NEW WORLDS SF

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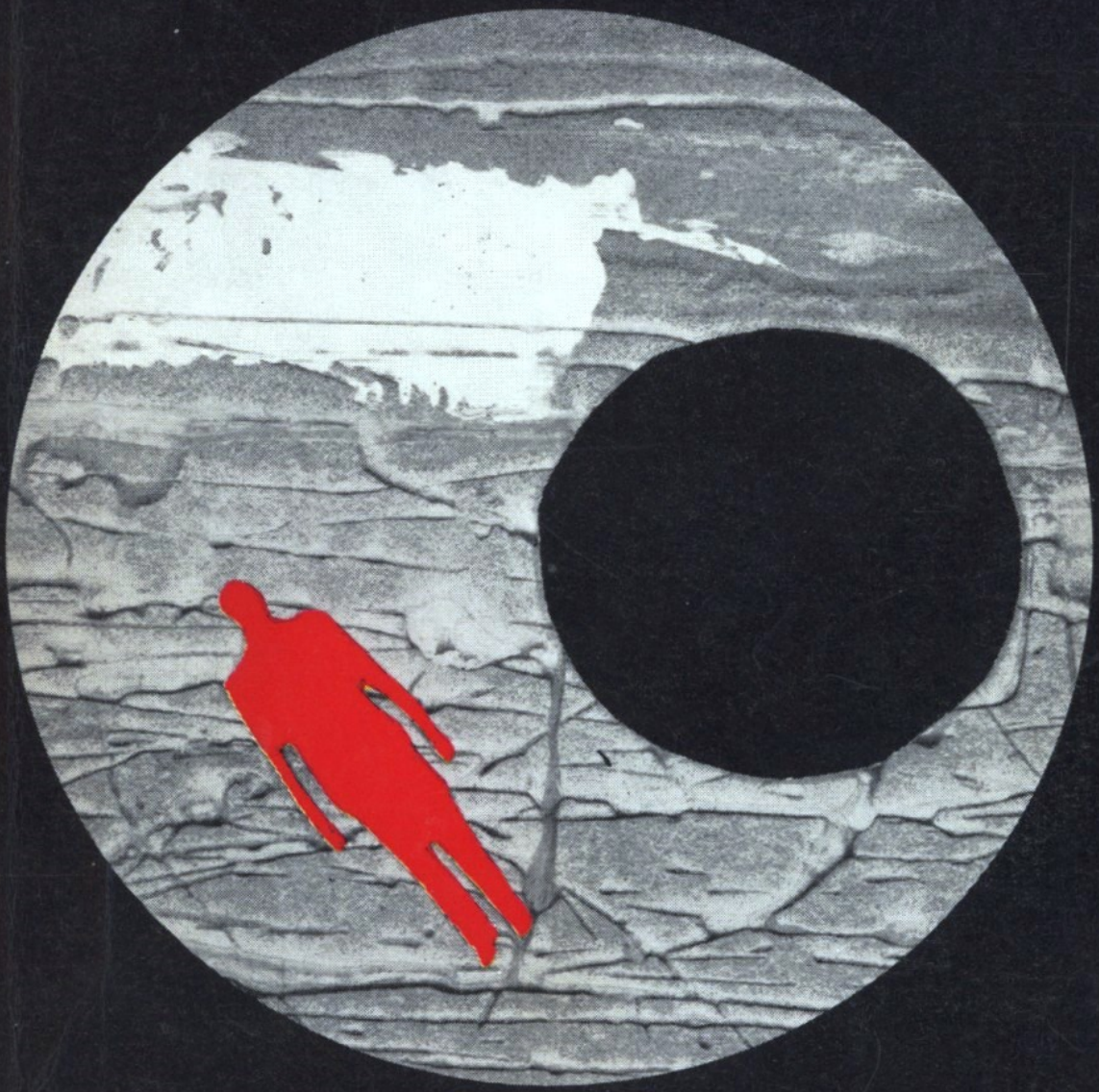

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ETC.

NEW WORLDS SF

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Contents

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All manuscripts must be double-spaced, typed on quarto paper with a top-sheet containing title, author's name, word-length and author's address. A stamped, self-addressed envelope must accompany all submissions.

SYMBOLS FOR THE SIXTIES

IN THIS ISSUE you will find perhaps the widest variety of stories we have published at one time. They are stories representative of most of the forms taken by present-day SF —Clarke's clear, factual speculation on a possible development in space-travel, Ballard's fascinating surrealistic allegory, Bayley's abstract and philosophical view of an alternative system of thought, the baroque *Escape from Evening,* and good variations on the conventional space story by Malcolm and Tilley. The first four are set on or near our own planet, yet they are all undoubtedly SF. They illustrate an increasing tendency in modern SF to stick close to home and deal with aspects of human life set against humanity's natural background. The day of the space-story in serious SF seems all-but over, the day of planetary-exploration is waning and writers appear to be deciding that exploration of the human mind, its capacities and defects, is more rewarding.

There are indications to show that, except as a vehicle for the short mood-piece (Malcolm's), humour (Tilley's), or satire, the space-story is on the way out. Whilst many will welcome this, others will be disappointed, but, if it is comforting, we still believe that the good space-story *can* be written, but that it is being produced less and less. The trouble is that our more sophisticated SF writers have found that the space-story is an unwieldy form to use when trying to put over an idea other than a technical one and that, as often as not, the form itself, by its nature, will obscure the main theme.

Many believe that since SF is growing up it must slough off some of its more sensational and spectacular aspects; they believe that the form must be reshaped and new symbols found to reflect the mood of the sixties, that too many

of today's stories are using the terms of the thirties, forties and fifties, terms which are becoming increasingly unrelated to present-day society. They feel that a good story, no matter what form it takes, is best when it applies to Now and that a story intended to apply to Now cannot do its job if written in terms applying to Then.

Part of the trouble could be that the young writer studies the work of a past generation and concludes that this is how to write a story. It was ; it isn't now. It is up to the young writer to find terms and symbols which make sense in the sixties. It is no good living in and off the past these days—no good living *in* the world of writers like Heinlein and *off* their terms, symbols, backgrounds and even ideas. The age that formed them is past. Their sort of story, good as it was, *cannot* be repeated without being unsatisfactory. Quite often the moral assumptions found in a story of the fifties can be virtually meaningless to today's new generation of adults.

We need more writers who reflect the pragmatic mood of today, who use images apt for today, who employ symbols gathered from the world of today, who use sophisticated writing techniques that can match the other techniques of today, who employ characters fitted for the society of today. Like all good writing, good SF must relate primarily to the time in which it is written ; a writer must write primarily for his own generation. He must not seek to emulate his predecessors in their own territory, neither must he write for a posterity which will anyway not remember him unless he is true to himself and his own age. He can learn from his predecessors, but he should not imitate them.

We feel that, in many ways, the image of North Country born Fred Hoyle driving a huge Buick convertible through a Californian summer, talking of the significance of quasars, is much more up-to-date that an image of a space-ship bearing a military-technician bending over a bench on which reposes a new secret electronic device for foxing the alien invaders. Some SF produced today is not at all forward-looking ; indeed it has the atmosphere of past decades—it is positively old-fashioned. We are sure

(*Continued on page* 25)

The king of All Britain fought his strange war on Earth while his subjects schemed against him. Much later Smith was to realise just why the king hadn't seemed to notice . . .

I SAW SORN'S beir, an electrically driven train decorated like a fanfare, as it left the North Sea Bridge and passed over the green meadows of Yorkshire. Painted along its flank was the name HOLATH HOLAN SORN, and it motored swiftly with brave authority. From where we stood in the observation room of the King's Summer Palace, we could hear the hollow humming of its passage.

"You will not find things easy without Holath Holan Sorn," I said, and turned. The King of All Britain was directing his mosaic eyes towards the train. "Things were never easy," he replied. But he knew as well as I that the loss of Sorn might mean the loss of a kingdom.

The King turned from the window, his purple cloak flowing about his seven-foot frame. I felt sorry for him: how would he rule an alien race, with its alien psychology, now that Sorn was dead? He had come to depend entirely upon that man who could translate one set of references into another as easily as he crossed the street. No doubt there were other men with perhaps half of Sorn's abilities, but who else could gain the King's trust? Among all humans, none but Sorn could be the delegate of the Invader King.

"Smith," he said, addressing me, "tomorrow we consign twelve tooling factories to a new armament project. I wish you to supervise."

I acknowledged, wondering what this signified. No one could deny that the alien's reign had been peaceful, even prosperous, and he had rarely mentioned military matters, although I knew there was open enmity between him and the King of Brazil. Either this enmity was about to become active, I decided, or else the King forecast a civil uprising.

Which in itself was not unlikely.

Below us, the beir was held up by a junction hitch. Stationary, it supplemented its dignity by sounding its

ALL THE KING'S MEN

B. J. Bayley

klaxon loudly and continuously. The King returned his gaze to it, and though I couldn't read his unearthly face I suppose he watched it regretfully, if he can feel regret. Of the others in the room, probably the two aliens also watched with regret, but certainly no one else did. Of the four humans, three were probably glad he was dead, though they may have been a little unsure about it.

That left myself. I was more aware of events than any of them, but I just didn't know what I felt. Sometimes I felt on the King's side and sometimes on the other side. I just didn't have any definite loyalties.

Having witnessed the arrival of the beir from the continent, where Sorn had met his death, we had achieved the purpose of the visit to the Summer Palace, and accordingly the King, with his entourage of six (two fellow beings, four humans including myself) left for London.

We arrived at Buckingham Palace shortly before sunset. Wordlessly the King dismissed us all, and with a lonely swirl of his cloak made his way to what was in a makeshift manner called the throne-room. Actually it did have a throne: but it also had several other kinds of strange equipments, things like pools, apparatus with what psychologists called threshold associations. The whole chamber was an aid to the incomprehensible, insectile mentality of the King, designed, I suspected, to help him in the almost impossible task of understanding a human society. While he had Sorn at his elbow there had been little need to worry, and the inadequacy of the chamber mattered so little that he seldom used it. Now, I thought, the King of All Britain would spend a large part of his time meditating in solitude on that enigmatic throne.

I had the rest of the evening to myself. But I hadn't gone far from the palace when, as I might have guessed, Hotch placed his big bulk square across my path.

"Not quite so fast," he said, neither pleasantly nor unpleasantly.

I stopped—what else could I have done?—but I didn't answer. "All right," Hotch said, "let's have it straight. I want nobody on both sides."

"What do you mean?" I asked, as if I didn't already know.

"Sorn's dead, right? And you're likely to replace him. Right?"

"Wrong," I told him wearily. "Nobody replaces Sorn. He was the one irreplaceable human being."

His eyes dropped in pensive annoyance. He paused. "Maybe, but you'll be the closest to the King's rule. Is that so?"

I shrugged.

"It has to be so," he decided. "So which way is it going to be, Smith? If you're going to be another traitor like Sorn, let's hear it from the start. Otherwise be a man and come in with us"

It sounded strange to hear Sorn called a traitor. Technically, I suppose he was—but he was also a man of genius, the rarest of statesmen. And even now only the 0.5 per cent of the population roused by Hotch's super-patriotism would think of him as anything else. Britain had lived in a plentiful sort of calm under the King. The fact of being governed by an alien conquerer was not resented, even though he had enthroned himself by force. With his three ships, his two thousand warriors, he had achieved a near-bloodless occupation, for he had won his victory by the sheer possession of superior weapons, without having to resort much to their usage. The same could be said of the simultaneous invasion of Brazil and South Africa: Brazil by fellow creatures of the King, South Africa by a different species. Subsequent troubles in these two areas had been greater, but then they lacked the phlegmatic British attitude, and more important, they lacked Holath Holan Sorn.

I sighed. "Honestly, I don't know. Some human governments have been a lot worse."

"But they've been human. And we owed a lot to Sorn, though personally I loathed his guts. Now that he's gone—what? The King will make a mess of things. How do we know he really cares?"

"I think he does. Not the same way a man would care, but he does."

"Hah! Anyhow, this is our chance. While he doesn't know what he's doing. What about it? Britain hasn't known another conquerer in a thousand years."

I couldn't tell him. I didn't know. Eventually he stomped off in disgust.

I didn't enjoy myself that evening. I thought too much about Sorn, about the King, and about what Hotch had said. How could I be sure the King cared for England? He was so grave and gently ponderous, but did that indicate anything? His appearance could simply be part of his foreignness and nothing at all to do with his feelings. In fact if the scientists were right about him, he had no feelings at all.

But what purpose had he?

I stopped by Trafalgar Square to see the Green Fountains.

The hand of the invader on Britain was present in light, subtle ways, such as the Green Fountains. For although Britain remained Britain, with the character of Britain, the King and his men had delicately placed their alien character upon it; not in law, or the drastic changes of a conquerer, but in such things as decoration.

The Green Fountains were foreign, unimaginable, and un-British. High curtains of thin fluid curled into fantastic designs, creating new concepts of space by sheer ingenuity of form. Thereby they achieved what centuries of Terran artists had only hinted at.

And yet they *were* British, too. If Britons had been prompted to conceive and construct such things, this was the way they would have done it. They carried the British stamp, although so alien.

When I considered the King's rule, the same anomaly emerged. A strange rule, by a stranger, yet imposed so easily.

This was the mystery of the King's government: the way he had adopted Britain, in essence, while having no comprehension of that essence.

But let me make it clear that for all this, the invader's rule did not *operate* easily. It jarred, oscillated, went out of phase, and eventually, without Sorn, ended in disaster. It was only in this other, peculiar way, that it harmonised so pleasingly.

It was like this: when the King and his men tried to behave functionally and get things done, it was terrible.

It didn't fit. But when they simply added themselves to All Britain, and lay quiescently like touches of colour, it had the effect I describe.

I had always thought Sorn responsible for this. But could Sorn mould the King also? For I detected in the King that same English passivity and acceptance; not just his own enigmatic detachment, but something apart from that, something acquired. Yet how could he be something which he didn't understand?

Sorn is dead, I thought, Sorn is dead.

Already, across one side of the square, were erected huge, precise stone symbols: HOLATH HOLAN SORN DIED 5.8.2034. They were like a mathematical formula. Much of the King's speech, when I thought of it, had the same quality.

Sorn was dead, and the weight of his power which had steadied the nation would be abruptly removed. He had been the operator, bridging the gap between alien minds. Without him, the King was incompetent.

A dazzling blue and gold air freighter appeared over the square and slanted down towards the palace. Everyone stopped to look, for it was one of the extraterrestrial machines, rarely seen since the invasion. No doubt it carried reinforcements for the palace defences.

Next morning I motored to Surrey to visit the first of the ten factories the King had mentioned.

The managers were waiting for me. I was led to a prepared suite of offices where I listened sleepily to a lecture on the layout and scope of the factory. I wasn't very interested; one of the King's kinsmen (referred to as the King's men) would arrive shortly with full details of the proposed conversion, and the managers would have to go through it all again. I was only here as a representative, so to speak. The real job would be carried out by the alien.

We all wandered round the works for a few hours before I got thoroughly bored and returned to my office. A visitor was waiting.

Hotch.

"What do you want now?" I asked. "I thought I'd got rid of you."

He grinned. "I found out what's going on." He waved his arms to indicate the factory.

"What of it?"

"Well, wouldn't you say the King's policy is . . . ill-advised?"

"You know as well as I do that the King's policy is certain to be laughably clumsy." I motioned him to a seat. "What exactly do you mean? I'm afraid I don't know the purpose of this myself."

I was apologetic about the last statement, and Hotch laughed. "It's easy enough to guess. Don't you know what they're building in Glasgow? *Ships*—warships of the King's personal design."

"Brazil," I murmured.

"Sure. The King chooses this delicate moment to launch a transatlantic war. Old Rex is such a blockhead he almost votes himself out of power."

"How?"

"Why, he gives us the weapons to fight him with. He's organising an armed native force which *I* will turn against him."

"You jump ahead of yourself. To go by the plans I have, no extraterrestrial weapons will be used."

Hotch looked more sober. "That's where you come in. We can't risk another contest with the King's men using ordinary arms. It would kill millions and devastate the country. Because it won't be the skirmish-and-capitulate of last time. This time we'll be in earnest. So I want you to soften things up for us. Persuade the King to hand over more than he intends: help us to chuck him out easily. Give us new weapons and you'll save a lot of carnage."

I saw his stratagem at once. "Quit that! Don't try to lay blood responsibility on my shoulders. That's a dirty trick."

"For a dirty man—and that's what you are, Smith, if you continue to stand by, too apathetic even to think about it. Anyhow, the responsibility's already laid, whatever you say. It depends on you."

"No."

"You won't help?"

"That's right."

Hotch sighed, and stared at the carpet for some seconds. Then he stared through the glass panels and down onto the floor of the workshops. "Then what will you do? Betray me?"

"No."

Sighing again, he told me: "One day, Smith, you'll fade away through sheer lack of interest."

"I'm interested," I said. "I just don't seem to have the kind of mind that can make a decision. I can't find any place to lay blame, or anyone to turn against."

"Not even for Britain," he commented sadly. "Your Britain as well as mine. That's all I'm working for, Smith, our country."

His brashness momentarily dormant, he was moodily meditative. "Smith, I'll admit I don't understand what it's all about. What does the King want? What has he gained by coming down here?"

"Nothing. He descended on us and took on a load of troubles without profit. It's a mystery. Hence my uncertainty." I averted my eyes. "During the time I have been in contact with the King he has impressed me as being utterly, almost transcendentally unselfish. So unselfish, so abstracted, that he's like a—just a blank!"

"That's only how you see it. Maybe you read it into him. The psychos say he's no emotion, and selfishness is a kind of emotion."

"Is it? Well, that's just what I mean. But he seems—humane, for all that. Considerate, though it's difficult for him."

He wasn't much impressed. "Yeah. Remember that whatever substitutes for emotion in him might have some of its outward effects. And remember, he's not the only outworlder on this planet. He doesn't seem so considerate towards Brazil."

Hotch rose and prepared to leave. "If you survive the rebellion, I'll string you up as a traitor."

"All right!" I answered, suddenly irritable. "I know."

But when Hotch did get moving, I was surprised at the power he had gained for himself in the community. He knew exactly how to accentuate the irritating qualities of the invader, and he did it mercilessly.

Some of the incidents seemed ridiculous: Such as when alien officials began to organise the war effort with complete disregard for some of the things the nation took to be necessities—entertainment, leisure, and so on. The contents of art galleries and museums were burned to make way for weapons shops. Cinemas were converted into automatic factories, and all television transmissions ceased. Don't get the idea that the King and his men are all tyrannical automata. They just didn't see any reason for not throwing away priceless paintings, and never thought to look for one.

Affairs might have progressed more satisfactorily if the set-up had been less democratic. Aware of his poor understanding, the King had appointed a sort of double government. The first, from which issued the prime directive, consisted of his own men in key positions throughout the land, though actually their power had peculiar limitations. The second government was a human representation of the aboriginal populace, which in larger matters was still obliged to gain the King's spoken permission.

The King used to listen very intently to the petitions and pseudo-emotional barrages which this absurd body placed before him—for they were by no means co-operative—and the meetings nearly always ended in bewilderment. During Sorn's day it would have been different: he could have got rid of them in five minutes.

Those men caused chaos, and cost the country many lives in the Brazilian war which shortly followed. After Hotch gained control over them, they were openly the King's enemies. He didn't know it, of course, and now that it's all finished I often wish I had warned him.

I remember the time they came to him and demanded a national working week of twenty-five hours. This was just after the King's men had innocently tried to institute a sixty hour working week, and had necessarily been restrained.

The petitioners knew how impossible it was; they were just trying to make trouble.

The King received them amid the sparse trappings of his Court. A few of his aides were about, and a few human advisers. And I, of course, was close at hand.

He listened to the petition in silence, his jewel eyes glinting softly in the subdued light. When it was over he paused. Then he lifted his head and asked for help.

"Advise me," he said to everyone present.

But the hostile influences in the hall were so great that everyone who might have helped him shrugged his shoulders. That was the way things were. I said nothing.

"If the proposal is carried out," the King told the ministers, "current programmes will not go through."

He tried to reject the idea, but they amazingly refused to let it be rejected. They threatened and intimidated, and one gentleman began to talk hypocritically about the will and welfare of the people. Naturally there was no response: the King was not equipped. He surveyed the hall again. "He who can solve this problem, come forward."

There was a lethargic, apathetic suspension. The aliens were immobile, like hard brilliant statues, observing these dangerous events as if with the ascetism of stone. Then there was more shrugging of shoulders.

It speaks for the leniency of the extraterrestrials that this could happen at all. Among human royalty, such insolence would bring immediate repercussions. But the mood was contagious, because I didn't volunteer either. Hotch's machinations had a potential, unspoken element of terrorism.

Whether the King realised that advice was being deliberately withheld, I don't know. He called my name and strode to the back of the hall.

I followed his authoritatively gyrating cloak, reluctantly, like a dreading schoolboy. When I reached him, he said: "Smith, it is knowledge common to us both that my thinkings and human thinkings are processes apart. Not even Sorn could have both kinds; but he could translate." He paused for a moment, and then continued with a couple of sentences of the mixed-up talk he had used on

Sorn, together with some of the accompanying queer honks and noises. I couldn't follow it. He seemed to realise his mistake, though, for he soon emerged into fairly sensible speech again, like this: *"Honk.* Environs matrix wordy. Int apara ; is trying like light to ; apara see blind, from total outside is not even potential . . . if you were king, Smith, what would you do?"

"Well," I said, "people have been angered by the impositions made on them recently, and now they're trying to swing the pendulum the other way. Maybe I would compromise and cut the week by about ten hours."

The King drew a sheaf of documents from a voluminous sash pocket and spread them out. One of them had a chart on it, and lists of figures. Producing a small machine with complex surfaces, he made what appeared to be a computation.

I wished I could find some meaning in those cold jewel eyes. "That would interfere with my armament programme," he said. "We must become strong, or the King of Brazil will lay Britain waste."

"But surely it's important not to foster a discontented populace?"

"Important! So often I have heard that word, and cannot understand it. Sometimes it appears to me, Smith, that human psychology is hilly country, while mine is a plain. My throne room contains hints, that some things you see as high, and others as low and flat, and the high is more powerful. But for me to travel this country is impossible."

Smart. And it made some sense to me, too, because the King's character often seemed to be composed of absences. He had no sense of crisis, for example. I realised how great his effort must have been to work this out.

"And 'importance'," he continued. "Some mountain top?"

He almost had it. "A big mountain," I said.

For a few seconds I began to get excited and thought that perhaps he was on his way to a semantic breakthrough. Then I saw where I was wrong. Knowing intellectually that a situation is difficult, and *why* it is diffi-

cult, is not much use when it comes to operating in that situation. If the King had fifty million minds laid out in diagram, with all their interconnections (and this is perfectly possible) he would still be no better able to operate. It is far too complex to grasp all at once with the intellect; to be competent in an environment, one must live in it, must be homogeneous with it. The King does not in the proper sense do the former, and is not the latter.

He spent a little while in the throne room, peering through thresholds, no doubt, gazing at pools and wondering about the mountainous. Then he returned and offered the petitioners a concession of ten minutes off the working week. This was the greatest check he thought he could allow on his big industrial drive.

They argued angrily about it, until things grew out of hand and the King ordered me to dismiss them. I had to have it done forcibly. Any one of the alien courtiers could have managed it single-handed by mere show of the weapons on his person, but instead I called in a twenty-man human bodyguard, thinking that to be ejected by their own countrymen might reduce their sense of solidarity.

All the humans of the court exuded uneasiness. But they needn't have worried. To judge by the King and his men, nothing might have happened. They held their positions with that same crystalline intelligence which they had carried through ten years of occupation. I was beginning to learn that this static appearance did not wholly result from unintelligibility, but that they actually maintained a constant internal state irrespective of external conditions. Because of this, they were unaware that the scene that had just been enacted comprised a minor climax. Living in a planar mentality, the very idea of climax was not apparent to them.

After the petitioners had gone, the King took me to his private chambers behind the courtroom. "Now is the time for consolidation," he said. "Without Sorn, the governing factions become separated, and the country disintegrates. I must find contact with the indigenous British. Therefore I will strike a closer liaison with you, Smith, my servant. You will follow me around."

He meant that I was to replace Sorn, as well as I could. Making it an official appointment was probably his way of appealing for help.

He had hardly picked the right man for the job, but that was typical of the casual way he operated. Of course, it made my personal position much worse, since I began to feel bad about letting him down. I was caught at the nexus of two opposing forces: even my inaction meant that somebody would profit. Altogether, not a convenient post for a neutral passenger.

Anyway, since the situation had arisen, I decided to be brash and ask some real questions.

"All right," I said, "but for whose sake is this war being fought—Britain's, or yours?"

As soon as the words were out of my mouth I felt a little frightened. In the phantasmal human-alien relationship, such earthy examinations were out of place. But the King accepted it.

"I am British," he answered, "and Britain is mine. Ever since I came, our actions are inseparable."

Some factions of the British public would have disagreed with this, but I supposed he meant it in a different way. Perhaps in a way connected with the enigmatically compelling characters and aphorisms that had been erected about the country, like mathematics developed in words instead of numbers. I often suspected that the King had sought to gain power through semantics alone.

Because I was emotionally adrift, I was reckless enough to argue the case. "Well," I said, "without you there would be no war. The Brazilians would never fight without compulsion from their own King, either. I'm not trying to secede from your authority, but resolve my opinion that you and the King of Brazil are using human nations as instruments . . . in a private quarrel."

For some while he thought about it, placing his hands together. He answered: "When the events of which I and the King of Brazil are a part, moved into this region, I descended onto Britain, and he onto Brazil. By the fundamental working of things, I took on the nature of Britain, and Britain in reciprocation became incorporated in the workings of those events. And likewise with the

King of Brazil, and with Brazil. These natures, and those events, are not for the time being separables, but included in each other. Therefore it is to defend Britain that I strive, because Britain is harnessed to my section of those outside happenings, and because I am British."

When I had finally sorted out that chunk of pedantry, his claims to nationality sounded like baloney. Then I took into account the slightly supra-sensible evidence of his British character. After a little reflection I realised that he had gone halfway towards giving me an explanation of it.

"What kind of happenings," I wondered, "can they be?"

The King can't smile, and he can't sound wistful, and it's hard for him to convey anything except pure information. But what he said next sounded like the nearest thing to wistfulness he could manage.

"They are very far from your mind," he said, "and from your style of living. They are connected with the colliding galaxies in Cygnus. More than that would be very difficult to tell you . . ."

There was a pause. I began to see that the King's concern was with something very vast and strange indeed. England was only a detail . . .

"And those outsiders who took over South Africa. What's their part in this?"

"No direct connection. Events merely chanced to blow this way."

Oddly, the way he said it made me think of how neat the triple invasion had been. In no instance had the borders of neighbouring states been violated, and the unmolested nations had in turn regarded the conquests as internal matters. Events had happened in discreet units, not in an interpenetrating mess as they usually do. The reactions of the entire Terrestrial civilisation had displayed an unearthly flavour. Maybe the incompatibility of alien psychology was not entirely mental. Perhaps in the King's native place not only minds but also events took a different form from those of Earth. What is mentality, anyway, but a complex event? I could imagine a sort of transplanting of natural laws, these three kings,

with all their power, bringing with them residual influences of the workings of their own worlds . . .

It sounded like certain astrological ideas I had once heard, of how on each world everything is different, each world has its own basic identity, and everything on that world partakes of that identity. But it's only astrology.

As the time for war drew nearer, Hotch became more daring. Already he had made himself leader of the unions and fostered general discontent, as well as organising an underground which in some ways, had more control over Britain than the King himself had. But he had a particular ambition, and in furtherance of this he appeared one day at Buckingham Palace.

Quite simply, he intended to do what I had refused to do for him.

He bowed low before the King, ignoring me, and launched into his petition.

"The people of Britain have a long tradition of reliability and capability in war," he proclaimed. "They cannot be treated like children. Unless they are given fighting powers equal to those of the extraterrestrials—for I do not suppose that your own troops will be poorly armed—their morale will relapse and they will be defeated. You will be the psychological murderer of Britain."

When he had finished, he cast a defiant glance at me, then puffed out his barrel chest and waited for a reply.

He had good reason to be afraid. One word from me, and he was finished. I admired his audacity.

I was also astounded at the outrageous way he had made the request, and I was at a loss to know what to do.

I sank onto the throne steps and slipped into a reverie. If I kept silence and showed loyalty to my country I would bring about the downfall of the King.

If I spoke in loyalty to the King, I would bring about the downfall of Hotch.

And really, I couldn't find any loyalty anywhere. I was utterly adrift, as if I didn't exist on the surface of the planet at all. I was like a compass needle which failed to answer the magnetic field.

"Psychological murderer of Britain." I repeated to my-

self. I was puzzled at the emotional evocation in that phrase. How could a human administer emotion to the King? But of course, it wasn't really an emotion at all. In the King's eyes the destruction of Britain was to be avoided, and it was this that Hotch was playing on.

Emerging from my drowsy thoughts, I saw Hotch leave. The King had not given an answer. He beckoned to me.

He spoke a few words to me, but I was non-committal. Then I waited outside the throne room, while he spent an hour inside.

He obviously trusted Hotch. When he came out, he called together his full council of eight aliens, four humans and myself, and issued directives for the modification of the war. I say of the war, and not of preparations for the war, because plans were now sufficiently advanced for the general outlines of the conflict to be set down on paper. The way the aliens handled a war made it hardly like fighting at all, but like an engineering work or a business project. Everything was decided beforehand; the final outcome was almost incidental.

And so several factories were retooled to produce the new weapons, the military heirarchy readjusted to give humans a greater part, and the focus of the main battle shifted five hundred miles further West. Also, the extrapolated duration of the war was shortened by six months.

Hotch had won. All Britain's industries worked magnificently for three months. They worked for Hotch as they had never worked, even for Sorn.

I felt weary. A child could have seen through Hotch's trick, but the King had been taken in. What went on in his head, after all? What guided him? Did he really care—for anything?

I wondered what Sorn would have thought. But then, I had never known what went on in Sorn's head, either.

The fleet assembled at Plymouth and sailed West into a sunny, choppy Atlantic. The alien-designed ships, which humans called swan-boats, were marshalled into several divisions. They rode high above the water on tripod legs, and bobbed lightly up and down.

Aerial fighting was forbidden by treaty, but there was one aircraft in the fleet, a wonderful blue and gold non-combatant machine where reposed the King, a few personal servants, and myself. We drifted a few hundred feet above the pale green water-ships, matching our speed with theirs.

That speed was slow. I wondered why we had not fitted ourselves out with those steel leviathans of human make, fast battleships and destroyers, which could have traversed the ocean in a few days whereas our journey required most of a month. It's true the graceful swarm looked attractive in the sunlight, but I don't think that was the reason. Or maybe it was a facet of it.

The Brazilians were more conventional in their combat aesthetics. They had steamed slowly out of the Gulf of Mexico to meet us at a location which, paradoxically, had been predetermined without collusion. We were greeted by massive grey warships, heavy with guns. Few innovations appeared to have been introduced into the native ship-building, though I did see one long corvette-shape lifted clean out of the water on multiple hydroplanes.

Fighting began in a casual, restrained manner when the belligerents were about two miles apart. There was not much outward enthusiasm for some hours. Our own ships ranged in size from the very small to the daintily monstrous, and wallowed prettily throughout the enemy fleet, discharging flashes of brilliant light. Our more advanced weapons weren't used much, probably because they would have given us an unfair advantage over the Brazilian natives, who had not had the benefit of Hotch's schemings.

Inside me I felt a dull sickness. All the King's men were gathered here in the Atlantic; this was the obvious time for Hotch's rebellion.

But it would not happen immediately. Hotch was astute enough to realise that even when he was rid of the King he might still have to contend with Brazil, and he wanted to test his future enemy's strength.

The unemphatic activity on the surface of the ocean continued, while one aircraft floated in the air above. The King watched, sometimes from the balcony, sometimes

by means of a huge jumble of screens down inside, which showed an impossible montage of the scene viewed from innumerable angles, most of which had no tactical usefulness that I could see. Some were from locations at sea-level, some only gave images of rigging, and there was even one situated a few feet below the surface.

I followed the King around, remembering his warning of the devastation which would ensue from Britain's defeat. "But what will happen if we win?" I asked him.

"Do not be concerned," he told me. "Current events are in the present time, and will be completed with the cessation of the war."

"But something must happen afterwards."

"Subsequent events are not these events." A monstrous swinging pattern, made of bits and pieces of hulls and gunfire, built up mysteriously in the chaos of the screens, and dissolved again. The King turned to go outside.

When he returned, the pattern had begun again, with modifications. "I continued: "If you believe that, why do you talk about Britain's welfare?"

He applied himself to watching the screens, still showing no deviation from his norm, in a situation which to a normal man would have been crisis. "All Britain is mine," he said after his normal pause. "Therefore I make arrangements for its protection. That is comprehensible to us both, I think."

He swivelled his head towards me. "Why do you enquire in this way, Smith? These questions are not the way to knowledge."

Having been rebuked thus—if a being with a personality like atonal music can be said to rebuke—I too went outside, and peered below. The interpenetrated array seemed suddenly like male and female. Our own more neatly shaped ships moved lightly, while the weighty, pounding Brazilians were more demonstratively aggressive, and even had long gun turrets for symbolism. Some slower part of my mind commented that the female is alleged to be the submissive, receptive part, which our fleet was not; but I dismissed that.

After two hours the outcome still looked indefinite to

my mind. But Hotch decided he had seen enough. He acted.

A vessel which hitherto had kept to the outskirts of the battle and taken little part, abruptly opened up its decks and lifted a series of rocket ramps. Three minutes later, the missiles had disappeared into the sky and I guessed what war-heads they carried.

Everything fitted neatly: it was a natural decision on Hotch's part. In such a short time he had not been able to develop transatlantic rockets, and he might never again be this close to the cities of Brazil. I could see him adding it all up in his mind.

Any kind of aeronautics was outlawed, and the Brazilians became enraged. They used their guns with a fury such as I hope never to see again. And I was surprised at how damaging a momentum a few thousand tons of fast-moving steel can acquire. Our own boys were a bit ragged in their defence at first, because they were busy butchering the King's men.

With the new weapons, most of this latter was over in twenty minutes. I went inside, because by now weapons were being directed at the aircraft, and the energies were approaching the limits of its defensive capacity.

The hundred viewpoints adopted by the viewing screens had converted the battle-scene into a flurry too quick for my eyes to follow. The King asked my advice.

My most immediate suggestion was already in effect. Slowly, because the defence screens were draining power, we ascended into the stratosphere. The rest of what I had to say took longer, and was more difficult, but I told it all.

The King made no comment on my confession, but studied the sea. I withdrew into the background, feeling uncomfortable.

The arrangement of vision screens was obsolete now that the battle-plan had been disrupted. Subsidiaries were set up to show the struggle in a simpler form. By the time we came to rest in the upper air, Hotch had rallied his navy and was holding his own in a suddenly bitter engagement.

The King ordered other screens to be focused on Brazil. He still did not look at me.

After he had watched developments for a short time, he decided to meditate in solitude, as was his habit. I don't know whether it was carelessness or simple ignorance, but without a pause he opened the door and stepped onto the outside balcony.

Fortunately, the door opened and closed like a shutter; the air replenishers worked very swiftly, and the air density was seriously low for less than a second. Even so, it was very unpleasant.

Emerging from the experience, I saw the King standing pensively outside in the partial vacuum of the upper air. I swore with surprise: it was hot out there, and even the sunlight shining through the filtered windows was more than I could tolerate.

When he returned, he was considerate enough to use another door.

By this time the monitor screens had detected the squadrons of bombers rising in retaliation from Brazil's devastated cities. The etiquette of the old war was abandoned, and there was no doubt that they too carried the nuclear weapons illegally employed by Hotch.

The King observed: "When those bombers reach their delivery area in a few hours time, most of Britain's fighting power will still be a month away in the Western Atlantic. Perhaps the islands should be warned to prepare what defences they have." His gem eyes lifted. "What do you say, Smith?"

"Of course they must be warned!" I replied quickly. "There is still an air defence—Hotch has kept the old skills alive. But he may not have expected such quick reprisals, and early interception is essential."

"I see. This man Hotch seems a skilful organiser, Smith, and would be needed in London." With interest, he watched the drive and ferocity of the action on the seascape. "Which is his ship?"

I pointed out the large swan-boat on which I believed Hotch to be present. Too suddenly for our arrival to be anticipated, we dropped from the sky. The servants of

the King conducted a lightning raid which made a captive of Hotch with 30 per cent casualties.

We had been absent from the stratosphere for two minutes and forty-five seconds.

Hotch himself wasn't impressed. He accused me of bad timing. "You may be right," I said, and told him the story.

If he was surprised he didn't show it. He raised his eyebrows, but that was all. No matter how grave the situation may be, Hotch wouldn't let it show.

"It's a native war from now on," he acclaimed. "There's not an alien left in either fleet."

"You mean the Brazilians rebelled too?"

"I wish they would! The green bosses hopped it and left them to it."

The King offered to put Hotch down at Buckingham Palace, the centre of all the official machinery. Hotch greeted the suggestion with scorn.

"That stuff's no good to me," he said. "Put me down at my headquarters in Balham. That's the only chance of getting our fighter planes in the air."

This we did. The pilots had already set the aircraft in silent motion through the stratosphere, and within an hour we slanted downwards and flashed the remaining five hundred miles to England.

London was peaceful as we hovered above it three hours in advance of the raiders. Only Hotch's impatient energy indicated the air of urgency it would shortly assume.

But what happened on Earth after that, I don't know. We went into space, so I have only a casual interest.

It's like this: the King showed me space.

To see it with the bare eyes is enough, but on the King's set of multi- and null-viewpoint vision screens it really gets hammered in. And what gets knocked into you is this: nothing matters. Nothing is big enough to matter. It's as simple as that.

However big a thing is, it just isn't big enough. For when you see the size of totality—I begin to understand now why the King, who has seen it all the time, is as he is.

And nothing is important. There is only a stratified

universe, with some things more powerful than others. That's what makes us think they are important—they're more powerful, but that's all. And the most powerful is no more significant than the least.

You may wonder, then, why the King bothers with such trivial affairs as Britain. That's easy.

When I was a young man, I thought a lot of myself. I thought myself valuable, if only to myself. And once, I began to wonder just how much it would take for me to sacrifice my life, whether if it came to it I would sacrifice myself for a less intelligent, less worthwhile life than my own. But now I see the sacrifice for what it is: simply one insignificance for another insignificance. It's an easy trade. So the King, who has ranged over a dozen galaxies, has lost his war, his army, and risks even his own life, for Britain's sake. It's all too tiny even to hesitate over. He did what he could: how could he do anything else?

Like the King, I am quickly becoming incapable of judgment. But before it goes altogether, I will say this of you, Hotch: It was a low trick you played on the King. A low, dirty trick to play on a good man.

(EDITORIAL—*Continued from page* 3)

that this is one of the reasons why the 'sense of wonder' controversy raged—and still rages from time to time—in the Guest Editorials and letter-columns in this magazine.

We are already in the middle of the sixties and writers should have had sufficient time in which to analyse the mood of the decade. Some have—and they are the ones we intend to publish. The background is immaterial, the date selected for future events is not that important, what *is* important is that the stories make use of up-to-date information on all aspects of human life and are relevant to the world of Now.

Arthur C Clarke

SUNJAMMER

Their ships sailed the seas of space

THE ENORMOUS DISC of sail strained at its rigging, already filled with the wind that blew between the worlds. In three minutes the race would begin, yet now John Merton felt more relaxed, more at peace, than at any time for the past year. Whatever happened when the Commodore gave the starting signal, whether *Diana* carried him to victory or defeat, he had achieved his ambition. After a lifetime spent in designing ships for others, now he would sail his own.

"T minus two minutes," said the cabin radio. "Please confirm your readiness."

One by one, the other skippers answered. Merton recognised all the voices—some tense, some calm—for they were the voices of his friends and rivals. On the four inhabited worlds, there were scarcely twenty men who could sail a sun-yacht; and they were all here, on the starting-line or aboard the escort vessels, orbiting twenty-two thousand miles above the equator.

"Number One, *Gossamer*—ready to go."

"Number Two, *Santa Maria*—all O.K."

"Number Three, *Sunbeam*—O.K."

"Number Four, *Woomera*—all systems go."

Merton smiled at that last echo from the early, primitive days of astronautics. But it had become part of the tradition of space; and there were times when a man needed to evoke the shades of those who had gone before him to the stars.

"Number Five, *Lebedev*—we're ready."

"Number Six, *Arachne*—O.K."

Now it was his turn, at the end of the line; strange to think that the words he was speaking in this tiny cabin were being heard by at least five billion people.

"Number Seven, *Diana*—ready to start."

"One through Seven acknowledged," answered that

impersonal voice from the judge's launch. "Now T minus one minute."

Merton scarcely heard it; for the last time, he was checking the tension in the rigging. The needles of all the dynamometers were steady; the immense sail was taut, its mirror surface sparkling and glittering gloriously in the sun.

To Merton, floating weightless at the periscope, it seemed to fill the sky. As well it might—for out there were fifty million square feet of sail, linked to his capsule by almost a hundred miles of rigging. All the canvas of all the tea-clippers that had once raced like clouds across the China seas, sewn into one gigantic sheet, could not match the single sail that *Diana* had spread beneath the sun. Yet it was little more substantial than a soap-bubble; that two square miles of aluminised plastic was only a few millionths of an inch thick.

"T minus ten seconds. All recording cameras *on*."

Something so huge, yet so frail, was hard for the mind to grasp. And it was harder still to realise that this fragile mirror could tow him free of Earth, merely by the power of the sunlight it would trap.

". . . Five, Four, Three, Two, One, *cut!*"

Seven knife-blades sliced through the seven thin lines tethering the yachts to the motherships that had assembled and serviced them.

Until this moment, all had been circling Earth together in a rigidly held formation, but now the yachts would begin to disperse, like dandelion seeds drifting before the breeze. And the winner would be the one that first drifted past the Moon.

Aboard *Diana,* nothing seemed to be happening. But Merton knew better; though his body could feel no thrust, the instrument board told him that he was now accelerating at almost one thousandth of a gravity. For a rocket, that figure would have been ludicrous—but this was the first time any solar yacht had ever attained it. *Diana's* design was sound; the vast sail was living up to his calculations. At this rate, two circuits of the Earth would build up his speed

to escape velocity—and then he could head out for the Moon, with the full force of the Sun behind him.

The full force of the Sun. He smiled wryly, remembering all his attempts to explain solar sailing to those lecture audiences back on Earth. That had been the only way he could raise money, in those early days. He might be Chief Designer of Cosmodyne Corporation, with a whole string of successful spaceships to his credit, but his firm had not been exactly enthusiastic about his hobby.

"Hold your hands out to the Sun," he'd said. "What do you feel? Heat, of course. But there's pressure as well—though you've never noticed it, because it's so tiny. Over the area of your hands, it only comes to about a millionth of an ounce.

"But out in space, even a pressure as small as that can be important—for it's acting all the time, hour after hour, day after day. Unlike rocket fuel, it's free and unlimited. If we want to, we can use it; we can build sails to catch the radiation blowing from the Sun."

At that point, he would pull out a few square yards of sail material and toss it towards the audience. The silvery film would coil and twist like smoke, then drift slowly to the ceiling in the hot-air currents.

"You can see how light it is," he'd continue. "A square mile weighs only a ton, and can collect five pounds of radiation pressure. So it will start moving—and we can let it tow us along, if we attach rigging to it.

"Of course, its acceleration will be tiny—about a thousandth of a g. That doesn't seem much, but let's see what it means.

"It means that in the first second, we'll move about a fifth of an inch. I suppose a healthy snail could do better than that. But after a minute, we've covered sixty feet, and will be doing just over a mile an hour. That's not bad, for something driven by pure sunlight! After an hour, we're forty miles from our starting point, and will be moving at eighty miles an hour. Please remember that in space there's no friction, so once you start anything moving, it will keep going forever. You'll be surprised when I tell you what our thousandth-of-a-g sailingboat will be doing at the end of a day's run. *Almost two thousand miles an hour!* If it starts

from orbit—as it has to, of course—it can reach escape velocity in a couple of days. And all without burning a single drop of fuel!"

Well, he'd convinced them, and in the end he'd even convinced Cosmodyne. Over the last twenty years, a new sport had come into being. It had been called the sport of billionaires, and that was true—but it was beginning to pay for itself in terms of publicity and television coverage. The prestige of four continents and two worlds was riding on this race, and it had the biggest audience in history.

Diana had made a good start; time to take a look at the opposition. Moving very gently. Though there were shock absorbers between the control capsule and the delicate rigging, he was determined to run no risks. Merton stationed himself at the periscope.

There they were, looking like strange silver flowers planted in the dark fields of space. The nearest, South America's *Santa Maria*, was only fifty miles away; it bore a resemblance to a boy's kite—but a kite more than a mile on its side. Farther away, the University of Astrograd's *Lebedev* looked like a Maltese cross; the sails that formed the four arms could apparently be tilted for steering purposes. In contrast, the Federation of Australasia's *Woomera* was a simple parachute, four miles in circumference. General Spacecraft's *Arachne*, as its name suggested, looked like a spider-web—and had been built on the same principles, by robot shuttles spiralling out from a central point. Eurospace Corporation's *Gossamer* was an identical design, on a slightly smaller scale. And the Republic of Mars' *Sunbeam* was a flat ring, with a half-mile-wide hole in the centre, spinning slowly so that centrifugal force gave it stiffness. That was an old idea, but no one had ever made it work. Merton was fairly sure that the colonials would be in trouble when they started to turn.

That would not be for another six hours, when the yachts had moved along the first quarter of their slow and stately twenty-four hour orbit. Here at the beginning of the race, they were all heading directly away from the Sun—running, as it were, before the solar wind. One had to make the most

of this lap, before the boats swung round to the other side of Earth and then started to head back into the Sun.

Time for the first check, Merton told himself, while he had no navigational worries. With the periscope, he made a careful examination of the sail, concentrating on the points where the rigging was attached to it. The shroud-lines—narrow bands of unsilvered plastic film—would have been completely invisible had they not been coated with fluorescent paint. Now they were taut lines of coloured light, dwindling away for hundreds of yards towards that gigantic sail. Each had its own electric windlass, not much bigger than a game-fisherman's reel. The little windlasses were continually turning, playing lines in or out, as the auto-pilot kept the sail trimmed at the correct angle to the Sun.

The play of sunlight on the great flexible mirror was beautiful to watch. It was undulating in slow, stately oscillations, sending multiple images of the Sun marching across the heavens, until they faded away at the edges of the sail. Such leisurely vibrations were to be expected in this vast and flimsy structure; they were usually quite harmless, but Merton watched them carefully. Sometimes they could build up to the catastrophic undulations known as the wriggles, which could tear a sail to pieces.

When he was satisfied that everything was shipshape, he swept the periscope around the sky, rechecking the positions of his rivals. It was as he had hoped; the weeding-out process had begun, as the less efficient boats fell astern. But the real test would come when they passed into the shadow of Earth; then manœuvrability would count as much as speed.

It seemed a strange thing to do, now that the race had just started, but it might be a good idea to get some sleep. The two man crews on the other boats could take it in turns, but Merton had no one to relieve him. He must rely on his own physical resources—like that other solitary seaman Joshua Slocum, in his tiny *Spray*. The American skipper had sailed *Spray* single-handed round the world; he could never have dreamt that, two centuries later, a man would be sailing single-handed from Earth to Moon—inspired, at least partly, by his example.

Merton snapped the elastic bands of the cabin seat around his waist and legs, then placed the electrodes of the sleep-inducer on his forehead. He set the timer for three hours, and relaxed.

Very gently, hypnotically, the electronic pulses throbbed in the frontal lobes of his brain. Coloured spirals of light expanded beneath his closed eyelids, widening outwards to infinity. Then—nothing . . .

The brazen clamour of the alarm dragged him back from his dreamless sleep. He was instantly awake, his eyes scanning the instrument panel. Only two hours had passed—but above the accelerometer, a red light was flashing. Thrust was falling; *Diana* was losing power.

Merton's first thought was that something had happened to the sail; perhaps the antispin devices had failed, and the rigging had become twisted. Swiftly, he checked the meters that showed the tension in the shroud-lines. Strange, on one side of the sail they were reading normally—but on the other, the pull was dropping slowly even as he watched.

In sudden understanding, Merton grabbed the periscope, switched to wide-angle vision, and started to scan the edge of the sail. Yes—there was the trouble, and it could have only one cause.

A huge, sharp-edged shadow had begun to slide across the gleaming silver of the sail. Darkness was falling upon *Diana*, as if a cloud had passed between her and the Sun. And in the dark, robbed of the rays that drove her, she would lose all thrust and drift helplessly through space.

But, of course, there were no clouds here, more than twenty thousand miles above Earth. If there was a shadow, it must be made by man.

Merton grinned as he swung the periscope towards the Sun, switching in the filters that would allow him to look full into its blazing face without being blinded.

"Manœuvre 4a," he muttered to himself. "We'll see who can play best at *that* game."

It looked as if a giant planet was crossing the face of the Sun. A great black disc had bitten deep into its edge. Twenty miles astern, *Gossamer* was trying to arrange an artificial eclipse—specially for *Diana*'s benefit.

The manœuvre was a perfectly legitimate one; back in the days of ocean racing, skippers had often tried to rob each other of the wind. With any luck, you could leave your rival becalmed, with his sails collapsing around him —and be well ahead before he could undo the damage.

Merton had no intention of being caught so easily. There was plenty of time to take evasive action; things happened very slowly, when you were running a solar sailing-boat. It would be at least twenty minutes before *Gossamer* could slide completely across the face of the Sun, and leave him in darkness.

Diana's tiny computer—the size of a matchbox, but the equivalent of a thousand human mathematicians—considered the problem for a full second and then flashed the answer. He'd have to open control panels three and four, until the sail had developed an extra twenty degrees of tilt; then the radiation pressure would blow him out of *Gossamer's* dangerous shadow, back into the full blast of the Sun. It was a pity to interfere with the auto-pilot, which had been carefully programmed to give the fastest possible run—but that, after all, was why he was here. This was what made solar yachting a sport, rather than a battle between computers.

Out went control lines one to six, slowly undulating like sleepy snakes as they momentarily lost their tension. Two miles away, the triangular panels began to open lazily, spilling sunlight through the sail. Yet, for a long time, nothing seemed to happen. It was hard to grow accustomed to this slow motion world, where it took minutes for the effects of any action to become visible to the eye. Then Merton saw that the sail was indeed tipping towards the Sun—and that *Gossamer's* shadow was sliding harmlessly away, its cone of darkness lost in the deeper night of space.

Long before the shadow had vanished, and the disc of the Sun had cleared again, he reversed the tilt and brought *Diana* back on course. Her new momentum would carry her clear of the danger; no need to overdo it, and upset his calculations by side-stepping too far. That was another rule that was hard to learn. The very moment you had started something happening in space, it was already time to think about stopping it.

He reset the alarm, ready for the next natural or man-made emergency; perhaps *Gossamer*, or one of the other contestants, would try the same trick again. Meanwhile, it was time to eat, though he did not feel particularly hungry. One used little physical energy in space, and it was easy to forget about food. Easy—and dangerous; for when an emergency arose, you might not have the reserves needed to deal with it.

He broke open the first of the meal packets, and inspected it without enthusiasm. The name on the label—SPACE-TASTIES—was enough to put him off. And he had grave doubts about the promise printed underneath: Guaranteed Crumbless. It had been said that crumbs were a greater danger to space vehicles than meteorites. They could drift into the most unlikely places, causing short circuits, blocking vital jets and getting into instruments that were supposed to be hermetically sealed.

Still, the liverwurst went down pleasantly enough; so did the chocolate and the pineapple purée. The plastic coffee-bulb was warming on the electric heater when the outside world broke in upon his solitude, as the radio operator on the Commodore's launch routed a call to him.

"Dr. Merton? If you can spare the time, Jeremy Blair would like a few words with you." Baid was one of the more responsible news commentators, and Merton had been on his programme many times. He could refuse to be interviewed, of course, but he liked Blair, and at the moment he could certainly not claim to be too busy. "I'll take it," he answered.

"Hullo, Dr. Merton," said the commentator immediately. "Glad you can spare a few minutes. And congratulations—you seem to be ahead of the field."

"To early in the game to be sure of that," Merton answered cautiously.

"Tell me, doctor—why did you decide to sail *Diana* yourself? Just because it's never been done before?"

"Well, isn't that a very good reason? But it wasn't the only one, of course." He paused, choosing his words carefully. "You know how critically the performance of a sun-yacht depends on its mass. A second man, with all his sup-

plies, would mean another five hundred pounds. That could easily be the difference between winning and losing."

"And you're quite certain that you can handle *Diana* alone?"

"Reasonably sure, thanks to the automatic controls I've designed. My main job is to supervise and make decisions."

"But—two square miles of sail! It just doesn't seem possible for one man to cope with all that!"

Merton laughed.

"Why not? Those two square miles produce a maximum pull of just ten pounds. I can exert more force with my little finger."

"Well, thank you, doctor. And good luck."

As the commentator signed off, Merton felt a little ashamed of himself. For his answer had been only part of the truth; and he was sure that Blair was shrewd enough to know it.

There was just one reason why he was here, alone in space. For almost forty years he had worked with teams of hundreds or even thousands of men, helping to design the most complex vehicles that the world had ever seen. For the last twenty years he had led one of those teams, and watched his creations go soaring to the stars. (But there were failures that he could never forget, even though the fault had not been his.) He was famous, with a successful career behind him. Yet he had never done anything by himself; always he had been one of an army.

This was his very last chance of individual achievement, and he would share it with no one. There would be no more solar yachting for at least five years, as the period of the quiet Sun ended and the cycle of bad weather began, with radiation storms bursting through the Solar System. When it was safe again for these frail, unshielded craft to venture aloft, he would be too old. If, indeed, he was not too old already . . .

He dropped the empty food containers into the waste disposal, and turned once more to the periscope. At first, he could find only five of the other yachts; there was no sign of *Woomera*. It took him several minutes to locate her—a dim, star-eclipsing phantom, neatly caught in the shadow

of *Lebedev*. He could imagine the frantic efforts the Australasians were making to extricate themselves, and wondered how they had fallen into the trap. It suggested that *Lebedev* was unusually manœvrable; she would bear watching, though she was too far away to menace *Diana* at the moment.

Now the Earth had almost vanished. It had waned to a narrow, brilliant bow of light that was moving steadily towards the Sun. Dimly outlined within that burning bow was the night side of the planet, with the phosphorescent gleams of great cities showing here and there through gaps in the clouds. The disc of darkness had already blanked out a huge section of the Milky Way; in a few minutes, it would start to encroach upon the Sun.

The light was fading. A purple, twilight hue—the glow of many sunsets, thousands of miles below—was falling across the sail, as *Diana* slipped silently into the shadow of Earth. The Sun plummeted below that invisible horizon. Within minutes, it was night.

Merton looked back along the orbit he had traced, now a quarter of the way around the world. One by one he saw the brilliant stars of the other yachts wink out, as they joined him in the brief night. It would be an hour before the Sun emerged from that enormous black shield, and through all that time they would be completely helpless, coasting without power.

He switched on the external spotlight, and started to search the now darkened sail with its beam. Already, the thousands of acres of film were beginning to wrinkle and become flaccid; the shroud-lines were slackening, and must be wound in lest they become entangled. But all this was expected; everything was going as planned.

Fifty miles astern, *Arachne* and *Santa Maria* were not so lucky. Merton learnt of their troubles when the radio burst into life on the emergency circuit.

"Number Two, Number Six—this is Control. You are on a collision course. Your orbits will intersect in sixty-five minutes! Do you require assistance?"

There was a long pause while the two skippers digested

this bad news. Merton wondered who was to blame; perhaps one yacht had been trying to shadow the other, and had not completed the manœuvre before they were both caught in darkness. Now there was nothing that either could do; they were slowly but inexorably converging together, unable to change course by a fraction of a degree.

Yet, sixty-five minutes! That would just bring them out into sunlight again, as they emerged from the shadow of the Earth. They still had a slim chance, if their sails could snatch enough power to avoid a crash. There must be some frantic calculations going on, aboard *Arachne* and *Santa Maria.*

Arachne answered first; her reply was just what Merton had expected.

"Number Six calling Control. We don't need assistance, thank you. We'll work this out for ourselves."

I wonder, thought Merton. But at least it will be interesting to watch. The first real drama of the race was approaching—exactly above the line of midnight on the sleeping Earth.

For the next hour, Merton's own sail kept him too busy to worry about *Arachne* and *Santa Maria.* It was hard to keep a good watch on that fifty million square feet of dim plastic out there in the darkness, illuminated only by his narrow spotlight and the rays of the still distant Moon. From now on, for almost half his orbit round the Earth, he must keep the whole of this immense area edge-on to the Sun. During the next twelve or fourteen hours, the sail would be a useless encumbrance; for he would be heading into the Sun, and its rays could only drive him backwards along his orbit. It was a pity that he could not furl the sail completely, until he was ready to use it again. But no one had yet found a practical way of doing this.

Far below, there was the first hint of dawn along the edge of the Earth. In ten minutes, the Sun would emerge from its eclipse; the coasting yachts would come to life again as the blast of radiation struck their sails. That would be the moment of crisis for *Arachne* and *Santa Maria*—and, indeed for all of them.

Merton swung the periscope until he found the two dark

shadows drifting against the stars. They were very close together—perhaps less than three miles apart. They might, he decided, just be able to make it . . .

Dawn flashed like an explosion along the rim of Earth, as the Sun rose out of the Pacific. The sail and shroud-lines glowed a brief crimson, then gold, then blazed with the pure white light of day. The needles of the dynamometers began to lift from their zeros—but only just. *Diana* was still almost completely weightless, for with the sail pointing towards the Sun, her acceleration was now only a few millionths of a gravity.

But *Arachne* and *Santa Maria* were crowding on all the sail they could manage, in their desperate attempt to keep apart. Now, while there was less than two miles between them, their glittering plastic clouds were unfurling and expanding with agonising slowness, as they felt the first delicate push of the Sun's rays. Almost every TV screen on Earth would be mirroring this protracted drama ; and even now, at this very last minute, it was impossible to tell what the outcome would be.

The two skippers were stubborn men. Either could have cut his sail, and fallen back to give the other a chance ; but neither would do so. Too much prestige, too many millions, too many reputations, were at stake. And so, silently and softly as snowflakes falling on a winter night, *Arachne* and *Santa Maria* collided.

The square kite crawled almost imperceptibly into the circular spider's-web ; the long ribbons of the shroud-lines twisted and tangled together with dreamlike slowness. Even aboard *Diana,* busy with his own rigging, Merton could scarcely tear his eye away from this silent, long drawn out disaster.

For more than ten minutes the billowing, shining clouds continued to merge into one inextricable mass. Then the crew capsules tore loose and went their separate ways, missing each other by hundreds of yards. With a flare of rockets, the safety launches hurried to pick them up.

That leaves five of us, thought Merton. He felt sorry for the skippers who had so thoroughly eliminated each other, only a few hours after the start of the race ; but they were young men, and would have another chance.

Within minutes, the five had dropped to four. From the very beginning, Merton had had doubts about the slowly rotating *Sunbeam*. Now he saw them justified.

The Martian ship had failed to tack properly; her spin had given her too much stability. Her great ring of a sail was turning to face the Sun, instead of being edge-on to it. She was being blown back along her course at almost her maximum acceleration.

That was about the most maddening thing that could happen to a skipper—worse even than a collision, for he could blame only himself. But no one would feel much sympathy for the frustrated colonials, as they dwindled slowly astern. They had made too many brash boasts before the race, and what had happened to them was poetic justice.

Yet it would not do to write off *Sunbeam* completely. With almost half a million miles still to go, she might still pull ahead. Indeed, if there were a few more casualties, she might be the only one to complete the race. It had happened before.

However, the next twelve hours were uneventful, as the Earth waxed in the sky from new to full. There was little to do while the fleet drifted round the unpowered half of its orbit, but Merton did not find the time hanging heavily on his hands. He caught a few hours sleep, ate two meals, wrote up his log, and became involved in several more radio interviews. Sometimes, though rarely, he talked to the other skippers, exchanging greetings and friendly taunts. But most of the time he was content to float in weightless relaxation, beyond all the cares of Earth, happier than he had been for many years. He was—as far as any man could be in space—master of his own fate, sailing the ship upon which he had lavished so much skill, so much love, that she had become part of his very being.

The next casualty came when they were passing the line between Earth and Sun, and were just beginning the powered half of the orbit. Aboard *Diana*, Merton saw the great sail stiffen as it tilted to catch the rays that drove it. The acceleration began to climb up from the microgravities, though it would be hours yet before it would reach its maximum value.

It would never reach it for *Gossamer*. The moment when

power came on again was always critical, and she failed to survive it.

Blair's radio commentary, which Merton had left running at low volume, alerted him with the news: "Hullo, *Gossamer* has the wriggles!" He hurried to the periscope, but at first could see nothing wrong with the great circular disc of *Gossamer's* sail. It was difficult to study it, as it was almost edge-on to him and so appeared as a thin ellipse; but presently he saw that it was twisting back and forth in slow, irresistible oscillations. Unless the crew could damp out these waves, by properly timed but gentle tugs on the shroud-lines, the sail would tear itself to pieces.

They did their best, and after twenty minutes it seemed that they had succeeded. Then, somewhere near the centre of the sail, the plastic film began to rip. It was slowly driven outwards by the radiation pressure, like smoke coiling upwards from a fire. Within a quarter of an hour, nothing was left but the delicate tracery of the radial spars that had supported the great web. Once again there was a flare of rockets, as a launch moved in to retrieve the *Gossamer's* capsule and her dejected crew.

"Getting rather lonely up here, isn't it?" said a conversational voice over the ship-to-ship radio.

"Not for you, Dimitri," retorted Merton. "You've still got company back there at the end of the field. I'm the one who's lonely, up here in front." It was not an idle boast. By this time *Diana* was three hundred miles ahead of the next competitor, and his lead should increase still more rapidly in the hours to come.

Aboard *Lebedev*, Dimitri Markoff gave a good-natured chuckle. He did not sound, Merton thought, at all like a man who had resigned himself to defeat.

"Remember the legend of the tortoise and the hare," answered the Russian. "A lot can happen in the next quarter-million miles."

It happened much sooner than that, when they had completed their first orbit of Earth and were passing the starting line again—though thousands of miles higher, thanks to the extra energy the Sun's rays had given them. Merton had

taken careful sights on the other yachts, and had fed the figures into the computer. The answer it gave for *Woomera* was so absurd that he immediately did a recheck.

There was no doubt of it—the Australasians were catching up at a completely fantastic rate. No solar yacht could possibly have such an acceleration, unless—

A swift look through the periscope gave the answer. *Woomera's* rigging, pared back to the very minimum of mass, had given way. It was her sail alone, still maintaining its shape, that was racing up behind him like a handkerchief blown before the wind. Two hours later it fluttered past, less than twenty miles away. But long before that, the Australasians had joined the growing crowd aboard the Commodore's launch.

So now it was a straight fight between *Diana* and *Lebedev* —for though the Martians had not given up, they were a thousand miles astern and no longer counted as a serious threat. For that matter, it was hard to see what *Lebedev* could do to overtake *Diana's* lead. But all the way round the second lap—through eclipse again, and the long, slow drift against the Sun, Merton felt a growing unease.

He knew the Russian pilots and designers. They had been trying to win this race for twenty years and after all, it was only fair that they should, for had not Pyotr Nikolayevich Lebedev been the first man to detect the pressure of sunlight, back at the very beginning of the Twentieth Century? But they had never succeeded.

And they would never stop trying. Dimitri was up to something—and it would be spectacular.

Aboard the official launch, a thousand miles behind the racing yachts, Commodore van Stratten looked at the radiogram with angry dismay. It had travelled more than a hundred million miles, from the chain of solar observatories swinging high above the blazing surface of the Sun, and it brought the worst possible news.

The Commodore—his title, of course, was purely honorary—back on Earth he was Professor of Astrophysics at Harvard—had been half expecting it. Never before had the race been arranged so late in the season; there had been

many delays, they had gambled and now, it seemed they might all lose.

Deep beneath the surface of the Sun, enormous forces were gathering. At any moment, the energies of a million hydrogen bombs might burst forth in the awesome explosion known as a solar flare. Climbing at millions of miles an hour, an invisible fireball many times the size of Earth would leap from the Sun, and head out across space.

The cloud of electrified gas would probably miss the Earth completely. But if it did not, it would arrive in just over a day. Spaceships could protect themselves, with their shielding and their powerful magnetic screen. But the lightly-built solar yachts, with their paper-thin walls, were defenceless against such a menace. The crews would have to be taken off, and the race abandoned.

John Merton still knew nothing of this as he brought *Diana* round the Earth for the second time. If all went well, this would be the last circuit, both for him and for the Russians. They had spiralled upwards by thousands of miles, gaining energy from the Sun's rays. On this lap, they should escape from Earth completely—and head outwards on the long run to the Moon. It was a straight race now. *Sunbeam's* crew had finally withdrawn, exhausted, after battling valiantly with their spinning sail for more than a hundred thousand miles.

Merton did not feel tired; he had eaten and slept well, and *Diana* was behaving herself admirably. The autopilot, tensioning the rigging like a busy little spider, kept the great sail trimmed to the Sun more accurately than any human skipper. Though by this time, the two square miles of plastic sheet must have been riddled by hundreds of micrometeorites, the pinhead-sized punctures had produced no falling off to thrust.

He had only two worries. The first was shroud-line Number eight, which could no longer be adjusted properly. Without any warning, the reel had jammed; even after all these years of astronautical engineering, bearings sometimes seized up in vacuum. He could neither lengthen nor shorten the line, and would have to navigate as best he could with the others. Luckily, the most difficult

manœuvres were over. From now on, *Diana* would have the Sun behind her as she sailed straight down the solar wind. And as the old-time sailors had often said, it was easy to handle a boat when the wind was blowing over your shoulder.

His other worry was *Lebedev,* still dogging his heels three hundred miles astern. The Russian yacht had shown remarkable manœuvrability, thanks to the four great panels that could be tilted around the central sail. All her flip-overs as she rounded Earth had been carried out with superb precision; but to gain manœuvrability she must have sacrificed speed. You could not have it both ways. In the long, straight haul ahead, Merton should be able to hold his own. Yet he could not be certain of victory until, three or four days from now, *Diana* went flashing past the far side of the Moon.

And then, in the fiftieth hour of the race, near the end of the second orbit round Earth, Markoff sprang his little surprise.

"Hullo, John," he said casually, over the ship-to-ship circuit. "I'd like you to watch this. It should be interesting."

Merton drew himself across to the periscope and turned up the magnification to the limit. There in the field of view, a most improbable sight against the background of the stars, was the glittering Maltese cross of *Lebedev,* very small but very clear. And then, as he watched, the four arms of the cross slowly detached themselves from the central square and went drifting away, with all their spars and rigging, into space.

Markoff had jettisoned all unnecessary mass, now that he was coming up to escape velocity and need no longer plod patiently around the Earth, gaining momentum on each circuit. From now on, *Lebedev* would be almost unsteerable—but that did not matter. All the tricky navigation lay behind her. It was as if an old-time yachtsman had deliberately thrown away his rudder and heavy keel—knowing that the rest of the race would be straight downwind over a calm sea.

"Congratulations, Dimitri," Merton radioed. "It's a neat trick. But it's not good enough—you can't catch up now."

"I've not finished yet," the Russian answered. "There's an old winter's tale in my country, about a sleigh being chased by wolves. To save himself, the driver has to throw off the passengers one by one. Do you see the analogy?"

Merton did, all too well. On this final straight lap, Dimitri no longer needed his co-pilot. *Lebedev* could really be stripped down for action.

"Alexis won't be very happy about this," Merton replied. "Besides, it's against the rules."

"Alexis isn't happy, but I'm the captain. He'll just have to wait around for ten minutes until the Commodore picks him up. And the regulations say nothing about the size of the crew—you should know that."

Merton did not answer. He was too busy doing some hurried calculations, based on what he knew of *Lebedev's* design. By the time he had finished, he knew that the race was still in doubt. *Lebedev* would be catching up with him at just about the time he hoped to pass the Moon.

But the outcome of the race was already being decided, ninety-two million miles away.

On Solar Observatory Three, far inside the orbit of Mercury, the automatic instruments recorded the whole history of the flare. A hundred million square miles of the Sun's surface suddenly exploded in such blue-white fury that, by comparison, the rest of the disc paled to a dull glow. Out of that seething inferno, twisting and turning like a living creature in the magnetic fields of its own creation, soared the electrified plasma of the great flare. Ahead of it, moving at the speed of light, went the warning flash of ultra-violet and X-rays. That would reach Earth in eight minutes, and was relatively harmless. Not so the charged atoms that were following behind at their leisurely four million miles an hour—and which, in just over a day, would engulf *Diana, Lebedev,* and their accompanying little fleet in a cloud of lethal radiation.

The Commodore left his decision to the last possible minute. Even when the jet of plasma had been tracked past the orbit of Venus, there was a chance that it might miss the Earth. But when it was less than four hours away, and

had already been picked up by the Moon-based radar network, he knew that there was no hope. All solar sailing was over for the next five or six years until the Sun was quiet again.

A great sigh of disappointment swept across the Solar System. *Diana* and *Lebedev* were halfway between Earth and Moon, running neck and neck—and now no one would ever know which was the better boat. The enthusiasts would argue the result for years; history would merely record: Race cancelled owing to solar storm.

When John Merton received the order, he felt a bitterness he had not known since childhood Across the years, sharp and clear, came the memory of his tenth birthday. He had been promised an exact scale model of the famous spaceship *Morning Star*, and for weeks had been planning how he would assemble it, where he would hang it up in his bedroom. And then, at the last moment, his father had broken the news. "I'm sorry, John—it costs too much money. Maybe next year . . ."

Half a century and a successful lifetime later, he was a heart-broken boy again.

For a moment, he thought of disobeying the Commodore. Suppose he sailed on, ignoring the warning? Even if the race were abandoned, he could make a crossing to the Moon that would stand in the record books for generations.

But that would be worse than stupidity. It would be suicide—and a very unpleasant form of suicide. He had seen men die of radiation poisoning, when the magnetic shielding of their ships had failed in deep space. No—nothing was worth that . . .

He felt sorry for Dimitri Markoff as for himself; they had both deserved to win, and now victory would go to neither. No man could argue with the Sun in one of its rages, even though he might ride upon its beams to the edge of space.

Only fifty miles astern now, the Commodore's launch was drawing alongside *Lebedev*, preparing to take off her skipper. There went the silver sail, as Dimitri—with feelings that he would share—cut the rigging. The tiny capsule

would be taken back to Earth, perhaps to be used again—but a sail was spread for one voyage only.

He could press the jettison button now, and save his rescuers a few minutes of time. But he could not do so. He wanted to stay aboard to the very end, on the little boat that had been for so long a part of his dreams and his life. The great sail was spread now at right angles to the Sun, exerting its utmost thrust. Long ago it had torn him clear of Earth—and *Diana* was still gaining speed.

Then, out of nowhere, beyond all doubt or hesitation, he knew what must be done. For the last time, he sat down before the computer had navigated him halfway to the Moon.

When he had finished, he packed the log and his few personal belongings. Clumsily—for he was out of practice, and it was not an easy job to do by oneself—he climbed into the emergency survival suit. He was just sealing the helmet when the Commodore's voice called over the radio. "We'll be alongside in five minutes, Captain. Please cut your sail so we won't foul it."

John Merton, first and last skipper of the sun-yacht *Diana*, hesitated for a moment. He looked for the last time round the tiny cabin, with its shining instruments and its neatly arranged controls, now all locked in their final positions. Then he said to the microphone: "I'm abandoning ship. Take your time to pick me up. *Diana* can look after herself"

There was no reply from the Commodore, and for that he was grateful. Professor van Stratten would have guessed what was happening—and would know that, in these final moments, he wished to be left alone.

He did not bother to exhaust the airlock, and the rush of escaping gas blew him gently out into space; the thrust he gave her then was his last gift to *Diana*. She dwindled away from him, sail glittering splendidly in the sunlight that would be hers for centuries to come. Two days from now she would flash past the Moon; but the Moon, like the Earth, could never catch her. Without his mass to slow her down, she would gain two thousand miles an hour in every day of sailing. In a month, she would be travelling faster than any ship that man had ever built.

As the Sun's rays weakened with distance, so her acceleration would fall. But even at the orbit of Mars, she would be gaining a thousand miles an hour in every day. Long before then, she would be moving too swiftly for the Sun itself to hold her. Faster than any comet that had ever streaked in from the stars, she would be heading out into the abyss.

The glare of rockets, only a few miles away, caught Merton's eye. The launch was approaching to pick him up at thousands of times the acceleration that *Diana* could ever attain. But engines could burn for a few minutes only, before they exhausted their fuel—while *Diana* would still be gaining speed, driven outwards by the Sun's eternal fires, for ages yet to come.

"Good-bye, little ship," said John Merton. "I wonder what eyes will see you next, how many thousand years from now?"

At last he felt at peace, as the blunt torpedo of the launch nosed up beside him. He would never win the race to the Moon; but his would be the first of all man's ships to set sail on the long journey to the stars.

FIRST DAWN

Donald Malcolm

THE STARS, LIKE a myriad light-kissed sparkles swimming in wine, twinkled dreamily. The ice-mantled land glittered with shaded dimness.

Lara drew his wide-pupiled eyes away from the stars and stared once more down to the floor of the valley where the strange, gleaming objects stood.

The eternally blowing wind scoured up the barren, icy slopes and ruffled Lara's thick pelt. It was no colder than usual: besides, he was reluctant to retire into the cave.

He wondered about the objects in the valley and about the creatures that had built them, piece by piece.

They were tall and cylindrical, towering above Lara and his kind. A round blob sat on top of the cylinder; two limbs protruded from the upper part, and they moved around stiffly on two lower limbs.

Lara belonged to a small, mole-like race. His people had all been frightened when the great, round things fell silently out of the sky. But Lara had always been the adventurous type and he felt no fear

Many times he had told his tribe that there was nothing to be afraid of, that the newcomers could not see people as small as themselves. He tried to persuade some companions to come with him to see for themselves, but none would venture.

And the Elders forbade it, saying that no good would come of it.

Lara had defied them often and gone down into the wide, mountain-ringed valley. He found that he couldn't go too near. If he did, the light hurt his eyes. His people were used only to starlight, for the parent star never shone on this side of the world. The tribes had never known the light, although deep-rooted legends told that one day it would come to kill them all.

He scoffed at the legends and succeeded in adding one

more offence to the list the Elders had marked against him. He knew that he risked banishment from the tribe. And those who were sent beyond the great mountains, over the rim of the world, never came back. But Lara had no thought for what might happen to him in the future. The streak of curiosity ran deep in him: he lived only for the present.

He watched the great ships slide down the star-shot sky and land in the valley. Mountainous as the land was, comparatively level ground was scarce.

With eager eyes, he saw many objects being unloaded. As time went by, the newcomers built various structures and started to bore immense holes in the ground. The land trembled to great explosions that echoed ringingly off the mountain peaks. Lara conquered his fear. He knew nothing of the purpose of what was happening. He watched the progress anyway, despite the whisperings that were going on against him. The Elders were becoming impatient with his defiance.

Time passed. The structures in the valley grew to such proportions that Lara thought they might challenge the chiming stars themselves. Occasionally, accompanied by tremendous rolls of thunder, searing gouts of flame would lick hungry tongues across the valley. Then vapour would rise and enshroud everything in swirling mist. Great channels were cut at various angles at the foot of the mountains.

Lara spent longer and longer periods away from his tribe and the Elders' anger against him grew strong. Recklessness seized him and he didn't care. Let them send him beyond the rim of the world if they wished! The very air in the valley tingled with frosty pregnancy and great forces seemed to stir restlessly in the bowels of the planet.

Finally the globular ships floated up from the valley and sailed into space like beautiful bubbles. The vapours dispersed and settled. Once more the land was alone beneath the jewel-scattered heavens. The huge structures squatted in sinister silence, glinting solemnly in the star-glow, waiting.

They called him to a meeting of the tribe. Reluctantly, he went. It was as he had expected. He had offended the Elders too many times. Because of him the legends were in

disrepute. There was only one punishment: he was to be banished from the tribe.

Strangely, he felt no regret as he heard, and accepted, the decision. For hadn't he known it would come, even from the day of his First Awareness? He had always been different.

Lara began his climb to the surface alone, an outcast. As he reached the mouth of the cave, cavernous rumblings shook the planet. It seemed as if it must fall apart. Fearfully, Lara pressed his body to the rock.

Ponderously, like a giant that had slumbered for an age, the world began to rotate slowly.

The engine in the valley trembled with an immensity of chained power as if it were a mighty monster striving to break through to its mate on the other side of the globe.

Lara knew instinctively that at last the thing he had always sensed was happening.

For hours, while the engines did their work and the awakening world swung groggily on its axis like a child learning to walk, Lara watched and waited.

Then, in the east, streamers of light reached with timid paleness among the haughty stars. The sky beyond the mountains assumed an almost colourless, translucent yellow aura. The luminescence began to spread and the peaks were bathed in it.

With its coming, harshness fell away from the mountain sheerness. A softness never before known stole everywhere.

A gentle radiance flooded the land with topaz fire and, oh! the colours that sprang from the sleeping ice! It became like multi-hued marble. The blue-veined ice was suffused with subtle, shifting tints of lemon and yellow and fuchsia and orange. It was like the breathless opening of a flower.

An arc of blinding light edged above the mountains. The brilliance hurt Lara's eyes: but fascinated, he could not avert them. The long time he had spent in watching the engine builders stood by him now He found that his eyes suffered less pain if he looked just to the side of the rising light.

The eastern sky was a glorious wash of delicate colours; rose, peach, lacy green, crystalline blue challenged each other in virginal beauty.

The waning stars were like pale flies trapped in amber.

The great ball of the star cleared the clutching peaks and its light poured down for the first time since the birth of the planet on the ice-locked land.

Lara withdrew into the cave mouth. Already the first faint tricklings of water were beginning. He was exultant. The light of the legends had come and he had not died.

The rim of the world could wait. He retraced his footsteps into the cave.

He had seen the first dawn.

NEW SF FILM

Reviewed by Alan Dodd

Voyage To The End of The Universe

LIFE ABOARD A gigantic interstellar space craft hurtling through space to an unknown destination can, as many science fiction stories have pointed out, be emotionally the same as those abroad any present day craft, ship, plane or island where a group of men and women can be forced to spend endless months at work and play.

The setting of this film is the 25th Century where the research ship *Icarus* takes fifty men and women on a voyage of exploration. In the midst of a birthday celebration for their astronomer the crew sight a strange disc craft which two of them agree to board using a rocket, on board they discover only dead bodies but before they can return to their mother ship the strange craft detonates in an atomic explosion killing them and damaging the *Icarus,* but not seriously.

Crew members repairing the damage caused by the explosion come down with radiation burns and next the *Icarus* meets the Dark Star, a huge celestial body whose radiation causes a mysterious sleeping sickness which causes a fatigue in living organisms. One leading

scientist goes temporarily berserk. The first child is born to another.

A new mass is seen to be moving along with the space ship at the same speed and the *Icarus*'s commander realises that the magnetic field of the Green Planet they are approaching is protecting them against the deadly radiation of the Dark Star.

As the *Icarus* lands upon the mysterious Green Planet so the final twist to the voyage is revealed, not a new one to readers of science fiction but a new one to science fiction film viewers—The Green Planet is of course Earth—and the inhabitants of the *Icarus* whom we have shared so many adventures through this voyage are in fact beings from another world.

Produced by Rudolph Wolh and directed by Jack Pollack *Voyage to the End of the Universe* has enough suspense in its 81 minutes of space problems easily to sustain most people's interest. The special effects involving spaceships, meteorites, strange clouds, spacial phenomena and atomic explosions are all to the credit of their creators and the settings, particularly of a spaceship hospital are authentically captured.

Those looking for escapism in a trip to another world should surely find it here.

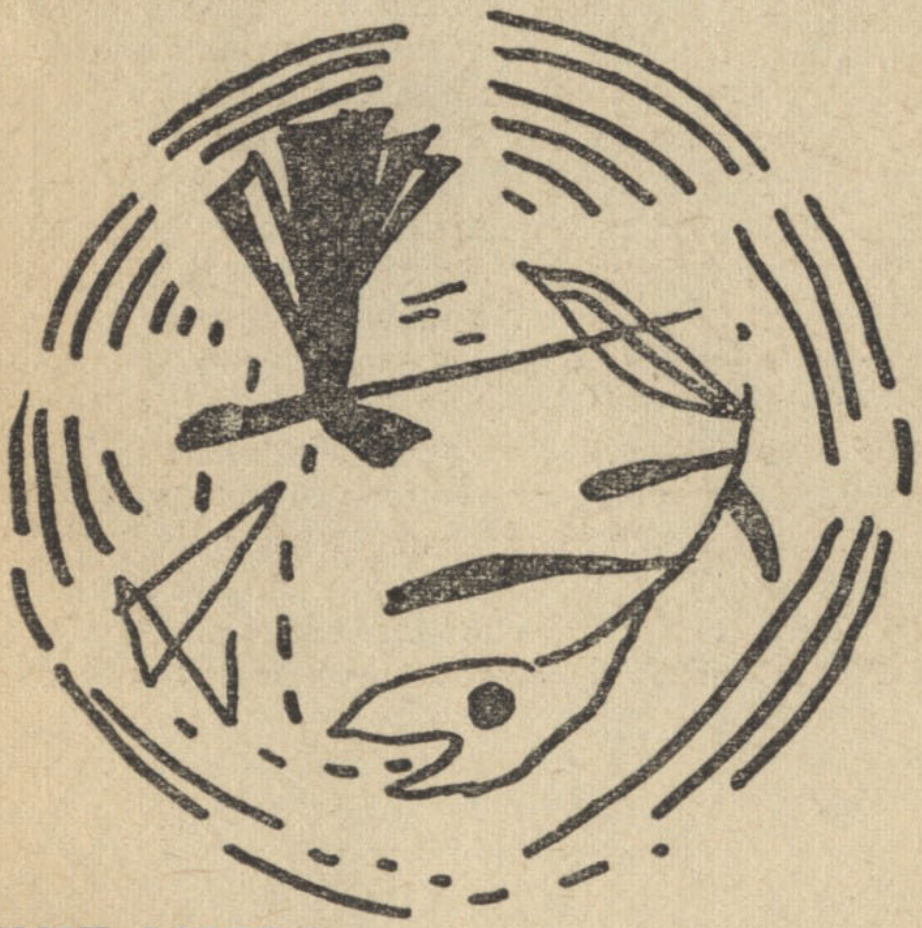
THE DROUGHT by J. G. Ballard (to be published in May by Jonathan Cape) is the strange and terrifying story of the world transformed by an endless drought. Rivers and lakes have drained, and everywhere people have fled to the coasts as the deserts close in upon the abandoned cities. Light and shade move slowly across landscapes that have lost their meaning, and from which all time has been eroded. At the riverside town of Hamilton, 100 miles from the sea, a few people remain behind—Quilter, the sinister idiot-son of the old woman of the barges; Catherine Austen, daughter of the former zoo curator, and remote sister of the lions she dreams of releasing; the rich and eccentric misanthropist Richard Lomax and his sister Miranda, a degenerate desert Eve; and Dr. Charles Ransom, who lives alone in his house-boat, preoccupied with the real significance of the changing landscape.

Each has his own reason for staying behind, but all are trying to find a substitute for the vanished river. As Ransom watches it draining, and the land turning into a desert, he senses that time too is drying up, isolating each of them like the craft stranded on the river-bed. Trying to free themselves, they set off a series of violent and nightmarish scenes. A group of fishermen, led by a mysterious Jonah-like figure obsessed by his vision of a lost river, rove through the deserted streets with their nets, hunting Ransom like a fish through an invisible sea.

Caught by them, Ransom realises that the deserts and sand-seas that now cover the continent are imposing their own system of time upon the landscape. Inverted marine images continually appear—in the guise of Ahab, Prospero, Caliban and the Ancient Mariner—the characters perform their grotesque roles in the sand-sea. But sand is the antithesis of water, the medium of their previous time-world, and the objects immersed in it lose their separate identities. Half-buried beneath the drifts, the abandoned cars and houses are reduced to the essence of their own geometries, and the human figures moving among them find their own motives and relationships reduced to their barest identity, bound together by the

now angular and unexpected perspectives of time and memory.

"Dune Limbo" is taken from the central section of the novel, in which the characters have tried to reach the sea, but even on the beaches find themselves held back by the immense drifts of salt produced during the previous years by the distilling of sea-water. Here, in this time-less purgatory, the debris of the past lies rusting around them like the bitter lees of their own failures. Eventually they are driven away from the coast along the drained river and discover the transformed landscape of the waiting sand-sea. More and more their behaviour becomes random and unpredictable, each act as isolated and quantified as the debris poking from the sand. A violent climax occurs, but when at last it begins to rain the characters are by now unaware of the rain and what it means. The drought has become absolute.



DUNE LIMBO **J G Ballard**

UNDER THE EMPTY winter sky, the salt-dunes ran on for miles. Seldom varying more than a few feet from trough to crest, they shone damply in the cold air, the pools of brine disturbed by the in-shore wind. Sometimes, in a distant foretaste of the spring to come, their crests would be touched with white streaks as a few crystals evaporated out into the sunlight, but by the early afternoon these began to deliquesce, and the grey flanks of the dunes would run with a pale light.

To the east and west the dunes stretched along the coast to the horizon, occasionally giving way to a small lake of stagnant brine or part of a lost creek cut off from the rest of its channel. To the south, in the direction of the sea, the dunes gradually became more shallow, extending into long saltflats. At high tide they were covered by a few inches of clear water, the narrowing causeways of firmer salt reaching out into the sea.

Nowhere was there a defined margin between the shore and sea, and the endless shallows formed the only dividing zone, land and water both submerged in this grey, liquid limbo. At intervals the skeleton of a derelict conveyer emerged from the salt and seemed to point toward the sea, but then, after a few hundred yards, sank from sight again. Gradually the pools of water congregated into larger lakes, small creeks formed into continuous channels, but the water never seemed to move. Even after an hour's walk, knee-deep in the dissolving slush, the sea remained as distant as ever, always present and yet lost beyond the horizon, haunting the cold mists that drifted across the salt-dunes.

To the north, the dunes steadily consolidated themselves, the pools of water between them never more than a few inches deep. Eventually, where they overran the shore, they rose into a series of large white hillocks, like industrial tippings, which partly concealed the coastal hills. The foreshore itself, over the former beaches, was covered by the slopes of dry salt running down to the dunes. The rusty spires of old distillation columns rose into the air, and the roofs of metal huts carried off their foundations floated like half-submerged wrecks. Further out there were the

shells of old pumping gear and the conveyers that once carried the waste salt back into the sea.

A few hundred yards from the shore, the hulks of two or three ships were buried to their upper decks in the salt, their grey superstructures reflected in the brine-pools. Small shacks of waste metal sheltered against their sides and beneath the overhangs of the sterns. Outside their lean-to doors, smoke drifted from the chimneys of crude stills.

Besides each of these dwellings, sometimes protected by a palisade of stakes, was a small pond of brine. The banks had been laboriously beaten into a hard margin, but the water seeping everywhere continually dissolved them. Despite the to-and-fro movements of the inhabitants of the salt wastes, no traces of their footsteps marked the surface, blurred within a few minutes by the leaking water

Only toward the sea, far across the dunes and creeks, was there any activity.

Shortly after dawn, as the tide extended slowly across the margins of the coastal flats, the narrow creeks and channels began to fill with water. The long salt-dunes darkened with the moisture seeping through them, and sheets of open water spread outwards among the channels, carrying with them a few fish and nautiloids. Reaching toward the firmer shore, the cold water infiltrated among the saddles and culverts like the advance front of an invading army, its approach almost unnoticed. A cold wind blew overhead and dissolved in the dawn mists, lifting a few uneager gulls across the banks.

Almost a mile from the shore, the tide began to spill through a large breach in one of the salt bars. The water sluiced outwards into a lagoon some three hundred yards in diameter, inundating the shallow dunes in the centre. As it filled this artificial basin, it smoothed itself into a mirror of the cloudless sky.

The margins of the lagoon had been raised a few feet above the level of the surrounding saltflats, and the wet crystals formed a continuous bank almost half a mile in length. As the water poured into the breach it carried away

the nearer sections of the mouth, and then, as the tide began to slacken, swilled quietly away along the banks.

Overhead the gulls dived, picking at the hundreds of fish swimming below the surface. In equilibrium, the water ceased to move, and for a moment the great lagoon, and the long arms of brine seeping away northwards through the grey light, were like immense sheets of polished ice.

At this moment, a shout crossed the air. A dozen men rose from behind the bank surrounding the lagoon and with long paddles of whalebone began to shovel the wet salt into the breach. Sliding up to their waists in the grey slush, they worked furiously as the wet crystals drained backwards toward the sea. Their arms and chests were strung with strips of rag and rubber. They drove each other on with sharp cries and shouts, their backs bent as they ladled the salt up into the breach, trying to contain the water in the lagoon before the tide turned.

Watching them from the edge of the bank was a tall, thin-faced man wearing a sealskin cape over his left shoulder, his right hand on the shaft of his double-bladed paddle. His dark face, from which all flesh had been drained away, seemed to be made up of a series of flintlike points, the sharp cheekbones and jaw almost piercing the hard skin. He gazed across the captured water, his eyes counting the fish that gleamed and darted. Over his shoulder he watched the tide recede, dissolving the banks as it moved along them. The men in the breach began to shout to him as the wet salt poured across them, sliding and falling as they struggled to hold back the bank. The man in the cape ignored them, jerking the sealskin with his shoulder, his eyes on the falling table of water beyond the banks and the shining deck of the trapped sea within the lagoon.

At the last moment, when the water seemed about to burst from the lagoon at a dozen points, he raised his paddle and swung it vigorously at the opposite bank toward the shore. A cry like a gull's scream tore from his throat. As he raced off along the bank, leaving the exhausted men in the breach to drag themselves from the salt, a dozen men emerged from behind the northern bank. Their paddles whirling, they cut an opening in the wall

twenty yards wide, then waded out to their chests in the water and drove it through the breach.

Carried by its own weight, the water poured in a torrent into the surrounding creeks, drawing the rest of the lagoon behind it. By the time the man in the cape had reached this new breach, half the lagoon had drained, rushing out in a deep channel. Like a demented canal, it poured onwards toward the shore, washing away the smaller dunes in its path. It swerved to the northeast, the foam boiling around the bend, then entered a narrow channel cut between two dunes. Veering to the left, it set off again for the shore, the man in the cape racing along beside it. Now and then he stopped to scan the course ahead, where the artificial channel had been strengthened with banks of drier salt, then turned and shouted to his men. They followed along the banks, their paddles driving the water on as it raced past.

Abruptly, a section of the channel collapsed and water spilled away into the adjacent creeks. Shouting as he ran, the leader raced through the shallows, his two-bladed paddle hurling the water back into the main channel. His men floundered after him, repairing the breach and driving the water back up the slope.

Leaving them, the leader ran on ahead, where the others were paddling the main body of water across the damp dunes. Although still carried along by its own momentum, the channel had widened into a gliding oval lake, the hundreds of fish tumbling over one another in the spinning currents. Every twenty yards, as the lake poured along, a dozen fish would be left stranded behind, and two older men bringing up the rear tossed them back into the receding wake.

Guiding it with their blades, the men took up their positions around the bows of the lake. At their prow, only a few feet from the front wave, the man in the cape piloted them across the varying contours. The lake coursed smoothly in and out of the channels, cruising over the shallow pools in its path. Half a mile from the shore it rilled along, still almost intact.

"Captain!" There was a shout from the two look-outs in the tail. "Captain Jordan!"

Whirling in the damp salt, the leader raised his paddle and drove the oarsmen back along the shores of the lake. Two hundred yards away, a group of five or six men, heads lowered as they worked their short paddles, had broken down the bank on the western side of the lake and were driving the water outwards across the dunes.

Converging around both banks, the trappers raced toward them, their paddles flashing at the water. The pirates ignored them and worked away at the water, propelling it through the breach. Already a large pool some fifty yards wide had formed among the dunes. As the main body of the lake moved away, they ran down across the bank and began to paddle the pool away among the shallows to the west.

Feet splashed after them through the brine, and the air was filled with whirling paddles and the spray of flying salt. Trying to recover the water they had lured with such effort from the sea, the trappers drove it back toward the lake. Some of them attacked the pirates, splintering their short paddles with their own heavier blades. The dark-faced leader beat one man to his knees, snapping the bony shaft of his paddle with his foot, then clubbed another across the face, knocking him into the shallows. Warding off the flying blades, the pirates stumbled to their feet, pushing the water between their attackers' legs. Their leader, an older man with a red weal on his bearded face, shouted to them and they darted off in all directions, dividing the water into half a dozen pools, which they drove away with their paddles and bare hands.

In the mêlée, the main body of the lake had continued its gliding progress to the shore. The defenders broke off the attempt to recapture the water and ran after the lake, their rubber suits streaming with the cold salt. One or two of them stopped to shout over their shoulders, but the pirates had disappeared among the dunes. As the grey morning light gleamed in the wet slopes, their footfalls were lost in the streaming salt.

Nursing his cheek against the rubber pad on his shoulder, Ransom made his way carefully among the watery dunes, steering the small pool through the hollows. Now and then,

as the pool raced along under its own momentum, he stopped to peer over the surrounding crests, listening to the distant cries of Jordan and his men. Sooner or later the stern-faced captain would send a party over to the beaches, where the outcasts lived, on a punitive expedition. At the prospect of smashed cabins and wrecked stills, Ransom rallied himself and pressed on, guiding the pool through the dips. Little more than twenty feet wide, it contained half a dozen small fish. One of them was stranded at his feet, and Ransom bent down and picked it up. Before he tossed it back into the water, his frozen fingers felt its plump belly.

Three hundred yards to his right he caught a glimpse of Jonathan Grady propelling his pool through the winding channels towards his shack below a ruined salt-conveyor. Barely seventeen years old, he had been strong enough to take almost half the stolen water for himself, and drove it along untiringly.

The other four members of the band had disappeared among the saltflats. Ransom pushed himself ahead, the salty air stinging the weal on his face. By luck Jordan's paddle had caught him with the flat of its blade, or he would have been knocked unconscious and carried off to the summary justice of the Johnstone settlement. There his former friendship with the Reverend Johnstone, long-forgotten after ten years, would have been little help. It was now necessary to go out a full mile from the shore to trap the sea—the salt abandoned during the previous years had begun to slide off the inner beach areas, raising the level of the offshore flats—and the theft of water was becoming the greatest crime for the communities along the coast.

Ransom shivered in the cold light, and tried to squeeze the moisture from the damp rags beneath his suit of rubber strips Sewn together with pieces of fishgut, the covering leaked at a dozen places. He and the other members of the band had set out three hours before dawn, following Jordan and his team over the grey dunes. They hid themselves in the darkness by the empty channel, waiting for the tide to turn, knowing that they had only a few minutes to steal a small section of the lake. But for the need to steer the main body of water to the reservoir at the settlement,

Jordan and his men would have caught them. One night soon, no doubt, they would deliberately sacrifice their catch to rid themselves forever of Ransom.

As Ransom moved along beside the pool, steering it toward the distant tower of the wrecked lightship whose stern jutted from the sand a quarter of a mile away, he automatically counted and recounted the fish swimming in front of him, wondering how long he could continue to prey on Jordan and his men. By now the sea was so far away, the shore so choked with salt, that only the larger and more skillful teams could muster enough strength to trap a sizeable body of water and carry it back to the reservoirs. Three years earlier, Ransom and the young Grady had been able to cut permanent channels through the salt, and at high tide enough water flowed down them to carry small catches of fish and crabs. Now, however, as the whole area had softened, the wet sliding salt made it impossible to keep any channel open for more than twenty yards, unless a huge team of men were used, digging the channel afresh as they moved ahead of the stream.

The remains of one of the metal conveyers jutted from the dunes ahead. Small pools of water gathered around the rusting legs, and Ransom began to run faster, paddle whirling in his hands as he tried to gain enough momentum to sweep some of this along with him. Exhausted by the need to keep up a brisk trot, he tripped on to his knees, then stood up and raced after the pool as it approached the conveyer.

A fish flopped at his feet, twisting on the salt slope. Leaving it, Ransom rushed on after the pool, and caught up with it as it swirled through the metal legs. Lowering his head, he whipped the water with the paddle, and carried the pool over the slope into the next hollow.

Despite this slight gain, less than two-thirds of the original pool remained when he reached the lightship. To his left the sunlight was falling on the slopes of the salt tips, lighting up the faces of the hills behind them, but Ransom ignored these intimations of warmth and colour. He steered the pool toward the small basin near the starboard bridge of the ship. This narrow tank, twenty yards long and ten wide, he had managed to preserve over the

years by carrying stones and pieces of scrap metal down from the shore, and each day beating the salt around them to a firm crust. The water was barely three inches deep, and a few edible kelp and water anemones, Ransom's sole source of vegetable food, floated limply at one end. Often Ransom had tried to breed fish in the pool, but the water was too saline, and the fish invariably died within a few hours. In the reservoirs at the settlement, with their more dilute solutions, the fish lived for months. Ransom, however, unless he chose to live on dried kelp five days out of six, was obliged to go out almost every morning to trap and steal the sea.

He watched the pool as it slid into the tank like a tired snake, and then worked the wet bank with his paddle, squeezing the last water from the salt. The few fish swam up and down in the steadying current, nibbling at the kelp. Counting them again, Ransom followed the line of old boiler tubes that ran from the tank to the fresh-water still next to his shack. He had roofed it in with pieces of metal plate from the cabins of the lightship, and with squares of old sacking. Opening the door, he listened for the familiar bubbling sounds, and then saw with annoyance that the flame under the boiler was set too low. The wastage of fuel, every ounce of which had to be scavenged with increasing difficulty from the vehicles buried beneath the shore, made him feel sick with frustration. A can of gasoline sat on the floor. He poured some into the tank, then turned up the flame and adjusted it, careful, despite his annoyance, not to overheat the unit. Using this dangerous and unpredictable fuel, scores of stills had exploded over the years, killing or maiming their owners.

He examined the condenser for any leaks, and then raised the lid of the water receptacle. An inch of clear water lay in the pan. He decanted it carefully into an old whisky bottle, raising the funnel to his lips to catch the last intoxicating drops.

He walked over to the shack, touching his cheek, conscious that the bruised skin would show through his coarse stubble. Overhead the sunlight shone on the curving sternplates of the wrecked lightship, giving the portholes a glassy opaque look like the eyes of dead fish. In fact, this stranded

leviathan, submerged beyond sight of the sea in this concentration of its most destructive element, had rotted as much as any whale would have done in ten years. Often Ransom entered the hulk, searching for pieces of piping or valve gear, but the engine room and gangways had rusted into grotesque hanging gardens of corroded metal.

Below the stern, partly sheltered from the prevailing easterly winds by the flat blade of the rudder, was Ransom's shack. He had built it from the rusty motorcar bodies he had hauled down from the shore and piled on top of one another. Its bulging shell, puffed out here and there by a car's bulbous nose or trunk, resembled the carapace of a cancerous turtle.

The central chamber inside, floored with wooden deck planks, was lit by a single fish-oil lamp when Ransom entered. Suspended from a chassis above, it swung slowly in the draughts moving through the cracks between the cars.

A small gasoline stove, fitted with a crude flue, burned in the centre of the room. Two metal beds were drawn up against a table beside it. Lying on one of them, a patched blanket across her knees, was Judith Ransom. She looked up at Ransom, her dented temple casting an oblique shadow across the lace-like burn on her cheek. Since the accident she had made no further attempt to disguise the dent in her temple, and her greying hair was tied behind her neck in a simple knot.

"You're late," she said. "Did you catch anything?"

Ransom sat down, and slowly began to peel off the rubber suit. "Five," he told her. He rubbed his cheek painfully, aware that he and Judith now shared the same facial stigma. "Three of them are quite big—there must be a lot to feed on out at sea. I had to leave one behind."

"For heaven's sake, why?" Judith sat up, her face sharpening. "We've got to give three to Grady, and you know he won't take small ones! That leaves us with only two for today!" She glanced about the shack with wavering desperation, as if hoping that in some magical way a small herring might materialize for her in each of the dingy corners. "I can't understand you, Charles. You'll have to go out again tonight."

Giving up the attempt to pull off his thighboots—like his suit, made from the inner tubes of car tyres—Ransom leaned back across the bed. "Judith, I can't. I'm exhausted as it is." Adopting the wheedling tone she herself had used, he went on: "We don't want me to be ill again, do we?" He smiled at her encouragingly, turning his face from the lantern so that she would not see the weal. "Anyway, they won't be going out again tonight. They brought in a huge lake of water."

"They always do." Judith gestured with a febrile hand. She had not yet recovered from Ransom's illness. The task of nursing him and begging for food had been bad enough, but faded into the merest trifle compared with the insecurity of being without the breadwinner for two weeks. "Can't you go out to the sea and fish there? Why do you have to steal water all the time?"

Ransom let this reproof pass. He pressed his frozen hands to the stove. "You can never reach the sea, can't you understand? There's nothing but salt all the way. Anyway, I haven't a net."

"Charles, what's the matter with your face? Who did that?"

For a moment her indignant tone rallied Ransom's spirits, a display of that self-willed temper of old that had driven her from the Johnstone settlement five years earlier. It was this thin thread of independence that Ransom clung to, and he was almost glad of the injury for revealing it.

"We had a brief set-to with them. One of the paddle blades caught me."

"My God! Whose, I'd like to know? Was it Jordan's?" When Ransom nodded she said with cold bitterness: "One of these days someone will have his blood."

"He was doing his job."

"Rubbish. He picks on you deliberately." She looked at Ransom critically, and then managed a smile. "Poor Charles."

Pulling his boots down to his ankles, Ransom crossed the hearth and sat down beside her, feeling the pale warmth inside her shawl. Her brittle fingers kneaded his shoulders and then brushed his greying hair from his forehead. Huddled beside her inside the blanket, one hand resting

limply on her thin thighs, Ransom gazed around the drab interior of the shack. The decline in his life in the five years since Judith had come to live with him needed no underlining, but he realized that this was part of the continuous decline of all the beach settlements. It was true that he now had the task of feeding them both, and that Judith made little contribution to their survival, but she did at least guard their meagre fish and water stocks while he was away. Raids on the isolated outcasts had now become more frequent.

However, it was not this that held them together, but their awareness that only with each other could they keep alive some faint shadow of their former personalities, whatever their defects, and arrest the gradual numbing of sense and identity that was the unseen gradient of the dune limbo. Like all purgatories, the beach was a waiting ground, the endless stretches of wet salt sucking away from them all but the hardest core of themselves. These tiny nodes of identity glimmered faintly in the grey light of the limbo, as this zone of nothingness waited for them to dissolve and deliquesce like the few crystals dried by the sun. During the first years, when Judith had lived with Hendry in the settlement, Ransom had noticed her becoming increasingly shrewish and sharptongued, and assumed this to mark the break-up of her personality. Later, when Hendry became Johnstone's right-hand man, his association with Judith was a handicap. Her bodkin tongue and unpredictable ways made her intolerable to Johnstone's daughters and the other womenfolk.

She left the settlement of her own accord. After living precariously in the old shacks among the salt tips, she one day knocked on the door of Ransom's cabin. It was then that Ransom realized that Judith was one of the few people on the beach to have survived intact. The cold and brine had merely cut away the soft tissues of convention and politeness. However bad-tempered and impatient, she was still herself.

Yet this stopping of the clock had gained them nothing. The beach was a zone without time, suspended in an endless interval as flaccid and enduring as the wet dunes them-

selves. Often Ransom remembered the painting by Tanguy that he had once treasured. Its drained beaches, eroded of all associations, of all sense of time, in some ways seemed a photographic portrait of the salt world of the shore. But the similarity was misleading. On the beach, time was not absent but immobilized, what was new in their lives and relationships they could form only from the residues of the past, from the failures and omissions that persisted into the present like the wreckage and scrap metal from which they built their cabins.

Ransom looked down at Judith as she gazed blankly into the stove. Despite the five years together, the five arctic winters and fierce summers when the salt banks gleamed like causeways of chalk, he felt few bonds between them. The success, if such a term could be used, of their present union, like its previous failure, had been decided by wholly impersonal considerations, above all by the zone of time in which they found themseves.

He stood up. "I'll bring one of the fish down. We'll have some breakfast."

"Can we spare it?"

"No. But perhaps there'll be a tidal wave tonight."

Once every three or four years, in response to some distant submarine earthquake, a huge wave would inundate the coast. The third and last of these, some two years earlier, had swept across the saltflats an hour before dawn, reaching to the very margins of the beach. The hundreds of shacks and dwellings among the dunes had been destroyed by the waist-high water, the reservoir pools washed away in a few seconds. Staggering about in the sliding salt, they had watched everything they owned carried away. As the luminous water swilled around the wrecked ships, the exhausted beachdwellers had climbed up onto the salt tips and sat there until dawn.

Then, in the first light, they had seen a fabulous spectacle. The entire stretch of the draining saltflats was covered with the expiring forms of tens of thousands of stranded fish, every pool alive with crabs and shrimps. The ensuing bloodfeast, as the gulls dived and screamed around the flashing spears, had rekindled the remaining survivors. For

three weeks, led by the Reverend Johnstone, they had moved from pool to pool, and gorged themselves like beasts performing an obscene eucharist.

However, as Ransom walked over to the fish tank he was thinking, not of this, but of the first great wave, some six months after their arrival. Then the tide had gathered for them a harvest of corpses. The thousands of bodies they had tipped into the sea after the final bloody battles on the beaches had come back to them, their drowned eyes and blanched faces staring from the shallow pools. The washed wounds, cleansed of all blood and hate, haunted them in their dreams. Working at night, they buried the bodies in deep pits below the first salt tips. Sometimes Ransom would wake and go out into the darkness, half-expecting the washed bones to sprout through the salt below his feet.

Recently Ransom's memories of the corpses, repressed for so many years, had come back to him with added force. As he picked up his paddle and flicked one of the herrings onto the sand, he reflected that perhaps his reluctance to join the settlement stemmed from his identification of the fish with the bodies of the dead. However bitter his memories of the half-willing part he had played in the massacres, he now accepted that he would have to leave the solitary shack and join the Reverend Johnstone's small feudal world. At least the institutional relics and taboos would allay his memories in a way that he alone could not.

To Judith, as the fish browned in the frying pan, he said: "Grady is going to join the settlement."

"What? I don't believe it!" Judith brushed her hair down across her temple. "He's always been a lone wolf. Did he tell you himself?"

"Not exactly, but—"

"Then you're imagining it." She divided the fish into two equal portions, steering the knife precisely down the midline with the casual skill of a surgeon. "Jonathan Grady is his own master. He couldn't accept that crazy old clergyman and his mad daughters."

Ransom chewed the flavourless steaks of white meat. "He was talking about it while we waited for the tide. It was obvious what was on his mind—he's sensible enough to know we can't last out on our own much longer."

"That's nonsense. We've managed so far."

"But, Judith . . . we live like animals. The salt is shifting now, every day it carries the sea a few yards further out."

"Then we'll move along the coast. If we want to we can go a hundred miles."

"Not now. There are too many blood feuds. It's an endless string of little communities, trapping their own small pieces of the sea and frightened of everyone else." He picked at the shreds of meat around the fish's skull "I have a feeling Grady was warning me."

"What do you mean?"

"If he joins the settlement he'll be one of Jordan's team. He'll lead them straight here. In an obscure way, I think he was telling me he'd enjoy getting his revenge."

"For his father? But that was so far in the past. It was one of those terrible accidents that happen."

"It wasn't really. In fact, the more I think about it the more I'm convinced it was simply a kind of coldblooded experiment, to see how detached from everyone else I was." He shrugged. "If we're going to join the settlement it would be best to get in before Grady does."

Judith slowly shook her head. "Charles, if you go there it will be the end of you. You know that."

An hour later, when she was asleep, Ransom left the cabin and went out into the cold morning light. The sun was overhead, but the dunes remained grey and lifeless, the shallow pools like clouded mirrors. Along the shore the rusting columns of the half-submerged stills rose into the air, their shafts casting striped shadows on the brilliant white slopes of the salt tips. The hills beyond were bright with desert colours, but as usual Ransom turned his eyes from them.

He waited for five minutes to make sure that Judith remained asleep, then picked up his paddle and began to scoop the water from the tank beside the ship. Swept out by the broad blade, the water formed a pool some twenty feet wide, slightly larger than the one he had brought home that morning.

Propelling the pool in front of him, Ransom set off across

the dunes, taking advantage of the slight slope that shelved eastwards from the beach. As he moved along he kept a careful watch on the shore. No one would attempt to rob him of so small a pool of water, but his departure might tempt some roving beachcomber to break into the shack. Here and there a set of footprints led up across the firmer salt, but otherwise the surface of the dunes was unmarked. A mile away, toward the sea, a flock of gulls sat on the wet saltflats, but except for the pool of water scurrying along at Ransom's feet, nothing moved across the sky or land.

The title of the American version of *The Drought* is *The Burning World.* (Berkley Books, 50c.)

The first story in this series "The Time Dweller" appeared in NWSF 139

ESCAPE FROM EVENING

Michael Moorcock

ON MOON IT was white like ice. An endless series of blocks and spikes, like an ancient cubist painting. But white; glaring, though the sun was almost dead, a red, featureless disc in the dark sky.

In his artificial cavern, full of synthetic, meaningless things that contained no mythology or mood, Pepin Hunchback bent over his book so that the tears from his eyes fell upon the plastic pages and lay there glistening.

Of all the things that the glass cavern contained—pumps and pipes and flinching dials—only Pepin had warmth. His twisted body was a-throb with life and large emotions. His imagination was alive and active as each word in the book sparked off great chords of yearning within him. His narrow face, utterly pale save for the bright black eyes, was intense. His clumsy hands moved to turn the pages. He was dressed, as were all his fellow Moonites, in cloth-of-metal which, with a helmet fitted to its hauberk, protected his life from an impossibility—the threat of the System collapsing.

The System was Moon's imitation of life. It aped an older Earth than that which now existed far away, barely visible in space. It aped its plants and its animals and its elements—for the System was Moon's artificial ecology. Moon was a planet of goodish size—had been for centuries since it had ceased to be Earth's satellite and had drifted into the asteroids and attracted many of them to itself.

And Pepin hated the System for what it was. Pepin was a throw-back, unsuited to his present Time or Space. Pepin's life was not the System, for with just that he would have died. It was his imagination, his sorrow and his ambition, fed by his few old books.

He read the familiar pages and realised again that the intellect had triumphed over the spirit, and both had conquered emotion. The men of Moon, at least, had become as barren as their accident of a planet.

Pepin knew much of Earth as his people's traders had described it. Knew that it was changing and was no longer as it was when his books were written. Yet still he yearned to go there and see if he could find some trace of what he needed—though he would only know what he needed when he found it.

For some time he had planned to visit Earth and his people were willing that he should go, if he did not return, for he discomforted them. His name—his true name—was on the list, close to the top. Soon a ship would be ready for him. His true name was P Karr.

Now he thought of the ship and decided to go to the list. He went to the list infrequently for in his atavism he was superstitious and believed completely that the more he looked at it, the less chance there would be of his name being at the top.

Pepin jerked his body off his stool and slammed the book shut. On the hushed world of Moon, he made as much noise as he could.

He limped, more evidently high-shouldered now that he was moving, towards the door section of his dome. He took down his helmet and fitted it on to his shoulders, activated the door section, and crossed the sharp, bright ground covering the distance between himself and the city. By choice, and to the relief of his people, he lived outside the city.

On the surface, there was little to see of the city. Merely a storey or two, perhaps three in places. All the prominences were square and transparent, to absorb as much energy from the waning sun as possible.

Another door section in one of the buildings opened to him and he went inside, hardly realising that he had left the surface. He entered a funnel containing a disc-shaped platform and the platform began to fall downwards, slowing as it reached the bottom.

Here the light was completely artificial and the walls were of metal—plain, undecorated tubes twice the height of a tall, thin Moonite. Pepin was not typical of his race.

He limped along this tube for a short distance, until the floor began to move. He let it carry him through the laby-

rinthine intestines of the city until he came to the hall he wanted.

The hall was quite unpopulated until Pepin entered. It had a domed ceiling and was covered by screens, charts, indicators, conveying every item of information which a citizen might require to know in the day-to-day life of the city. Pepin went to the list, craning his head to look at it. He started at the bottom and followed the list of names up.

His name was at the top. He must go immediately to Ship Controller and apply for his ship. If he did not, his name would go back to the bottom, according to regulations.

As he turned to leave the hall, another Moonite entered. His helmet was flung back, lying against his shoulder blades. His golden hair was long and his thin face smiled.

This was G Nak, the greatest of the trader-pilots, and he did not need to look at the list, for he had a permanent ship of his own. The population of Moon was small, and G Nak knew Pepin as well as anyone.

He stopped sharply, arms akimbo, and contemplated the list.

"So you journey to Earth, P Karr. You will find it decadent and unpleasant. Take plenty of food—you will not like their salty grub."

"Thank you," bobbed Pepin as he left.

As if mutated by their constant contact with the mother planet, only the ships of Moon had character. They were burnished and patterned with fancifully wrought images. Ancient animals prowled along their hulls, gargoyles glowered from indentations created by heavily moulded figures of famous men, tentacled hands curled themselves over the curves like the arms of wrecked sailors clinging to spars, or else like the protective hands of a she-baboon about her young. The ships were so heavily decorated that in the light they looked like frozen lava, all lumps and gulleys in obsidian or brass.

Pepin, luggage on back, paused before he put foot on the short, moving ramp which would deliver him to the entrance of his allotted ship. He allowed himself time to study

the raised images, then stepped upon the ramp and was whisked up to the airlock which opened for him.

The inside of the ship was very cramped and consisted mainly of cargo space. The cargo, which would go with Pepin and be delivered to an Earth-city called Barbart, was already stowed. Pepin lowered himself on to the couch where he would spend the journey. After Pepin and cargo had been delivered, the ship would return, as it had left, automatically.

A whisper of noise, hushed like all Moon sounds, warned him that the ship was about to take-off. He braced himself; felt no sensation as the ship rose on course for Earth.

The bright ship sped through the soft darks of weary space, a bold spark intruding the blackness. It flickered along its path until at length Pepin's screen picked up the growing globe of Earth—brown, yellow and white, turning slowly in the scant warmth of the dormant sun.

The planet seemed vaguely unreal, perhaps because it was imperfectly focused on the screen, yet the stuff of space seemed to drift through it as if the planet's very fabric was worn thin. Pepin felt the hard metal rocket would not stop when it reached Earth, but tear through it easily and continue on into empty space where more vital stars pulsed. At one time, Pepin knew, the universe had been even thicker with bright stars, and even his own sun had possessed more than the three planets that now circled it.

Silently, the ship went into orbit, easing itself by stages into the atmosphere, down through the clear, purple sky, down into the brown cloud-banks that hung close to the ground, through the clouds until it had levelled out again and moved with decreasing speed across sluggish seas and wastes of dark yellow, brown and black, studded by great white patches of salt. Much further inland, grey moss became apparent, and later the waving light green of the fragile fronds that marked what Earth's inhabitants called the Land of Fronds. In the Land of Fronds were two principal cities, two towns and a village. Barbart, the trading port between Moon and Earth, lay in a gentle valley. The hills were covered in fronds that from above seemed like a rolling sea—more sea-like than the salt-heavy waters far to the east.

Barbart was laid out precisely, in quadrangles, triangles and star-shaped plazas. The roofs of the low houses were of dark green and brick-brown, yet seemed brightly coloured compared with their surroundings. The ship passed over the huge red-gold machine which rose high above the other buildings. This, Pepin knew, was called the Great Regulator and supplied necessary power to the city. Behind the Great Regulator, in the city's central plaza, was a cradlepad ready for his ship. It hovered and then dropped down on to the cradlepad.

Pepin shivered suddenly and did not rise immediately but watched his screen as people began to enter the plaza, moving speedily towards the ship.

Barbart was the city most like those he had read about in his books. It was considerably smaller than the Golden Age cities had been and resembled best a medieval Italian city. From the ground, even the frond-covered hills might be a forest of oaks and elms if they were not looked at closely. Also Pepin knew that the folk of Barbart were quite similar to the ancient folk of Earth. Yet he could not convince himself, though he tried, that he had returned to the Earth of his books. For one thing the light was fainter, the air darker, the drifting brown clouds unlike any that had existed in Earth's past. Pepin was not as disappointed as he expected. Whatever deficiencies existed here, at least the planet was *natural* and Pepin placed much value on the naturalness of things.

The airlock had opened and the Barbartians grouped themselves outside it, waiting for the pilot to appear.

Pepin took up his luggage from beside the couch, swung his well-shaped legs to the floor and limped out of the cabin and through the airlock.

The heavy, brine-laden air half-choked him. The smell of salt was so marked that he felt faintly sick. He swung his helmet up so that it enclosed his head. He turned on his emergency oxygen supply, deciding to give himself time to adjust.

The merchants of Barbart stood around the ramp leading from the cradlepad. They looked at him eagerly.

"May we inspect the cargo, Pilot?" enquired a heavy-shouldered man with broad cheek-bones and a flaking skin

half-invisible beneath his thick, black beard. He wore a quilted coat, belted at his chest. This was of rusty black. A white stock was tied at his throat and he wore baggy yellow trousers tucked into furry boots.

Pepin looked at him, wanting to greet him in some manner that would convey the pleasure he felt at seeing a human-being of heavy build, with muscles and flaws on his skin.

"Pilot?" said the merchant.

Pepin began to limp slowly down the ramp. He stood aside to let the bulky merchant move up it and duck his head to enter the airlock. Three others followed him, glancing rather quizzically at the silent Moonite.

A man smaller than Pepin with the narrow face of a reptile, dressed in dull red and black, sidled up clutching a hand-written list. Fascinated, Pepin looked at it, not understanding the words. He would like to have taken off his gauntlets and fingered the parchment, but he would wait for a little.

"Pilot? When do you return?"

Pepin smiled. "I do not return. I have come to live here."

The man was startled. He took the parchment back and turned his head, did not see what he looked for and gazed up the ramp towards the open airlock.

"Then be welcome," he said absently, still not looking at Pepin. He excused himself and walked with short, rapid steps back to the warehouse at the side of the plaza.

Pepin waited until the merchant and his friends reappeared. They looked satisfied and were nodding to one another. The black-bearded merchant bustled down the ramp and slapped Pepin's arm.

"I admit it," he grinned, "a very generous cargo. We have the best of this month's bargain I think. Gold and alcohol for our fertilisers. May I begin unloading?"

"As you wish," Pepin said courteously, wondering at this man who could delight in receiving such useless things in return for valuable fertilisers.

"You are new," said the merchant, taking Pepin's arm and leading him towards the warehouse where the other man had gone. "What do you think of our city?"

"It is wonderful," sighed Pepin. "I admire it. I should like to live here."

"Ha! Ha! With all those marvels and comforts in Moon you have. You'd miss them after a while, Pilot. And every year we hear of cities dying, populations shrinking, fewer children than ever being born. No, I envy you Moonites with your safety and stability—you don't have to worry about the future, for you can plan efficiently. But we here can make no plans—we merely hope that things will not alter too much in our own lifetimes."

"At least you are part of the natural order, sir," Pepin said hesitantly. "You might adapt further as the Earth changes."

The merchant laughed again. "No—we of Earth will all be dead. We accept this, now. The human race has had a long run. No one would have expected us to last this time, but soon the point will be reached where we can adapt no longer. It is already happening in less fortunate areas. Man is dying out on Earth. Yet while you have your System, that is not possible on Moon."

"But our System is artificial—your planet is natural."

They reached the warehouse. Men were already folding back the heavy doors. The casks of fertiliser were stacked in a cool, dark corner of the place. The man with the reptile face glanced at Pepin as he counted the casks.

"There is the matter of the pilot's gift," said the merchant. "The traditional gift of gratitude to the man who brings the cargo safely to us. Is there anything we have which you desire?"

Traditionally, the pilot asked for a small token gift of no great value and Pepin knew what was expected of him.

"You mine antiques in Barbart I believe?" he said politely.

"Yes. It provides employment for our criminals. Forty cities have stood where Barbart now stands."

Pepin smiled with pleasure. Such history!

"I am fond of books," he said.

"Books?" The merchant frowned. "Why, yes, we have a stack of those somewhere. Have the folk of Moon taken to reading? Ha! ha!"

"You do not read them yourselves?"

"A lost art, Pilot. Those ancient languages are impossible. We have no scholars in Barbart, save for our elders—and their wisdom comes from here," he tapped his head, "not from any books. We've little use for the old knowledge—it was a knowledge suitable for a younger Earth."

Though Pepin understood, he felt a pang of sorrow and disappointment. Intellectually he had known that the folk of Earth would not be like his idealised picture of them, yet emotionally he could not accept this.

"Then I would like some books," he said.

"As many as your ship has room for when our cargo's loaded!" promised the merchant. "What language do you read in? I'll let you sort them out for yourself."

"I read in all the ancient tongues," said Pepin proudly. His fellows thought his a useless skill and it probably was, but he did not care.

He added: "And there is no need to load them. I shall not be returning with the ship. That will go back to Moon automatically."

"You'll not be—? Are you then to be some sort of permanent representative of Moon on Earth?"

"No. I wish to live on Earth as one of her folk."

The merchant scratched his nose. "Aha, I see. Aha . . ."

"Is there reason why I should not be welcome."

"Oh, no—no—I was merely astonished that you should elect to stay with us. I gather you Moonites regard us as primitives, doomed to die with the planet." His tone was now mildly resentful. "Your regulations admitting no one of Earth to Moon have been strict for centuries. No Earthman has visited Moon, even. You have your stability to consider, of course. But why should you *elect* to suffer the discomforts of our wasted planet?"

"You will note," said Pepin carefully, "that I am not like other Moonites. I am, I suppose, some sort of romantic throwback—or it may be that my original difference has fostered mental differences, I do not know. However, I alone amongst my race have an admiration for Earth and the folk of Earth. I have a yearning for the past, whereas my people look always to the future—a future which they

are pledged to keep stable and as much like the present as possible."

"I see . . ." The merchant folded his arms. "Well, you are welcome to stay here as a guest—until you wish to return to Moon"

"I never wish to return."

"My friend," the merchant smiled. "You will wish to return soon enough. Spend a month with us—a year—but I warrant you'll stay no longer."

He paused before saying: "You'll find plenty of signs of the past here—for the past is all we have. There is no future for Earth."

The clock, centrepiece of the Great Regulator, had measured off six weeks before Pepin Hunchback became restless and frustrated by the uncaring ignorance of the Barbartians. The citizens were pleasant enough and treated him well considering their covert antipathy towards the Moonites. But he made no friends and found no sympathisers.

He rejoiced in those books which were not technical manuals or technical fiction. He enjoyed the poetry and the legends and the history books and the adventure stories. But there were fewer than he had expected and did not last him long.

He lived in a room at an Inn. He grew used to the heavy, briney air and the dull colours, he began to enjoy the gloom which shadowed the Earth, for it mirrored something of his own mood. He would go for walks over the hills and watch the heavy brown clouds course towards him from the horizon, smell the sweetish scent of the frond forests, climb the crumbling rocks that stood against the purple sky, worn by the wind and scoured by the salt.

Unlike Moon, this planet still lived, still held surprises in the sudden winds that blew its surface, the odd animals which crawled over it.

Pepin was afraid only of the animals, for these had become truly alien. The principal life-form other than man was the oozer—a giant leech which normally prowled the bleak sea shores but which was being seen increasingly further inland. If Man's time was ending, then the time of

the oozer was beginning. As Man died out, the oozer multiplied. They moved in schools varying from a dozen to a hundred, depending on the species—they grew from two feet to ten feet long. Some were black, some brown, some yellow—but the most disgusting was the white variety which was also the largest and most ferocious, a great grub of a thing capable of fast speeds, able to outdistance a running man and bring him down. When this happened, the oozer, like its leech ancestor, fed off the blood only and left the body drained and dry.

Pepin saw a school moving through a glade once as he sat on a rock staring down into the frond forest.

"The new tenants," he said aloud, after he'd conquered his nausea, "are arriving—and the Earth ignores Man. She is not hostile, she is not friendly. She no longer supports him. She has forgotten him. Now she fosters new children."

Pepin was given to talking to himself. It was the only time when words came easily—when he was alone.

Pepin tried to talk with Kop, the merchant and his fellow residents at the Inn, but though they were polite enough, his questions, his statements and his arguments made them frown and puzzle and excuse themselves early.

One fellow resident, a mild-mannered and friendly man called Mokof, middle-aged with a slight stoop, made greater attempts to understand Pepin, but was incapable, rather than unwilling, of helping him.

"With your talk of the past and philosophy, you would be happier in that odd city of Lanjis Liho by the sea," he said pleasantly one day as they sat outside the Inn, tankards at their sides, watching the fountain play in the plaza.

Pepin had heard Lanjis Liho mentioned, but had been so curious about other matters, that he had not asked of the city before. Now he raised one fair, near-invisible eyebrow.

"I once knew a man from Lanjis Liho," Mokof continued in answer. "He had a strange name which I forget—it was similar to your last name in type. He had a scar on his face. Got into trouble by eating his food at the wrong time, saved himself by fixing the Great Regulator for us. We know nothing of these machines these days. He believed that he could travel in Time, though I saw little evidence of this

while he was here. All the folk of Lanjis Liho are like him, I hear—bizarre, if you follow me—they know nothing of clocks, for instance, have no means of measuring the hours. Their ruler is called Chronarch and he lives in a palace called the House of Time, though only an oozer knows why they should emphasise Time when they can't even *tell* it."

Mokof could tell Pepin very little more that was not merely opinion or speculation, but Lanjis Liho by the sea sounded an interesting place. Also Pepin was attracted by the words 'time travel'—for his true wish was to return to Earth's past.

During the seventh week of his stay in Barbart, he decided to journey eastwards towards Lanjis Liho by the sea.

Pepin Hunchback set off on foot for Lanjis Liho. Mokof in particular tried to dissuade him—it was a long journey and the land was dangerous with oozers. He could easily lose his direction without a good steed.

But he had tried to ride the seal-beasts which were the mounts of most Earthmen. These creatures, with their strongly muscled forefins and razor-sharp tails, were reliable and fairly fast. They had built-up saddles of silicone to give the rider a straight seat. Part of their equipment also included a long gun, called a piercer, which fired a ray from its ruby core, and a torch fed by batteries which supplied the traveller with light in the moonless, near-starless night.

Pepin Hunchback took a torch and balanced a piercer over his shoulder. He liked the feeling both gave him. But he did not trust himself to a seal-beast.

He left in the dark morning, with food and a flask in the pack on his back, still dressed in his cloth-of-metal suit.

The citizens of Barbart, like those of Moon, were not regretful when he had gone. He had disturbed them when they believed they had conquered all disturbances within themselves. For seven weeks he had interrupted their purpose and the purpose they wished to transmit to any children they might have.

That purpose was to die peacefully and generously on an Earth which no longer desired their presence.

Pepin was disappointed as he limped away from Barbart in the Land of Fronds. He had expected to find dyanamic vitality on Earth—people prepared for change, but not for death. Somewhere on the planet—possibly in Lanjis Liho by the sea—he would find heroes. From what Mokof had hinted, he might even find a means of travelling into the past. This is what he wanted most, but he had never expected to achieve it.

The moss of the frond forests was springy and helped his walking, but by evening it was beginning to give way to hard, brown earth over which dust scurried. Ahead of him, ominous in the waning light, was a barren plain, cracked and almost featureless. Here and there chunks of rock stood up. He selected one as his goal, realising, even as night fell, cold and pitch dark, that to sleep would be to risk his life. Oozers, he had been told, only slept when they had fed—and there was little to feed on save Man.

He depressed the grip of his torch and its light illuminated a distance of a few yards round him. He continued to walk, warm enough in his suit. As he walked, his mind became almost blank. He was so weary that he could not tell how long he had marched by the degrees of weariness. But when a silhouette of rock became apparent in the torch-light, he stopped, took off his pack, leant his back against the rock and slid down it. He did not care about the oozers and he was fortunate because no oozers scented his blood and came to care about him.

Dawn came dark brown, the muddy clouds streaming across the sky, blocking out much of the sun's dim light. Pepin opened his pack and took out the flask of specially distilled fresh water. He could not drink the salt-water which the folk of Earth drank. They, in turn, had adapted to the extent where they could not bear to drink fresh water. He took two tablets from a box and swallowed them. Having breakfasted, he heaved his aching body up, adjusted the pack on his back, slung the torch into its sheath at his side, shouldered the piercer and looked about him.

In the west, the frond forests were out of sight and the plain looked as endless in that direction as it did in the

other. Yet the plain to the east was now further broken by low hills and many more rocks.

He set off eastwards. *In the east,* he reflected, *our ancestors believed Paradise lay. Perhaps I will find* my *Paradise in the east.*

If Paradise existed, and Pepin was entitled to enter, he came very close to entering two days later as he collapsed descending a salt-encrusted hill and rolled many feet down it, knocking himself unconscious.

As it was, the Hooknosed Wanderer saved him from this chance of Paradise.

The Hooknosed Wanderer was a burrower, a gossiper, a quester after secrets. Amongst all the Earth folk he was perhaps the only aimless nomad. No-one knew his origin, no-one thought to ask. He was as familiar in Barbart as he was in Lanjis Liho. His knowledge of Earth, past and present, was extensive, but few ever availed themselves of it. He was a short man with a huge nose, receding chin, and a close-fitting hood and jerkin which made him resemble a beaked turtle.

He saw the fallen tangle that was Pepin Hunchback at much the same time as the school of oozers scented Pepin's blood.

He was riding a big, fat seal-beast and leading another on which was heaped a preposterous burden of rolled fabric, digging equipment, a small stove, angular bundles —in fact the Hooknosed Wanderer's entire household tied precariously to the seal-beast's back. The seal-beast seemed mildly pleased with itself that it was capable of carrying this load.

In the Hooknosed Wanderer's right hand, borne like a lance resting in a special grip on his stirrup, was his piercer. He saw Pepin, he saw the oozers.

He rode closer, raised his piercer, pressed the charger and then the trigger-stud. The concentrated light was scarcely visible, but it bit into the oozer school instantaneously. They were of the black variety. The Hooknosed Wanderer moved the piercer about very gradually and burned every oozer to death. It gave him satisfaction.

Then he rode up to where Pepin lay and looked down at

him. Pepin was not badly hurt, he was even beginning to stir on the ground. The Hooknosed Wanderer saw that he was a Moonite by his dress. He wondered where Pepin had got the piercer and torch which lay near him.

He dismounted and helped the Moonite to his feet. Pepin rubbed his head and looked rather nervously at the Hooknosed Wanderer.

"I fell down," he said.

"Just so," said the Hooknosed Wanderer. "Where is your spaceship? Has it crashed nearby?"

"I have no spaceship," Pepin explained, "I was journeying from Barbart, where I landed some seven weeks ago, to Lanjis Liho, which I am told lies close to the shores of the sea."

"You were foolish to go on foot," said the Wanderer. "It is still a long way."

He continued eagerly: "But you must guest with me and we will talk about Moon. I should be happy to add to my knowledge."

Pepin's head was aching. He was glad that this odd stranger had come upon him. He agreed willingly and even tried to help the Wanderer raise his tent.

When the tent was finally erected and the Wanderer's goods distributed about it, Pepin and he went inside.

The Wanderer offered him leg-fish and salt-water, but Pepin refused politely and swallowed his own food.

Then he told the Wanderer of his coming from Moon to Earth, of his stay in Barbart, of his frustration and disappointment, and of his ambition. The Wanderer listened, asking questions that showed he was more interested in Moon than Pepin.

Listlessly, Pepin replied to these questions and then asked one of his own.

"What do you know of Lanjis Liho, sir?"

"Everything but the most recent events," said the Wanderer with a smile. "Lanjis Liho is very ancient and has its origin in an experimental village where a philosopher tried to educate people to regard Time as they regard Matter—something that can be moved through, manipulated and so on. From this, the Chronarchy was formed and it became traditional in Lanjis Liho to investigate

Time and little else. Perhaps by mutation, perhaps by the awakening of some power we have always possessed, a race of people exist in Lanjis Liho who can *move themselves through Time*!

"I had the good fortune to know the young man who first discovered this talent within himself and trained others in its use. A man called the Scarfaced Brooder—he is the present Chronarch."

"He can travel into the past?"

"And future, so I hear. Once the chronopathic talent is released in Man, he can move through Time at will."

"But the past," said Pepin excitedly. "We can journey back to Earth's Golden Age and not worry about natural death or artificial living. We can *do* things!"

"Um," said the Wanderer. "I share your love for the past, Pepin Hunchback—my tent is full of antiques I have excavated—but is it possible to return to the past? Would not that act change the future—for there is no record in our history of men from the future settling in the past?"

Pepin nodded. "It is a mystery—yet surely *one* man, who did not admit he was from the future, could settle in the past?"

The Hooknosed Wanderer smiled. "I see what you mean."

"I realise now," said Pepin seriously, "that I have little in common with either my own people or the folk of Earth. My only hope is to return to the past where I shall find the things I need to exist fully. I am a man out of my time."

"You are not the first. Earth's ancient history is full of such men."

"But I shall be the first, perhaps able to find the Age which most suits him."

"Perhaps," said the Hooknosed Wanderer dubiously. "But your wishes are scarcely constructive."

"Are they not? What, then, has this Earth to offer mankind? We on Moon live an artificial life, turning year by year into machines less perfect than those which support us. And you here accept death passively—are only concerned with the business of facing extinction 'well'! My

race will not be human within a century—yours will not exist. Are we to perish? Are the values of humanity to perish—have the strivings of the last million years been pointless? Is there no escape from Earth's evening? I will not accept that!"

"You are not logical, my friend," smiled the Wanderer. "You take the least positive line of all—by refusing to face the future—by your desire to return to the past. How will that benefit the rest of us."

Pepin clutched his head. "Ah," he murmured. "Ah . . ."

The Hooknosed Wanderer continued. "I have no wish to survive the evening. You have seen something of the horrors which will multiply as Earth's evening turns to night."

Pepin did not reply. He had become inarticulate with emotion.

The Hooknosed Wanderer took him outside and pointed into the east. "That way lies Lanjis Liho and her chronopaths," he said. "I pity you, Pepin. for I think you will find no solution to your problem—and it *is* your problem, not humanity's."

Pepin limped from weariness as well as deformity. He limped along a beach. It was morning and the dull, red sun was rising slowly from the sea as he moved down the dark shore towards Lanjis Liho. It was cold.

Grey-brown mist hung over the sea and drifted towards the bleak landscape that was dominated by the solid black outline of cliffs to his right. The brown beach glistened with patches of hard salt and the salt-sluggish sea was motionless, for there was no longer a nearby moon to move it.

Pepin still considered his conversation with the strange Wanderer. Was this the end of Earth, or merely one phase in a cycle? Night must come—but would it be followed by a new day? If so, then perhaps the future was attractive. Yet the Earth had slowly destroyed the greater part of the human race. Would the rest die before the new morning?

Suddenly, Pepin slipped into a pool of thick water. He floundered in the clinging stuff, dragging himself back by clutching a spur of hardened salt, but the salt wouldn't

bear his weight and he fell into the pool again. Finally he crawled back to dry land. Everything was crumbling or changing.

He continued along the shore more carefully. Leg-fish scuttled away as he approached. They sought the deeper shadow of the crags of rock which rose from the beach like jagged teeth, corroded by wind-borne salt. They hid and were silent and the whole shore was quiet. Pepin Hunchback found no peace of mind here, but the solitude seemed to absorb his tangled thoughts and eased his brain a little.

The disc of the sun took a long time to rise above the horizon, and brought little light with it, and even less warmth. He paused and turned to stare over the sea which changed from black to brown as the sun came up. He sighed and looked at the sun which caught his face in its dull glow and stained it a deep pink, bringing a look of radiance to his native pallor.

Later, he heard a sound which he first took to be the squawking of fighting leg-fish. Then he recognised it as a human voice. Without moving his head, he listened more intently.

Then he turned.

A tiny figure sat a seal on the cliff above. Jutting upwards from it like a lance was the barrel of a long piercer. The figure was half-shadowed by the ruin of an ancient watch-tower and, as he looked, jerked at the reins impatiently, disappeared into the whole shadow and was gone.

Pepin frowned and wondered if this could be an enemy. He readied his own piercer.

Now the rider had descended the cliff and was nearing him. He heard the distant thwack of the beast's fins against the damp beach. He levelled the gun.

The rider was a woman. A woman from out of his books.

She was tall, long-legged, with the collar of her seal-leather jacket raised to frame her sharp-jawed face. Her brown hair drifted over it and flew behind. One hand, protected by a loose-fitting glove, clutched the pommel of her high, silicone saddle. The other held her beast's reins.

Her wide, full-lipped mouth seemed pursed by the cold, for she held it tight.

Then her seal entered a deep pool of sluggish water and began swimming through it with great difficulty. The strong smell of the brine-thick liquid came to his awareness then and he saw her as a woman out of mythology—a mermaid astride a seal. Yet, she frightened him. She was unexpected.

Was she from Lanjis Liho? It was likely. And were they all like her?

Now, as she reached firm ground again, she began to laugh in rhythm with the seal's movement. It was rich, delightful laughter, but as she came towards him, the heavy drops of water rolling slowly from her mount, his stomach contracted in panic. He backed away a few paces.

At this moment she seemed to personify the bleak insanity of the dying planet.

She halted her beast close to him. She lowered her chin and opened her grey-green eyes. She still smiled.

"Stranger, you are from Moon by your garb. Are you lost?"

He put the piercer over his shoulder. "No. I seek Lanjis Liho."

She pointed backwards up the beach. "You are close to our city. I am, Tall Laugher, sister to the Scarfaced Brooder, Chronarch of the City of Time. I will take you there."

"I am Pepin Hunchback, without kin or rank."

"Climb up on my seal-beast's back, hang on to my saddle and we will soon be in Lanjis Liho."

He obeyed her, clinging desperately to the slippery silicone as she wheeled the seal about and sped back the way she had come.

She called to him once or twice on the journey up the salty beach, but he could not make out the sense.

It had begun to rain a little before they reached Lanjis Liho.

Built upon a huge and heavy cliff, the city was smaller even than Barbart, but its houses were tower-like—slim and ancient with conical roofs and small windows. Lanjis

Liho was dominated by the Tower of Time which rose from a building called, according to Tall Laugher's shouted description, the Hall of Time, palace of the Chronarch.

Both Hall and Tower were impressive, though puzzling. Their design was an impossibility of curves and angles, bright colours bordering on the indefinable, and creating an emotion in Pepin similar to the emotion created in him by pictures of Gothic architecture—though whereas Gothic took the mind soaring upwards, this took the mind in all directions.

The pale sun shone down on the city streets and the salt-rain fell, washing the gleaming salt deposits off the walls and roofs and leaving fresh ones. The drops even fell between the blades and domes of the Hall and Tower of Time.

There were few people in the streets, and yet there seemed to be an air of activity about the city—almost as if the people were preparing to abandon it.

Although quite similar in their various types to the folk of Barbart, these people seemed livelier—eager.

Pepin wondered if he had arrived at a festival time, as Tall Laugher reined in her beast on the corner of a narrow street. He clambered down, his bones throbbing. She also dismounted and pointed at the nearest house. "This is where I live. Since you claimed no rank, I gather you have come here as a visitor and not as an official emissary from Moon. What do you seek in Lanjis Liho?"

"Transport to the past," he said at once.

She paused. "Why should you want that?"

"I have nothing in common with the present."

She looked at him through her cool, intelligent eyes. Then she smiled. "There is nothing in the past that would attract you."

"Let me decide."

"Very well," she shrugged, "but how do you propose to find the past?"

"I," his momentary confidence disappeared, "I had hoped for your help."

"You will have to speak with the Chronarch."

"When?"

She looked at him, frowning slightly. She did not seem unsympathetic. "Come," she said, "we will go to the Hall of Time now."

As Pepin followed the girl, walking quickly to keep up with her long strides, he wondered if perhaps the people of Lanjis Liho were bent on keeping the secrets of Time to themselves.

Though they glanced at him curiously as they passed him, the citizens did not pause. The mood of hurried activity seemed even stronger as they reached the spiralling steps which led upwards to the great gates of the Hall.

The guards did not challenge them as they entered an echoing corridor, the tall walls of which were decorated with peculiar cryptographs inlaid in silver, bronze and platinum.

Ahead of them were double-doors of yellow gold. Tall Laugher pushed against these and they entered a large, oblong wall with a high ceiling. At the far end, on a dais, was a seated man talking to a couple of others who turned as Tall Laugher and Pepin Hunchback entered.

The seated man smiled calmly as he saw Tall Laugher. He murmured to the other two who left by a door at the side of the dais. The man's pale face bore a scar running from the left corner of his mouth along his cheek-bone. His black hair swept from a widow's peak to his wide shoulders. He wore clothes that did not suit him—evidently the clothes of his office. His shirt was of yellow cloth and his cravat, knotted high at his chin, was black. He wore a long-sleeved jacket of quilted blue velvet and britches of wine-red. His feet were shod in black slippers.

The hall itself was strange. At regular intervals the walls were set alternately with symbolic mosaics and computers. Behind the seated man, close to the far wall, which was blank, was a metal bench bearing the ancient tools of alchemy. They seemed in bizarre contrast to the rest of the hall.

"Well, Tall Laugher," said the man, "who is this visitor?"

"He is from Moon, Brooder—and seeks to journey into the past!"

The Scarfaced Brooder, Chronarch of Lanjis Liho, laughed and then, looking sharply at Pepin, stopped.

Pepin said eagerly: "I have heard that you can travel in Time at will. This is true?"

"Yes," said the Brooder, "but . . ."

"Do you plan to go backward or forward?"

The Scarfaced Brooder seemed non-plussed. "Forward, I suppose—but what makes you think you have the ability for travelling in Time?"

"Ability?"

"It is a special skill—only the folk of Lanjis Liho possess it."

"Have you no *machines*?" Pepin demanded, his spirits sinking.

"We do not *need* machines. Our skill is natural."

"But I must return to the past—I *must*!" Pepin limped towards the dais, ignoring the restraining hand of the Tall Laugher. "You want no-one else to share your chance of escape! You must know much about Time—you must know how to help me return to the past!"

"It would do you no good if you went back."

"How do you know?"

"We know," said the Chronarch bleakly. "My friend, give up this obsession. There is nothing we can do for you in Lanjis Liho."

"You are lying!" Pepin changed his tone and said more levelly: "I beg you to help me. I—I need the past as others need air to survive!"

"You speak from ignorance."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that the secrets of Time are more complex than you believe." The Chronarch stood up. "Now I must leave you. I have a mission in the future."

He frowned, as if concentrating—and vanished.

Pepin was startled. "Where has he gone?"

"Into the future—to join others of our folk. He will return soon, I hope. Come, Pepin Hunchback, I will take you to my house and let you eat and rest there. After that, if you'll accept my advice, you had best arrange to go back to Moon."

"You must be able to construct a machine!" he shouted. "There must be a way! I must return!"

"Return?" she said, raising an eyebrow. "Return? How can you return to somewhere you have never been? Come." She led the way out of the hall.

Pepin Hunchback had calmed down by the time he had eaten a little of the salty food in the Tall Laugher's house. They sat in a small room with a bay window which overlooked the street. He sat on one side of a table, she on the other. He did not speak. His mood had become apathetic. She seemed sympathetic and he was attracted to her for the qualities which he had first noted on the beach, and for her warm womanliness, but his despair was greater. He stared at the table, his twisted body bent over it, his hands stretched out in front of him.

"Your yearning, Pepin Hunchback, is not for the past as it was," she was saying softly. "It is for a world that never existed—a Paradise, a Golden Age. Men have always spoken of such a time in history—but such an idyllic world is a yearning for childhood, not the past, for lost innocence. It is childhood we wish to return to."

He looked up and smiled bitterly. "My childhood was not idyllic," he said. "I was a mistake. My birth was an accident. I had no friends, no peace of mind."

"You had your wonderment, your illusion, your hopes. Even if you could return to Earth's past—you would not be happy."

"Earth's present is decadent. Here the decadence is part of the process of evolution, on Moon it is artificial, that is all. Earth's past was never truly decadent."

"One cannot recapture the past."

"An old saying—yet your ability disproves that."

"You do not know, Pepin Hunchback," she said almost sadly. "Even if you used the ship, you could not . . ."

"Ship?"

"A Time craft, an earlier, cruder experiment we abandoned. We have no need of such devices now."

"It still exists?"

"Yes—it stands behind the Hall of Time," she spoke vaguely, her thoughts on something else.

Afraid that she would soon guess what was in his mind, Pepin changed the subject.

"Maybe you are right, Tall Laugher. Old Earth has none to love her any longer—her appearance does not inspire love. If I am the last who loves Earth, then I should stay with her." Part of him meant what he said, he realised. The words had come spontaneously, he had never considered this before.

She had only half-heard his words. She gave him a slightly startled look as he spoke. She rose from the table. "I will show you to your room," she said. "You need sleep."

He pretended to agree and followed her out. There would be no sleep now. He must seize his opportunity. Outside, in the fading light of evening, lay a Time craft. Soon, perhaps, he could return to the past, to security, to a green, golden Earth, leaving this tired ball of salt forever!

There was enough light coming from the houses to show him the way through the twisting streets to the Tower of Time. He was unobserved as he circled around the great building, searching for the ship which Tall Laugher had said was there.

At last, half-seen in shadows, he noticed a shape lying in a small square at the back of the Tower.

Resting in davits was a ship of cold, blue metal. It could only be the Time craft. It was large enough to contain three or four men. Several other machines stood nearby, showing signs of neglect. Pepin limped cautiously forward until he stood by the ship.

He touched it. It swayed slightly and the davits squealed. Pepin tried to steady it, looking nervously around him, but no-one had noticed. The ship was roughly egg-shaped, with a small airlock in its side. Running his hand over it, Pepin found a stud which he pressed. The outer door slid open.

With considerable difficulty, Pepin managed to heave himself into the violently swinging ship. The noise of the

squealing davits was ghastly. He shut the door and crouched in the utter blackness of the interior as it swayed back and forth.

It was likely that a light-stud was near the door. His searching hand found a projection and hesitated. Then, risking the possibility that it was not for the light, he pressed it.

The light came on. It was a bluish, mellow light, but it served adequately to show the interior of the ship. There were no seats and most of the machinery seemed hidden behind squat casings. At the centre of the ship was a column on which was set, at hand height, four controls. The ship was still swaying as Pepin went over to the controls and inspected them. His life on Moon had made him very familiar with all kinds of machinery, and he noted that the system of measurement was the same. The largest dial was in the middle. A division on the right was marked with a minus sign and on the left with a plus sign—obviously indicating past and future. Yet Pepin had expected such a control to be marked off with dates. There were none. Instead there were figures—units from one to ten. One trip, however, was all he would need in order to equate these numbers with the actual period of time they measured.

Another dial seemed to indicate speed. A switch was marked 'Emergency Return' and another, mysteriously, 'Megaflow Tuner'.

Now all Pepin had to discover was whether the ship was still powered.

He limped over to another bank of instruments. There was a lever set into it. At the moment the indicator on its handle said OFF. His heart beating rapidly, Pepin pushed the lever down. A light flashed on the indicator and now it read ON. An almost inaudible humming came from the bank of instruments as needles swung and screens gleamed. Pepin returned to the column and put his large hand on the central dial. It moved easily to the right. He left it at —3.

The ship no longer swung on its davits. There was no sensation of speed, but the banks of instruments began to click and whirr noisily and Pepin felt suddenly dizzy.

The ship was moving backwards in Time.
Soon, he would be in the past at last!

Perhaps it was something to do with the ship's motion, the eruptions of colour which blossomed and faded on the screens, or the weird sounds of the instruments that made Pepin become almost hysterical. He began to laugh with joy. He had succeeded! His ambition was close to fruition!

At last the sounds died down, the sensation of sickness left him, the ship no longer seemed to move.

Pepin trembled as he raised his helmet and set it over his head. He knew enough to realise that the air of an earlier Earth would probably be too rich for him at first. This action saved his life.

He went to the door and pressed the stud to open it. The door moved backwards slowly and Pepin stepped into the airlock. The door closed. Pepin opened the outer door.

He looked out at absolutely nothing.

A lightless void lay around the ship. No stars, no planets —nothing at all.

Where was he? Had the ship's instruments been faulty? Had he been borne into an area of space so far away from any material body?

He felt vertigo seize him, backed into the airlock for as far as he could go, frightened that the vacuum would suck him into itself. He closed the outer door and returned to the ship.

In panic he went to the control column and again twisted the dial. This time to —8. Again the screens filled with colour, again lights blinked and needles swung, again he felt sick. Again the ship came to a stop.

More cautiously, he opened the inner door, closed it, opened the outer door.

Nothing.

Shouting inarticulately, he hurried back into the ship and turned the dial to —10. The same sensations. Another stop.

And outside was the same featureless pit of empty space.

There was only one thing left to do to test the ship. Set the dial for the future and see what lay there. If it was the same, he could switch to Emergency Return.

He swung the dial right round to +2.

The humming rose to a shrill. Lightning exploded on the screens, the needles sped around the dials and Pepin flung himself to the floor in panic as his head began to ache horribly. The ship seemed to be tossed from side to side and yet he remained in the same position on the floor.

At last the ship came to a halt. He got up slowly, passed through the airlock.

He saw *everything.*

He saw gold-flecked bands of blue spiralling away into infinity. He saw streamers of cerise and violet light. He saw heaving mountains of black and green. He saw clouds of orange and purple. Shapes formed and melted. It seemed he was a giant at one moment and a midget at the next. His mind was not equipped to take in so much.

Quickly, he shut the airlock.

What had he seen? A vision of chaos? The sight seemed to him to have been metaphysical rather than physical. But what had it signified? It had been the very opposite of the vacuum—it had been space filled with everything imaginable, or the components of everything. The ship could not be a Time craft after all, but a vessel for journeying—where? Another dimension? An alternate universe? But why the plus and minus signs on the controls? Why had Tall Laugher called this a Time ship?

Had he been tricked?

He pushed back his helmet and wiped the sweat from his face. His eyes felt sore and his headache was worse. He was incapable of logical thought.

He was tempted to turn the dial marked 'Emergency Return', but there was still the mysterious dial marked 'Megaflow Tuner'. Filled with hysterical recklessness, he turned it and was flung back as the ship jerked into normal motion. On the screens he saw a little of what he had observed outside.

All kinds of images appeared and disappeared. Once

human figures—like golden shadows—were seen for a moment. His eyes fixed insanely on the screens, Pepin Hunchback could only stare.

Much, much later, he fell back to the floor. He had fainted.

At the sound of Tall Laugher's voice, he opened his eyes. His initial question was scarcely original, but it was the thing he most needed to know.

"Where am I?" he said, looking up at her.

"On the Megaflow," she replied. "You are a fool, Pepin Hunchback. The Brooder and I have had a considerable amount of difficulty locating you. It is a wonder you are not insane."

"I think I am. How did you get here?"

"We travelled up the Megaflow after you. But your speed was so great we wasted a great deal of energy catching you. I see from the instruments that you went into the past. Were you satisfied?"

He got up slowly. "Was that—that vacuum the *past*?"

"Yes."

"But it was not Earth's past?"

"It is the only past there is." She was at the controls, manipulating them. He turned his head and saw the Chronarch standing, head bowed, at the back of the ship.

He looked up and pursed his lips at Pepin.

"I attempted to explain—but I knew you would not believe me. It is a pity that you know the truth, for it will not console you, my friend."

"What *truth*?"

The Scarfaced Brooder sighed. He spread his hands. "The only truth there is. The past is nothing but limbo—the future is what you have observed—chaos, save for the Megaflow."

"You mean Earth only has existence in the *present*?"

"As far as we are concerned, yes." The Brooder folded his arms across his chest. "It means little to us of Lanjis Liho—but I knew how it would affect you. We are Time Dwellers, you see—you are still a Space Dweller. Your mind is not adjusted to understand and exist in the dimensions of Time-without-space."

"Time without space is an impossibility!" Pepin shouted.

The Brooder grimaced. "Is it? Then what do you think of the future—of the Megaflow? Admittedly something exists here, but it is not the stuff of space as you would understand it. It is—well, the physical manifestation of Time-without-space." He sighed as he noted Pepin's expression. "You will never properly understand, my friend."

Tall Laugher spoke. "We are nearly at Present, Brooder."

"I will explain further when we return to Earth," said the Chronarch kindly. "You have my sympathy, Pepin Hunchback."

In the Hall of Time, the Scarfaced Brooder walked up to his dais and lowered himself into his chair. "Sit down, Pepin," he said, indicating the edge of the dais. Dazedly, Pepin obeyed.

"What do you think of the past?" said the Chronarch ironically, as Tall Laugher joined them. Pepin looked up at her and then at her brother. He shook his head.

Tall Laugher put her hand on his shoulder. "Poor Pepin . . "

He did not have enough emotion left to feel anything at this. He rubbed his face and stared at the floor. His eyes were full of tears.

"Do you want the Chronarch to explain, Pepin?" she asked. Looking into her face, he saw that she, too, seemed extraordinarily sad. Somehow she could understand his hopelessness. If only she were normal, he thought, and we had met in different circumstances. Even here, life would be more than bearable with her. He had never seen such a look of sympathy directed at him before. She was repeating her question. He nodded.

"At first we were as astonished as you at the true nature of Time," said the Chronarch. "But, of course, it was much easier for us to accept it. We are capable of moving through Time as others move through space. Time is now our natural element. We have adapted in a peculiar way —we are able to journey into the past or future merely by an effort of will. We have reached the stage where we no longer need space to exist. In Time-with-space our physical

requirements are manifold and increasingly hard to meet on this changing planet. But in Time-without-space, these physical requirements no longer exist."

"Brooder," put in Tall Laugher, "I do not think he is interested in us. Tell him why he found only limbo in the past."

"Yes," said Pepin, turning to stare at the Chronarch. "Tell me."

"I'll try. Imagine Time as a straight line along which the physical universe is moving. At a certain point on that line the physical universe exists. But if we move away from the present, backward or forward, what do we find?"

Again Pepin shook his head.

"We find what you found—for by leaving the present, we also leave the physical universe. You see, Pepin, when we leave our native Time stream, we move into others which are, in relation to us, *above* Time. There is a central stream along which our universe moves—we call this the Megaflow. As it moves it absorbs the stuff of Time—absorbs the chronons, as we call them, but leaves nothing behind. Chronons constitute the future—they are infinite. The reason you found nothing in the past is because, in a sense, space *eats* the chronons but cannot replace them."

"You mean Earth absorbs this—this temporal energy but emits none herself—like a beast prowling through Time gobbling it up but excreting nothing." Pepin spoke with a faint return of interest. "Yes, I understand."

The Chronarch leaned back. "So when you came to me asking to return to the past, I almost told you this, but you would not have believed me. You did not want to. You cannot return to Earth's past because, simply, it no longer exists. Neither is there a future in terms of space, only in terms of the chronon-constituted Megaflow and its offshoots. We have managed to move ourselves where we wish, individually absorbing the chronons we need. Thus, the human race will continue—possibly we shall be immortal, ranging the continents of Time at will, exploring, acquiring knowledge which will be useful to us."

"While the rest of us die or turn into little better than machines," said Pepin flatly.

"Yes."

"Now I have no hope at all," said Pepin, rising. He limped up to Tall Laugher. "When do you leave for good?"

"Shortly."

"I thank you for your sympathy and courtesy," he said.

He left them standing silently in the Hall of Time.

Pepin walked along the beach, still moving towards the east, away from Lanjis Liho by the sea. The morning was a brown shroud covering the endlessness of sluggish sea and salt-frosted land, illuminated by a dying sun, blown by a cold wind.

Ah, he thought, *this is a morning for tears and self-contempt. Loneliness sits upon me like a great oozer with its mouth at my throat, sucking me dry of optimism. If only I could give myself up to this pitiless morning, let it engulf me, freeze me, toss me on its frigid wind and sink me in its slow-yielding sea, to lose sight of sun and sky, such as they are, and return to Mother Earth's ever-greedy womb . . .*

Oh, this alien Earth!

And yet he did not envy the Time Dwellers. Like the Moonites, they were renouncing their humanity. At least he still had his.

He turned as he heard his name called—a thin cry like that of an ancient seabird.

Tall Laugher was riding towards him, waving to him. She rode beneath the brown and heaving sky, her back straight and a smile on her lips and for some reason it seemed to him that she was riding to him out of the past, as when he had first seen her, a goddess from an age of mythology.

The red disc of the sun glowed behind her and again he noticed the strong smell of brine.

He waited by the edge of the thick, salt sea and, as he waited, he knew that his journey had been worthwhile.

They had to invent the ultimate weapon for

THE UNCIVIL WAR

Robert J Tilley

"THERE'S NOTHING IN the star-littered universe," said the old space-dog, genially, "that sets a body up like a dram of gleeb-juice. True, eh, lad?"

I acknowledged his introductory remark with a polite but bitter smile. His unintentional reminder of my youth had only served further to deepen my despondency, but it would have been churlish to have ignored what was obviously merely intended as a congenial conversational overture. Besides, this was my first visit to Firkl's somewhat notorious bar, an expedition that I was already regretting. Until that moment there had been a notable tendency on the part of the clientele to cast what seemed to my youthfully inexperienced eye, sinister looks in my general direction. This obviously innocuous opening remark was something in the nature of a reassurance that Firkl's was not exclusively patronised by vagabonds and rogues.

Correspondingly, I turned what must by then, I fear, have been a slightly bloodshot eye in his direction, preparatory to replying in a more cordial fashion, to find his wrinkled, kindly features a few inches from my own, interestedly studying my lapel button.

"A member of the press, hey?" said the old space-dog. "An interesting and worthy profession, lad. Many's the system that's seen you, I'll warrant, your trusty recorda-pack by your side, reaping the harvest of news that abounds in the strange, far places of our universe. Why, I'll wager this is your last night in Urz before blasting off for Procyon IV!"

I winced. After all, his choice of remark could hardly have been less fortunate under the circumstances. The sole reason for my presence in Firkl's doubtful establishment was an attempt to erase the ignominious picture of myself that the senior news-editor had seen fit to paint when confronted with my request for immediate transfer

from Algol II to Procyon IV to assist with the coverage of the just-ignited internal conflict there. I am, it is true, merely a junior copy-clerk at Trans-Galactic News at the present time, but youthful initiative can be irreparably stunted by such crudely phrased rebuffs as I had experienced that afternoon.

"It should prove an interesting and highly profitable trip, lad," said the old space-dog. "Aye, war is an educational experience, leaving a man with much to ponder on. Unless he gets his head blown off, o'course." He drained his glass cheerfully, and signalled for further refreshment. "A straightforward affair, this on Procyon, as I hear it. Only bombs, disintegrator rays, and such. Not a mite like the strange happenings we ran across out on Capella XII, first time out on the old 'Pioneer Queen'. Why, I was only a slip of a boy at the time, a mere fifteen summers behind me . . ."

"You were on the 'Pioneer Queen'?" I said. His statement had at least partially steered my depressed thoughts away from my own affairs. I gazed at him with considerable respect. "Why, you must have been with the Pioneer Corps in the early days, when . . ."

"True, lad, true," said the old space-dog, the light of reminiscence bright in his eyes. "And proud to wear the colours. Ah, those early days! They were hard, brutal at times, but we carried the tang of discovery in our nostrils then. There was this time on Capella XII that I mentioned a moment or so back. Civil strife raged as we touched down . . ."

Emboldened by my unaccustomed alcoholic content and heedless of good manners, I gauchely interrupted.

"A war?" I said. "On Capella XII? But there's never been a war on Capella XII." With my college days a few sparse months behind me I was absolutely certain on this point. "At least, not in Earth-Capella XII history. The tapes . . ."

The old space-dog smiled, ruefully.

"Aye, lad, you're right. No record of that first meeting with the Cap-Twelvers was ever made official. And small wonder, when it would have made fools out of half the

governing gentry of the time." He smiled mysteriously into his glass and chuckled the deep, kindly chuckle that I was to come to know so well. "And who, after all, should know better about it than I? Aye, who, indeed?"

He fell into a pensive silence, leaving me vastly intrigued. Could it be, I wondered in a sudden flush of excitement, that this old space-rover genuinely possessed knowledge of some furtive governmental action of the past, some dark suppression of the facts that cried out to be brought to light? Great Heavens, if such was the case, then it was duty as a right-minded citizen to unearth the truth and expose it to the public gaze! Why, this could take the form of a leader, a journalistic coup that I would confront the senior news-editor with on the following morning, the contemptuously proffered proof of my worthiness to serve in the field!

I timidly ventured to suggest that he may care to enlighten me with details of the occurence in question.

The old space-dog expressed delight at my interest, confidingly stating that it was becoming an increasingly rare experience to stumble across one such as myself, whose imagination was capable of extending beyond the confines of one's own personal history. Despite his mild protests, I firmly ordered a generous quantity of further refreshment for us both, then settled more comfortably on my stool to listen, spellbound, to his remarkable tale.

I was mess-lad (said the old space-dog) on the old 'Queen' when she headed out to the Capellas for the first time, loaded to the reactors with diplomats and such. Capella II was our destination, this being a month or so after the 'Pioneer King' had come blasting home from her first trip out to those parts, carrying her joyous news that there were intelligent beings out there, and willing and eager to talk in diplomatic fashion, to boot.

It was a quiet trip out, or as quiet as they ever were in those danger-filled days. But my mates and I had little time to loll on our bunks, dreaming of our dear ones or playing pocket mumbly-peg as we might have wished. We had no such fancy gear as deflection-screens and such on those

early pioneering ships, and hot-patch duty was the order of the day for all idle hands aboard.

There, though, came the rub. The passengers, high-ranking officials that they were, would have none of it. Hot-patch repairs, said they, was a menial's task, not for diplomats as had to keep their skilled minds fresh and clear for the demanding task that lay ahead. Besides, they said, it's messy. And when the skipper, mindful of his tongue, though I swear he could roast a man when he had a mind to, pointed out that asbestos gloves were used, he was told what to do with them in a mighty undiplomatic kind of way.

The crew took to muttering among themselves, and small wonder, say I. As well as refusing to hot-patch, the passengers grumbled without pause. When they weren't complaining about their quarters, there was something wrong with the food, and when the food passed muster the air circulation was too sluggish for their comfort. Aye, it says much for the iron wills of the cook and chief-steward that they manfully refrained from taking advantage of the opportunities that presented themselves three times a day and then heaving the bodies into the garbage-disposal ejector. And as for having an encouraging word for us crewmen in our tireless efforts to provide them with every comfort, no, lad, not one syllable did they utter. Noses so high in the air, it was a wonder they didn't wipe them on the ceiling. A mighty unsocial crowd, to be sure, and there wasn't a crewman aboard that wouldn't have given his tot of gleeb-juice to have applied hot-patches right across their ministerial features.

We were moving into the Capellan system, the trip out well-nigh done, when the trouble began. The chief engineer reported that the number three reactor was behaving in a highly suspicious manner, and if we wanted to make sure of the trip staying a healthy one, fast repairs would have to be tackled mighty soon. It was grim news, and a sigh of relief was heard throughout the ship when the skipper announced that as we were a mite ahead of schedule we were putting down on the outermost planet before serious trouble developed.

So soon we were spiralling down towards number XII,

and a dull, scrubby looking ball of rock she was, too. About half of her was barren, waterless desert, and the rest just greeny-brown plains and woods, with a muddy-looking lake dotted here and there. 'Pioneer King' hadn't touched down for fear of running short on fuel, but they'd run routine tests while they looped around her a time or two. Reports said that the air was breathable, and as far as could be seen there was no sign of any population.

We made planet-fall in one of the vegetated areas, ran double checks on the atmosphere and went through all the standard virus tests, and a cheer went up when it was announced official that there was no call for protective suits. So outside we trooped, the skipper in the lead, then the passengers, and us crew bringing up the rear. We stood around, filling our lungs with good, unfiltered air, and glad to have the feel of solid dirt beneath our feet again, and after a while the skipper climbed up onto a small rock and addressed us all. He solemnly told us that he'd just that minute received a full report on the number three, and fortunate we were that it had been decided to tackle repairs without delay, because if she'd been left reacting for another hour or so at the most, chances were that none of us would have been standing there, then or ever.

The passengers turned a mighty fancy green at this grim news, and if the truth be told there was a pale face or two among us crew, but after a while the delegates were all laughing away right heartily, a little high-pitched you might say, but then it was only to be expected, them having lived comfortably dirt-side most of their lives.

Then an elderly party—and this was my first real look at Planetary Public Relations Minister Boomasnicker, although I was in youthful ignorance of his status at the time—a crimson-featured gentleman, carrying a stomach that made me think it was small wonder the number three had over-reacted, pushing a load like that, strutted forward and said loudly, "Three cheers for the captain, gentlemen, for bringing us safely through the perilous situation that we have just learned of. Not forgetting, of course," says he, favouring us crew with a smile that put no great

strain on his mouth muscles, "the—ah—efforts of your crew."

His companions dutifully inflated their lungs, but before a sound could be uttered, a strange voice broke through the stillness of the peaceful alien air.

"You," it says, loud and clear, but perhaps a mite doubtful, "are a loud-mouthed gibly, who was fathered by a dirt-grubbing fundersnutch."

Thunderstruck to a man we were, following this strange statement, everybody looking first at his neighbour and then at the ground and then back to his neighbour again, while Minister Boomasnicker turned redder then redder yet, 'til at the finish he was a mighty fearful shade of purple and a'rumbling fit to burst.

"Step forward," says the skipper at last, looking and sounding a sight more surprised than angry," the man who said that!"

There was head-shaking and a deal of muttering among us crew, and then to a man we upped and denied any part of it. Minister Boomasnicker was grinding his teeth and hissing something fearful all this while, and by the time the last crewman had had his say, he looked like he was ready to over-react a mite hisself.

"Are you inferring," he booms, "that one of my fellow cabinet members would indulge in such infantile and pointless idiocy? I have never, in all my years in public office, been subjected to such . . ."

"Not to mention," says the voice, sounding downright apologetic this time, "—er—a cross-eyed groopl."

Everybody looked at everybody else again, mighty solemn, while Minister Boomasnicker made noises like a waste-disposal tube that needed a clearance blast. Then he muttered an oath, the phrasing of which drew a murmur of approval from the quarter-deck hands, although, of course, it was surprising to learn that a highly respected member of the Federation government was familiar with such rough and ready talk, and waddled back into the ship leaving the rest of us just a'looking pop-eyed at each other and not one of us knowing what to say.

"Men," says the captain, addressing us crew, "I don't know who is responsible for this childish outrage, but

needless to say when I find out—er—disciplinary measures will be taken. Very stern," he says, hiding a smile behind his hand, "disciplinary measures, indeed. In the meantime, all crew not directly connected with repairs and maintenance report back to their posts at the double. Step lively, now!"

So off we trooped back into the 'Queen', and once inside many a sullen oath was uttered by one shipmate to another, each accusing the other of being the foolhardy culprit, but to a man we stuck to our stories.

"Anyway," says somebody, "what's a cross-eyed groopl?"

"And them other things," says somebody else. "A what-chasnutch, and all that?"

Lad, we racked our brains for long enough, but nought came of it, and it was a mighty puzzled crew that headed back to its posts before the skipper came aboard and was forced to get disciplinary like he'd promised. I must have been back in the galley ten minutes or so, going about my menial tasks and puzzling over the mysterious happening, when the intership was switched on and the skipper's voice came through.

"Attention all hands," he says, very brisk. "This is to notify you that while the necessary repairs are being made, Planetary Public Relations Minister Boomasnicker and several members of the delegation are taking advantage of our visit here to undertake a short tour of the immediate vicinity. They will be gone for approximately an hour. Transport crew, break out the number one heli-car immediately, at the double".

There was a deal of banging and clanking outside the ship after that as the transport crew did as they were told, and then off the delegates buzzed, and good riddance was the cry throughout the galley and no doubt the rest of the ship as well, the only sad part being that they'd be coming back.

Well, lad, that was when the second strange thing happened. They didn't. Two hours passed, the second in a growing fever of speculation, and then the skipper came back on the intership again.

"Attention all hands," he says, and he sounded mighty grim by this time. "The heli-car has failed to return and we are unable to make radio contact with the party. This seems to indicate that a mechanical failure has occurred which they are unable to repair without assistance. Transport crew, break out the number two heli-car immediately, at the—"

He broke off right there, because with all the hullabaloo that suddenly came a'bursting out of the speaker it sounded like there were twenty people all trying to chip in at once.

"Captain!" says one, panting with excitement. "Beg to report, sir, the ship is surrounded by—"

"Beg to report, sir," hollers another, just as winded, "we've just made contact with the number one heli-car! It seems they're in real trouble, sir! They say—"

"One," booms the skipper, "at a time! Keep calm! A cool head in the bush is worth—er—you there, Schnack-piper! You were first! What's that you were saying?"

"Beg to report, sir," says leading-spaceman Schnack-piper's voice, "but we're surrounded by natives! They're greenish-brown, sir, and covered in moss or something! They—"

"Natives?" says the skipper, thunderstruck. "But there *are* no—By George!" he says. "Just wait 'til we get back to Earth! I shall have a sharp word or two to say in the ear of Captain Cooch of the 'Pioneer King' about *this* little kettle of fish! Why, good grief!" he says. "Do you realise what this means? Those passengers of ours out there in the number one heli-car are in danger of being—"

"Beg to report, sir," says the second voice, "but the number one heli-car reports that they've been taken prisoner by a bunch of mossy natives!"

(At this crucial point in his enthralling narrative, the old space-dog broke off to beg that he be permitted to continue at another time; the strain of talking, he confessed, an unaccustomed exercise in the solitude of his old age, was beginning to tell on his vocal chords. Petrified by this turn of events, and recognising the possibility of this one Heaven-sent opportunity of revealing my true worth to

my employers being postponed for an indefinite period, I selfishly pleaded with him to continue. Was it possible, I inquired, that a steady supply of gleeb-juice, noted among other things for its lubricative qualities, would assist him to complete his tale?

I was overjoyed at his courageous acceptance of my suggestion, and, I confess, extremely flattered by his reiteration that willing ears such as my own were becoming increasingly difficult to find. I hastily produced my wallet, a move that I had not resorted to before, but I had by now completely exhausted my supply of loose change, and demanded a further supply of liquid refreshment for my companion and myself. With this in front of him, and following the downing of a large draught to ease the soreness induced by his efforts, the old space-dog bravely continued his tale.)

Well, lad, (said he) all hell broke loose after that. Alarm bells clattered their shrill warnings throughout the ship, and like one man the crew leaped to defensive action stations. Us galley-crew, being non-combatant save in extreme emergency, hurried to the nearest ports to see for ourselves this latest strange happening.

And there they were, sure enough, little fellows no more than hip-high and covered from head to toe with a strange moss-like covering that well-nigh blended with the surrounding landscape. There must have been a thousand of them on our side of the ship alone, a'jostling and a'shoving each other, but taking mighty good care to keep a fair space between themselves and us.

As we watched them, our eyes fair popping with the wonder of it all, the skipper's voice boomed the speakers yet again.

"If they make one false move, destroy them to the last —er—destroy them!" he hollers. "I am at present in contact with the number one heli-car which has been seized by a number of similar creatures, following a forced-landing due to a mechanical failure. Their radio suffered damage at the time, this being the reason for our failing to contact them earlier. It appears, furthermore," he says, sounding more desperate by the minute, "that we have

landed here at a singularly inopportune time. The inhabitants, who are, I am led to understand, primitive short-range two-way telepaths, are at present engaged in civil strife, the opposing factions being the captors of the number one heli-car and its occupants and the natives surrounding the ship. However, a rescue party is being despatched immediately—"

"No, no, you blockhead!" whispers another voice, hoarsely, a mite muffled, but nonetheless easily recognisable as that of Minister Boomasnicker. "Keep away from us, do you hear? If these people suspect for one moment that we are nothing more than normal flesh and blood, then our chances of survival—"

"I beg your pardon?" says the skipper, and it was plain that he was fast losing his customarily iron grip of the situation. "But if they don't think you're ordinary flesh and blood, then what—er—do they think you are?"

"I was about to tell you when you commenced issuing your idiotic and foolhardy instructions," hisses Minister Boomasnicker. "They are at present waiting for us to identify ourselves as the emissaries of either Mif, the God-of-Strength-through-Deadly-Insult, come to teach them the ultimate insult that will strike the enemy a mortal blow, or those of his opposite number, Fungoo, the dreaded God-of-Treachery-and-Deceit, come to destroy them from within. It seems—"

"Excuse me," says the skipper, floundering badly by this time. "I was with you until this insult business, then you blasted right past me. If you could clarify—"

"Clarify, schmarify," grates Minister Boomasnicker, seething with ill-concealed impatience. "Oh, very well. Perhaps it will be as well if I give you the entire incredible story."

It seemed, he related, that the local religious beliefs were such that the natives believed it a mortal sin for brother to lay hand on brother with any violent intent without ensuring a fearful afterlife, permanently roasting in everlasting fire. But at some point in their past history they had uncovered a strange and spine-chilling means of bypassing such restrictions. Personal pride, it seemed, allied

to hasty and violent tempers was their weak point, and one day, when two oldsters were engaged in fearsomely insulting verbal conflict, it had finally ended with the abrupt and totally unexpected demise of one of them.

It was eventually deduced by the puzzled natives that this had been caused by the final insult offered by his opponent, a coarsely worded and highly ingenious reference to his possible parentage, which had ultimately provoked a fatal seizure. Delighted at their discovery of this bloodless means of engaging in deadly combat, they fell-to with a will, over the years maturing into skilled users of murderously foul abuse. But violence, even when no blow is struck, begets violence. Traditional game-rights were violated, insult was exchanged for insult, and soon the present struggle was in progress between the plain-dwellers and their forest-based fellows, increasing in ferocity over the years.

Now, the Minister stated in hollow tones, his own party had been foolishly assumed to be the emissaries of either Mif, a mythical being capable of producing the ultimate insult that would blast the opposition from the face of the planet, or those of Fungoo, a treacherous spirit whose sole purpose was to ensure the defeat of the righteous by sinister infiltration. Under the circumstances, he now grudgingly deduced that the strange oaths heard by both passengers and crew shortly after our arrival had not, after all, been aimed at him personally, but must have come from a scouting party concealed nearby and been a generally directed attempt to discover whether we were the minions of Fungoo, and therefore possessors of the same Achilles heel as themselves, or those of Mif, who must be logically immune to such deadly attacks. The fact that none of our party had fallen stricken to the ground was strongly in our favour, but evidence of good faith had now been demanded, and it was only thanks to Minister Boomasnicker's cunning move (he had informed the natives that a lengthy consultation with his All-High was required before action could be taken) that explained both the fact that they were until now unharmed and his own presence at the transmitter. Our own position, he concluded in a hoarsely furtive whisper, still appeared to

be something in the nature of an unknown quantity, and an attempt to remove this possible obstacle at all speed would be greatly appreciated. The natives surrounding the heli-car were already displaying distinct signs of impatience—two of them, it seemed, were already prodding a rather plump junior minister in a thoughtful kind of way—and while no direct reference had been made as to what was in store should they fail to produce the required weapon it was beginning to appear that some form of ritual cannibalism might possibly be involved.

The skipper agreed, hastily, and it was with heavily beating hearts that we heard him stumblingly leave the control room. Time passed, and we waited, filled with gnawing impatience and dread, for his return.

At long last we heard his re-entry, and listened, breaths suspended, for his opening words.

"Well?" snaps Minister Boomasnicker, impatiently.

"They think," says the skipper, numbly, "that we, too, are the emissaries of either Mif, the God-of-Strength-through-Deadly-Insult, come to teach them the ultimate insult that will strike the enemy a mortal blow, or those of Fungoo, the dreaded God-of-Treachery-and-Deceit, come to destroy them from within."

"Why, those dunderheaded—!" hisses Minister Boomasnicker. "Great Heavens, what shall we do? Without time to effect the necessary repairs to this infernally gimcrack machine we shall be unable even to attempt an escape, and any efforts on your own part to assist us by force will only precipitate an even more perilous situation! However, captain," says he, in a treacly kind of way that sat ill on his tongue, "I have no hesitation in expressing my complete confidence in your ability to formulate a *modus operandi* that will settle the matter satisfactorily. Well, now. What clever ruse do you suggest to extricate us from the clutches of these bloodthirsty half-wits without further delay?"

"Er—," says the skipper, a mite half-heartedly.

At this Minister Boomasnicker launched hisself into as fancy a display of language as ever I heard, and one that produced yet another admiring chorus from the grizzled veterans among us.

"If you'll kindly dog your main air-lock for just one moment," cuts in the skipper coldly, and it was plain that he was a far from beaten man at this stage of the grim game. "Instead of wasting them there insults on me, mister, I suggest you try them for size on these here natives that are a'holding you captive. It's true enough that their request is a mighty queer one, but if you should happen on what they're after, then I reckon as how it's your best chance. Seems to me it should be simple enough to convince that your opening remarks will be something in the nature of a warming-up process, so to speak, and in the meantime us aboard ship will see if we can't find some other means of extricating you and your friends. In any event," says he, a mite malicious, "it would appear that your vocabulary seems tidily equipped for the conducting of such an experiment. And considering the fact that they appear to be expecting something in the way of action mighty soon, I suggest you commence cussing them without further delay."

There was a deal of huff and splutter from Minister Boomasnicker, but at the finish he agreed to give it a try.

"But I have no hestitation in pointing out," hisses he, nastily, "that should this experiment further endanger my fellow-ministers and myself, you have my personal guarantee that you will find yourself demoted to latrine orderly faster than you can say Fungoo."

"Quite so," says the skipper, dryly. "Regrettable that you won't be present to handle the details personally, of course. Now, in view of the urgency of the situation, I suggest you blast off without wasting any more precious time."

Minister Boomasnicker let loose a final epithet that caused many a silent nod of appreciation, and then his transmitter clicked into silence.

The skipper dropped a sigh so heavy it must have wellnigh dug a hole in the deck, and then he says, "Well, my lads, there you have it, and a tidy predicament it is, you'll agree. While it's true enough there's little harm can come to our own skins, it seems that an untimely end is in sight for our unfortunate passengers. Lads," says he, fervently, "if there's any one of you comes up with a notion that will

help us out of this situation, your old skipper won't be forgetting it in a hurry, you have my solemn word. Promotion, a fat bonus, and as much gleeb-juice as he can handle awaits the man that helps us at this crucial time."

Why, those were prizes beyond the wildest dreams of every man-jack among us, and without waiting for another word, thinking-caps were donned! There was many a hand aboard that hadn't a thought in his head bar what wild rampage he'd be setting out on when next we hit port, but now every face was screwed up in desperate surmise as the answer was sought.

Did such a solution truly exist? Was it possible to extricate the Minister and his unfortunate party without gravely endangering them in the process? Was it within our power to find the almighty insult that these demented aliens sought, present it to them and then blast on our way, leaving them to conclude their internal strife in a final flourish of brutal invective? What *was* the ultimate insult? Did such a thing exist? Was there a universally recognisable lash of abuse that no thinking creature could fail to writhe beneath? What—?

And it was then, lad, as my youthful mind writhed its tortuous way around this seemingly insoluble problem that it hit me, a mental blow that caused me to shout my triumph aloud! Ignoring the thoughtful buffet from the fist of the chief-steward who was still immersed in brooding conjecture, I picked myself to my feet and fled hot-foot to the control room, hurtling through the door in a very froth of impetuous excitement.

"Captain, captain," I cried in my boyish treble. "I have it, sir, I have it! The ans—!"

"Hold hard there!" booms the skipper. "Avast, that man! What d'ye mean by invading the bridge in this undisciplinary—Why, blast my aft-tubes!" exclaims he in wide-eyed surprise. "'Tis our young galley-lad! What's this I hear you shout, youngster? You claim to have found the answer to the terrible predicament that we're a'floundering in?"

"Sir," says I, thrusting myself tremblingly to attention and saluting with both arms in my wild excitement. "Sir, I know what it is, sir!"

"You do?" says the skipper, hoarsely, and the look on his face is a memory I'll carry to the breaker's-yard, I swear. Awed, it was like a man that's tripped over a barrel of gleeb-juice in the middle of the storm-swept deserts of Algol XVI. "Tell us, lad," he says, a break in his voice. "For pity's sake, tell us!"

"Sir," says I, loud and clear, "the answer is—"

And right at that very moment there's a thumping and a puffiing, and the rest of the ministerial gentry still aboard came thundering through the door.

"What's this I hear?" hollers the leading one. "Do we understand that a solution has been found by one of your crew members? Praise be, indeed, captain, and on behalf of the Minister, you have my assurances—"

"Belay, there!" roars the skipper, and the very ship shook to the thunder of it. "Belay, I say! By what right do you present yourselves on my bridge without as much as my by-your-leave? By all that's holy," says he, a nasty gleam in his eye, "I could have the lot of you in the brig for this, and on quarter-rations, too. Now, batten your top-hatches and be on your way while the lad here tells us what he has to say."

Thunderstruck to a man, the delegates were, but they were cowed, too. The ominous threat of quarter-rations to such well-fed gentry as they struck fear to their very marrows, that was plain. A'mumbling and a'muttering, they turned to leave, but it was then that I struck my blow for my shipmates and myself.

"Sir," I says. "If it's all the same to you, sir, I'd be obliged if you'd let the gentlemen stay."

"Stay?" says the skipper, and he looked a mite put out. "Stay, lad? But why?"

"Because, sir," says I, in ringing tones, "I should like them to hear what I have to say, sir."

Nonplussed, the skipper was, but time was pressing and it was no occasion for whys and wherefores.

"As you wish," says he, mighty grim, and the ministerial gentlemen stayed where they were, a'shuffling their feet in the doorway. "And now," says he, "what's your answer, lad? Do you mean you've found it, the insult that will save

our passengers' bacon, and, incidentally, mine? Say it, lad," says he, brokenly. "Say it."

"Sir," says I, and I fixed my gaze straight and firm on the red-faced party in the doorway. "The worst insult that can be paid a man is to be ignored."

Silence fell in the cabin following my clear-toned announcement, and then the skipper broke it with a mighty gale of laughter.

"Why," roars he, "of course! What bends the pride of a man more than the thought that he's beneath the noticing of another? You're right, lad, you're right! And I'll wager every brass button I own that it fits these mossy fellows, too! And by thunder," he whispers, with awe etched plain on his features as the full implications of my answer sank home. "It means the finish of their shindig, too! For how can you have a war when neither side will admit that the other exists lad?" says he, gazing at me with the misty eye of a father. "Lad, you've done it! Every man-jack and alien on this here planet owes you a debt that he can never repay. And I hope," says he, hardening his craggy features once again and turning to the open-mouthed gentry, "that the full meaning of what you say has been understood by all present, a'following the shameful treatment that you and your shipmates have been accorded on this here voyage. It strikes me," he says, with a cold eye, "that diplomacy should ought to begin at home before a man can offer hisself as an expert on the subject elsewhere. Now, misters, if you'll kindly allow us a sliver of elbow-room, we'll proceed with the urgent business at hand."

And off they shuffled, as red-faced and sorry a bunch as ever you saw, while the skipper turned his attention back to the transmitter and the gentry at the other end of it.

Some little time passed before the number one heli-car was sighted on the horizon, but it was no quiet time aboard, especially for me. Why, I was the hero of the hour, and every crewman on the 'Queen' was shaking me by the hand and pounding my back 'til I felt like I'd been hull-hauled, a pastime that occasionally provided great sport in those rough and ready days. And then who was

shaking my hand, although none too graciously, I might add, than Minister Boomasnicker hisself, and the gentry that had been captured along with him!

It was a proud and happy time for a young slip of a boy, but that was far from the finish of it. Almost before we'd blasted clear of that incredible planet, the crew were out-doing each other to see to my every comfort and begging to be allowed to present me with his day's tot of gleeb-juice as a token of the high regard they held me in.

Aye, youthful foolishness will have its way. I confess I recall precious little of the rest of our journey, and there's little doubt that it was at this time that I developed my taste for the comforting brew. "Perhaps (said the old space-dog) a final tot to round off a most pleasant evening—? What do you say, lad?"

Truth compels me to admit that I had already imbibed considerably more of the insidiously potent refreshment than I had intended, but my imagination was at fever-pitch by this time. Hastily producing my wallet for a second time, I demanded further drinks, and then turned my attention back to my companion.

But why, I demanded, had no record been kept of this amazing encounter? Surely the history tapes would carry at least some trace of such an outstanding moment in the annals of space-faring?

Gravely toasting my good health and offering his wishes for my prosperous future, the old space-dog sadly informed me that it had been destined not to be. Furious argument had broken out aboard the 'Pioneer Queen' on her journey home (having completed a highly successful visit to Capella II, during which time trade relations had been cemented between the two races) and it centred on their adventure and the noble part that he had played. The ministerial party hotly opposed any report of the encounter being made, blusteringly contesting that the high regard in which their achievements would be held would be irreparably deflated by the story of how a young mess-lad had proved to be the only person capable of rescuing a party of highly qualified diplomats, the chosen emissaries of their government, from such an absurd situation. If word

of this humiliation were to leak out, many a hard-won career would be jeopardized, and, it was cunningly added, our prestige as a power to be reckoned with would possibly suffer considerable harm. Were those not early days in Earth/Capellan relations, possibly fraught with many unforseen pitfalls for the race which naïvely invited ridicule?

The skipper at last grudgingly accepted the truth in this, and humbly approached the boy with the facts as they had been presented ; and he had not hesitated in relinquishing the glory that was rightly his. He would, he firmly stated, be more than content with the promised bonus that awaited him, coupled with his promotion to fifth steward, excused garbage disposal. The rest of the crew were sworn to secrecy, and until this very day no word of their astounding adventure had been heard by ears other than my own.

Following this dramatic closure to his narrative, I must have been seized with a gastric disorder of some kind, for the next thing that I recall is suggishly awakening to find myself confined in a noxious metal container that transpired to be a dustbin situated in a mean alley-way at the rear of Firkl's bar. On freeing myself, I discovered to my horror that my wallet, a small, tastefully engraved gold tie-pin that had been a gift from my mother, and my shoes, all had been removed.

It was, of course, painfully obvious what must have happened. Sundry rogues who had been present at the same time as my companion and myself had witnessed my foolhardy action in openly producing my wallet, and then, when I had left the premises, an occasion of which I have no recollection whatever, waylaid and robbed me.

Of the kindly old space-farer who had befriended me, I could find no trace. It was possible, of course, that he had remained in the bar when I had taken my leave (the premises were still alight and sounds of considerable merriment issued from them at irregular intervals, but I felt disinclined to investigate further) and eventually, discerning no evidence that he had suffered a fate similar to my own, took myself at all speed to my meagre lodgings to begin the task that was to prove my journalistic worth!

For the remainder of that night I scribbled feverishly in my room, and as dawn broke across the stirring city, my work was done. There it was, exactly as it had been related to me—the at-last disclosed story of a piece of political chicanery that would shortly shake the galactic scene to its very foundations! Hurriedly, I breakfasted and shaved, made my way to my place of employment, and, following an unnecessarily obstructive exchange with his secretary, confronted the senior news-editor!

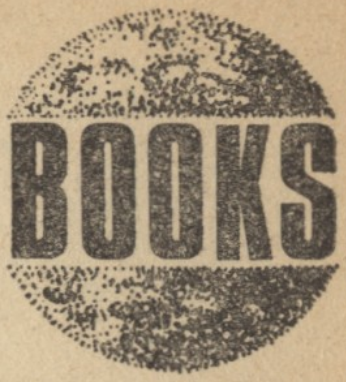
The bitter conclusion of my tale is best disposed of briefly. Following his initial acid comments on my no doubt slightly haggard appearance, he subsided into a stoic and glowering silence while I made my disclosure, maintaining this until the conclusion of my narrative—at which point he inexplicably burst into coarse laughter!

I stiffly enquired the reason for this, a query which only served to increase the volume of his inane braying. I could extract no further coherent comment from him, apart from a wheezing suggestion that I took myself off to commence my day's duties, coupled with a rackingily delivered remark to the effect that he would give the matter his serious consideration. Mollified by this statement, but still puzzled, I withdrew.

And there, incredibly, the matter has ended! Now, whenever I see fit to pursue enquiries as to when action will be taken, I must humiliatingly record that to a man my co-workers, from the lowliest junior to the senior news-editor, exploded into raucous amusement. The entire affair is quite inexplicable, but in the interests of justice I shall grimly persist in my endeavour to introduce the contents of my startling document to the naïvely gullible public.

The truth, after all, is the truth, and it is only the block-headed among us that fail to recognise it when it confronts them.

"THAT IS NOT OIL, MADAM. THAT IS JELLIED CONSOMME"



THE ABOVE QUOTE is from *The Weird Ones,* introduced by H. L. Gold (Dobson, 15s.). No indication is given anywhere in this book that the stories were actually collected by Gold. Judging by the general standard, I think it is rather unlikely.

The weirdest—and probably the best—part of the book is H. L. Gold's introduction, which has little to do with SF, and nothing whatever to do with the contents. The stories themselves are by authors whose names should, according to the dust-jacket blurb, "convince the science fiction addict that there is a feast in store for him." The promised feast turns out to be rather frugal.

Small Lords by Frederik Pohl starts very well. Gradually the picture is built up of a man walking in a world peopled by civilised creatures only half an inch high. By the time he meets one of the other crew members of the ship that crashed here, the complete domination of the humans by the tiny creatures is revealed. The only trouble is that it's all been done before by someone called Jonathan Swift. The set-up could have been justified if Pohl had gone in a different direction from Swift, but beyond setting up the picture he doesn't really go anywhere at all. There were many interesting ethical problems and emotional situations that are merely skirted round, when they should have been gone into much more fully. The resultant story is readable, but not really much more.

Sentiment, Inc by Poul Anderson has much the same fault. This seems a characteristic of a lot of American SF. The really interesting ideas that come out of a situation are often referred to obliquely, if at all. In this story the 'villain' turns out—almost predictably—to be a Russian

spy. Still, the Soviets are not called 'Reds,' which I guess is something.

Name Your Tiger by Milton Lesser is probably the most readable story in the book, although it suffers from the same fault I have already mentioned. On Mars a settlement of colonists is suddenly disturbed by a creature which, as a defence-attack mechanism, transforms itself into the shape of the observer's greatest fear. What happens when someone is not aware of their greatest fear, and is suddenly confronted by it? What happens when someone is forced to recognise their own basic and personal phobia? How would one react to the discovery of what one feared most? None of these questions are gone into in any detail, and the story consists of nothing more than an adventure.

They kill it in the end.

Iron Man by Eando Binder is possibly the worst story. A man one day thinks that he's a robot. The plot consists of the efforts of his psychiatrist to bring him back to sanity. The story is quite funny in places, but the trouble is I don't think the author would agree with me as to which parts are funny. The man comes home, picks up heavy furniture, calls himself X-88, calls his wife madam, and insists that he is not her husband but merely a house robot. Even when he spits a mouthful of consommé over the wall, and squirts a can of oil round his neck she still thinks that he's playing a joke, and it's not until he takes a healthy swig from the can that she realises that something is wrong.

As soon as we are introduced to the psychiatrist, we see that he's a master of his craft. After trying to pick holes in the man's story for at least thirty seconds, he suddenly delivers the *coup de grâce*.

"You almost gave me the answer a moment ago," he says. "You are not a robot called X-88, are you? Think once; you are a man, a human being of flesh and blood, called Charles Becker. Isn't that right?" As he speaks his tone is described as unaccusing, friendly and persuasive. But surely, there must have been a hint of pride there? No man who had delivered such a brilliant psychiatric trap could remain free of some element of self-appreciation.

Unfortunately it just doesn't work and the psychiatrist decides to be even more subtle. After several more abortive

attempts to restore Charles' sanity, he makes him take off his clothes, and then points out his sex organs. "But humans have sex organs," says the doctor, brilliantly. Unfortunately the patient doesn't see them.

The next part reads like the beginning of a dirty joke. He rings a buzzer and brings the wife into his office to be with her naked husband. "There's a closet for your clothes," he says significantly as he goes out. Even the charms of his wife, who, we are informed, is the lucky possessor of soft white thighs and womanly curves, fail to affect poor Charles Becker. Mind you, it's not surprising really, for the atmosphere of a psychiatrist's office, with the doctor presumably hanging expectantly about outside the door can't be the most conducive to romance, and I can't help wondering how many men would have been able to do any better.

While all this has been going on, however, our psychiatrist must have been swotting up on his Freud. It appears that all that has gone before has just been a preliminary to the final *dénouement*. The psychiatrist decides, for reasons unknown to a layman, that even if Becker couldn't see his own genitals, he will be able to recognise blood. After the last rather sordid episode, the wife is sent packing, in tears The psychiatrist sits at his desk and confronts Becker. I'm sure that this time there must be a smug smile on his face. Then he does it. He brings to bear all the vast resources of contemporary psychoanalysis, in one final and magnificent effort.

He rushes Becker with a knife.

Probably the best story in the book is *The Hunted Ones* by Mack Reynolds. Told from the point of view of the Denebians who are hunted by the Earth people, it has a ring of sincerity. For once a few ethical problems are gone into to a certain extent, and it also succeeds as an exciting story.

Hail to the Chief by Sam Sackett is also an interesting story. A professor of political science is offered a sinecure in the government, for no apparent reason. Then he finds out that it's not a sinecure at all, and that the government is not what he expected. A group of intellectuals is in control of the country, and the masses are swayed to vote in the right way. Is this right? Sackett doesn't really say.

The ending is abrupt and a little disappointing. Once more I feel that if he had bothered really to delve into the problems involved, he would have given us a really fine story. As it was, on finishing this one I felt a little cheated.

Impractical Joke by L. Sprague de Camp seems to be an impassioned appeal against practical jokes. As a story it's rather poor.

The general standard of most of the stories in this collection is equivalent to that of an average SF magazine. I don't think that this justifies the hard covers or the 15s. price tag.

Langdon Jones

STORY RATINGS No. 146

1	The Power of Y (I)	... *Arthur Sellings*
2	There's a Starman in Ward Seven	... *David Rome*
3	The Sailor in the Western Stars	... *Bob Parkinson*
3	Tunnel of Love	... *Joseph Green*
4	Election Campaign	... *Thom Keyes*

The next issue (149) *will begin E. C. Tubb's excitingly complex (but unconfusing) novel* ***THE LIFE BUYER*** *and stories in hand include new material from British and American writers of Ability and Repute for your Delight and Edification. Don't miss it!*

All correspondence to
The Editor,
NEW WORLDS SF,
17, Lake House,
Scovell Road,
London, S.E.1.

The Shores of Death

Dear Sir,

The second instalment of *The Shores of Death* is a real stunner. I was enthralled; but . . . What happened to the rest of it? Don't tell me it ends there. I am quite sure that the *final* final instalment is crystal clear in your mind. I could almost write it myself! Something like this, maybe: Clovis returns to Klobax, this time in search of something other than immortality, and ultimately discovers that Take is still alive in *his* Clovis's body; Take having insisted on a simple exchange of identities thus leaving the body of Clovis intact. (Don't forget that Sharvis said: 'I can use your body (Take's)—with simple modifications I can make it a duplicate of the one Clovis Marca has now—and give it to Clovis Marca.') Sharvis wouldn't waste a body, and Take may have insisted on this arrangement from purely altruistic motives knowing that only Clovis could save the world, etc. Well, something like that, anyway. Saving the world is another matter, of course. I haven't given it any real thought; but I expect Sharvis could help quite a lot if he so wished. Yes?

Edward Mackin 17 Oxford Street, Liverpool 7

Now read back! Actually, although an author shouldn't really explain a story if it hasn't 'clicked', the whole background of the story—the coming cataclysm, etc.—was not intended to be anything more than a counterpoint to the real theme of the tale.

Dear Sir,

Thank you—and the editor of SCIENCE FANTASY—for excellent reviews of Brian Aldiss's *Greybeard*. Sadly not everyone has your discrimination. I am thinking particularly of certain reviews that have appeared in the United States—and especially of Ron Goulart's recent review in FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION. When will these literal-minded dimwits cease reading everything that comes in front of their eyes on the level of a boys' adventure story? Goulart seemed to see the novel purely as 'yet another cataclysm-novel of the kind the English specialise in'. Didn't he realise that, as in certain other British novels that begin with some sort of cataclysm, the cataclysm was simply a starting-point to a book which discusses, among other things, the poignant problem of childless old-age? This, and other reviews, reminded me that it was high time we in this country stopped looking to America for our SF standards. Apart from a few honourable exceptions, the American scene has become barren in the last few years, whereas the British scene has suddenly become alive and dynamic—leading the field. From Swift onwards it has been a tradition among British writers to make use of imaginative concepts and landscapes in order to discuss whatever point they wish about human behaviour in some form or other. H. G. Wells, Wyndham Lewis, C. S. Lewis, Aldous Huxley, George Orwell, Angus Wilson—and Brian W. Aldiss—have all written in this tradition. The similarity between their work and the stuff appearing in American pulps for the last forty years is merely superficial. Anyone with the ability to see past the merely superficial must surely accept that?

A. D. P. Cornelius, Madingley Road, Cambridge

We wonder if any of our American readers would like to take up the gauntlet? A copy of Introducing SF *edited by Brian W. Aldiss as your prize for the best—or, at least, most controversial—letter in this issue.*

Dear Sir,

Warmest congratulations on having made NEW WORLDS SF a monthly and on having doubled sales. Eight months ago it looked as if British SF magazine fiction had ended but you have revitalised it. What a splendid achievement! It is gratifying that (on a planet never noted for justice) you have received your well-earned reward.

An interesting point was raised by Mr. Latto in his letter in No. 146. He says that *I Remember, Anita* (in NWSF 144) suffered from an unfortunate placing of emphasis and he appears to think that the author could have made the story right by—among other remedies—the use of simple and powerful language.

I suggest that the story cannot be made right because it is based on an unawareness of one of "those solid principles for the criticism of SF" which are mentioned in the Editorial.

The principle in question is defined by Kingsley Amis in his *New Maps of Hell*. He says that ordinary fiction can be compared with portrait painting, while SF can be compared with landscape painting. This pictorial comparison explains what puzzles many of us—why SF and sex rarely get on together. While no personal experience (portrait) may be complete without sex, in a landscape sex is detectable only as a pair of distant lovers beneath the trees. It is the trees (non-human forces) that are important.

Consider Gainsborough. He kept his portraits and landscapes utterly separate. When he painted a lady in a big hat she filled the whole picture, but in his landscapes human beings are of the same value as bushes or cows: dots to emphasize the height of his spreading trees.

The tremendous (and as yet unlived) imaginary experiences on which SF is based are the trees beneath which man and his sex life are dots, and if an artist (author) makes his dots too big he gets his picture (story) out of proportion. That is what happened in *I Remember, Anita.*

By contrast, the proportions are right in *Tunnel of Love* in NWSF 146. The mystery of the tunnel (not love) dominates the story.

Another point: when an author writes of sex in the future surely he is not dealing with it in its own terms.

Sex is so *immediate*. Therefore it should be and usually is written about in the present tense. It appears incapable of getting into that awkward tense: "to be about to be."

Of course, *I Remember, Anita* appears to be in the present, but this does not convince because the story is set in the future.

SF offers so much of absorbing interest that we should not ask for what is not in its nature to give—all this and sex, too. After all, the reader can easily turn from Heinlein to Romeo and Juliette (or Fanny Hill, if he must) and the writer can take example from the greatest of SF pioneers: Wells, who kept *The War of the Worlds* and *Mr. Kipps* in different fictional galaxies.

Because its proportions are wrong *I Remember, Anita* is not a bad story. It can be compared with a photo of the Eiffel Tower in which a tourist's face, too close and out of focus, appears in the foreground. One can still see much that is excellent.

The fact that we are still arguing about it is sufficient proof that *I Remember, Anita* is (though flawed) a fascinating and powerful story.

Elizabeth French Biscoe, 48 Brighton Road, Rathgor, Dublin 6

Dear Sir,

Congratulations on the monstrous book reviews plus the superabundance of reviewers! I notice, however, that SF reviewers have to work on two planes. It reminds me of a mainstream review of SF which described the latest Heinlein novel as a rattling good adventure yarn of its kind, and Miller's *Conditionally Human* as not up to the standard of *A Canticle for Leibowitz* which left you guessing where the Miller stood in relation to the Heinlein. I feel you do the same. You describe *The Dark Light Years* as a failure, and then slip gear and recommend *The Paradox Men*. This is an admirable ability, and fulfills the spirit of the Aldiss extract from SF HORIZONS, but am I wrong in thinking that you preferred the Aldiss 'failure' to many other less ambitions successes?

James Colvin lets politic intrude into his reviews . . . and I would feel happier about Colvin if he would use adjectives other than 'reactionary' to condemn Anderson and Heinlein . . . I hope neither Gordon Walters nor any other science writer is to take up permanent residence. This is the one thing ANALOG does well, so leave ANALOG to do it. I've just realised that this will look like a Carping Criticism. It's nothing of the sort. Your magazine is stimulating me, is all. More strength to James Colvin's arm!

P. Johnson, 159 Kingsway, Petts Wood, Orpington, Kent

About The Paradox Men, *we don't think we slipped gear there*—Dark Light Years *was a failure* (*we felt*) *but* Paradox Men *fulfilled its author's intention.*

Dear Sir,

I don't know how many people realise this, indeed it may not have any effect on other people, but science fiction is a medicine. Among other things it cures prejudices, especially colour prejudice and suspicion of madness. Besides curing, it gave me an understanding of why I am living and an open-mind. If I stopped reading SF for one week I would lose my open-mind, etc. I doubt if it would happen, but if ever I read all the science-fiction there was I'd kill myself; science fiction has taught me that death is not disastrous. I don't want to kill myself yet so I want you to publish information on how to get short stories published in NEW WORLD'S SF. We might get a few names.

Malcolm E. Wright (14), Barnstable Estate, Basildon, Essex

We don't want you to kill yourself either—so here's the information: Send in your short story (presented as we suggest on the title-page) and we will read it. If we like it—we'll publish it. If we don't like it—we'll tell you why.

BEYOND from Charles Platt, 18E, Fitzjohns Avenue, London, N.W.3. This is perhaps the best issue of BEYOND to date. No. 7 is, as usual, well-produced by duplicator and photographic processes. Articles on Orwell and Amis, mental homes, sociology in SF, etc. A 'double-issue' in two fattish parts. Illustrations still aren't up to the standard of the written material and production, apart from an excellent back cover.

DOUBT from Graham M. Hall, c/o Tewkesbury Register, 8, High Street, Tewkesbury, Glos. This is the first issue and here the art-work tends to be better than the production or writing. A too-short article on 'The Thorne Smith Tradition' by Archie Mercer is the best thing in the issue. No price seems mentioned.

NIEKAS from Ed Meskys, LRL, Box 808, Livermore, Cal 94551, U.S.A. Available for contribution, letter of comment, or 35 cents. Much larger and more substantial than most of its British counterparts, NIEKAS 9 contains some good stuff by Anthony Boucher, Philip K. Dick (on *The Man in the High Castle*), John Baxter and others. Tolkein fans will be interested in the long glossary of names, terms, etc. used in Middle Earth. Production is clean and readable—again superior to most of the British SF fan magazines.

ZENITH from Peter R. Weston, 9, Porlock Crescent, Northfield, Birmingham 31, 1/6. Number 7 should be out by now, but Number 6 is to hand. Still has an excellent standard of production and the material seems to be improving, although the magazine-reviewer appears rooted somewhat in the past. If you're rooted in the past and proud of it, then you'll probably enjoy the reviews. This one's worth watching—it shows promise.

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IN THIS ISSUE

NOT 64 BUT 66

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