetically, and underneath in minuscule letters, "J. Kraus, prop."

The old shop fronted directly on to the street, as most of the others did. A narrow window coated with grime effectively prevented anybody from looking inside, and the brass fittings were stained with age, but there was a certain jauntiness about the place. The door, of the ordinary panelled kind, had been painted in robin's egg blue, and the harsh sun had crackled the surface like the glaze on an old Chinese vase. It was the sort of door that one expected to see in a glossy magazine, with a gaunt model leaning languidly against it. It had . . . character, if that is the word. With a certain diffidence—the feeling I have when touching a painting to feel the texture—I knocked, then pushed the door open.

From the moment I stepped inside, I was in another world. There was a tinkle above my head and I looked up in surprise to see a tiny bell trembling at the end of a spiral spring. The shop was as quaint and old-fashioned as this little mechanism. Shoes lined the shelves that covered two walls. Old shoes, run down and cracked like the faces of the old men musing in the sun. New shoes still glowing with the rich gloss of good leather. A pair of these was placed prominently on the counter where prospective

customers were most likely to see them. They were beautifully made, but there was a heaviness and solidity about them that doomed their chances of popularity. These shoes, displayed so proudly, seemed to typify the shop and the trade practised in it—honest, dependable, hopelessly out of date.

“I can help you?”

The little man who spoke was so obviously a cobbler that I almost laughed. He wore a leather apron, the timeless and universal uniform of the craft. From behind a straggly and much-stained moustache, a face peered at me that might have jumped from an Arthur Rackham illustration. His wrinkled features, like a knot of wood, the rimless glasses poked low on the nose, the querulous voice, rich in German gutturals, all were so typical of the fairytale shoemaker that I felt oddly out of place in the shop, like a traveller who has arrived in a country where magic really exists, and there may be an elf under every stone.

“Mr. Kraus?” I said lamely. One had to start somewhere.

“Yes, yes,” he said. “Yes, Jacobus Kraus at your service. Did you want boots mended? Soled? Heeled?” Looking over my clothes especially the shoes, he apparently decided I was not the type who went out of his way to find cheap repairs for his footwear. “New shoes then,” he went on. “I have some very nice pairs here. Now what size . . .” He pottered around the shop, looking under things. “Should have a rule here,” he muttered. “Should have . . .”

“No, really,” I said. “My shoes are quite all right. I just . . .”

He looked up from his search. “No shoes to be repaired,” he said briskly. “No new shoes. Then you are selling something. Thank you, but I am a poor man and I have no . . .”

I held up a desperate hand to block off the stream of talk.

“No. I’m not selling anything—I’m interested in your toys.”

He looked at me with a gaze that was surprisingly penetrating for so old a man.

“Toys?” he said. “Who told you I sold toys?”

“It’s outside on your sign,” I replied, puzzled. “A friend of mine bought some from you.”

“A friend?”

Ordinarily I would have been offended, but he questioned me with such assurance that I answered automatically.

“A Mrs. Lovat. She bought a doll and a puppet. I saw them when I went to a party at her house. They interested me so much that I got your address from her.”

Kraus took off his glasses and polished them thoughtfully. "Mrs. Lovat?" he repeated to himself. "Ah yes—I remember her." He smiled. "A very . . . agitated lady."

I grinned at the description. Agitated. That certainly summed up Myra, with her frantic gestures and bubbling, unstoppable conversation. She seemed always to be approaching, experiencing or looking back with horror on a crisis.

"That sounds like her," I said. "She told me you had quite a few toys for sale. Could I see some of them?"

"Certainly, certainly." Apparently I had passed the test, because he carefully locked the front door of the shop and then ushered me into a little room that adjoined the one where he worked. From the way the door creaked, I knew there were few customers.

"Here you are," he said, motioning around him. "My toys."

The room was incredible. Toys filled it as shoes had filled the little cobbler's store, but the brightness of the colours and the comic vitality of the articles piled along these shelves made the whole place vibrate with life. Unable to think of a comment that would not seem ridiculous coming from a grown man, I wandered around picking up toys, admiring them, and a second later putting down one and moving on to another that looked more inviting. No child could have played the part so well. I was enchanted.

Every item was a masterpiece of workmanship. There were dolls that seemed better suited to a Museum of Fine Arts than a shop. The costumes were superbly made, and accurate down to the last flounce and ruffle. In the features, there was a delicacy and restraint completely atypical of the usual doll. These faces reminded me of Egyptian wall-paintings—stylised yet peculiarly alive and vital. I picked up wooden animals carved with a wit and humour that any caricaturist would have envied; tops that, when spun, dissolved into vivid cauldrons of colour; dolls houses that were miracles of miniaturisation. Eventually I found my tongue.

"Did you make all of these?" I asked incredulously. Myra had mentioned 'lots more' but the actual quantity was staggering.

Kraus looked around at the shelves as a father might look at his assembled children.

"Yes," he said slowly. "Every one. It has taken many years."

"And yet you still mend shoes?" For a man of such talent, it seemed a terrible waste.

The old man shrugged. "I have to live. There is no money to be made from toys."



I smiled. I knew of a dozen people who would have jumped at a chance to buy these dolls and carvings even if they had been on stands in a gallery with startling price-tags attached. I told him so. He looked at me with an odd expression, as if I were a child who had made an error he was too young to avoid.

"Toys are not for adults," he said gently. "Toys are for children."

"Some toys, perhaps, but not these." I picked up a puppet at random off the shelves. It was a peasant, carved from a light oak that was perfect for the subject. Its face held just the right combination of good humour and rural shrewdness. The smock and crumpled hat were completely authentic and yet the proportions had been varied just enough to add a satiric touch to the costume. With his lumpy grinning face, he might have just stepped from a Brueghel painting.

"This, for instance," I said. "It has feeling, humour, meaning. It's art."

Kraus shook his head in a manner that I can only describe as chiding, with all the antique connotations that word has accumulated over the years.

"It is nice of you to say so, young man," he said, "but all I know is that it is a little puppet that will probably make some child happy."

I looked around at the hundreds of tiny masterpieces ranked on their shelves. That an artist of this calibre should make playthings for children seemed incredible. Without thinking, I betrayed a little of my irritation.

"Don't you think that it's . . . well, a waste of time?"

I saw at once that this was the wrong line to take. Old Kraus drew himself up with a dignity that surprised me.

"It may seem a waste of time to you," he said frostily, "but . . ."

I hurried to correct my mistake. "Of course I don't mean it as any reflection on your work. It's just that I have such respect for your ability that I think it should be used . . ."

But it didn't stop him.

"I know, I know," he said. "You think I am an old man, too stupid to know what he is doing. But I have made toys for fifty years. One learns a great deal in that time."

"Have you ever thought," he continued energetically, "of the effect that a toy has on a child. The deep, the . . ." He groped for the word and dragged it up like a dripping stone from the depths of his memory. ". . . the psychological effects?"

I turned the question over in my mind. Coming from his lips, the words were incongruous, but there was no doubt that he had serious theories about his trade and the things he made. I understood for the first time that secret magic in the craft of the toymaker that story-tellers have respected even from the earliest days. I was intrigued.

"No," I replied. "To be honest, it never occurred to me that there were any."

"It is obvious when you think about it," he said. "A child always has a favourite toy—yes?"

"That's true," I answered in what I hoped was an encouraging tone. I thought back to my own childhood and remembered the battered set of blocks, that, despite their cracks and chips, I had kept with me until I was well into my teens.

"A child doesn't care if the toy is cheap or dear, clean or dirty. He lives with that toy. It is in his room, in his bed, always near. To him, nothing is more important."

I agreed, wondering where all this was leading.

"If he lives with a toy like this, so closely," Kraus continued with the air of a lecturer delivering a most telling point, "then don't you think it will have some effect on him—start to change him?"

I thought it over. "I suppose it might," I said eventually, "but what if it's the other way around? Perhaps a child chooses a toy because he is already interested in the thing that that toy represents."

Kraus ignored my point. "What was your favourite toy when you were a boy?" he asked.

"A set of blocks. They had the letters of the alphabet painted on them."

"And you like to pile them up, put them into patterns?"

"Yes."

"What is your profession today?" He snapped the question at me so quickly that I answered without thinking.

"I'm a writer." A second later, the significance of the answer sank in. "And you mean that the influence of the *blocks* caused me to become a writer?"

"Why not?" Kraus said. "Perhaps it was not the only encouragement, but it must have had some effect. So why would not a doll's house make a little girl a good housekeeper, a toy piano cause some child to become a musician?"

It was one of those infuriating theories that strikes a false note in the mind as soon as one hears it, but which is perfectly logical on the surface. For the moment, I couldn't see any sensible reason why Kraus shouldn't have been right, but I made a mental resolution to take the whole subject up with a psychiatrist friend of mine as soon as I could.

Then something connected with the idea jogged my mind and I glanced again around the shop.

"Is that why you don't have any violent toys here?" I asked. "No swords, guns?"

He stood for a long time silent, and I glimpsed in his face the full weight of years that pressed down upon him. The question seemed to bring back to him some echo of times long past and things best forgotten. Then, extracting a key from some recess of his apron, he bent and unlocked a small cupboard huddling under the shelves. From it, he took a bundle wrapped in cloth.

"You mean like this?" he said, unwrapping it.

Inside was a sword.

It was the sort of weapon that every backyard warrior dreams of. The guard was set with coloured stones, the hilt a miracle of detailed inlay. The blade glinted wickedly—a hackneyed word, I know, but nothing else conveys the uneasy feeling its sheen aroused in me. When I picked it up, the weight—or rather lack of weight—was surprising. It was, I realised, made entirely of wood. The stones were painted on, and the inlay had been carved and carefully gilded to look like metal. It must have taken weeks of work to complete.

"Did you make this?" I asked, already knowing he could not have.

Kraus shook his head slowly. "No. My Brother Wilhelm."

"Is he a toymaker too?"

He didn't answer for a long time, as if the point were so important that it demanded careful consideration.

"Oh, yes, I suppose so," he said eventually. "He knows no other trade. Our family has made toys for generations. First in Bavaria, then in Germany, and now here. But I cannot believe that Wilhelm has thrived. In Europe, people want only happy toys."

Rummaging around in the cupboard, he took out an old photograph framed in one of those extravagances of gilt and fretwork that were fashionable in the early part of this century. It showed two young men in *lederhosen*. One was obviously Jacobus. Even

then, he had been small, bespectacled and slightly stooped. The other man was completely different. His dark eyes and tight-lipped smile betrayed a more fiery temperament, a restlessness that would never be satisfied.

"Is this your brother?"

Kraus sighed. "Yes," he said, "though that was taken when we were very young. But you can see we have always been different. It is in our eyes. He was a wild boy, Wilhelm. Always getting into fights. For a while he settled down and worked in the shop, but then he got mixed up in politics—his life was never settled for very long. The last time I saw him was in 1945. After the bombing there was nothing left of our town. My parents had been killed—I was getting ready to leave. He wouldn't come. After that, I never saw him again."

I looked again at the toy sword. "Were all his toys like this?"

"Most of them," he said, weighing the weapon in his hand. "Our father would not sell them in the family shop, but Wilhelm made many of them for the village children. Swords, bows and arrows . . . guns too, so well-made you could hardly tell the difference. He laughed at me when I said it was wrong to make toys like that. 'Jacob,' he would say, 'Jacob, you are an old woman. The children like to play with things that are real. Young men should play with men's toys. Dolls and puppets are for girls.' There was nothing I could do. But it made me sick to see the children fighting among themselves with Wilhelm's toys."

I could see it pained him to talk of these things, so I steered the conversation away from Wilhelm and back to his own toys, and ended up buying a few of the better items from him. At first he seemed unhappy at parting with his work to an adult, but I invoked my two children and he withdrew his objections. Perhaps he knew they would take a fancy to the things as soon as I brought them into the house, and that when a child wants something, there is no point in pleading its artistic merits. The old toymaker was, I realised more than once afterwards, considerably smarter than he looked.

As for his theory, I almost forgot about it, especially after my psychiatrist friend made mincemeat of the suggestion that toys have an undue influence on childhood behaviour. He was quite scathing and I put the matter right out of my mind. That is, until it was brought back to me with a rush some weeks later.



I was walking through the more elegant part of the city, browsing among the big department stores with their slick Americanised facades and chic merchandising. A window display in one of the shops caught my eye and I stopped to look. Two minutes later I was still looking, although my casual equanimity had evaporated completely. Pushing through the crowds of shoppers, I headed for the toy department. The supervisor was very obliging.

"Yes, certainly sir," he said brightly. "We have a full range, just off the boat." He opened a box and pulled out a pistol so convincingly made that I almost raised my hands. "Just look at this. A masterpiece. Plastic, but looks just like blued steel. Magazine holds twelve bullets—dummy, of course. Hammer and breech work just like a real gun. And when you pull the trigger . . ." He pulled it. The gun went off with a roar that made a dozen customers look around in surprise. "Neat, eh?"

He turned, indicating the shelves behind him. "If you don't care for a pistol, how about a sub-machine gun? Rocket launcher? Guided missile? Atomic cannon?"

I looked at the display. The quantity and quality of advertising indicated a lavish campaign that would make every child anxious to have his own pistol or rocket or cannon. But there were large stocks—every doting parent would be supplied. I thought of these cheap and beautiful instruments of death flooding into England, America, the whole Western world, each bringing with it a tiny increment of death, planting in every child a dark and evil seed. Accident or design? We would find out soon enough, when future generations reaped the harvest of hate and violence.

Picking up the pistol, I turned it over in my hands. On the butt was impressed the legend, "Made in West Germany," but I had no doubts about from which country the idea and plans for this deadly little masterpiece had come. The workmanship was unmistakable.

Someone had found a use for Wilhelm Kraus's talents after all.

**john baxter**

The blinding force which has been gathering in the dark side of Ivan Dalroi's mind, now splits wide open as the pressures build up on all sides to kill him and some of his persecutors begin to wish that they had not dabbled in subversive attempts to push him too far.

# the dark mind

by colin kapp

---

## foreword

*In a harsh political and business world of the future, Failway Terminal is a law unto itself, grinding its minions into the dust of its vast combines and pulling the political strings of a gigantic empire. Much of that empire is situated on other worlds in parallel to Earth, Failway having perfected a technique involving space-time lattices, based on the principle that atoms, and therefore energy, may be transferred from one energy level to another.*

*Ivan Dalroi, a private investigator working for the Cronstadt Committee (an organisation opposed to Failway) becomes involved in the disappearance of three Cronstadt Committee members and crosses verbal swords with Peter Madden, head of Failway Public Relations who bluntly threatens his life. Thereafter numerous attempts are made to kill him, but each time Dalroi unexpectedly escapes. It seems evident that he cannot be killed.*

*When his assistant, the beautiful Zdenka, disappears after a suspicious murder and Dalroi is on the run from Inspector Quentain, head of the local police, he decides to conduct a personal vendetta of sabotage against Failway. Reporting to Gormalu, head of*

Cronstadt, Dalroi also learns that the Black Knights, a secret Government organisation, want him for a number of offences. In an argument that follows, Gormalu tries to kill Dalroi and his body is dumped outside the city, but some indestructible element inside him keeps him alive, his brain burning with a terrible desire for revenge and destruction. He does not know that his mind is developing untapped sources of energy—that, in fact, the dark side of his mind could eventually become a mental Hiroshima.

After a number of successful sabotage attempts in Failway, Dalroi is finally trapped and sent through the polarising matrix field without the benefit of a shuttle, which should completely disintegrate the atoms of his body. In transfinite space, however, Dalroi revives to find himself on a gigantic golden web which apparently leads nowhere. His strangely developing mind eventually reasons a way out and he arrives back on Earth with a mental control of terrene and contra-terrene matter. The destruction to Failway property becomes tremendous. In the process Dalroi discovers that Gormalu is, in fact, his chief antagonist, but when they finally face each other for the showdown, Gormalu vanishes before his eyes.

The Black Knights move in on their investigations of the Cronstadt Committee after Gormalu's sudden disappearance and find scientific equipment incomprehensible to Earthly minds, with a radio set monitoring messages from life on millions of different energy levels in transfinite space. It is apparent that the whole of intelligent life 'outside' is arraigned against Dalroi.

Dalroi now begins to move into other Failway transfinite worlds, wreaking havoc as he goes. On Failway Two, Peter Madden finally catches up with him again.

## seventeen

"My God!" said Peter Madden. "You've a great deal to answer for. If killing you wasn't a matter of prime urgency I'd take you to the Security wing and extract that much vengeance from your body before you died."

Dalroi looked at the radiation pistol and at Madden's tunic streaked with charcoal and still acrid from the lingering smoke of the ruined cepi field.

"Looking down the wrong end of your gun is becoming a habit," he said. "It's a vice I can afford to do without."

"The cure is permanent and guaranteed," said Madden. "I shall shoot you if you dare to move an inch. Even if I didn't kil

you you'd not be much use without a chest. You're a danger to yourself and to everyone else. I can't take chances." His finger tightened on the trigger.

The explosion of a slug pistol shattered the silence. Madden stared at his hand in disbelief and agony, and the radiation pistol clattered to the floor. Berina kept him covered with her still-smoking gun.

"Thanks !" said Dalroi. "He was just mad enough to try it."

Madden's eyes were full of cold shock. "That was very foolish, Berina. If I had killed him I might have overlooked the fact that you sought to harbour him. Even yet I might give you a second chance."

"Since when did you ever give anyone any sort of chance ?" asked Berina quietly. "For years I've stood your drugs and blackmail and pressure. Here's an end to all that. Live or die, the whole damn organization is starting to collapse. I, for one, intend to help it on its way."

"You're a little premature," said Madden. "I'll surely break you for this. You know how well I can do that."

"Yes." She spat vehemently in his face. "I've seen what you've done to the others. Do you think that entitles you to anything but hate ?"

"The biter bit," said Dalroi pleasantly. "But now we're due for a short session of questions and answers."

"Don't waste your breath," said Madden. "The squad will be here looking for me in a moment. Under no circumstances can you be permitted to escape."

"Nevertheless," Dalroi picked up the radiation pistol and adjusted it to low intensity meaningly, "I think we'll try. I don't need to tell you what this weapon can do to the eyeballs, so I advise you not to become tongue-tied. There's something I'd rather like to know : exactly what's the urgency to see me dead ?"

Madden glanced down at the cepi-ash streaks on his tunic. "Consedo, Failway goods-yard, and now this—and you still need to ask ? You're a hell of a fellow, Dalroi ! When you're around I don't sleep so well at nights."

"The feeling is mutual," said Dalroi, "but you've dodged the question. You had me measured for a coffin long before Consedo. From the first moment we met you've had it in for me. Who gave you the instructions to kill me, Madden ?"

"The dislike was purely personal. I took exception to your face."



"No," said Dalroi, raising the pistol. "There's more to the story than that. Securing my death was your prime objective. I want to know on whose decision and why the urgency?"

His finger moved imperceptibly but sufficient. Madden clapped his hands over his eyes in sudden anguish.

"Take a tip," said Dalroi. "Never defy a man who has nothing to lose. He tends to forget the niceties of something called fair-play."

"It isn't that easy," said Madden. "Even if I wanted to I couldn't talk. There's a psychosomatic trigger planted in my brain which prevents me from answering most of the things you want to know, no matter what pressures you use. You can't get information from a corpse."

Dalroi shrugged. "I'm not particular which way you die. Tell me about Gormalu. I already know he isn't human."

Madden crossed and uncrossed his fingers with agitation. "I don't think you are either, Dalroi. Not quite. But you're dangerous, Dalroi, far more dangerous. than you know yourself. You're a danger to all of us. Gormalu knew that and wanted you killed quietly if possible. In his own twisted way he was quite a humanitarian. You see, somebody wants you dead and a lot of people are liable to get hurt by the very act of your execution. You have no idea how desperately they want you dead. Why the hell don't you die reasonably?"

"Because I choose not to," said Dalroi. "I don't scare easily, either. Not any more. I'll see both you and Gormalu to hell, and it won't be in easy stages."

"I doubt if that's true, but if it was only us you had to contend with you'd stand about one per cent chance of living through the next twenty-four hours. As it stands you've more trouble coming to you than you could dream of in a lifetime's nightmares. I don't give you one chance of survival in infinity raised to the infinite power. There's no hope for you, but if humanity means anything you'll try and arrange to receive your execution somewhere pretty lonely."

"Keep talking," Dalroi said. "Who's behind all this?"

Madden pressed his knuckles to his eyes. "If I even tried to tell you, my heart would freeze."

"Let it," said Dalroi. His trigger finger tightened again.

"Dalroi, for pity's sake!"

"Failway killed all the pity that was ever in me."

Madden's eyes were filled with misery and fear. His words stumbled awkwardly as he strove to pick his meanings without stumbling over the mental trigger which would freeze his heart.

"Failway level . . . is a spot of three-dimensional reality inserted into a pattern of stabilised chaos . . . with an electronic rope ladder which lets you in and out. No mind can grasp the universes beyond . . . but things live out there in the multiple darknesses . . . things which are beyond our knowing."

"Is it things who so much want me dead?"

Madden opened his mouth to speak, but his eyes dilated with sudden horror. He fought back a choking sob and clutched at his chest. Breath rasped in a dry throat and he tottered and slumped to the ground. Then for a second he rallied and his hand sought Dalroi's.

"Dalroi, you've got to stop them! For Humanity's sake! Stop them!"

"Where," said Dalroi. "How?"

"Go to Failway Six. Careful. They're waiting for you there. That's the only way to get at them. You can do it . . ."

The last sentence choked away into a half sob. Dalroi knelt and examined the prostrate form.

"Is he dead?" asked Berina.

Dalroi laid his head on Madden's chest and listened to the heart. "Almost. Whoever laid that mental block forgot to take into account the effect of years of addiction to cepi. He might even live if he isn't moved."

Berina held out the slug pistol, but Dalroi thrust it aside.

"No. If he lives he's earned it. Towards the end he was genuinely on our side. He sacrificed his life to give me that last answer. Now I have to move fast. If this situation is one half as bad as I'm thinking, there's going to be such hell let loose as would make Madden's police state look like a benevolent institution."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to keep an appointment—on Failway Six."

"Are you crazy?" Berina stared at him aghast. "You can't go into Failway Six! Don't you see, that's what they've been waiting for. Madden said so himself. That's where they want you to go."

"I don't much care," said Dalroi. "I've lost all capacity for that kind of thinking. Either they'll get me or I'll get them. It's a question that has to be resolved."

"But why do they want to kill you, in particular?"

Dalroi felt his head. Deep inside he felt the throbbing rhythm—not heartbeat but something vastly more powerful—quieter now, but the same pulse that flared sometimes to activity and drove him crazily to achieve things which were far beyond his sanest comprehension.

“I don’t know,” said Dalroi. “There’s something living inside of me, something bigger than all hell and twice as ugly. But it’s something which belongs. I think it’s *that* they’re afraid of, so afraid they’re prepared to lose all Failway and damn several million souls to see it destroyed. Don’t you see, they know what it is, but I don’t. I have to go into Failway Six in order to find myself.”

“It’s your funeral !”

“You know,” said Dalroi, “even that phrase has lost its sting. Is there a way I can get into Failway Six without going back to the terminus ?”

“There’s a service shuttle connection direct, but it’s not designed for the living.”

“Where can I find it ?”

“I don’t advise you to.”

“Why not ?”

“We call it the graveyard service. If anyone dies in Failway the bodies are consigned to Failway Six via the graveyard service. Don’t ask me why the hell. I assume they’ve a great granddaddy of a crematorium down there. Do you want to start out looking for yourself by travelling in a coffin ?”

“I don’t have much choice,” Dalroi said. “How can I get aboard without attracting attention ?”

Berina shrugged. “If that’s what you want I can arrange it.”

“For heaven’s sake do that,” Dalroi said. “I should hate whatever’s coming to happen here. Too many people around. If they’re waiting for me on Failway Six then I’d better not keep them waiting. I only hope they’ve chosen to do battle in a place where they can do the maximum amount of damage to the minimum number of people.”

“You think you stand a chance ?”

“They’re afraid of me,” said Dalroi simply. “There has to be some reason for that.”

Together they left the house. No security men were in the immediate vicinity and people were returning to the streets now that the search had passed. Berina led the way and Dalroi followed at a discreet distance. Near the outskirts of the golden city the oriental camouflage gave way to the functional lines of a

service area. She motioned for him to loiter whilst she went inside.

Minutes later she returned and beckoned him to follow into what he rightly surmised to be a mortuary. A clammy chill hugged his skin as he followed between rows of surgical white slabs to the door where a man with a white apron and pallid skin waited with a metal casket. Dalroi looked into his eyes. The fellow was in an advanced state of cepi hypnosis, obeying Berina's instructions with a leaden dullness which branded him as nearer automaton than human.

Berina looked at Dalroi and at the coffin, and there was agony in her eyes.

"You have to do this, don't you?"

"Yes," said Dalroi. "You know me."

She nodded. "I thought that's what you'd say. I was a fool ever to come into Failway. You know that, don't you?"

"No," Dalroi said. "I don't think you had much choice. You see, they planned it that way, hoping I'd follow."

"My God!"

"That's a sample of how they manipulate people. That's the reason I have to go through with this. It's them or me, and they aren't going to stop pushing people around until either they've won or until I stop them."

"Give them hell, Dalroi. If ever you loved me, give them hell!"

Dalroi climbed into the coffin. She placed one kiss on his forehead then arranged the lid. Darkness. He felt the rollers pin as the coffin moved along the track then the firm vibration as the load was picked up by a belt en-route for the graveyard shuttle and the unknowns of Failway Six.

The loading was automatic. The coffin hit the end of the capsule with a clang which made his ears ring. Then the nerveless excitement of the speeding track and the dimensionless agony of shooting the matrix field. In his confinement, Dalroi screamed. Such was the nature of the stark fantasy and claustrophobia which the journey induced that he was still screaming when the coffin reached Failway Six.

From his nightmares he disentangled two stimuli which had direct reference to reality. The first was an overwhelming drowsiness caused by near asphyxiation, the second was a vibrant roar which shook the very fabric of his environment. He kicked open the lid and sat up to find himself suddenly at the mouth of hell. He was nearing the hearth of a furnace the size of which



made him gasp with amazement. The inexorable black steel belt seemed destined to deliver him into the incandescent chamber which rose like the nave of some small cathedral charged with blinding radiance.

Swinging out rapidly, he balanced for precious seconds whilst he tried to gauge the hazards of a jump, then kicked off into the darkness. It was a blind drop, for the intense light of the furnace robbed his eyes of the ability to differentiate things in the heated gloom below the hearth.

He landed some twenty feet below, one foot striking the casing of something which may have been an oil pump, and twisted himself clumsily. Agony burned into a sprained knee. He was in a world of pumps and boilers like the engine room of one of the wickedly powerful tugs he used to stow away on when, as a youth, home life became particularly intolerable.

For many minutes he stood in the darkness under the hearth and listened to the pulsing pipes and savoured the richness of heated oil whilst he rested his knee and recomposed his nerves. The drop had shaken him more than he had supposed ; more, in fact, than had his passage through transfinity. Something about the environment was gnawing at his mind. Memories ? Yes ! *This place is like a memory. My God it is ! See now, oil feed compressor . . . gauges . . . feedlines . . . balancer . . . jets . . . injectors . . . Oh My God ! Gear like this we used on the Vagrant Curlew . . . only there were fed turbines and here they feed crematoria. Nobody in their right senses would use this set up as a meat fryer . . . unless . . . unless it was put here especially for me !*

His senses reeled in the thick heat. *Psychological warfare !* Somebody had stolen a memory out of his mind and built it into a pit at the back of nowhere. *The elements of madness built into the equipment. These boys aren't missing any tricks ! Dalroi, what the hell is in you to make them go to this trouble ?* Only the black belt above his head with its occasional steel coffin destined for the fire kept him in touch with reality. There was an unbearable feeling of terrifying alienness about the whole idea which made his bones ache deep inside.

*What the hell have I got myself into ?*

He looked for a way out, and found it. A deserted corridor, dim and brown like that of a school he once had known, stretched away to a flight of concrete stairs. He didn't need to count the steps to remember their feel. Another part of life, another memory trapped in concrete, out of context, an idle snapshot turned to reality.

*Insanity must be something like this !*

## eighteen

A door gave on to a street, and as he stepped through the whole weight of his dismay and anguish fell upon him. It was night, damp and chill, and the street was a complex of all the wasted and crippled streets that ever had torn his soul under the dim lamplight.

If he had hoped to find himself alone, as he had so often been alone, he was disappointed. Figures moved, as figures always did, forlornly along the dark pavements, calling or talking to others, or singing to themselves in consolation, or walking the roads unseeing whilst contending with some inner misery. If this was the place of his execution then his hopes of dying alone were not likely to be realized.

In the incredible fidelity of scene and atmosphere the wonder was horribly complete. The property-men of Failway possessed an artistry almost lost to the outside world. Given a mood for a particular area they interpreted it into a reality of bricks and paint, light and shade, artifact and object, with a skill which was phenomenal.

No panorama was too large or detail too small for their attentions, and the whole scheme was blended by a diabolical understanding of the whims and foibles of human nature. As a work of three-dimensional art a Failway installation was incredible ; as an interpretation of the human soul it was clever to the point of insane genius.

The Elysian-fields of Failway One drew the finest fancies from mythology, and the mind and body became transported to a miniature world of light and wonder, modelled on the grandeur and the dreams of ancient Greece and Rome. Failway Two took the splendours of everybody's dream of orient, and in a blaze of gold and contrast wove a new magic such that the mightiest of eastern princes would have cried in awe and amazement.

So also with the turbulent wilderness and excitement of Failway Three ; the soft, sweet seductive sensuality of Failway Four ; and the brash, brazen passions of Failway Five—complete, insanely accurate and believable dream-worlds of fantasy, pleasure and escape.

Only here, on Failway Six did the unnatural cunning of the grand deception shock the mind into awareness of the inhuman genius which controlled the whole design. Just as Failway interpreted with quiet precision every element of gaiety, wonder, awe, excitement, and the thousand human emotions, so did they also interpret the dark and sordid. Dalroi, with his quick appreciation of atmosphere and intent, was shattered by the impact of the world into which he stepped.

He stood almost blindly for a few moments, forcing his mind to accept the truth of what he saw. Failway Six was a close analogy of all the scenes and places where, as a boy, he had known fright, anger, confusion, hate, hunger and uncontrollable dismay. It was a mirror held up to his soul. He felt as forlorn and dirty as the streets on which he stood. Failway Six was a city of inhospitable streets, callous slum tenements and cruel, soul-destroying gloom. It was the environmental influence straight out of Dalroi's psyche.

It took him a few moments to convince himself that this unholy place was not the unfortunate by-product of apathy, time and vicious economics, but had been deliberately constructed, brick by sorry, blackened brick, to some Satanic, detailed master plan. High-riding over the narrow streets and alleys an ancient electric locomotive hauled a train of filthy, dilapidated carriages in line with the rooftops, shattering the brittle silence with an unkempt roar. Humidifiers, simulating rain, laid a fine carpet of condensation over the scarred and unwashed roads, and from scraggy, curtained windows of a dozen lighted hulks of buildings flowed shafts of discordant jazz, or bawdy voices raised in alcoholic song or anger.

Dalroi savoured the atmosphere carefully. Being a connoisseur of the moods of men he could appreciate the faithful reproduction of the sordid and the desperate. The setting was perfect, he reflected sickly, down to the last dark puddle and the floating grains of dirty chaff therein. Anything could happen in such a hateful place.

He moved instinctively into the shadows, avoiding the illumination of the greenish gas flares, and carefully picking his way from door to door, exploring the mood and trying to understand the depth of the genius behind it. Everything fitted too neatly into place : from the worn steps and the dirty, blistered paint to the patched fanlights and the greasy halls, the effect exactly matched the credible.

He turned to an alley undercutting the railway and was not amazed to find it lined with cracked ceramic tiles and rotting bricks. Desolation was complete and accurate even to the slight stalactite of a water drip through the concrete up above. This was the atmosphere of black despair that drove the humanity out of a man and led him down to the gutter by the shortest available route. Here were all the elements of crime and loneliness and violence brought to reality by the most vivid and ruthless piece of scene-setting that ever existed.



Dalroi moved warily ahead, uncertain now of his next move, and still trying to capture the implications of this atrocious place. Breaking free of the damp, black tunnels, he moved out into a cobbled street where the lights shone through the windows of a bar and the hot breath of liquor and coarse voices spilled out on to damp pavements. The subtlety of the scene closed round him like a dead hand clutching. He laughed mirthlessly as the trick unfolded in his mind. This place was inhuman, alien. It was tailored with minute precision to key into the memories and habit pattern of Ivan Dalroi ! They had brought him home to die !

He felt almost masochistic lure to encounter the pangs of past hopelessness, to slip back into the mire of shades and secrets which had characterized his youth. He entered the bar and scanned the assembly, knowing before he looked that every sorry character would be in place. He ordered splitza laced with white spirit, as he always had in Old Town, and savoured the colourless fire as it trickled down his throat.

The atmosphere was insidious, working its way down inside him, filling half-forgotten needs with an almost soporific exactness. Detail by detail, with exquisite finesse, the place seeped into the voids in the dark side of his soul. There was no doubt about it now—this *was* the place appointed for his execution. Somebody had constructed it deliberately, with ruthless knowledge of the workings of his mind. These were the streets of Hell.

He studied the occupants of the bar carefully. Nearly all the men were Failway patrons, drawn by the inexplicable urge to spend their vacations in the squalid shadows of Failway Six. These were the haunted men, the men drawn inexorably back seeking to rediscover the fatal fascination of some dark hour in their lives when they had acquired the taste for passions which only the skilful *demi-monde* of Failway could unfailingly supply. Here and there were sailors back from the vicious waterfronts of half a hundred ports, tainted with subtle vices from the orient and restless appetites from the tropics. This was the place where the cold-eyed thirsting could find its slaking and where the sleepless agonies of wanting found a little brief relief.

The women were painted with a lavish imprecision which stamped them for what they were. These were some of the legions of hostesses employed in hopeless bondage by Failway to cater for the patron's wants. Failway training and selection, ever meticulous, matched the women to the particular class of clientele. From the naive nymphs of Failway One to the oriental coquettes



of Failway Two, the pattern traced wearily down. Failway Three, with its sharp-eyed, sophisticated adventuresses was replaced by the skilful seductresses of Failway Four and in turn by the gilded, padded courtesans of Failway Five. Failway Six dispensed with dreaming and slapped the hateful cast of cold reality over the souls of men.

Dalroi noticed an anomaly in two eyes and a mouth that moved from raucous, acquiescent laughter back to the slightest, comprehending smile. She saw him looking and moved in his direction, the smell of cepi from her cigarette filling his nostrils with its acrid bitterness.

She was dressed in cheap and gaudy synthetics ; her eyes heavily outlined in black and sunk in wells of green eye-shadow. Perhaps the hair had once been attractive, but years of cooking and chemicals had given the yellow tresses a fixed brittleness and a texture resembling straw. The skin was coarse, the colour too high . . . and the lips . . . Dalroi was fascinated by the lips. Underneath their full, crudely painted sensuality the lips betrayed a humour and an understanding which was shatteringly out of place.

“ Want to buy a girl a drink ? ”

Dalroi had no such ambition but he complied nevertheless ; to have done otherwise would have thrust him out of character for the part he had been assigned to play. Besides which, he was curious.

“ Cigarette ? ”

He took one, wondering. Something did not fit, but he could not place his finger on it exactly. He lit the cigarette and exhaled sharply. The smoke stung his lips and his tongue with a cloying bitterness. He swore under his breath. The darkness of the flake through the paper suggested grains of cepi alkaloid, as he had expected. He had long ago learned to smoke cepi without the fatal inhalation which secured those sweeter dreams and sensitivities than opium with no less cost in terms of misery and degradation.

*But this was not cepi !*

He leaned over and took away the cigarette that she was smoking and replaced it with his own. Her eyes widened interestedly as he flicked open the filter tip to expose the activated-charcoal capsule which had prevented the drug from reaching her mouth. Then he took his own and did the same.

"Just a tip," said Dalroi quietly. "Cepi shows in the eyes. You've never been under cepi in your life."

"Nor you," she said. "My name's Tina."

"I'd guess you already know who I am."

"Dalroi, yes. I've been waiting for you. Let's leave this place before somebody else picks up a clue. You're not exactly popular with the hierarchy."

They left. Several heads turned incuriously. Somebody remarked that Tina was having a busy night, but apart from that they passed unnoticed.

She led him to a flat three blocks away, a sorry tenement apartment at the head of a flight of filthy concrete stairs. The room was dirty, badly lit, and had a degree of untidiness which verged upon abandon. Papers, bottles and clothing littered the dresser and spilled over into the sink and on to the floor. The room was dominated by a large iron bedstead ornamented with vulgar brass, at the head of which hung a handworked text in a gilt frame which proclaimed that : ' God is love.'

Dalroi scowled. The character pattern of the room contrasted unreally with the person. Despite her appearance he recognized the strength of character beneath the surface.

She read the look in his eyes. "Don't worry. The dirt is strictly for the customers."

"Who are you ?" asked Dalroi. "You're not the type to rest content in a cess-pit like this. Even in Failway you could use your talents better."

"I'm Tina Macoray. I work for Ombudsmand Rhodes."

"Lord ! You mean you work here as part of your duty ?"

She shrugged. "Somebody has to do it. The dregs of humanity finish up on this level, so it's here that the champions of the underdog need to start."

"All right," said Dalroi. "What do you want with me ?"

"We know a great deal about you, Dalroi, and we have a rough idea of the sort of situation you're in. I'm instructed to offer you any sort of help you need."

"The sort of help I need doesn't exist this side of immortality."

"Perhaps not. Perhaps I can't help you, but do you want everyone else here to suffer ? You know that whatever's after you isn't going to be a humane operator."

"There's no avoiding that. I can't imagine Failway releasing a quarter of a million potential hostages."

"There may be a way. It's desperate, but I think it could work. If there existed a separate threat which would render this level totally unusable anyway, I think that Failway might react to that."

Dalroi frowned. "There's no such threat which could make Failway act out of mercy."

"Not mercy but in self-protection—protection of investments."

"What did you have in mind?"

"Venusian smallpox."

"God!" Dalroi put his hands to his face involuntarily.

"It's a plague they could not tolerate," said Tina. "They dare not let it spread because, win or lose, they could never re-open the level if they did. It would be a factual impossibility ever to decontaminate an area like Failway Six."

"It might just work," said Dalroi. "They'd have to evacuate the place or write it off for good. Hell, if only we had some spores."

She took a hypo-phial from a small bag and held it up. "One dose. Guaranteed death in eight hours in the nastiest possible way."

He reached for the phial but she moved away. "Get out, Dalroi! Get as far away from here as you reasonably can. I'll give you ten minutes, then I'll make the injection and go right back to the bar. I don't think anyone will miss the initial symptoms."

"Tina, no!" There were almost tears in his eyes. "Not you! Use it on a hop-head and get clear. Hell, you know what venuspox is like!"

"Yes, I know what it's like," said Tina quietly. "Now get out! There's too little here to risk wasting trying to pump it into a hop-head."

"Take this," said Dalroi, handing her the slug pistol. "It's a crude form of anodyne but the only possible one which could be any use in the circumstances. Do it sooner rather than later because once the nerves start going you won't have that much control."

He grasped her quickly and kissed her, then looked away because his eyes were full of misery. "If there ever was a reason for me to succeed," he said, "this is it. I've never heard of any sacrifice quite as brave."

"Don't pity me, Dalroi. You're the one who's going to take the beating. After all, I've only got a few hours left."

Unashamedly Dalroi wept.

## nineteen

Once on the street he kept going. The sordid town was full of bent and crooked streets, dark, damp and carved out of misery and despair. Street-girls haunted the corners and taunted or pleaded as he passed. Once Dalroi could have pitied them ; now his heart was too choked with emotion to count them as more than shadows against the bright bank of hatred which clawed under his eyelids.

*Dear God ! Somebody's going to pay for this !*

At the far end of the town he found another bar. He ordered bread and meat and sat in a corner, ears attentive, waiting for the storm to break. In his mind he pictured the rising panic : firstly the suspicion of an outbreak of venuspox, then its confirmation ; the news spreading along the chains of communication to the unknown hierarchy and the emergency instructions filtering back again. **ACTION ! REACTION !**

With eyes on the clock he tried to imagine the timing of the various stages, wondering where the mysterious hierarchy was located and how it was composed. The scheme would stand or fall on the decision to evacuate or to sweat it out—a decision which would be taken by persons unknown in places he had yet to find.

Finally he decided that all was lost. Whoever should have made the decision had given the thumbs down and every living soul on Failway Six was lost, because those who did not succumb to whatever was waiting for Dalroi were inevitably doomed by the Venusian spores with which Tina had infected herself.

Or had Tina's courage failed ? Or had she fallen in the street and was dying unnoticed—or was it possible that anyone in any sort of authority could have ignored the danger ? Certainly no authority on Failway Six could have failed to take action. Self-preservation alone would have taken care of that.

He moved out of the bar again, unable to restrain his curiosity at the continued silence. He had to know why the city still slept when it should have been wild with all the chaos of mass migration. He had not gone far before the reason became apparent.

Dark vehicles, like those of a forbidden army, were traversing the streets. Everywhere a quiet and orderly evacuation was taking place. Teams of figures were entering the buildings and waking the occupants, conducting them to places on the trucks swiftly and without fuss. The essential urgency of the occasion was overruled by the imperative need to avoid panic. Dalroi mentally saluted the organizers of Failway. They were caterers for every need including the need of escape.



Carefully he moved through the streets towards the transfinite passenger shuttle installation. Again the precise bonds of organization were apparent. The immense shuttles slid away at one-second intervals, programmed for Failway Terminal, and the fleet of vehicles kept coming with a steady stream of hastily awakened sleepers, many of whom were obviously under cepi hypnosis and had no idea of the nature of their nocturnal journey.

Later the Security men began to comb the streets looking for stragglers, but the search was perfunctory for none had any desire to remain for one second longer than was necessary in such a plague spot. Dalroi climbed to the roof of a group of deserted flats and lay out of sight whilst the search went past. The weight of exhaustion and sleepless hours bore down on him, and, unwillingly, he slept.

When he awoke the whole city was empty and abandoned. He reconnoitred the silent streets and probed into the buildings without finding trace of any remaining soul. So far as he could tell he was the only living thing in the whole area of Failway Six. Although it was now time for the artificial morning the plasma-sun remain dark, and a sinister silence held deep over the unofficial night.

Ruefully he reflected that Tina, whether or not she had the opportunity to use the gun on herself, would be dead by now. "Don't pity me, Dalroi," she had said. "You're the one who's going to take the beating." *Even she thought that! Well, I'm ready. If they really want so much to kill me now's the time for them to try. But they'd better make no mistakes because if I survive I shall make it my business to extract such unholy vengeance for this hour that my retribution will resound throughout the far centuries.*

He grew uncomfortably aware that the sky was growing lighter, not with the stained greys of the artificial morning which would never come, but with a mercuric blueness only just out of ultraviolet. Checking the charge in the radiation pistol Dalroi climbed down from the high roof to the murky streets, dim crevasses in the unlikely dawn.

The city had been abandoned with all services still running and as he touched the pavements he experienced a twinge of incredible loneliness that behind the dimly lighted windows no sleepers stirred or lovers moved or cried or sang or wept. Only his footsteps blunted the quick silence.

"Make no mistake," said Dalroi to his unseen persecutors. "If I survive I'll hunt you to the far corners of infinity."

There was a white flash, brilliant, eclipsing vision with a dynamic blankness. It filled the whole atmosphere and coruscated and burned on corners and projections. Dalroi himself became the centre of a shaft of living white fire which ate at him with tongues of cold flame and then as rapidly was extinguished. The white fires flickered and died ; nothing was burnt, or was scorched or showed any sign of difference.

Dalroi's skin crawled. This was a new phenomenon, of unknown potency, but presumably it was designed to be deadly. In what way ? His attention fastened on the radiation pistol in his hand, an incredible fear forming in his mind. In verification he squeezed the trigger. The gun mashed under his fingers and disintegrated into crumbling powder. Stupidly he watched the particles fall.

*Metal !* Fear flashed sharply. *Something happened to the molecular binding forces in the metal. All metals ?* He turned to a lamp standard and smote it sharply with his hand. The blow catalysed some reaction and the standard broke crisply and fell in untidy, crumbling shards before his feet. *Not only metal !* Glass, ceramic, plastic—every substance the lamp had contained crumbled to sickening dust under his probing toes. *My God ! The whole damn place is made of dust !*

His shoes disintegrated with a sudden exotherm which made him jump. The fibres of his clothing shredded, unwillingly at first, then with growing impetus, and the particles dusted as they fell from his body, leaving him naked and unarmed. He looked in bewilderment at the tall, empty buildings which surrounded him. Such lights as had shone were slowly going out as the filaments fatigued. How sound were these apparently solid walls and the hideous banks of masonry ?

Somewhere in a clock a pivot broke, causing an escapement to jam. The pendulum swung with just sufficient momentum to jar the mechanism. The catalysis touched off, and the mechanism crumbled into powder. The pendulum fell through the bottom of the case on to a marble mantleshef, and a seven story tenement crumbled into a heap of noisy dust. A bursting fuse shattered its cartridge and a line of tawdry shops became a pile of flowing particles ; a cistern burst and two blocks disappeared.

The last of the lights collapsed and died, but in the artificial sky remained the weird blue fluorescence, an ungodly aurora, and it was by this light that Dalroi moved. As his bare feet touched the ground the pavements crumbled into bowls of dust under the

impact. Sewers collapsed like dusty death-traps, and on either side the tall buildings began to totter and wave as some small impetus touched-off a chain reaction which led to complete disintegration.

He was half afraid of choking in the dust, but it settled swiftly by some electrostatic charge, though several times he sank deeply into drifts of crumbled brickdust and nearly suffocated on that account. Of the unknown enemy he saw no sign, but they had in one incredible second robbed him of weapons, of cover, and of everything outside of his own body which a lifetime of fighting had taught him to use for self-preservation.

*Somebody wants me dead ! . . . So badly they don't measure the cost in ordinary terms. Hell ! What's so special about me ? I'm Dalroi . . . and I've got something burning at the back of my brain . . . and sometimes I get almighty mad . . . and do things I never quite remember. What is it a man can have which makes him so special they'd tear the universe apart to see him in his grave ? And if he has it . . . how does he recognise it and use it to survive ?*

Something blew up with a jet of fire, and a whole quarter of the artificial city slid into oblivion. Behind the dusty desolation the quick, trim lines of the trans-finite passenger shuttle installation came into view. He waded through the dusting rubble, knowing what he would find yet unable to resist the faint hope that the installation was untouched. A bright shuttle capsule mashed like rotten tin and turned to dusty dribblets as he touched it with his hand. With eyes long past astonishment he watched the matrix coils powder to brown and copper and gold on the crumbling floor. On a tottering girder a solitary notice hanging over what had been the passenger bays crumbled its topical legend :

### NO WAY OUT

“ You can say that again ! ” said Dalroi sourly to nobody at all.

He was trapped on a transfinite level, and out there—out in the multiple darknesses all around—waited the something which so desperately wanted him dead ; something whose power and malice was to be feared with more than ordinary dread.

Trapped ! He had been trapped in transfinity before and managed to escape. *How ? No memory of that. What happens when I touch the limit of endurance ? What comes over me that's all fire and fury and crazing bitterness and anger ? Oh God ! What untapped power becomes unleashed ? What is it that lives in me in the dark side of the mind ?*



Nothing happened.

*Why don't they come out and get me ? Are they biding their time before the final punch—or are they afraid ? Afraid ? That's a laugh ! I might just manage a good spit at them if the damn dust hadn't made my mouth so dry. Why should they be afraid of me ? I'm Dalroi . . . I was born in the Old Town precinct . . . and a little bit of the Devil has got into my brain. Is that the sort of crime that shakes the Universe ? Is that why they want me dead ?*

Something happened. The remnants of the city crumbled, not spasmodically but in a continuous stream, tumbling like dry water. Walls tottered and splintered and were dust long before they hit the ground. The whole dim landscape writhed and trembled and dissolved, striving to form one bare, flat waste of powder, like shifting, unclean snow.

Then he felt the tremor beneath his feet and knew, sickly, why the rest of the city was falling. Vibration, terrible and deep, of ever increasing amplitude, was shaking the terrain bodily. In a few moments no features were left ; only a pale, shifting waste under the ungodly blue radiance which dwelt above.

*This is it ! This is the moment they've been waiting for. How is it to come—this thing called death ?*

In the dim distance the black plain held its secrets. No lights, no movements ; nothing but the harrowing certainty of eyes watching from the darkness, of unknown, unknowable power being concentrated and focussed on one solitary morsel of humanity called Dalroi.

*How is it to come ? In a fire-flash . . . heat, searing, scalding . . . or as lightning, to cinders . . . or radiation . . . high velocity projectile . . . by pressure, vacuum, gas . . . starvation, paralysis . . . or a new way of dying . . . Watch it, Dalroi ! You're paranoia's showing ! You're on the wrong end of a war of nerves !*

The vibration stepped up, tearing at his feet, creating warmth by frenzied friction. *God, it hurts !* Like a sea around him the livid dust rose in a hurling turbulence, shocked into such pitch of vibrant activity that it flowed and eddied like a tide of water. Fluidized by the pressure of colliding particles, it expanded up to his waist, then to his shoulder ; a monstrous flood in seething flow ; a drowning, bitter sea of heated dryness in which he had no hope of swimming to survival.



And it burned. He was immersed in a boiling shotblast of hot grit. Where his feet touched down on the denser layers beneath, the vibration tore at his naked feet, trying to tear the skin off, and producing frictional burns. He leaped, partly to draw clear breath above the swirling grit-storm and partly to ease the agony of standing ; and each time he leaped the lower part of his body descended again into excruciating fire.

And the fire and the tearing vibration reached steadily higher and higher. He felt he was in a boiling bath that was trying to tear the flesh from his bones ; he felt he was plunging into boiling lead, into vats of simmering steel . . . into the sun . . . Agony beyond endurance which had to be endured ; pain so intense that it was no longer pain but a synaptic short-circuit which funnelled all his awareness into one vast pit illuminated by black lightning. Then something snapped within him.

Desperation piled on desperation, resolution on resolution ; the megaton impulse of the unconquerable will to live pulsed in his brain. Fury more brilliant and more destructive than a nova charged his bloodstream with a fantastic plasma derived from the core of creation.

*Somebody will pay for this ! God, I'll make them pay !*

Anger burst over him like a storm but he could still recognise the diabolical nature of the trap. No matter what effort of will or desperation he achieved he could never hope to wade clear of the boiling maelstrom. Inflammable dust motes were bursting into spontaneous points of fire and it was only a matter of time before the whole mass became incandescent. His mind and his will might live, but it was a matter of minutes only before his body was burnt and torn to dust.

*Ashes to ashes and dust to dust. Not this way, thought Dalroi. Not this way and not now.*

For a fragment of a second he blacked out, but the life impulse pounding in his brain reset the tripped circuit-breakers of his mind and forced him back to scalding consciousness.

There had to be some way out !

**VIBRATION STRICTION RELAXATION AMPLITUDE  
FREQUENCY**

There had to be an answer !

There was an answer. The vibration was a standing wave, adjusted to place him at the anti-node so that the punishment would have full effect. If he could only reach the nodal point . . .

He could see it now that he knew what to look for. The pattern of standing waves was traced by the activity of the dust like sand on a vibrating tray. At the nodal points the lessened activity was marked by a valley in the whirling flood. Here a man could stand in the midst of the fury and escape all but the incidental effects. He thrust himself forward. Within seconds his feet touched down on cooler surfaces and the dust rose no higher than his waist. Before and behind him the barbarous dust rose higher and hotter like the waves of some monstrous time-locked sea.

## t w e n t y

His relief was of short duration. Whether it was deliberate or some quirk of the harmonics of the place he never knew, but suddenly there was a rapid node-change which plunged him into an anguished wave now well above his head. He floundered, and more by luck than judgment broke out to a new node point. He pressed swiftly along the channel formed by the standing wave, intent on reaching the limits of the city material, beyond which there would be nothing in which to drown or burn.

Something else slammed into the fabric of the nightmare terrain, another frequency from another direction, beating with the first then locking into synchronization an octave above. The node channel began to twist and dissolve, breaking into patterns and diamonds like a monstrous living quilted eiderdown. Progress became a matter of timing and placing, a wild dance through shifting red-hot quicksand with agony the reward for a misplaced foot or a misjudged tempo. Dalroi was dancing the Devil's ballet, with death as the most critical of audiences.

The unknown enemy must have guessed what he was up to, for the vibration patterns changed again. The immense dunes began rolling, huge as houses, and the uncertain valleys shifted even as he trod. The synchronization escaped him, and for a second he knew he was roasting alive, but suddenly he was on the edge of the city that had been, stumbling down a weak, vibrating incline on to a plain of cool black darkness. His eyes were wide with terror, not from the narrowness of his escape from death but with fear of the thing which burned in the dark side of his mind. The last half mile he had not walked . . . he had jumped !

The conflict smote him with the force of a physical blow. He had jumped—projected himself across half a mile of space without intention and without knowing how. The trouble was

that he knew the sensation was familiar to him. He had jumped before, many times, but where and how he could not quite recall. It was a part of those things his mind refused to admit, a dark shadow chained deep in the dungeons of the subconscious.

Only once, on the web, could he recall consciously breaking through into the realms of self-projection. He could remember breaking free of the web, but after that all was confused nightmare and blankness. He had woken in a hospital just as the doctor was signing his death certificate. Of his journey to that peculiar circumstance he had no knowledge at all.

*I must have jumped . . . Only . . . His blood ran cold. Gormalu jumped too—and Gormalu's not human !*

*I had his neck under my fingers and he jumped—clean out of existence. When I was trapped on the web—and just now—I also jumped. God ! Don't tell me I'm not human either : I'm Dalroi, I was born in Old Town . . . my mother was a tramp and my father was an alcoholic . . . and between them they hadn't enough energy to roll out of bed, let alone jump.*

The vibration died unwillingly. The dust behind him collapsed in ribbed patterns on the bedrock, and Dalroi searched carefully around the black terrain seeking signs of his persecutors. He was naked and his skin was raw and inflamed and burned as though he had been bathed in vitriol, but he believed now what he had refused to believe before : he *had* an immunity to murder, a painful kind of ersatz immortality. How or why was an academic point, but for the moment he clung to it with an animal belief. Nothing else could have brought him out of that hell alive.

But, he conceded grimly, it was not himself who needed to be convinced. Whatever was out there was not going to be as easily persuaded. They might never succeed in killing him—but he was having a hell of a painful time whilst they tried. And then again, perhaps they knew precisely . . . how to kill an immortal . . .

*What next ? They must know that I escaped the trap. Perhaps that was just a softening-up process. They were dead right ! Much softer and I'd go right through a jelly-sieve. But they didn't go to all that trouble just to baste me turkey-red and then let me escape. I wish to hell I knew what was coming next. I have a feeling this is the finale.*

He saw the beam swinging towards him, its path detailed by dust motes in the air, and he flung himself to the floor. The beam halted and locked over him, flooding the area with a D-line sodium yellow glare. Another projector lashed out from behind,



then another and another until he lay centrally in a circle of spotlights. Surprisingly, nothing hurt. He rose warily to his feet and, shielding his eyes, he walked experimentally along the floor. The projectors were locked on to him with elegant precision, for he moved no nearer to the edge of the brilliant circle.

"All right !" said Dalroi to the bright darkness. "So what do you want—a tap dance ?"

The position was inconceivably bad. Whilst he was bathed in that illumination anyone out in the darkness could hit him with almost anything without fail. A rifle, a revolver, a radiation pistol—a hand grenade even. It was a situation that needed to be rectified as soon as he could decide how to do it. After ten minutes it did not seem as though anyone was going to hit him at all, and the incongruity struck home.

*Why a sodium light ? These people must have progressed well past the stage of fluor-atomics, and a sodium discharge is not particularly efficient even by our own standards. Hell, have I made a mistake ? I've been waiting for a brickbat from out of the darkness when maybe it's something in the light that is the danger.*

The idea grew to a certainty and the certainty to a rising panic. Dalroi was never one to underestimate his opponents capabilities and the circle of light put him at a gross psychological disadvantage. Experimentally he tried to jump, but without the crazing fury and desperation seething in his veins the effort was useless. Jumping was strictly a survival reaction and this particular peril was one in which the survival threat was carefully obscured. He needed to be teetering near to the essential brink of destruction before the trigger flung him clear in a burst of wild madness ; he had to know the breath of death before he could evoke such superhuman talent.

*My God ! Suppose I don't know how before it's too late !*

He concentrated, exploring the senses of his body, trying to detect the first impulse which would tell him how he was supposed to die. He was well aware that a heavy dose of short radiation could damage him beyond recovery without his being able to detect it, but he felt in his bones it would be something more virulent, more painful and more swiftly effective than blood cancer. He primed his mind to react to the first microsecond of pain, knowing he would have no time to make a conscious decision.

He nearly did not make it.



The nature of the threat, the pain and the reaction were as near instantaneous as his senses could measure.

## SODIUM ! SODIUM !

The words shrieked through his mind. The supposed lamps were ion projectors seeding his body with molecules of metallic sodium. Sodium reacts with moisture in the body . . . exothermally . . . produces hydrogen . . . spontaneous combustion . . . produces sodium hydroxide . . . eats flesh . . . fatally toxic.

Simultaneously his flesh burst into flame and he jumped. . .

No sudden transition, this. They were waiting for him with some fiendish understanding of transfinity. His progress was arrested by the slam of a wall of solid energy which he struck with a momentum that would have killed him outright had he been moving in a normal space-time continuum. He jumped again. Again force slashed out and beat him back . . . burning . . . burning . . .

He jumped once more. This time the whole megaton impulse of the fire in his mind flared with unbelievable intensity. Anger, hatred and desperation came together like triple components of sub-critical mass uniting to form the ultimate of chain reactions. Uncontrolled, uncontrollable, the power punched through his body and his brain. *He was Dalroi . . . the irresistible force . . . and he had the power to destroy the universe !* The irresistible force closed again with the immovable wall his antagonists had set around him. This time it was the wall that had to give.

Transfinity shuddered. Streamers of light speared away into the black depths and the wall of energy collapsed back on its creators like a sheet of mad lightning. Dalroi, spinning like a top, toppled into a pit of veined darkness, wondering how much more punishment he would have to take before his antagonists realised they were fighting a lost battle.

Even as he broke through into the next strata of transfinity he knew his persecutors had no intention of calling the battle lost. No matter how his body burned it was his mind which was to take the brunt of the shock. His eyes refused to focus on the kaleidoscope of impossibilities which passed before his agonized gaze. Shapes and forces seethed before him, geometrical idiocies, non-euclidian absurdities ; an ebullient configuration of seven-dimensional images both living and inanimate.

The gross nightmare bore heavily on his powers of reason. Sound, too, held all the acoustic unreality of something which reason declares cannot possibly exist. Dalroi was the intruder, an object inflicting as much curiosity and fear as the sudden appearance of a one-dimensional man in a crowded shopping centre on a Saturday afternoon. He felt the waves of terror and consternation beating back at him as the unimaginable entities skittered insanely in an inconceivable number of directions to leave him standing on an abstract and impossible plane.

**I'M BURNING**, said Dalroi. **CAN'T YOU SEE I'M BURNING !**

If they understood at all they gave no sign. Fear begat anger, and the atmosphere crackled with hostility. Entities approached, winging quickly on mind-splitting trajectories which would have driven a ballistics computer into screaming hysteria.

**BURNING ! BURNING ! BURNING !**

The sweet smell of intended murder seeped into Dalroi's nostrils.

**CAN'T YOU SEE I'M BURNING !**

Encouraged by his passive resistance the entities wheeled to press an emboldened attack. Sounds stuttered and stammered and his mind groped for patterns of sound as the only possible substitute for intelligibility.

**CUT ! CUT ! CUT ! SPLITTER ! CUT !** said the sparkling chaos.

"Hate !" said Dalroi. "**HATE !**" His words were a blaze of gold on blue, hazed against the keen brilliance. His mind twisted between rejection of the seven-dimensional images and an attempt to resolve them in three-dimensional terms. In neither case was he successful. His position was that of a blind idiot without legs engaged in a rapier duel with a practised swordsman. He could neither see the enemy, follow his manoeuvres nor knew where the next blow was to fall. The chaotic patterns seethed before his eyes, evoking impossible perspectives and mind-twisting matrices of things material, things immaterial and things which were different from either. Sanity teetered dangerously on an unstable pivot.

**SPLITTER ! SPLITTER ! CUT !**

His left arm whooped with a thousand agonies which were overlaid with a numbing dullness. The limb felt as if it had become encased with lead. He knew his arm had been hurt, but

by what or how badly it was impossible to tell, for the multiple refractions of the media in which he moved distorted even his own image beyond recognition. More terribly, he sensed he was beaten. His eyes and brain had no way of interpreting or responding to a seven-dimensional configuration, yet he sensed from the waves of immortal panic which splintered and phased around him that he was more terrible than they.

## BURNING ! BURNING !

His only chance was to fight them on their own ground. He had to learn how to manipulate a geometry which could tolerate seven lines each at right-angles to the rest ; and this he had to do in the face of an attack as vehement as it was abstract. He forced his mind to grapple with the cascading irrationalities. The violence with which his mind withdrew told him that he could never do it and remain sane enough to be objective.

p  
s e cut  
i r cut  
h e cut  
Triangles w d **SPLITTER**

Yellow was acrid in his mouth.

"Hate !" said Dalroi. "**HATE !**"

Fire sang like soft steel splitting over a piercing tool, tumbling into troughs of boiling light. Movement was an echo which had no origin ; pain was a red dimensionless haze ; attitude was a concrete substance which rippled off the tongue like an ecstatic prayer.

Sound, SOUND that he could touch, taste, smell, eddied like small explosive clouds of coloured malice. Time was a shrill wind, echoing isolation, discreet quanta, a string of numbered knives to be separated and re-aligned.

## SPLITTER ! SPLITTER ! CUT !

Madness seized him. Desperation more desperate than the mere laws of preservation charged him with an awful strength. Intelligences were all around him, moving in, trying each to press a separate hurt. In the face of Dalroi's new burst of inspired spite they drew back in apparent consternation. Warmth wounded ; light loitered loftily, shapes spun and shattered ; sensations shivered. Time cut like a fine edge of a whetted blade. Entropy moaned with anguish.

**TOOTH ! NAIL ! WILL ! SPITE ! HATE ! FIGHT !**

Dalroi turned on his persecutors with a maniacal fury, the dark thing in his mind burning bright like a thousand beacons. The furious furnace within him burst into his blood with a marvellous flood of intrinsic contempt and barbarism. With every ounce of his being vibrating he hurled at his alien adversaries a vast tide of corrosive, vitriolic hatred.

Something snapped.

There was a period of blindness which had nothing akin to lack of seeing, and a gulf of pain which had no correspondence with sensation. There was searing heat without warmth, pressure unfelt, a moment locked in trans-temporal stillness and a fold in time which would have ruptured the most carefully constructed clock.

When the bright darkness cleared he gazed aghast on the twisted discords which surrounded him. He took up a black triangle and counted the sides. *Twenty-four now. God, what have I got myself into ?*

**t w e n t y - o n e**

The dilemma fazed him temporarily. Seven dimensions had been trial enough, but this—this was madness. The chaotic geometry had been smashed apart and replaced with chaos upon chaos upon chaos. Dimensionality was lost, criteria had run amuck. The awesome blast of malicious fury which had burst from him had destroyed the tottering reference frame of this hideous universe, and no geometrical concept could begin to grasp the formless groping after new order which dominated the nightmare scene.

Atoms toyed in meaningless associations ; radiations strayed looking for finite laws of nature ; raw energy abounded, harmless, having no anathema which to attack or repel ; raw intelligence, alien and *sans corpore* coalesced into frightened spinning whirlpools of spluttering light. Dalroi stood trying to collect his mazed senses and to grasp the enormity of the havoc he had wrought. He had no doubt of what he had done. He had knocked a complete dimensional level straight into a transfinite loop, the absurd mathematical shriek from which no undistorted form had ever returned.



The quasi-universe fell apart. He fell like a part of the rainbow, blazed like the sun on a spring morning, howled like the wind through a million keyholes. He was spreadeagled across the realms of null, racked by the waves of a tideless sub-atomic sea. He was a loose coalition of atomic particles caught in transfinity's deadliest trap, yet the raging thing in the dark side of his mind was a binding force which locked his molecules together and maintained a reasoning being in the midst of unchartable madness.

He knew now beyond doubt that the fabric of transfinite space was amenable to control by thought. He had within him the power to create chaos or end it, to project himself through the transfinite lattices or to bend them to his will. It was all a question of . . . formulation. One had to know what to manipulate, and how and when. Given that, some special act of resolution or despair was sufficient to catalyse the reaction.

Right now he wanted out. He wanted a particular destination for a particular purpose. Caught up in the maddening vortex of a transfinite loop he worked desperately to find the formula. Somewhere it was forgotten . . . deliberately repressed. He had to have that information even if he went through his mind with an atomic-hydrogen torch.

The secret yielded under the ruthless self-analysis. From the shadows he culled the co-ordinates he needed, a meaningless string of symbolism. With effortless, inhuman reaction he computed the unready mathematics and without the luxury of hesitation or wonder—he jumped.

**BURNING !**

**BURNING !**

**BURNING !**

“Korch, what's the present position at Failway?”

“Panic,” said Korch drily. “To give them their due they seem quite as baffled about all this as we are. They've sent a boomerang shuttle into the Failway-Six stratum. They haven't developed all the photographs yet, but first indications are that the entire installation has been blasted flat. I've never seen anything like it. There's a waste in there which looks as though it's never been occupied since eternity.”

"That figures," said the Monitor. "Whatever they did to Dalroi they'd have to do in a big way."

"You think they got him?"

"I don't know what the hell to think. This whole affair has more loose ends than the average sheep. Somebody on the other side of nowhere wanted Dalroi's head and I don't think it was for a hunting trophy. As far as I can judge the whole reason for the existence of Failway was to act as a combined bait and execution block for Dalroi or somebody like him. Does that make sense to you?"

"Not a bit," said Korch.

"Nor to me. The more you look at it the insaner it becomes. Calculate the cost of putting in the Failway installation and figure how long it would take to get that investment back. Don't bother, I'll tell you the answer—it's seventeen hundred years. Hardly an attraction for a get-rich-quick merchant, and if it's merely the bait for a Godallmighty trap then it adds up to an awful lot of wanting for somebody's skin."

"Or an awful lot of fear."

"That seems to be the answer," said the Monitor, "but it still doesn't make sense. I'll swear Dalroi never knew of their existence before they started on him. We're missing the whole point somewhere and it's imperative we catch up fast."

"How can we do that?"

"Perhaps we can't but just supposing they don't get Dalroi? Suppose he manages to get back . . . What's he liable to do?"

"Start looking for the ones who set all this up for him, I suppose. And a rare job he'd make of it, too!"

"Precisely, so I've collected a group of prime suspects which we'll invite him to find—on our own ground. I've put them in the cells below here and left enough clues so that Dalroi will know where to come looking. There's Cronstadt, Hildebrand, Presley, and Ombudsmand Rhodes who asks all the wrong questions about all the right people."

"I don't see how Rhodes fits in?"

"Neither do I, but Harry Dever was one of his men. You can take it from me that Rhodes is in the thick of this somewhere. Rhodes knows a lot more than he's saying and I have a feeling that if Dalroi came back we'd start getting a few straight answers."

"But with Dalroi . . . ! You're taking a hell of a risk. Remember Consedo?"

"I don't think this would be another Consedo. I suspect Dalroi's vengeance may be a little more personal. There's another point also. Whilst I intend to let Dalroi in if he comes, I have no intention of letting him out again."

Korch considered this for a moment then whistled softly through his teeth. "What makes you think you can hold Dalroi if Failway can't?"

"A certain cylinder labelled X47 Neurogas which I saved from World War Three."

"X47's banned under the Tel-Aviv Humanitarian Convention."

"You think I don't know that? But I don't think we're dealing with humanitarians either. There are forces involved in this struggle which could wipe out the entire human race without so much as a sideways glance. Dalroi is one of them. Regardless of who or what he's fighting I don't think we can let a man with powers like that remain at large in our society?"

"A hypothetical point," said Korch, "since Dalroi has not and never may return. But supposing he did, you still can't localise X47. Release one milligram of that in the vicinity of the cells and you'd affect everybody in the entire area."

"The fact had not escaped me, but you cannot have a trap without bait, and bait is, almost by definition, expendable."

"My God!" said Korch. "You must want to get Dalroi badly."

"I do," said the Monitor, "I certainly do."

At one hour past midnight the brittle clatter of the alarm bell shattered the silence deep in the subterranean H.Q. of the Black Knights. The Monitor was activating his communicator button even before it toned his personal summons.

"Korch here, Chief. I think you were right. The electrified fence just went down. The control board's fused solid as though it got mixed with a thousand KV power line."

The Monitor took a deep breath. "Nothing short of a direct strike by lightning could fuse that board solid."

"Uh! So we were struck by lightning out of a clear sky and clean through the ion-cloud umbrella. That sort of coincidence I don't like. My money says Dalroi's arrived and he's not being too gentle about his means of entry."

"Anything on the screens?"

"There's enough mush to write a love lyric but nothing which is identifiable as Dalroi. There's some extremely broad-band interference chewing into our circuits somewhere. Effectively

we're blind. If that's Dalroi he's got some cute tricks up his sleeve."

"That's Dalroi all right, and I don't imagine we've seen all of his tricks yet. Upgrade the alert to yellow imperative, and be prepared for anything. The next half hour could be decidedly rough."

"What about the A.F.I. projectors?"

"Turn them off. We don't want to burn him on the way in. Only if he tries to go out again."

Silence for long seconds. "Too late," said Korch, with just a hint of hysteria in his voice. "The A.F.I.'s just fused. Load resistance died somehow. The magnetrons went up like fireworks. Hell, are you sure you know what you're doing letting Dalroi in here?"

"I don't think I could stop him even if I wanted to. You're sure that everyone knows what to do?"

"Positive. I've checked them through it half a hundred times. Dalroi comes in but he doesn't go out again. If he does it'll be over a big pile of dead bodies."

"Don't joke," said the Monitor. "It could even happen that way. Give me the full range of video pickups in the cells, I want to . . . Hell!"

"What's the matter?"

"The girl, Zen, she's still in the cells with the others. There's no sense in her getting a dose of X47 too. How much time do you reckon I've got?"

"If Dalroi's only just through the A.F.I. range I'd say about four minutes. The Devil take all blind personnel-detecting instruments!"

"I'm going down to get the girl out," said the Monitor. "Signal me if he gets too close before I'm through. I'll leave my communicator open so we can compare notes."

"Check!" Korch closed his eyes. He did not like last minute rearrangements.

By the time the Monitor arrived the doors of the individual cells had been opened and the prisoners had congregated in the wide passage that led through the cell area. There was no doubt that they took this as a sign of their impending release and they came forward eagerly when the main doors broke open to admit the Monitor. But when the great doors sealed behind him the atmosphere grew electric.



"Something's happening," said Cronstadt. His face was a shade of grey from the contagious fear. "You're expecting some sort of trouble."

"I'm expecting Dalroi," said the Monitor tonelessly, "and that tends to have the same effect. I don't know what he wants, but I suspect it's a little spectacular vengeance. If anyone here has anything on his conscience he'd better figure out a few good explanations. Dalroi in a vengeful mood doesn't bear thinking about."

"You're letting him come in?" asked Cronstadt. Fear and disbelief stood high on his face.

"Frankly I don't have any way to stop him."

"Speed it up!" Korch's urgent voice came over the communicator. "I guess he's nearly here by now. Things are too damn silent."

The Monitor started to say something then thought better of it. He caught Zen by the arm.

"You'd better come out of here. For the next half an hour anything goes. Dalroi's after the blood of one of these idiots and I'd sooner watch it on the screen than in person. You're not involved. We'd better get out of here before that rampant boy friend of yours starts tearing the whole bloody place apart."

Zen stood her ground. "Take your hands off me! I'll take my own chances. You're as much involved as anyone in what's happened to Dalroi. Suppose he starts looking for you?"

"Speed it up," said Korch. "Something's starting to happen."

The Monitor had no use for finesse. He chopped Zen savagely with his hand and swung the sagging body over his shoulder. As they passed through the door the solenoids clamped down, locking the slab with an ominous finality, leaving Cronstadt, Presley, the Ombudsmand and Hildebrand looking at each other with mutual unquiet.

The Monitor signalled the guards to abandon the cell area. He set the trips in the recess wherein lay the cylinder of X47 neurogas and its attendant controllers, then turned to go up the stairs. As he did so pandemonium broke out. The speaker system cut in with a string of conflicting orders which terminated in a shout. In the background somebody was screaming with hysteria. The Monitor's face paled. The men who were breaking down were seasoned Black Knights, conditioned to the toughest deeds and scenes. Whatever they had contacted had

broken mind and spirit with singularly shattering effect. Nothing had any right to be as horrific as that.

"Korch ! For Christ's sake what's going on up there ?"

Korch was almost incoherent. "My God ! Oh my God ! He suddenly appeared . . . and he's burning . . . My God ! He's all on fire."

"Hell !" said the Monitor. "Don't you crack up on me."

"I tell you he's burning. I never saw a living man on fire before. God, I feel giddy !"

The Monitor cut the connection impatiently, and pressed on up the stairs. As he reached the landing a wave of giddiness hit him too. He threw it off with a puzzled frown and continued for five more paces before his sense of balance went haywire and the floor rushed up to meet him. He fell heavily, instinctively cushioning Zen's head as they hit the ground.

Cursing wildly he sat up and nearly overbalanced until his fingers contacted the wall. He gripped tightly to the corner of a panel and tried to analyse the situation. The corridor appeared to be revolving wildly. He felt he was on a mad merry-go-round with himself at the centre point. He knew that something was affecting both his eye muscles and his sense of balance. The swinging, shifting disorientation tied his stomach into knots and filled him with a profound nausea. He tried crawling, but the floor seemed to buck and twist beneath him so alarmingly that he had to rest every few seconds to reassure himself that he was in no danger of being spun helplessly down the corridor by centrifugal force.

The communicator fell from his pocket and clattered to the floor. In recovering it he thumbed the button and Korch's voice came in chanting : "Burning . . . Burning . . . Burning !"

## twenty - two

It said much for the discipline of his training that the Monitor was still capable of logical thought. Something was affecting them all, and, with Dalroi in the vicinity, it was certainly no casual misfortune. The question was, how was it done. Carving arcs above his head was a ventilator louver. That made sense ! He moved himself giddily out of the immediate airstream and the whirlaround grew slightly less. He even climbed to his knees without falling, though the gyrations still spun the usefulness from

his eyes and limbs. Whatever it was, then, it was coming in through the ventilator shafts. A logical move where one wished to paralyse an entire underground installation. Only . . .

This revealed the strength of Dalroi's hand with a shattering clarity. The air conditioning plant was equipped with batteries of filters, electro-static precipitators, scrubbers, charcoal beds, UV sterilizers, low-temperature condensers and every device that science could provide to ensure that what was happening could not possibly occur. In some way Dalroi had contrived a method to make molecules, indistinguishable from those of normal air, which could carry the seeds of this gross disorientation through the most critical of treatment plants. The hair prickled on the back of the Monitor's neck. He had grossly underestimated Dalroi's capabilities.

"How can a man burn?" asked Korch plaintively through the communications set. "All going round!"

"Shut up!" said the Monitor. "I have to think. Do you suppose there's a fit man anywhere in the place?"

Korch said nothing so the Monitor drew his own conclusions. Things were working out all wrong, catastrophically wrong. He tried the communicator again.

"Where's Dalroi now?"

"He's coming down and . . . God, you should see the way he's burning!"

"Keep him in view on the screens," said the Monitor. "Use a camera. I want to have a record of whatever it is he does."

He leaned back and tried to think. When he closed his eyes the nausea overwhelmed him with such violence that he felt he was being drawn inside-out; with his eyes open the spinning environment charged him with such insecurity that panic and self preservation destroyed objective thinking. The disorientation was growing worse. There was nothing to do but wait.

Shortly the expected began to happen. From the centre of his own particular vortex the Monitor heard the whine of the elevator descending. Dalroi was on his way. Sickly the Monitor tried to roll himself out of the fairway, but the giddy whirl defeated his muscle co-ordination and he merely rocked backwards and forwards on his back crying with frustration. The elevator doors snarled slightly and something entered the corridor. The Monitor, impelled by fear and fascination, strove to focus his eyes on Dalroi as he appeared.

"Oh, My God! Oh, My God! He's all on fire! Dalroi's burning!"

The apparition was dimly recognizable as Dalroi, but the face was the face of a soul fire-tormented through eternity. Satan's kingdom had opened and vomited one of the luckless spawn of Hell. Lines of agony were etched more deeply than they had any right to be in a face that once had been human. One arm hung limply by his side and the fire flowed from the naked body like flames from a burning brand. But it was the eyes which dominated; eyes which held a flame of their own, far brighter and more consuming than the fire which racked the body. It was fire against fire, spirit against combustion, limitless power against inconsequential flame.

The figure moved towards him, and the Monitor nearly blacked-out trying to force his eyes and his mind to follow its progress. It came close and stopped before the blur which was the prostrate Zen, paused for a brief examination then lifted her body like a babe, one handed, and came on to the Monitor's side. The words, when they came, were more than words : garlanded in flame like the pronouncements of some ancient god of war.

"I had to come back for her. Revenge will be so very, very sweet," was all that Dalroi said.

The monitor strove to sit up, his mind protesting at the wrongness of the statement, but something gave way inside him and the blackness that closed around spun him sickeningly downwards into oblivion.

When the Monitor awoke he was feeling sick and empty and Korch was standing over him dashing water into his face.

"What happened to Dalroi ?" asked the Monitor wanly.

"Gone," said Korch. "It was unholy. I was watching through the screens. Dalroi took the girl and walked towards the video pickup in the corridor. My God ! That face—it haunts me. Do you suppose a martyr would look like that when he was being crucified ?"

"Stick to the point !" said the Monitor quickly.

"Dalroi walked up the corridor, then he went."

"Went where ?"

"Nowhere. He stepped a little way into the air and vanished. He and the girl both vanished . . . like the flame going out on a candle."

"Jesus !" said the Monitor. "I might have known there'd be days like this ! Then Dalroi didn't go into the cells ?"

"No, he didn't even try. I get the impression he only came for the girl."



"He did," said the Monitor grimly. "He even told me as much. But why the hell? She had no part in this."

"We slipped up," said Korch. "I put through a call to Census when I was sure Dalroi was gone. There's no record of that girl."

"What?"

"Just that. She never was born and she never lived anywhere. Officially she never even existed. Hell, I think she was one of them!"

"Get the prisoners back to their cells," said the Monitor ominously. "Somebody's got to be made to answer these riddles and I think I'll start with them." He moved downstairs to the panel to disarm the cylinder of X47. As he opened the case he swore sharply.

"Korch!"

"Sir?"

"Don't go near the cells. There's five milligrams of X47 down there. Did Dalroi get anywhere near that panel?"

"Nowhere near."

"Then somebody else did—somebody who wanted to stop the others talking. Give me a view of the cells on the screen. Ah yes! I rather thought as much."

"Give it to me straight," said Korch. "After all that, I guess I can take anything."

"Cronstadt, Presley and Rhodes are obviously under neurogas. We may yet get them out in time to save them. But Hildebrand—now there's a mystery for you! He's completely disappeared."

Petch Hollow was a damp and mouldering bowl of leaves overhung by tall, dark trees. Nobody went there now save those, perhaps, with murder on their conscience and the need to find a few days undisturbed repose for the corpse under the raincoat in the back of the automobile. Even the hill surrounding was desperate and uninspired, and in the trees around the hollow no birds sang. It was one of Nature's forlorn places with an inbuilt atmosphere of causes lost and unrelieved despair.

It was here that Dalroi stopped. He dropped the girl's body to the ground and paced away a short distance waiting for her to wake. By now the fire in his flesh was burning low but he still dared not look at himself lest the horror broke the block he had set up in his mind to reject the pain which would otherwise have crazed him. Instead he had to listen to a noise, the throbbing in his skull, a pain he had no power to reject because it was built too

deeply into him. He had to listen, because there was no way to wrench it out of his mind.

Finally the girl awoke. At first she sat up, bewildered by the dawn and the trees and the dampness of the ground on which she lay. Then, turning, she saw Dalroi and instantly her eyes were full of fear and hideous comprehension.

"Dalroi!"

"Yes," said Dalroi. "You'll never know what it cost me to arrange this meeting. You know what its purpose is."

"Revenge!" She struggled to her feet, facing him, her face pale and shining in the wan sunlight and suddenly possessed of a certain otherworldliness. "You came back to kill me."

"You set me up for all this, Zen. Throughout everything you were the one person I never doubted. You did a good job, too. It was no fault of yours that I came through it. Had Gormalu served you better I should not be here, now. Now you're going to tell me why I have to die. Why the hell does it have to be me? What is this thing that's inside of me?"

Mixed with the fear in her eyes was a tinge of compassion.

"Don't hate me, Dalroi. If you knew as much about yourself as we know about you then you'd see we have no option. We didn't choose to play this game. Self preservation forced us into it. We have known bitterness such as even your heart could never start to comprehend."

"Hell," said Dalroi. "What harm did I ever do to you?"

"You really don't know, do you, Dalroi? God! After all this and you still don't know who or what you are. Deep down inside you're still the same old Dalroi. It hurts me even to think of it. You were the baby with the power to crack the universe, the youth who could ravage the cosmos, the man who had the most unspeakable talent for destruction in all the transfinite strata—and yet you never wanted or tried to claim your powers. You still have no idea what a terrible creature you are."

"I'm learning," said Dalroi. "Some friends of yours have been giving me some lessons on how to live dangerously."

"The pain?" she asked. "Is it terrible? You weren't intended to survive it."

"I had the same impression," said Dalroi drily. "But you still have not told me why. What is it about me that you so much want to see me dead?"

"It isn't you, Dalroi, but the thing inside of you in the dark side of the mind. We can't tolerate it, and we can't kill it except by killing you. Under no circumstances can we permit it to live, and itself it will not suffer you to die."

"What is this thing of which you're so afraid?"

"It's the power that brutally ravished a million island universes; an insane dominance of spirit which conquers and kills, abuses, breaks, lays waste and despoils everything it touches. In you is the seed of Hell itself."

"Whatever it is," said Dalroi, "it belongs there. I was born with it."

"I know," said Zen quietly. "And that's the pity. You're an attractive brute, Dalroi. Oh, I wish to God it didn't have to be in you."

Dalroi's reaction was triggered by the minutest hardening of her eyes. As her fingers raised and the white fire flashed towards his temple so he jumped. Zen jumped also. Dalroi came out on the edge of the hollow; she only a yard away. Again the white fire flashed at his face. He jumped again and again, always emerging to find her just beside him.

Rapidly he weakened. The game was unfamiliar; for him it was a survival reaction almost unused, making great demands on his already hammered physique. She jumped with an expertise of long familiarity and control. He soon realised he must reach that microsecond of hesitation which would enable the fire to strike. The next time he emerged he stood stock still.

If he had expected triumph in her face he was disillusioned. She stood before him white faced and anguished and her eyes were filled with profound misery.

The fire struck and coalesced inside his brain, short-circuiting the neurones, robbing him of anger and resolve and consciousness and everything except the imponderable will to live. The last thing he remembered was falling, and, as he lay, a white face pressed against his and hot tears fell on his cheek—tears which burned with greater heat than the fire which he had carried on his body out of transfinity.

\*

\*

\*

## twenty - three

"Will he live?" asked the Monitor anxiously.

The doctor looked down at Rhodes' unconscious body swathed in white. "What do you think?" he asked cynically. "If I could revive a neurogas patient I'd go in for reincarnation in a big way."

"But will he be able to talk?"

The doctor's disgust was unrestrained. "Yes, he will be able to talk. With enough adrenalin and the use of the artificial-heart-lung apparatus I can keep him alive just that long. I can only hope that he has enough mind left to employ his dying gasps calling down curses on the criminal idiot who left him as bait in a trap primed with neurogas."

"When will he talk?"

The doctor exhaled heavily. "The sooner the better, perhaps. His mind can't last long with continued oxygen starvation." He adjusted his syringes carefully. "I can give you about half an hour's conversation with the corpse of the man you murdered. See me when you've finished and I'll give you something to help you sleep tonight."

"Rhodes," said the Monitor, "can you hear me?"

"I hear you," said the Ombudsmand, and the voice rattled drily through the tube in his throat.

"Tell me about Dalroi? Who is Dalroi?"

Rhodes told him in a voice like a creaking ghost. The atmosphere grew tense and still as the words fell to a piping whisper then to a sigh like wind among reeds and finally to silence as the spirit fled away. The Monitor saluted and paid his last respects, and felt, for the first time in his life, the meaning of humility.

Korch was waiting for him at the door. "Any luck?"

"Yes." The Monitor mopped his brow. "He put more sense into those thirty minutes than the human race has into twenty thousand years of philosophy. I went into there as a man and I leave as an animal."

"Are you all right, Chief?"

"All right!" The Monitor was quick with scorn. "We shall none of us be all right again—ever. Hell, I feel dirty and sick and tired of it all. You'd better come with me. We have an appointment to keep with our keeper. How does it feel to be living in a zoo?"



At first Dalroi thought he was blind, so peculiar was the quality of the darkness. His eyes and head ached abominably. Only after, when he had lain staring at the blackness for many minutes, could he discern the dim outlines of the room. The shapes were unfamiliar, yet each detail his adjusting eyes revealed discharged a bolt of emotional shock. This was a place he did not know, yet every facet was painted with overtones of remembered fear. It was part of the sequence of things he could never quite remember.

He felt weak, terribly weak. It did not take him many seconds to realize the weakness was not natural. Touching his face he found with something of a shock, that the flesh was clean and whole, but his left arm was immobile and covered with a heavy plastic dressing. But the weakness . . . he could never remember feeling quite so drained and empty before. His metabolism was so low that his body scarcely ticking over. They had found his Achilles' heel.

The surge of anger which welled-up inside him leaked impotently away. Whatever drugs they had used on him had been remarkably effective. He no longer had the power to raise mountains—he scarcely had the power to move his limbs. He sagged back on the soft couch, trying to conserve a little energy, a reserve to meet whatever was to come. But even as he lay the weakness grew and cheated him of his last vitality. When death came, no matter what its form, he would be powerless to resist.

Footsteps sounded in a corridor somewhere, coming closer towards the dark shadow of the door. Dalroi propped himself on a leaden arm and looked out from under leaden eyelids. Despite the curious enervation his mind still boiled like a cauldron of vaporizing lead, extraordinarily aware. He knew now with dreadful certainty that he had seen this room before. This was the ante-chamber . . . to the other place, the place where things had been done to his brain . . . where horror had amassed upon horror at the hands of someone whose identity was a shadow. Only, it was not a shadow any more—it was the clear image of a man, a man of brilliant intensity and purpose who had worked on his brain with a dexterity slightly more than human.

Raw fear flared up as he began to gather the pieces of the puzzle and fit them into place. Even as the pattern became clearer the door opened to reveal his executioner. Hildebrand was there, scowling whilst his eyes adjusted to the darkness, a weapon of unfamiliar pattern in his hand.

"Dalroi, are you awake?"

"Go to hell!" said Dalroi with great difficulty. Every syllable a conscious effort.

Hildebrand came and stood over him silently. "Don't try to move. The drug allows you only minimal reaction. Any sudden exertion would burst your heart. You'd be dead long before you could reach me."

"But reach you I would," promised Dalroi.

"I don't doubt that at all. I have no illusions about the risk I'm taking. I should have destroyed you the last time I had you under the knife, but I thought I could repair something which is apparently irreparable. This time I shall take no such chances. I've been waiting a long time to rectify that mistake."

"Who are you?" asked Dalroi. Black shadows stirred in his brain. "And what did you do in my mind?"

"I tried to drive a wedge between you and what you were in danger of discovering. I tried to set up a block between the subconscious and the deep brain. Only that could have saved your life. I did not succeed. You carry things in your head which are more terrible and enigmatic than the weapons of Creation."

"Who are you?" repeated Dalroi wearily.

Hildebrand stood up straight. "I am called *Car Carra na Leodat*. My occupation is watching out for ones such as you. I come from a place you cannot imagine and from a level of civilization you can only dimly understand. I am a custodian of humanity."

"I hadn't noticed," Dalroi said. "Is that why you have to kill me?"

Hildebrand's eyes grew large and haunted with hidden sorrow. "Let me ask you a question now. Have you any idea what hell-fire inhabits you? Do you know who *you* are, Dalroi?"

Dalroi tried to nod, but his head seemed to weigh a ton and the movement was stillborn. "Yes," said Dalroi. "I think I do. We are mutual enemies. One of us is going to have to die."

Hildebrand sighted the weapon at Dalroi's head. "Just so! You must by now realize that you are no match for us. What we lack in spite we make up for in persistence and sheer numbers."

"And what I lack in numbers I make up for in sheer hatred," Dalroi said. "Nature built us as terrible opposites."

"How much do you know about us?" asked Hildebrand.

"Little. I know that Gormalu is not human. I know that both you and Zen have no origin in the world I know. I sense that Failway has a function not only as a trap but as a brake on our kind of culture. It was set there like a cancer to eat the heart out of our species, to delay something in our evolution. *Homo Sapiens* is being engineered, manipulated by unseen forces which live far beyond our notions of the transfinite strata."

"You think that is a terrible thing?"

"A man takes enough pushing around from his own kind without other agencies having a poke," said Dalroi bitterly.

"The two things are not unconnected. Don't judge until you know our reasons. I will tell you our story. It concerns a time and a place beyond even your imagination. Once, among the many civilizations of the multiple galaxies there arose a race of upstart creatures more terrible than any who opposed them. The upstarts were a race of warriors and murderers who ravaged whatever worlds they reached. They were fanatical killers, who could tolerate the existence of no other species than their own and those on whom they lived. By any standards they were supermen."

"I hate you," said Dalroi.

"In self-defence the civilized species of the multiple galaxies joined forces against the Destroyers, and put them down not once, but many times. Yet always the terrible ones arose and returned with hatreds and lusts renewed. Whole universes were shaken with their thunder. The civilized ones, in anger and desperation decided to end the matter once and for all, but having the humanity that goes with a high culture they could not tolerate the complete destruction of a race.

"After crushing the Destroyers at terrible costs to themselves they took the remnants of the race and transferred them to a far exile in a corner of transfinity, and built by genetic engineering a blockage whereby all the inherited knowledge in the racial brain was locked down out of reach. But the blocks grow weaker as the millennia pass and we have to resort to selective weeding of individuals who penetrate their own minds too deeply, and arrange wars and diversions whereby we can sap the vitality of the species as a whole."

"And that is the predicament of *Homo Sapiens*?"

"Just so. Your race is descended from those same Destroyers. You carry the ever-pregnant seeds of Hell in your souls. The truth of this is self-evident. If ever there was a race addicted to practising spite and vengeance one upon the other it is yours.



Bloodshed, murder, rape, war, slavery, torture, persecution, genocide—you name the crime and you'll find it on your doorstep. From the thumbscrew through to neurogas you know it all."

"Then what am I?" asked Dalroi.

"You," said Hildebrand, smiling wearily, "you're the mutation the one that didn't breed true. You're a throwback. In you the genetic chain grew thin and weak and the pressure of the pent-up life-force damaged the blocks which kept you from knowing the rest of yourself. Something snapped and gave you access to a little of the deep brain wherein lies all the old race memories and skills. It released to you a little of the flair for destructive science, the hyper-fast survival reactions, the amazing strength of the life force which refuses to accept death as a fact.

"In you, a split-hair's breadth beneath the surface is all the old corroding insanity, all the prowess, all the bitter refusal to submit or compromise. You are the potential killer it is so difficult to kill, the hell-spawn which has such a thirsting for life that it can twist the basic laws of the universe into a pattern for survival. You are the virus which could infect the culture. Can you wonder we wish so desperately to see you dead?"

"Can you prove what you say?" asked Dalroi.

"I can do better than prove it. I'm going to show you for yourself. I'm going to remove the block completely, let you see fully all the things that lie in the dark side of your mind."

"Why should you?"

"Because I think the shock of all that hell released at once will kill you. You don't have the old physique, Dalroi. You haven't been brought up to stand that sort of unrestrained barbarity. You've been softened by the taints of your so-called earthly civilization. There's a certain poetic justice about the idea."

Dalroi tried to move, to force himself to fight. He actually managed to get halfway off the couch before the pressure in his chest doubled him up. He toppled and fell to the ground perilously short of breath and with his consciousness and will flickering dim under the tide of inhibitors that coalesced in his bloodstream.

"I told you that was foolish," said Hildebrand quietly.

He went away and shortly returned with a trolley on to which he lifted Dalroi with one trained movement. Bands of steely hardness clamped on Dalroi's arms and legs, and Dalroi's



darkened senses were aware only that they were leaving the room, passing now down a corridor with doors of surgical whiteness into an operating theatre pungent with the smell of ether and terrible with the sharp click of instruments being dropped on a tray.

Zen came up and looked down at him. Her face was white and troubled under the white cowl she wore on her head, and her hands worked at the instruments with a precision slightly more than human. He wondered idly if her tears always burned like they had in Petch Hollow or whether they were sometimes soft and warm and salty like tears of human kind. As she leant over him a tear did fall on his lips and he moved his tongue with the last ounce of energy left in his body and tasted it, and knew what he wanted to know. He felt like crying also except there was not enough life left in him even to raise a tear.

Hildebrand moved a gantry into sight and on it oscilloscopes phased and wrote with green fingers the stories told by the electrodes they were placing round Dalroi's head. They shaved his scalp and isolated his mind from pain and feeling. Then came the part he was dreading. The saw bit into the skull . . .

Irrational fear . . . the instinctive need to protect the sinister seed in his brain . . . overwhelmed him. Dalroi was no coward and had it been merely life they were taking from him he could have borne the moment with drugged equanimity. But the panic spread not from his own psyche but from the deeper thing that flared and haunted in the dread, dark chambers of the brain. Here was splintering fright, shattering apprehension, harrowing dread . . . and as yet they had only bared the brain.

Then came the probes, seeking down through the convolutions of the brain, triggering sights and sounds and fantasies which had nothing to do with experience. It was a mad kaleidoscope of sensory stimuli—a hand, a light, a scene, a voice, a bell tolling as it once had tolled across a mighty courtyard somewhere dimly past remembering.

Through it all came Hildebrand's voice.

"Know thyself, Dalroi. Know thyself!"

Searing lightning stabbed, and his mind took a wrench which should have passed him into immortality. The block was breaking down. His body stiffened as the maelstrom blasted out into his conscious mind.

Imagine that the world is made of thunder, that the rivers run with boiling yellow phosphorous . . . that the rain is concentrated hydrofluoric acid slashed to fury by a bromine gale . . .

that all the birds are blind and venomous and desperately mad . . . take this allegory and you can still only dimly visualize the terrain of Dalroi's mind as the bitter tide flowed out.

Dalroi stood again at the seat of the life-force, a force as fantastic as a million-motor-generators overloaded to simultaneous destruction on the hearths of Hell. Malice was a note on a gigantic organ thrust deep into the inner ear ; hatred was a shaft of illumination so bright that it blinded through sixty feet of concrete. The urge to kill was a black, corroding jet of vapour of such velocity and scale that it could have countered the rotation of the Milky Way.

And then it died . . . The pressures faded and fled, folded and dropped. Hildebrand sprang to his instruments and watched with unbelieving eyes as the writhing traces died on the faces of the 'scopes.

"You've killed it !" His voice was high with disbelief and wonder. "Dalroi, do you know what you've done ? You've killed it !"

But Dalroi was past making answer. The bitter war which had raged through his mind had thrown him into a state of deep shock, and if he had any awareness left at all it was focussed on the slight saltiness of a tear which had fallen on his lips.

The door burst open with a crash and the Monitor entered with Korch at his heels. Hildebrand signalled them back with a singular lack of curiosity, and drew the probes from Dalroi's brain and began repairing the skull. For a long time nobody spoke, and Hildebrand worked on with swift fingers of genius aided by advanced and unknown skills. When he had finished he turned and walked to the Monitor's side.

"I see you know who I am," he said.

The Monitor nodded briefly. "Yes, I know, and I know now what Dalroi meant to you. Rhodes told me before he died."

"I'm sorry he had to die," said Hildebrand, "but he began to know too much about us. He was a true humanitarian and a man of great intelligence. He even guessed the nature of Failway. That policeman Quentain proved his guess by kidnapping Zdenka and interrogating her under drugs. When they realized how sadly out of depth they were, Rhodes tried to cover by pretending he'd found her in the river. But his forced evacuation of Failway Six showed his hand and we knew just how close to the truth he was. In his own way he endorsed Dalroi's

execution because he realized we had no alternative. There are hopes yet for the race who can breed such a man."

"What are you going to do with us?" asked the Monitor.

"With *Homo Sapiens*? We shall continue to watch you as we have always done. You are the juvenile delinquents of the multiple galaxies. One day, perhaps, you will come of age and we shall welcome you home again. In the meantime . . ."

". . . in the meantime," said the Monitor, "you will manipulate us and organize our wars and our disasters just to keep us out of mischief."

"Certainly. Can you think of a better control than letting you work off your spite on yourselves? As an exercise in Stellar ecology, Failway was an instrument not without merit. A pity you discovered it so soon. My comrade Gormalu provided the technical advice, but all the misery it evolved was purely of your own devising. What toys can we give you which you will not turn into weapons of oppression? While creatures like Madden and Cronstadt and yourself continue to strut and threaten and coerce we have no alternative but to protect ourselves from your psychopathic rat-race by any means at our disposal. You would not do otherwise if the position was reversed."

"No," said the Monitor sadly. "I don't suppose we would."

"We're leaving now," said Hildebrand, nodding to Zen who had remained at Dalroi's side. "Our task of eliminating the danger of Dalroi is finished. Perhaps another field man like Gormalu will be with you shortly—perhaps he's already here. Look to the centres of war or disaster, or anywhere that a man controls the destiny of many, and there you may find him encouraging you to be bestial to yourselves. Look to your tyrants and dictators, for he will be there somewhere. And one day, perhaps, you'll be too grown-up to listen to him—but oh, you've a hell of a distance to travel yet!"

"I wonder," said the Monitor, "what our history would have looked like without your hand forever pushing us over the precipice?"

"Short, sharp and brutish," said Hildebrand/Car Carra na Leodat. "We push the forces of destruction inwards on themselves before any become too powerful. But we have nothing to gain and a great deal to lose by leniency, so don't push your luck. Remember we can deal you a new Dark Age at any time we choose, and only another like Dalroi could stand against us."



Hildebrand/na Leodat nodded to Zen. "It is time we were going."

She looked at the form of Dalroi then back to him quickly, an unspoken question in her eyes, but na Leodat shook his head. Then the two of them stepped upwards as though on an invisible stairway, and abruptly vanished from sight.

The Monitor gazed thoughtfully at the sudden emptiness for a few moments then walked to Dalroi's side and stood as if regarding a corpse. The slight throb of a vein in Dalroi's temple attracted his attention and he realized for the first time that Dalroi still lived.

"Korch, fetch me a heavy blaster."

"What you going to do, cremate him?"

"As near as I can," said the Monitor. "I shan't rest easy while he lives."

"But he must be harmless now or they'd not have left him."

"Is that a risk that you're prepared to take? Could you live in the same world as Dalroi now?"

"I take your point," said Korch. "There's a blaster out in the truck. Wouldn't a pistol be quicker?"

"I said a heavy blaster, damn you! Nothing less than ashes will convince me that this limb of Satan won't reach down at me out of the darkness. Nothing less than . . ." He looked round but Korch had already gone about his errand, suddenly infected with the Monitor's more than mortal fear.

*Something coming back to life . . .*

The Monitor did not know, could not have known that Dalroi was already conscious and listening—listening to the first pulses of a throbbing rhythm deep in his brain. Yet with some unknown, unknowable perception he felt the growing eddy and flow of menace, cold and chill upon his brow.

"Korch, where the Hell's that blaster?"

*A growing pulse of something coming back to life . . . something incredible . . . something terrible . . . something . . . God! How they underestimated the old cunning!*

"Korch, for Christ's sake! He's coming round!"

*Something coming back to life . . . the re-lit flame in the primeval furnace . . . the fantastic chain reaction of the bitterest passions in the multiple galaxies . . . growing . . .*

"Korch! My God, Korch! If we don't kill him now we're lost for sure."



"Here's a mark seven," said Korch, returning, "and God preserve our eyeballs if you fire it here at this range."

*. . . growing . . . tinged with all the old corroding bitterness and stealth, all the hatreds and the lusts, all the bright, untarnished fury, all the unrestrained barbarity . . . all the mammoth resolution to survive . . .*

Dalroi stirred in the bonds that held him to the trolley, and attempted to sit up. In that same instant the Monitor fired the blaster at point-blank range. The back-flash deprived him of his senses and it was a full minute before he and Korch were able to crawl and grope, with damaged eyes, through the wreckage of the room. The farther wall had mainly collapsed and the roof was torn asunder. In the room beyond were the remnants of the trolley, burnt and shattered.

Of Dalroi there were no remains at all.

Korch began praying to a deity the name of which he had not used with reverence since a child. The Monitor sat staring through the grey mists in his eyes to a small part of the damaged roof through which broke a shaft of sunlight as if through a winter's sky.

"He's gone," said Korch finally. "Do you think he's going to come back?"

"Who can tell?" asked the Monitor slowly. His face was stiff with the mask of some unknown passion. "With that sort of hell in him I shouldn't think there's much mischief here which could gratify his appetite. But I wonder if the people out there believe in a God, consoling and benevolent. I have a feeling they're going to need a little solace . . .

colin kapp

---

## cambridge science fiction society

On Wednesday, November 27th, the inaugural meeting of the Cambridge Science Fiction Society was held at the "Horse and Groom" tavern, King Street, with guest speakers Brian W. Aldiss and John Carnell. A lively discussion ensued from many of the 30 attendees, which augurs well for the future of the group. Readers in the area, either town or gown, should contact the Secretary, Charles Platt, 5 Windsor Road, Cambridge, for information regarding membership and subsequent meetings.

guest editorial continued

In the Third Programme discussion I quoted at the start, Blish cited stories of his which on the one hand seemed to approve the "robber baron" economy of 19th-century America and on the other seemed to approve Major Douglas's Social Credit plan. You can't have both. They're almost diametrical opposites.

On the edge of s-f, you'll find a whole lot of quasi-political material in virtually pure form, ranging from 1984 to those extraordinary paranoid novels by Ayn Rand which include *Atlas Shrugged*, where the worship—literal, not figurative—of the dollar is held up for us to admire and emulate.

Within the field as we generally define it, though, an attempt is usually made to place political considerations where they exist in the real lives of most of us : in the background. Unless we are directly engaged in either a political party or some associated public activity such as local government, we tend to regard politics as someone else's speciality. Consequently a very high proportion of stories involving political arguments are done on the level of action-adventure or crude tragedy.

Indeed, this appears to be editorial policy in most magazines. Mack Reynolds, who is probably the most politically oriented of our well-known writers just now, has put some fascinating and brilliantly-argued concepts into his recent work ; his elaboration of the system of People's Capitalism, for instance, which is an attempt to combine the nominally-free-enterprise American economy with the security made possible by the affluent society by endowing every child with inalienable common stock from which he draws what amounts to a life-long pension in the form of dividends, could be propounded with enthusiasm by many right-wing amateur economists known to me. Only—it wouldn't work. And in such novels as *Frigid Fracas* he proceeds to show how and why, but through the distorting mirror of a violent action yarn.

At this point it's necessary to pause and ask a question which most people put when I get to this stage of this argument in conversation. Simply enough : *define what you mean by politics, huh ?*

And that isn't easy. In fact, it pretty often means that the argument changes course entirely and we wind up discussing something like the pros and cons of the Berlin Wall. (Which side I find myself on depends on who the other person is !)

I can't do much better than say that just about *anything* is politics. From a wrangle between the tribal chiefs and the young man who's learned to read books, all the way to the competition between General Dynamics and Convair for a billion-dollar contract—or between heavy industry and consumer goods for control of available raw materials in the Soviet bloc, as the case may be—you're involved in matters which are bounded by political restrictions, conducted by political rules and resulting in political consequences.

It's clearly noticeable that for established writers of the older generation in the s-f magazines this is far too ill-defined a basis on which to work comfortably. We blended two traditions in early s-f : an engineering tradition, exemplified perhaps by Heinlein once again, in which one could detect an impatience with the orneriness of human beings in the mass as compared to well-built machines, and a pulp magazine tradition in which there were certain conventions about villains and heroes which led to sharp black-versus-white principles being implied in the plots—and in turn reflected a lack of acceptance of people as they are : grey.

Hence famous tales like *Solution Unsatisfactory*, envisaging forms of paternalism such as the *Pax Americana* imposed on a world whose people wouldn't behave themselves and made like reasonable folk. At its most sophisticated this stream of s-f thinking appeared in Cyril Kornbluth's late work (*The Marching Morons*, and the Earthside chapters of *Search the Sky*).

We've had some marvellous fiction out of this school. But we've had very little which we could proudly show to non-fans with any grounding in the realities of this human world and say, "Here's a serious attempt to treat the evolution of men and their societies in the guise of entertainment." I once found myself putting a friend completely off s-f by trying to explain van Vogt's check-and-balance society from *The Weapon Shops of Isher*. He was quite right. It didn't make sense outside the defined limits of his highly artificial story. It barely makes sense inside, to be candid.

Even someone like Howard Fast, who is undeniably an author with a tremendous political awareness, is capable of amusing nonsense like *The Martian Shop*. People who've read *Spartacus* can hardly credit that the two are by the same man.

But nowadays . . . Well, perhaps it's the disillusionment of the Cold War ; perhaps it's a natural stage in s-f's development—I won't attempt to assign causes. I'll just make a bald statement : thanks to writers like Chad Oliver, with his grounding in anthro-



pology, and to people whom we'd like to see more often in magazines like Robert Abernathy, and to some who have not only kept up with but slightly gained on the general trends in the field, like Poul Anderson, we are getting material which can be read on two levels as some of the fine stories from *Astounding's* "Fabulous Forties" could be.

By this I mean that the ordinary reader could take del Rey's *Nerves* or Heinlein's *Blowups Happen* or Cartmill's *Deadline* as exciting stories in their own right, while the student physicist, the engineer, the "science buff," could all take them as sound speculation into the bargain. (We're still seeing such tales, but they speculate in different scientific fields. *Titan's Daughter* by Jim Blish would suggest what I'm thinking).

So too, currently, we are getting stories with increasing frequency that point a contrast between an earlier method of working and a more recent. Imagine Dr. Hieronymous Splosh, Ph. D., Dipl. Ing., P.D.Q. for L.S.D., in the year 1933 deciding to work up his speculations about the atmosphere of Mercury into a ten-thousand-word slam-bang adventure for *Appalling Stories*. He spent six weeks, every evening, working out the exact chemical balance in that atmosphere, computing temperatures and light-levels and whatever. Then he proceeded to splice it into a yarn where the characters (if any) behaved like pulp characters in the same month's issue of *Loathsome Love Romances* or *Worthless Western*. Mores? Well, he might reach into the air and come up with Victorian-style clothes. Politics? He'd reach into the air and come up with—nothing.

Hah! Contrast today's writer. Anonymous Gosh may very well have no letters after his name. He may (like me!) never have had a science lesson in his life. But he has twenty feet of shelves full of s-f, a good encyclopedia, a set of Asimov's non-fiction and all the latest pop-sociology. (Vance Packard is a good source of plots, naturally, for Mr. Gosh).

He decides to work out a ten-thousand-word bitterly satirical yarn for *Programmed Prognosticative Literary Monthly*. He doesn't just reach into the air for what Dr. Splosh left till last. He *begins* with mores. He daren't just grab. Because—well, suppose he considers casual nudity as an ingredient of the action. What does that do to sexual symbolism (psychology there) and *business* for heaven's sake? You can't very well build advertising around sexual depth-motivation when you discard the element of titillation! Now he's involved with economics, mass-manipulation, religion—and politics. And when he's got all those things



straight *he* reaches into the air and decides to set the whole story on . . . well, let's see . . . an Earth-type planet of (what's a good name ?) Deneb, that'll do !

But if he puts in his six weeks of evening work, there's a chance the readers will disregard Deneb (as they disregarded the cardboard hero of Dr. Splosh's tale) and talk and think about the sore spot in the public conscience that he's hit fair and square.

This is an area in which I find myself naturally doing most of my work. And since (as I said on a previous visit to this department) one definition of *man* is "the political animal," I can't help feeling it's a pretty rewarding area for us to be exploring with the world as it is.

john brunner

## ***back issues***

for readers and collectors who are  
missing any of the previous issues  
we can still supply the following  
copies but stocks are very limited

**Nos. 73; 76 to 81; 83 to 87**  
**2/- each post free (35 Cents)**

**Nos. 89 to 103; 104 to 132**  
**2/6 each post free (40 Cents)**

**No. 136, 137, 3/- post free (50 Cents)**

**NOVA PUBLICATIONS LTD**

**7 Grape Street, Holborn, London, W.C.2**

# book reviews

american—paperback

**Mission of Gravity**—Hal Clement (Pyramid Books, 40¢). This is one of those rare *science fiction* books which have moved into the 'classic' class since first publication in 1953. Mesklin, the planet with a surface gravity of nearly 700 times that of Earth, covered with liquid methane and frozen ammonia—and a crashed research rocket which someone, or some *thing*, had to rescue. A combination of both and some brilliant storytelling puts this novel in a class on its own.

**5 Tales From Tomorrow**—edited by T. E. Dikty (Crest Books, 50¢). Selected from the original *Best Science Fiction Stories and Novels* : 1955 when this series had just passed its zenith, but containing five good novelettes, including Tom Godwin's "The Cold Equations" (another *science fiction* story) which was featured in the ABC-TV playhouse series last year.

**Men Against The Stars**—edited by Martin Greenberg (Pyramid Books, 40¢). Another cut-down version from the original bulky anthology, this one containing 9 of the original stories Gnome Press published. This selection of interplanetary and galactic stories is about the best of the current bunch in this particular group. Leinster, Wellman, Padgett, van Vogt, Williams, Hal Clement ("Cold Front," a gem) and with an Introduction by Willy Ley.

**A Handful of Time**—Rosel George Brown (Ballantine Books, 50¢) In a quiet sort of way this author has been producing some charming and sometimes off-trail science fiction stories and it is a pleasure to see a well balanced collection by her. In fact, a round dozen of them from a variety of sources within the accepted s-f magazine field but well worth a permanent binding.

john carnell

continued on page 128

# survey 1963

Science fiction is read by every section of the community and has been growing in popularity for many years, but never so rapidly as since the first Sputnik was launched in 1959 and placed us virtually on the threshold of space. Prior to Sputnik 1, we ran two *Survey* questionnaires of our readership (in 1955 and 1958) and produced some tremendously interesting statistics which were widely publicised in the daily press and trade papers. While there were variations between the two results (higher salaries, better living standards, increased educational facilities, etc.) we still found that the average age of our readership was 31 years in both instances.

The 1958 *Survey* showed, amongst other things, that 90% of the readers were male, 52% technically employed or undergoing technical training or education and that 73% received grammar school education or above. Occupations ranged from the professions to paperboys, skilled technicians to service personnel, tradesmen to trade unionists, the unemployed and the retired.

Obviously, in the five years since our last questionnaire, conditions have changed considerably for all classes of the community—living standards have improved, wages and salaries are 20% higher than in 1958, educational facilities have been further extended, more and more technological opportunities are available for trained personnel. We expect to see some sweeping changes in the current *Survey* report but this can only be successful if you will co-operate by answering the questionnaire on the next page truthfully and honestly (we do not require your name and address, but only your residential area) and letting us have it before the end of December.

Readers co-operated wholeheartedly in the previous two *Surveys*, nearly 10% returning their answers within eight weeks. Send in your answers *now* and we will analyse them and publish the results showing the changes since 1955 and 1958.

# survey

Fill in the following questionnaire (or make a copy) and post to us not later than February 1st, 1964.

*(This questionnaire is only for readers in the British Isles)*

Age ..... Male or Female ..... Married .....

City .....

Education .....  
*(State if still attending school or college)*

Present Employment.....

If technical, which branch .....

Degrees (if any) .....

Approximate yearly salary .....  
(Under £250; £250-£500; £500-£750; £750-£1000; over)

Hobbies .....  
.....  
.....

How many other s-f magazines do you read ?.....

Do you prefer to read s-f novels or short stories?.....

How many s-f paperbacks do you buy a month?.... A year?..

How many libraries do you belong to ?.....

Do you belong to the Science Fiction Book Club ?.....

Post this questionnaire to :  
NOVA PUBLICATIONS LTD. (Dept. S3)  
7 Grape Street, London, WC 2.



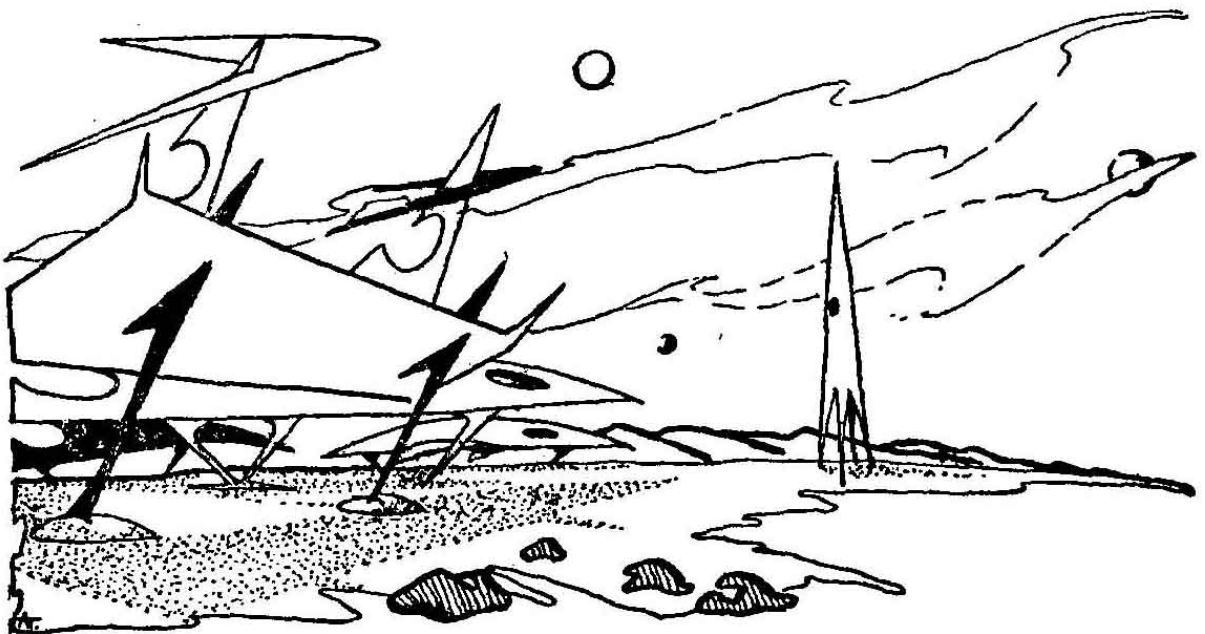
## book reviews continued

## British — hardcover

Nostalgic memories of the late and very much lamented "*Unknown*" magazine were aroused by **Hell Hath Fury** edited by George Hay (Neville Spearman, 15/-) but sadly dashed by the curiously dated and dispirited collection of ghosts and devilry by such names as Fritz Leiber, Jane Rice, Robert Bloch, A. M. Philips and Cleve Cartmill whose title story is passably interesting but over long. Only L. Ron Hubbard's "The Devil's Rescue" seemed to me to capture the right atmosphere. Surely there must be better stories than these left unpublished from those hallowed pages? Or is the myth so easily shattered?

The first serial in America's newest s-f magazine—" *Worlds of Tomorrow* "—was Arthur C. Clarke's "People of the Sea" and it now turns up as a juvenile-slanted novel retitled **Dolphin Island** (Gollancz, 12/6). Like Heinlein, Clarke's stories for the younger reader are no whit less interesting or readable, particularly in this entertaining adventure concerning the dolphins. Other so-called "juveniles" which do not talk down beyond the level aimed at are **Moon of Destiny** by Lester Del Rey and **Destination Mars** by Hugh Walters (both from Faber and Faber 15/- each) space-flight adventures of some considerable excitement, plausibility and scientific accuracy.

leslie flood



# SALES AND WANTS

3d. per word. Minimum 5/- Cash with order.

**AMERICAN** Science Fiction pocketbooks: 'The Crossroads of Time,' Andre Norton; 'Scavengers in Space,' Alan E. Nourse; 'Cosmic Checkmate,' Charles DeVet and Katherine MacLean, with 'King of the Fourth Planet,' Robert Moore Williams; 'Armageddon 2419 A.D.,' P. F. Nowland; 'Nemesis from Terra' Leigh Brackett, with 'Collision Course,' Robert Silverberg. Post free 4/- each, or all five books for 19/-. Cash with order. F. (M) L., 75 Norfolk Street, Wisbech, Cambs.

**FOR SALE:** Galaxy S-F (American edition) Oct. 1950 (Vol. 1, No. 1) to October 1959; Astounding S-F, Sept. 1949 to Sept. 1959. All in excellent condition. J. Chambers, 78 Greencroft Gardens, London, N.W.6.

**MELBOURNE** (Australia) **READERS.** For information concerning the Melbourne S-F Library and Film Group, write to the Secretary, 90 Spring Street, Preston, Victoria.

**SCIENCE FICTION** For Sale! Write for list to M. R. Binns, 19 Somerset Place, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia.

**WANTED — U.S.A.** "Galaxy" August 1961. No. 6, Vol. 19. G. Shiel, Promenade, Port Erin, Isle of Man.

**MEET** other science fiction readers at the Birmingham Science Fiction Group. Large library of books and magazines. Details from P. R. Weston, 9 Porlock Crescent, Northfield, Birmingham.

**S-F STOCK TO CLEAR.** 12 Amazing's 1928-32, 15/- each. War issues Startling, Wonder, Super Novels, 1/6d. each. For list write to K. Smith, 34 Connemarra Street, Bexley, N.S.W., Australia.

**THE BRITISH** Science Fiction Association Annual Convention for 1964 will be held in Peterborough, Northants, March 28th to 30th. Registration Fee: 6/6. Full details from A. P. Walsh, 38 Saxon Road, Bridgwater, Somerset.

**American S-F. ACE DOUBLES** etc. Send s.a.e. for list. Plus Books, 19 Abbey Parade, Merton High Street, London, S.W.19.

**COME AND BROWSE** at the Fantasy Book Centre—always large stocks of books and magazines including collector's items, 10 Sicilian Avenue, London, W.C.1.

**AUSTRALIAN READERS!** Postal science fiction library service for all states. Details from Futurian Society, Box 4440, Sydney, N.S.W.

**This is your market place for the world. Why not advertise your sales, exchanges or requirements in this column? S-f, stamps, coins, all hobbyist activities, etc.**



## This should interest you . .

Today photographs are being taken at speeds up to 10,000,000 pictures a second. Scientists "see" where there is no light ; they examine the internal structure of huge metal castings ; they "slow down", photographically, phenomena too fast for the eye to see ; they measure every slightest vibration and stress in moving machinery.

Details of unusual photographic applications are described each month in "The Industrial and Commercial Photographer", the professional's technical journal. Subscription 30s. a year ; specimen copy 2s. 6d. post free.

Dept. L.M. 'I.C.P.', 7, Grape Street, Holborn, W.C.2

**Your Favourite Film** is probably on 16 mm ! Fifty or more new films are released on 16mm every month. Unless you know what they are about and who they are available from you may be missing something of great interest. With **FILM USER** to keep you in touch with the latest informational, training and general interest films this risk will never arise. **FILM USER**'s monthly reviews of new releases—unique in its comprehensiveness—is but one of several reasons for taking out a subscription (20s. for twelve issues) today. Free specimen on request from Dept.F.U.E.,

**FILM USER**, P.O. Box 109, Davis House  
66/77 High Street, Croydon, Surrey