



The title "the contact } point" is rendered in a large, bold, serif font. The word "the" is lowercase, while "contact" and "point" are lowercase. A large right-facing curly brace connects the two words. The text is surrounded by decorative elements: five solid black stars, several hollow arrowheads pointing in various directions, and several hollow diamond shapes. The stars and arrows are scattered around the left and center, while the diamonds are clustered on the right side.

the contact } point

Somewhere on Mars there had to be a meeting of the minds . . .

LIEUTENANT Lloyd spotted the first alien in the ruins of the strange red Martian city on the second day of exploration. His first impulse was to call out to the other men—but then, afraid his voice would startle the creature down at the end of the rubble-strewn street, he silently unholstered his military service pistol and crept forward toward the back (he hoped it was the back) of the alien, his breath rasping behind his faceplate.

He was a mere ten paces short of his goal when loose gravel beneath his heavy boot betrayed him. Even in the thin Martian atmosphere, the sound was a sharp one. The creature spun about, one appendage gripping the haft of a slim crystal tube. He froze there, watching Lloyd with odd oval-shaped eyes, yellow-orange in color. Lloyd's thumb slid back the safety catch on his automatic, slowly, carefully.

Then the creature lowered

the tube and its wide lipless mouth curled in what had to be a grin. "Ookl okkl?" it said distinctly.

Lloyd looked into the alien eyes and was pleased to see the intelligence within their depths. He reholstered his pistol and held out his hand. "Lieutenant Lloyd of the *Sherlock II*," he said.

The alien hesitated, then inserted the four flaccid stalk-things at the end of its "arm" into Lloyd's hand. They shook these clasped appendages solemnly, then withdrew their own with relief.

"Boy, am I glad you Martians are friendly!" Lloyd laughed. "When I saw you up the street, I envisioned a full-scale guerrilla attack and—Damn, you're not getting a word of this, are you?"

In reply, the creature pointed to its thoracic region and said, "Ulkay Blet." It pointed to Lloyd again and enunciated carefully, "Lieutenant Lloyd."

"Glad to know you, Ulkay. Or do I call you by both names? Or just Mister Blet?"

"Ulkay," the alien said. "Blet," he added. "Ulkay Blet," he clarified, with an almost Earthlike shrug.

IT WAS strictly a take-your-pick name, Lloyd saw. He took his pick. "Ulkay, tell me, are you the last of your race, or are there others of your kind still left alive on Mars?"

Ulkay just stared, friendly but lost.

Lloyd tried again. "I—" he pointed to himself—"am here with more like me—" he pointed to himself, held up one finger to Ulkay, then pointed in a long sweep behind himself toward the end of the street and held up four fingers. His only success was an envious look from Ulkay at Lloyd's extra finger.

"Hoo boy!" said Lloyd, smacking his brow in chagrin. "This is a rough one. Look, Ulkay, you hold on and don't be scared." He laid a hand upon Ulkay's shoulder for assurance, then turned his head and shouted, "*Here! This way, men!*"

The sound of heavy booted feet began, far up the cluttered street. Lloyd felt Ulkay grow tense. "It's all right," he said slowly, soothingly, as one talks to a horse or dog, knowing the tone conveys what the words cannot. Ulkay seemed to sense the assurance and relaxed a little.

In another minute, Kroner, Harrison, Tandy and Craig were beside their commanding officer, gaping with unconcealed glee at the slightly under five-foot form of Ulkay, who stared right back, steadily if not boldly.

"Our first contact with a Martian!" Kroner exulted, his voice metallic through the oxygen helmet.

"Does he talk?" Harrison

wanted to know immediately.

"Where are his friends?" asked Tandy, frowning.

Craig, unable to think of a question, was silent. But it was to Craig that Lloyd addressed his first statement. "He speaks a language. His name is Ulkay Bret. Think you can rig a written or oral Rosetta Stone for us, Craig?"

Craig shuffled his feet bashfully. "I can try."

"Is he *alone*, though?" said Tandy, irked that his question had gone unanswered. "His buddies might be around here waiting to pick us off. This is their city, after all, and we're trespassers."

Lloyd shook his head dubiously. "I think you're wrong, Tandy. Ulkay's got some sort of weapon with him and he put it away without trying to use it. If there are others, they're probably intelligent and friendly, too."

"Unless I'm mistaken," Kroner remarked dryly, "we're about to put your statement to the test."

"What—?" said Lloyd, and looked where Kroner was now facing.

Seven creatures like Ulkay were on their way toward the group, each bearing one of those long crystal rods. At first glance, they all looked alike to Lloyd. Then, as they drew nearer, he saw that they were as different from one another as he from his own men.

"Ulkay," he said softly, "would you tell *your* friends that we're *their* friends? They look kind of trigger-happy and . . ."

Ulkay, catching Lloyd's meaning from the way he looked toward the approaching squad, turned and babbled something at them. They hesitated. Then all put their crystal rods into short scabbards hanging from their belts.

BEHIND him, Lloyd heard Tandy's sigh of relief. He turned to Craig. "You and Ulkay see if you can set up something to bridge the language barrier, while Kroner and I go back to the ship and radio the news back to Earth."

"Okay," said Craig. He was the expedition's linguist, but extremely shy, considering he was the liaison man with any aliens they encountered. "I'll start them with numbers; that's usually a good kicking-off place, and then I can work into body parts, relationships, and—"

"Whoa," said Lloyd. Craig could be talkative on his professional topics. "I don't want the details, just some results. Kroner and I should be back in about an hour. I'll talk with Ulkay then, if you can show me how to reach him."

He and Kroner strode off to their ship, set onto the cold red sands a mile away.

It would take nearly three minutes for a message to reach Earth, and another three, at least, before the reply came back, so Lloyd, dispensing with formality, sent, "This is Lieutenant Lloyd of the *Sherlock II*. We have landed successfully on Mars, discovered a decaying Martian city, and eight inhabitants, so far. If you read me, set up a recorder and signal me when you are ready to tape my report."

He sat back in the chair with a sigh. "There, that cuts out a lot of fuss," he remarked to Kroner.

"And the less time spent away from our men, the better."

"Yes," said Lloyd. "How does this thing—well, how does it *feel* to you?"

"Too easy," said Kroner without hesitation. "Of course, there's no reason why it should feel at all *hard*, is there?"

"No," Lloyd admitted reluctantly. "No reason at all why we shouldn't establish contact with these Martians, find them friendly, get our information about their city, way of life, and so on, and go back safely to Earth and home. But—"

"Yeah," said Kroner. "*But!*"

"They *act* friendly."

"Maybe that's all it is, an act. But if they're not going to be chums, why go to all this

trouble? You know what I mean, sir?"

Lloyd leaned back in the padded chair and scratched his short-cropped head. "Beats me. And yet I can't help feeling uncomfortable about—There's the blinker. Earth's ready to record." He dropped the conversation and set himself to telling Earth of developments so far.

"**I**S it some sort of taboo or what?" Lloyd demanded irritably of Craig. It was three hours since he and Kroner had returned from the ship, and communication with Ulkay and his bunch had been established—but with one annoying and unexpected feature.

"I can't seem to find out, sir," Craig said miserably. "He's responsive on almost every other topic, but when I ask him about the city here, he says he can't tell me. I've asked him why, but his answer escapes me."

"When he says he 'can't' tell you, does he mean he is physically unable to, or forbidden to?"

"I'm not even sure if it's 'can't.' It might just be 'won't.' But I *am* sure it's a negative of some sort. They shake their heads and nod same as we do for yes and no."

"Let's see that list," Lloyd said, his voice tired.

Craig held it out, but Kroner took it. "You've looked at

it ten times in the past hour, sir," he apologized. "Let me have a whack at it."

Lloyd started to argue the point, then gave it up. "Okay, Sergeant. See what you can make of it. If you can ask a clear question of Ulkay and Company with those choice bits of language, I'll put in your name for a decoration."

Kroner scanned the list, noting with fading hope the vocabulary he had to work with. "Wish we had more verbs!" he said.

"They're the hardest, always," said Craig. "Active ones are easy enough, though the tenses and irregularities can be tough, but the non-active — the intransitive — can't be demonstrated the way actions and things can."

"Well, we've got *Mars*, and *city*, and—that's a good one —*men*. That's them?"

Craig nodded.

"Hey, weren't there *eight* of those guys a while back? We're two short!"

"What?" said Lloyd, looking over at the aliens. "You're right, Kroner! Ulkay's gone, and—let me see—that heavy-set one with the big shoulder-span. Where the hell—?"

Tandy and Harrison came up at that moment.

"Sir," Tandy looked disgusted, "we can't find out a thing from the rubble. No heavy radiation present, so it kind of discounts an atomic war, although—"

"Never mind the surmises for now," said Lloyd. "Tell me just what you know for sure."

One side of Tandy's mouth twisted. "Yes, sir. Very little of the rubble seems to be due to any *heavy* damage. I mean, no buildings have collapsed or anything like that. It's just as though time had crumbled off a brick hole here and there, and nobody bothered sweeping the street."

"The city gates were knocked down," Lloyd protested.

TANDY shook his head. "Not knocked down, sir—fallen. It's my opinion this place is just obsolete, a sort of last-year's model that needs a new coat of paint and an engine overhaul. Except for all the dust, sand and crumbled material, it's in pretty good shape."

"You mean it's unfashionable but serviceable?" said Kroner. "Like a spring-driven phonograph?"

"That's about it, Sergeant," Tandy nodded. "Anything else, you're going to have to ask the Martians themselves."

"Which brings me back to my earlier apprehension," said Kroner. "I don't like the idea of two of those guys being missing. Hold on—there they come! And with a small cannon, unless I miss my guess!"

The Earthmen were all on their feet now, facing the pair of aliens who lugged a heavy contraption with a tubular nozzle on the front of it up the street toward the waiting group.

"It can't be a cannon," said Lloyd, puzzled. "Why would they bother, when hand-weapons would do?"

By that time, Ulkay and his crony had the gadget set down on a tripod base and were turning dials on its side. The Earthmen, every one of them, loosened pistols in their holsters, but only Tandy actually brought his out.

Then they jumped as a metallic voice came out through the gadget's nozzle. "Men!" said the voice. "Do not possess fear."

"A miracle!" gasped Craig. "It's a translating machine!" He rushed forward to view this thing, his face glowing with delight.

Lloyd, recovering from his start, saw that Ulkay was speaking into a tube at the side of the machine, and realized that his translated voice had been the one heard.

"Ulkay," he said, going toward the machine, "does this work both ways?"

Ulkay nodded and pointed to the nozzle on the front. "This," said his voice from the nozzle, "picks up as well as receipts."

"*Receives,*" said Craig automatically.

"—as receives," said the nozzle automatically. "There will exist some few ungrammatics, but it will mostly make sensible."

"Man, this simplifies everything!" Lloyd exclaimed. "Ulkay, do you mind if we ask you some questions?"

Ulkay, via the nozzle, replied with dignity, "You and your Craig have questioned with relentless of us. Can we be allowed the similar luck?"

"I beg your pardon," Lloyd said sincerely. "Go ahead and ask."

"These transparents you wear upon your faces, why?" asked the nozzle, in a mechanical monotone.

"The air." Lloyd gestured with a sweep of his arm. "It is too thin to support our kind of life without these masks."

"Strange," said the nozzle. "And where are your women?"

"We did not bring them with us," said Lloyd. "We made this trip strictly to find you."

Ulkay stared at Lloyd a long moment. Then the nozzle asked, "What trip?"

"To your city," said Lloyd. "To your planet."

ULKAY frowned, then fiddled a moment with a dial on the side of the machine. The nozzle spoke slowly this time. "Repeat your response. It was not a sensible."

"We came here. To Mars. To find you." Lloyd said it carefully and distinctly, feeling very uneasy.

"But this is Earth," said the nozzle loudly.

"To *you* it is Earth," said Lloyd, with a tolerant smile. "I think we're having a semantic problem, Ulkay. Each planet's self-name would translate as 'Earth.' This machine cannot make the proper distinction."

"No, no, no!" came the nozzle's voice. "You say your planet is called 'Earth'. Why do you now call it 'Mars'?"

"We don't," said Lloyd, bewildered. "We call *this* planet Mars. *Our* planet is called Earth—"

"Sir!" Kroner grasped his arm tightly. "Wait a minute! I think I get it! . . . Ulkay! Is this *your* planet?"

"No," said the nozzle. "Is it not *yours*?"

"Numbers!" said Craig. "Ask him by the *number* of the planet from the sun."

"We are from Earth, the third planet from the sun," said Lloyd, holding up three fingers for emphasis. "Where are you from?"

"We are from Earth," said the nozzle, "the second planet from the sun." Ulkay held up two digits.

"Venusians?" Tandy squawked, while Harrison doubled up in a fit of laughter as the idea sank in. In another moment, both groups—Ul-

kay's and Lloyd's—had joined him in a tension-breaking paroxysm of mirth.

"Where are *you* parked?" asked Kroner, the first to recover some semblance of control.

Ulkay, still chuckling, pointed in the opposite direction to that in which the *Sherlock II* was standing. "Outside the west gate of the city," said the nozzle. "Where are you?"

"Outside the east gate. We thought you were Martians—people of this, the fourth planet."

"And we in turn thought you were Martians," said Ulkay, through the nozzle. There was more laughter in both groups.

"For Pete's sake!" muttered Lloyd. "For Pete's sake! Look, Ulkay, why don't both our groups get some rest and we'll make our inspection tour of the city tomorrow, the two groups together?"

Ulkay, after a babble of discussion with his men, was in agreement with this plan, and they and the Earthmen shared a large room within one of the old abandoned buildings.

"Will your air supply not run out?" Ulkay queried.

"Not on these," Lloyd explained. "They're not tank masks; they're compression masks. A hydraulic system inside the suit keeps a compressor running in this gadget on

our backs, as long as we're moving about. Martian air is thin but non-poisonous."

"But if you sleep?"

"The air runs low, which makes us fidget, which pumps more air through the compressors," Lloyd explained.

Ulkay expressed admiration at the cleverness of Earth scientists, and then joined his men in slumber. The Earthmen, tired and happy, fell soundly asleep.

IT was still dark, the chill purple dark of Mars at night, when Lloyd awakened abruptly. His body was tense and his mind keenly alert. Something was wrong. He felt it, but couldn't place the source of his uneasiness.

He sat up and looked about him. Starlight, coming in bright pinpoints through a high arched window, glinted reassuringly off the helmets of his men, lying in pools of deep shadow all about him. He looked for Ulkay and his group, and saw their smaller silhouettes huddled on the stone flooring. Feeling a little better, he lay down once more and tried to fall back to sleep. But there was a gnawing, nagging something in his mind that would not allow sleep to come.

"What's bothering me?" he asked himself. "Is it something about Ulkay and his bunch? The only really odd thing about them is that they

don't wear any breathing equipment in this thin air, right? And didn't Ulkay explain that the atmosphere on Venus is just as thin? It didn't jibe with Harrison's opinion about atmospheres, but Harrison hasn't actually *been* to Venus, after all, and the cloudiness still keeps its atmosphere a secret from Earth's spectroscopes, right?"

His mind assured him that this was right and he felt a little better, but not much.

"So what's eating me? A hunch? Intuition? Or just alien-planet nerves?" he went on. "Why should I wake up in the middle of the night feeling scared? Aren't my men all present and accounted for? Aren't they sleeping quietly, just as they should be?"

Feeling annoyed with his own nebulous fears, Lloyd sat up again and looked over the groups, Ulkay's and his own. As he watched, Kroner grunted in his sleep and rolled over. Tandy's helmet emitted gentle snoring noises. Harrison and Craig lay more quietly, but their chests could be seen, even in that dim light, rising and falling normally. Lloyd excoriated his imagination for worrying him—it had fed him a quick suggestion that perhaps his companions' masks had been slit, suffocating them silently to death.

"I *must* trust Ulkay; it's necessary," said Lloyd to himself. "I can't let these ground-

less fears spoil future relations between Earth and Venus. The Venusians are friendly and intelligent, and not really odd-looking, once you discount the number of digits on their hands and a few unearthly color schemes on their torsos. So what am I scared of?"

Cold touched his spine, shocking him into alertness, as he isolated his fear. He rolled over and shook Kroner awake with barbaric callousness.

"Huh? Wha?" said Kroner, sitting up.

"Sergeant," said Lloyd, trying to confide his fear to the other man, "when we got here, we were nervous about making contact with aliens, right?"

"Yeah," Kroner said sleepily. "But it turned out okay, sir, didn't it?" He shook his groggy head. "I mean, Ulkay and his bunch are okay, aren't they?"

"Yeah," said Lloyd shakily. "They are fine—but, Kroner, they're not the right aliens!"

It took Kroner a moment to get it. When he did, he came awake with a jolt. "And we haven't even posted a guard!"

Lloyd, his worries abetted by Kroner's response, got to his feet, shouting, "Mayday! Mayday!"

His men—and Ulkay's a few seconds later—were up, everybody snapping on portable torches and setting the chamber alive with flashing lights.

"Ulkay!" Lloyd said, rushing to the Venusian. "If you're not the Martians, and we're not the Martians, then there is still a chance that someone else is the Martians!"

Ulkay yelled something to his men, and Lloyd watched with horror as each Venusian fumbled at an empty scabbard upon his belt. Lloyd's hand shot to his holster and found there just what his men were finding in their own holsters: nothing.

"Do you think we've discovered the Martians?" said Kroner, his voice hoarse with fright.

Then the glaring overhead lights of the room came on, revealing the surrounding phalanx of hard-eyed, armed creatures.

"Unless I'm mistaken," Lloyd said, "the Martians have discovered us."

An instant later, there was nothing in the center of the alien room but half-molten air compressors and the charred, smoking remains of a funny-looking little nozzle, still echoing a bilingual chorus of agony.

END

Worlds of if

Book Reviews by Frederik Pohl

ON the jacket of *Venus Plus X* (Pyramid), the book is called "the strangest science-fiction novel Theodore Sturgeon has ever written." It is strange, all right, but Sturgeon has a talent for strangeness. Often he has seemed to want to shock his readers with his daring. It is love that he writes about, in whatever form love may appear.

Some of the forms repel. "I wrote an empathetic sort of tale about some homosexuals," he reminisces, in a postscript to *Venus Plus X*, "and my mailbox filled up with cards drenched with scent and letters written in purple ink with green capitals . . . You cannot be objective about sex, especially when it's outside certain parameters." But I can, he is saying.

It is this point of view, this objective compassion for queerness - for - its - own - sake coupled with a godlike contempt for those who do not have the same warmth and the same objectivity, that has caused some otherwise first-rate Sturgeons to leave a bad taste in the mouth of the read-

er. Sturgeon clearly feels that beauty can be found in mire. And it can; but not by pretending that mire is beauty.

Then, too, Sturgeon is hip, and a lot of the time too hip for comfort. His characters don't talk, they do routines. *Venus Plus X* is by no means free from this. Threaded throughout its length is a series of gray-flannel dialogues. In the past this sort of thing has been unhelpful to his story. If the interludes had a connection, it was not always easy to see; once found, it was not always worth the trouble.

And now here comes *Venus Plus X*, a story set in a human but not a bisexual world, where anyone can do what, and with which, and to whom; and, lo! the thing turns out to be *wonderful*. It is not very surprising that Sturgeon has written an excellent book. But it is surely astonishing that he has built it not out of his strong points, but out of his weaknesses!

Sturgeon has something to tell us in *Venus Plus X*. He says it with irresistible authority. He has invented a

new, fascinating, self-consistent, exciting world and peopled it with a remarkable, plausible, provocative new species. He has put into that world a sympathetic, comprehensible, well-intentioned human being named Charlie Johns. And he has let world, species and human interact before our eyes, so that we are told everything we should know and nothing we needn't; and in the process he has evoked our compassion, our pleasure and our love.

If there has been a better science-fiction novel in the past few years—say, since James Blish's *A Case of Conscience*—this reviewer has not seen it. It is so good that it can't be praised in detail, because the detail deserves to come to you as Sturgeon intends it, seriatim. This one you've got to read for yourself and don't let anyone spoil it for you.

Now, even *Venus Plus X* is not all perfection. Charlie Johns is the name of a real man—a nonce-figure of a couple decades ago, who got to be a nonce-figure by marrying a nine-year-old bride. It is hard to escape the suspicion that Sturgeon (a man who seldom does anything by coincidence) is enjoying some sort of private joke in giving his lead character that name. And then the postscript tacked to the end of the book is—well—smart-alecky. It is

as though, having finished the novel and having seen for the first time what a really remarkable piece of work it was, the author couldn't resist the temptation to crow.

Well, let him crow. The man is entitled.

Venus Plus X may or may not be the strangest science-fiction novel Sturgeon ever wrote. But it is his best.

IN *The Challenge of the Sea* (Holt-Rinehart-Winston), Arthur C. Clarke provides young readers with a useful and uniformly entertaining book about the world of water. This is not a subject that has previously occupied Clarke, except as far as the sea is a necessary adjunct to skin-diving, but he acquits himself with grace and merit. He always does.

There are, it is true, a few annoying lapses. Some are plain slips of fact: e.g., the name of the most successful abyss-penetrating vessel is uniformly, but wrongly, spelled as "bathyscape." Some are errors of omission: e.g., where in listing the economically likely ways of extracting fresh water from the sea Clarke includes distillation, ion-exchange and osmotic barriers, but does not even mention what is at present the chiefest contender: simple freezing. And some are in the area of opinion. For instance, it is possible

that, as Clarke says, farming ultimately "will have abandoned the continents and moved out into the ocean." It certainly is not *likely*. Of all the false hopes the anti-Malthusians have held out for humanity, the prospect of limitless food from the sea is surely the most illusory. Land plants are inherently more efficient than aquatic ones. Moreover, although it is true enough that there are many edible fish uncaught, it is also true that the total contribution of the sea to the human diet is quite small, and even multiplying it many times cannot make it decisive.

Nevertheless, the book's merits vastly exceed its few faults. Clarke has been everywhere and read everything, and his reliable talent for imagining the consequences of known scientific fact let him fill in his marine future background with plausible detail. The publisher lists *The Challenge of the Sea* as a "young adult" book. Oddly enough, that's about right. Teen-agers will be able to read it with pleasure and profit, but so will adults.

ROBERT SHECKLEY's *The Status Civilization* (Signet) is a rarely uneven book, a story that makes a point, but reaches its goal only after threading the most remarkable maze of portentous blind alleys and scamped

explanations since Van Vogt.

The story concerns a man, Will Barrent, who is exiled to a prison planet, his memory wiped away. The planet is a hell of topsy-turvy moral values—"Evil is that force within us which inspires men to acts of strength and endurance. The worship of evil is . . . the only true worship"—and lethal violence: "I'm going to shoot you . . . We have the right to shoot down any new peon who leaves his barracks area." "But I wasn't told!" "Of course not. If you new men were told, none of you would leave your barracks area."

Barrent manages to survive both the informal potshots of the citizens and the elaborately organized "Games" to which he is (inevitably) subjected. He then tackles the central problem toward which the story has been heading, the understanding and mastery of the Earth from which the prisoners have been exiled.

It is in this last section that Sheckley finds his way. Back on Earth, in the last seven of the book's thirty chapters, the author pulls himself together and gives us a sharply drawn picture of a stagnant planet and the culture which has made it so.

But the bulk of the book is neither sharp nor convincing. Sheckley does not scruple to advance his plot by tricks,

and some of the tricks are dubious. The gladiatorial games as an ingredient of science fiction have become a cliché; those in *The Status Civilization* are kissed off so briskly that they seem hardly to interest the author. The behavior of the book's minor characters is uniformly preposterous. Those who have a secret go to elaborate lengths to advertise its existence. A girl from the underground movement (naturally there is an underground movement, nothing is spared us), who has gone to great trouble to help Barrent survive, concludes that he is worthy of the help she gave him because he *did* survive. (Obviously, this girl can't lose. If she had decided not to help him, he would have died. This would have proved she was right in not helping him.) Barrent both knows everything and knows nothing. He has psi-sensed "mutants" to read the past and future for him, but their powers are oddly limited. They can, in fact, see only what the author needs to move the story along, and nothing to simplify it.

The book seems, all in all, to add up to a long series of false starts, climaxed by an excellent novelette which is more or less irrelevant to what has gone before. The "novelette" is well worth reading. It's too bad about the false starts.

A TIME for reminiscing comes to us through the joint efforts of Avalon and Ballantine. Avalon has two novels which seem to belong to an earlier age of science fiction, while Ballantine has reissued the short science-fiction stories of the trail-blazer himself under the title of *Best Stories of H. G. Wells*. There is not much point in a critical assessment of Wells, at this date, but there is much point in reading him. His "futures" are now often enough well in our past—aircraft and armored warfare are among his projections—but where he guessed wrong he was plausible, and where he guessed right he was uncanny. Moreover, the texture of his writing is a standing reproof to most of those who followed.

Avalon's pair of books are nothing like Wells for quality, but they have much sentimental interest for old-timers. Actually, *Next Door to the Sun*, by Stanton A. Coblenz, is not really a resurrected magazine story (or, if it is, is one which this reviewer missed.) But it has so much of the exact quality of the same writer's *Into Plutonian Depths*, *The Bue Barbarians*, *After 12,000 Years* and so on that it might just as well be. Coblenz is a poet of considerable attainments, and some thirty years ago was considered to be science-

fiction's leading satirist. Very few traces of either quality now appear. *Next Door to the Sun* takes place, of course, on the planet Mercury, populated by a lost settlement of humans who talk with a Pennsylvania Dutch accent and live under a regimented society whose principal comprehensible feature seems to be a distaste for red-haired men. There is some heavy-handed comedy, but there was also, at least for this reviewer, enjoyment in reading. It may be that some of the enjoyment was nostalgia.

For the same reasons Otis Adelbert Kline's *The Swordsman of Mars* was pleasant to read. At roughly the same date as Coblenz's pre-eminence, science-fiction readers were witnesses to one of the most dogged manhunts in literary history. It seemed that wherever Edgar Rice Burroughs sent John Carter, Otis Adelbert Kline's characters were only inches behind. Venus was predominantly Kline territory, as Mars belonged to Burroughs, but both executed many sorties on the other's holdings. *The Swordsman of Mars* was one of the sorties. It has exactly the merits of the Burroughs Mars books—excitement and a sure victory of good over evil—and exactly the faults.

AVALON has also a brace of L. Sprague de Camp

novels: *Solomon's Stone* and *The Glory That Was*.

Solomon's Stone is a dream-world fantasy; the author proposes that men and women imagine themselves to be different than they are, and that these imagined characters have flesh and blood existence on another level of reality. The story concerns a man who incautiously tampers with a demon and is thrust into the other world for punishment. Fast, entertaining, rather slight.

The Glory That Was presents a near-future world in which the Emperor Vasil, a hobbyist of enormous dimensions, has recreated ancient Greece, complete with Parthenon and smelly drains, and peopled it with brainwashed 21st Century human beings hypnotically persuaded that they are Pericles, Kritias, etc. De Camp is always exact in his history—well, maybe a little more than exact; "pedantic" suggests itself as a possible term sometimes—and his recreations of the past are first-rate. Still, the book has the air of an author repeating himself. *Lest Darkness Fall*, an earlier and far better de Camp story, has no particular resemblance to this one in terms of plot; but the feelings of the characters, the conversations, the paradoxes are so similar that it is impossible to think of the one book without thinking of the



CHIPPER CHARLIE

Never been sick a day in his life. But he knows it can happen to him—so he gets a health check-up every year—just in case. He also supports the American Cancer Society's Crusade. Send your contribution to "Cancer," in care of your local post office.

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other. *The Glory That Was* suffers. *Lest Darkness Fall*, where one man proposes to change the whole course of humanity for a millennium and a half, contains a theme of scope and power; and *The Glory That Was* is, after all, only an adventure.

IN HIS incarnation as an ethnologist, the present reviewer edited a series of collections of originals for Ballantine under the general title of *Star Science Fiction Stories*. Doubleday has just published a hard-cover selection of the selections. It is called *Star of Stars*, and it contains what the undersigned deems to be among the finest works of C. M. Kornbluth, Alfred Bester, William Morrison, Arthur C. Clarke, Henry Kuttner, H. L. Gold, Fritz Leiber and Jack Williamson, with three or four less familiar names (at any rate, less familiar in connection with science-fiction stories: Gerald Kersh is one of them) thrown in.

A similar collection, from *Galaxy Magazine*, is called *Bodyguard and Four Other Short Novels* (also Doubleday), containing not only Christopher Grimm's story, from which the book's title is taken, but stories by Clifford D. Simak, Daniel F. Galouye and others. The editor here, of course, is H. L. Gold.

END