

THE WEIRDEST WORLD

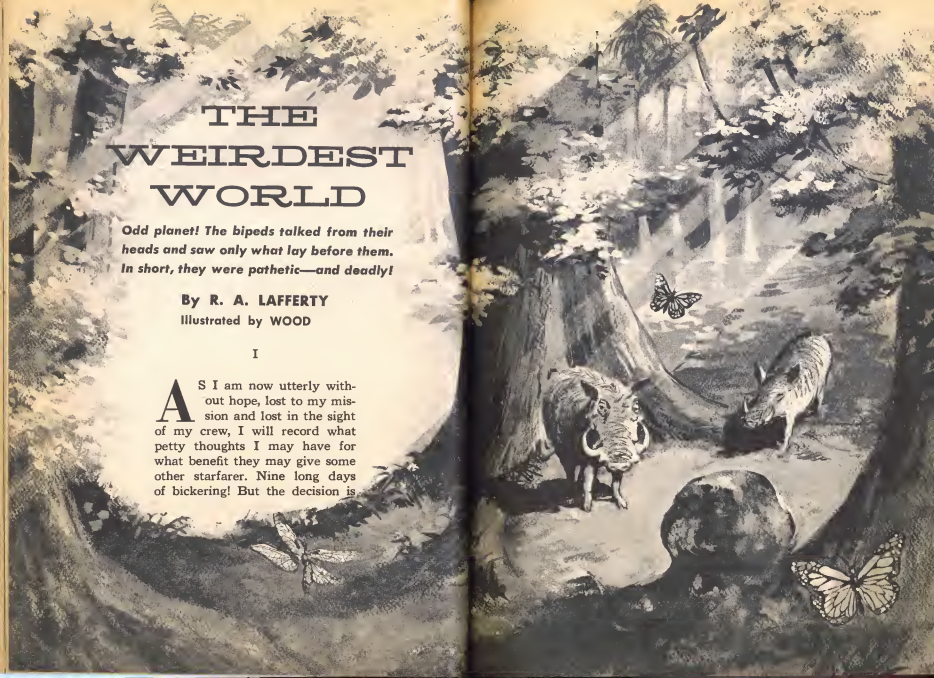
Odd planet! The bipeds talked from their heads and saw only what lay before them. In short, they were pathetic—and deadly!

By R. A. LAFFERTY

Illustrated by WOOD

I

AS I am now utterly without hope, lost to my mission and lost in the sight of my crew, I will record what petty thoughts I may have for what benefit they may give some other starfarer. Nine long days of bickering! But the decision is



sure. The crew will maroon me. I have lost all control over them.

Who could have believed that I would show such weakness when crossing the barrier? By all the tests I should have been the strongest. But the final test is the event itself. I failed.

I only hope that it is a pleasant and habitable planet where they put me down . . .

Later. They have decided. I am no longer the captain even in name. But they have compassion on me. They will do what they can for my comfort. I believe they have already selected my desert island, so to speak, an out-of-the-way globe where they will leave me to die. I will hope for the best. I no longer have any voice in their councils . . .

Later. I will be put down with only the basic survival kit: the ejection mortar and sphere for my last testament to be orbited into the galactic drift; a small cosmoscope so that I will at least have my bearings; one change of blood; an abridged universal language correlator; a compendium of the one thousand philosophic questions yet unsolved to exercise my mind; a small vial of bug-kill; and a stack of sexy magazines . . .

Later. It has been selected. But my mind has grown so demoralized that I do not even rec-

ognize the system, though once this particular region was my specialty. The globe will be habitable. There will be breathable atmosphere which will allow me to dispense with much bothersome equipment. Here the filler used is nitrogen, yet it will not matter. I have breathed nitrogen before. There will be water, much of it saline, but sufficient quantities of sweet. Food will be no problem; before being marooned, I will receive injections that should last me for the rest of my probably short life. Gravity will be within the range of my constitution.

What will be lacking? Nothing but the companionship of my own kind, which is everything.

What a terrible thing it is to be marooned!

ONE of my teachers used to say that the only unforgivable sin in the universe is ineptitude. That I should be the first to succumb to space-ineptitude and be an awkward burden on the rest of them! But it would be disastrous for them to try to travel any longer with a sick man, particularly as their nominal leader. I would be a shadow over them. I hold them no rancor.

It will be today . . .

Later. I am here. I have no real interest in defining where

"here" is, though I have my cosmoscope and could easily determine it. I was anesthetized a few hours before, and put down here in my sleep. The blasted half-acre of their landing is near. No other trace of them is left.

Yet it is a good choice and not greatly unlike home. It is the nearest resemblance I have seen on the entire voyage, which is to say that the pseudodendrons are enough like trees to remind me of trees, the herbage near enough to grass to satisfy one who had never known real grass. It is a green, somewhat waterlogged land of pleasant temperature.

The only inhabitants I have encountered are a preoccupied race of hump-backed browsers who pay me scant notice. These are quadruped and myopic, and spend nearly their entire time at feeding. It may be that I am invisible to them. Yet they hear my voice and shy away somewhat from it. I am able to communicate with them only poorly. Their only vocalization is a sort of vibrant windy roar, but when I answer in kind, they appear more puzzled than communicative.

They have this peculiarity: when they come to an obstacle of terrain or thicket, they either go laboriously around it or force their way through it. It does not seem to occur to them to fly over

it. They are as gravity-bound as a newborn baby.

What air-traveling creatures I have met are of a considerably smaller size. These are more vocal than the myopic quadrupeds, and I have had some success in conversing with them, but my results still await a more leisurely semantic interpretation. Such communications of theirs as I have analyzed are quite commonplace. They have no real philosophy and are singularly lacking in aspiration; they are almost total extroverts and have no more than the rudiments of introspection.

Yet they have managed to tell me some amusing anecdotes. They are quite good-natured, though moronic.

They say that neither they nor the myopic quadrupeds are the dominant race here, but rather a large grublike creature lacking a complete outer covering. From what they are able to convey of this breed, it is a nightmarish kind of creation. One of the flyers even told me that the giant grubs travel upright on a bifurcated tail, but this is difficult to credit. Besides, I believe that humor is at least a minor component of the mentality of my airy friends. I will call them birds, though they are but a sorry caricature of the birds at home. . .

LATER. I am being hunted. I am being hunted by the giant grubs. Doubling back, I have seen them on my trail, examining it with great curiosity.

The birds had given me a very inadequate idea of these. They are indeed unfinished — they do lack a complete outer covering. Despite their giant size, I am convinced that they are grubs, living under rocks and in masses of rotten wood. Nothing in nature gives the impression of so lacking an outer covering as the grub, that obese, unfinished worm.

These are, however, simple bipeds. They are wrapped in a cocoon which they seem never to have shed, as though their emergence from the larval state were incomplete. It is a loose artificial sheath covering the central portion of the corpus. They seem never to divest themselves of it, though it is definitely not a part of the body. When I have analyzed their minds, I will know the reason for their carrying it. Now I can only conjecture. It would seem a compulsion, some psychological bond that dooms them in their apparent adult state to carry their cocoons with them.

Later, I am captured by three of the giant grubs. I had barely time to swallow my communication sphere. They pinned me down and beat me with sticks. I

was taken by surprise and was not momentarily able to solve their language, though it came to me after a short interval. It was discordant and vocal and entirely gravity-bound, by which I mean that its thoughts were chained to its words. There seemed nothing in them above the vocal. In this the giant grubs were less than the birds, even though they had a practical power and cogency that the birds lacked.

"What'll we do with the blob?" asked one.

"Why," said the second, "you hit it on that end and I'll hit it on this. We don't know which end is the head."

"Let's try it for bait," said the third. "Catfish might go for it."

"We could keep it alive till we're ready to use it. Then it would stay fresh."

"No, let's kill it. It doesn't look too fresh, even the way it is."

"Gentlemen, you are making a mistake," I said. "I have done nothing to merit death. And I am not without talent. Besides, you have not considered the possibility that I may be forced to kill you three instead. I will not die willingly. Also I will thank you to stop pounding on me with those sticks. It hurts."

I was surprised and shocked at the sound of my own voice. It

was nearly as harsh as that of the grubs. But this was my first attempt at their language, and musicality does not become it.

"Hey, fellows, did you hear that? Was that the blob talking? Or was one of you playing a joke? Harry? Stanley? Have you been practicing to be ventriloquists?"

"Not me."

"Not me either. It sure sounded like it was it."

"Hey, blob, was that you? Can you talk, blob?"

"CERTAINLY I can talk," I responded. "I am not an infant. Nor am I a blob. I am a creature superior to your own kind, if you are examples. Or it may be that you are only children. Perhaps you are still in the pupa stage. Tell me, is yours an early stage, or an arrested development, or are you indeed adult?"

"Hey, fellows, we don't have to take that from any blob. I'll cave in its blasted head."

"That's its tail."

"It's its head. It's the end it talks with."

"Gentlemen, perhaps I can set you straight," I said. "That is my tail you are thwacking with that stick, and I am warning you to stop it. Of course I was talking with my tail. I was only doing it in imitation of you. I am new at

the language and its manner of speaking. Yet it may be that I have made a grotesque mistake. Is that your heads that you are waving in the air? Well, then, I will talk with my head, if that is the custom. But I warn you again not to hit me on either end with those sticks."

"Hey, fellows, I bet we could sell that thing. I bet we could sell it to Billy Wilkins for his Reptile Farm."

"How would we get it there?"

"Make it walk. Hey blob, can you walk?"

"I can travel, certainly, but I would not stagger along precariously on a pair of flesh stilts with my head in the air, as you do. When I travel, I do not travel upside down."

"Well, let's go, then. We're going to sell you to Billy Wilkins for his Reptile Farm. If he can use a blob, he'll put you in one of the tanks with the big turtles and alligators. You think you'll like them?"

"I am lonesome in this lost world," I replied sadly, "and even the company of you peeled grubs is better than nothing. I am anxious to adopt a family and settle down here for what years of life I have left. It may be that I will find compatibility with the species you mention. I do not know what they are."

"Hey, fellows, this blob isn't a

bad guy at all. I'd shake your hand; blob, if I knew where it was. Let's go to Billy Wilkins' place and sell him."

II

WE traveled to Billy Wilkins' place. My friends were amazed when I took to the air and believed that I had deserted them. They had no cause to distrust me. Without them I would have had to rely on intuition to reach Billy Wilkins, and even then I would lack the proper introductions.

"Hey, Billy," said my loudest friend, whose name was Cecil, "what will you give us for a blob? It flies and talks and isn't a bad fellow at all. You'd get more tourists to come to your reptile show if you had a talking blob in it. He could sing songs and tell stories. I bet he could even play the guitar."

"Well, Cecil, I'll just give you all ten dollars for it and try to figure out what it is later. I'm a little ahead on my hunches now, so I can afford to gamble on this one. I can always pickle it and exhibit it as a genuine hippopotamus kidney."

"Thank you, Billy. Take care of yourself, blob."

"Good-by for now, gentlemen," I said. "I would like you to visit me some evening as soon as I

am acclimated to my new surroundings. I will throw a whing-ding for you—as soon as I find out what a whing-ding is."

"My God," said Billy Wilkins, "it talks! It really talks!"

"We told you it could talk and fly, Billy."

"It talks, it talks," said Billy. "Where's that blasted sign painter? Eustace, come here. We got to paint a new sign!"

The turtles in the tank I was put into did have a sound basic philosophy which was absent in the walking grubs. But they were slow and lacking inner fire. They would not be obnoxious company, but neither would they give me excitement and warmth. I was really more interested in the walking grubs.

Eustace was a black grub, while the others had all been white; but like them he had no outside casing of his own, and like them he also staggered about on flesh stilts with his head in the air.

It wasn't that I was naive or hadn't seen bipeds before. But I don't believe anyone ever became entirely accustomed to seeing a biped travel in its peculiar manner.

"Good afternoon, Eustace," I said pleasantly enough. The eyes of Eustace were large and white. He was a more handsome specimen than the other grubs.



"That you talking, bub? Say, you really can talk, can't you? I thought Mr. Billy was fooling. Now just you hold that expression a minute and let me get it set in my mind. I can paint anything, once I get it set in my mind. What's your name, blob? Have blobs names?"

"Not in your manner. With us the name and the soul, I believe you call it, are the same thing and cannot be vocalized, so I will have to adopt a name of your sort. What would be a good name?"

"Bub, I was always partial to George Albert Leroy Ellery. That was my grandfather's name."

"Should I also have a family name?"

"Sure."

"What would you suggest?"

"How about McIntosh?"

"That will be fine. I will use it."

I TALKED to the turtles while Eustace was painting my portrait on tent canvas.

"Is the name of this world Florida?" I asked one of them. "The road signs said Florida."

"World, world, world, water, water, water, glub, glub, glub," said one of them.

"Yes, but is this particular world we are on named Florida?"

"World, world, water, water, glub," said another.

"Eustace, I can get nothing from these fellows," I called. "Is this world named Florida?"

"Mr. George Albert, you are right in the middle of Florida, the greatest state in the universe."

"Having traveled, Eustace, I have great reservations that it is the greatest. But it is my new home and I must cultivate a loyalty to it."

I went up in a tree to give advice to two young birds trying to construct a nest. This was obviously their first venture.

"You are going about it all wrong," I told them. "First consider that this will be your home, and then consider how you can make your home most beautiful."

"This is the way they've always built them," said one of the birds.

"There must be an element of utility, yes," I told them. "But the dominant motif should be beauty. The impression of expanded vistas can be given by long low walls and parapets."

"This is the way they've always built them," said the other bird.

"Remember to embody new developments," I said. "Just say to yourself, 'This is the newest nest in the world.' Always say

that about any task you attempt. It inspires you."

"This is the way they've always built them," said the birds. "Go build your own nest."

"Mr. George Albert," called Eustace, "Mr. Billy won't like your flying around those trees. You're supposed to stay in your tank."

"I was only getting a little air and talking to the birds," I said. "You can talk to the birds?" asked Eustace.

"Cannot anyone?"

"I can, a little," said Eustace. "I didn't know anyone else could."

But when Billy Wilkins returned and heard the report that I had been flying about, I was put in the snake house, in a cage that was tightly meshed top and sides. My cellmate was a surly python named Pete.

"See you stay on that side," said Pete. "You're too big for me to swallow. But I might try."

"There is something bothering you, Pete," I said. "You have a bad disposition. That can come only from a bad digestion or a bad conscience"

"I have both," said Pete. "The first is because I bolt my food. The second is because — well, I forget the reason, but it's my conscience."

"Think hard, Pete. Why have you a bad conscience?"

"Snakes always have bad consciences. We have forgotten the crime, but we remember the guilt."

"Perhaps you should seek advice from someone, Pete."

"I kind of think it was someone's smooth advice that started us on all this. He talked the legs right off us."

BILLY WILKINS came to the cage with another "man," as the walking grubs call themselves.

"That it?" asked the other man. "And you say it can talk?"

"Of course I talk," I answered for Billy Wilkins. "I have never known a creature who couldn't talk in some manner. My name is George Albert Leroy Ellery McIntosh. I don't believe that I heard yours, sir."

"Bracken. Blackjack Bracken. I was telling Billy here that if he really had a blob that could talk, I might be able to use it in my night club. We could have you here at the Snake Ranch in the daytime for the tourists and kids. Then I could have you at the club at night. We could work out an act. Do you think you could learn to play the guitar?"

"Probably. But it would be much easier for me merely to duplicate the sound."

"But then how could you sing

and make guitar noise at the same time?"

"You surely don't think I am limited to one voice box?"

"Oh. I didn't know. What's that big metal ball you have there?"

"That's my communication sphere, to record my thoughts. I would not be without it. When in danger, I swallow it. When in extreme danger, I will have to escape to a spot where I have concealed my ejection mortar, and send my sphere into the galactic drift on a chance that it may be found."

"That's no kind of gag to put in an act. What I have in mind is something like this."

Blackjack Bracken told a joke. It was a childish one and in poor taste.

"I don't believe that is quite my style," I said.

"All right, what would you suggest?"

"I thought that I might lecture your patrons on the Higher Ethic."

"Look, George Albert, my patrons don't even have the lower ethic."

"And just what sort of recompense are we talking about?" I asked.

"Billy and I had about settled on a hundred and fifty a week."

"A hundred and fifty for whom?"

"Why, for Billy."

"Let us make it a hundred and fifty for myself, and ten per cent for Billy as my agent."

"Say, this blob's real smart, isn't he, Billy?"

"Too smart."

"Yes, sir, George Albert, you're one smart blob. What kind of contract have you signed with Billy here?"

"No contract."

"Just a gentlemen's agreement?"

"No agreement."

"Billy, you can't hold him in a cage without a contract. That's slavery. It's against the law."

"But, Blackjack, a blob isn't people."

"Try proving that in court. Will you sign a contract with me, George Albert?"

"I will not dump Billy. He befriended me and gave me a home with the turtles and snakes. I will sign a joint contract with the two of you. We will discuss terms tomorrow—after I have estimated the attendance both here and at the night club."

III

OF the walking grubs (who call themselves "people") there are two kinds, and they place great emphasis on the difference. From this stems a large part of their difficulties. This dis-

inction, which is one of polarity, cuts quite across the years and ability and station of life. It is not confined only to the people grubs, but also involves apparently all the beings on the planet Florida.

It appears that a person is committed to one or the other polarity at the beginning of life, maintaining that polarity until death. The interlocking attraction-repulsion complex set up by these two opposable types has deep emotional involvements. It is the cause of considerable concern and disturbance, as well as desire and inspiration. There is a sort of poetic penumbra about the whole thing that tends to disguise its basic simplicity, expressible as a simultaneous polarity equation.

Complete segregation of the two types seems impossible. If it has ever been tried, it has now evidently been abandoned as impractical.

There is indeed an intangible difference between the two types, so that before that first day at the Reptile Ranch was finished, I was able to differentiate between the two more than ninety per cent of the time. The knowledge of this difference in polarity seems to be intuitive.

These two I will call the Beta and Gamma, or Boy and Girl, types. I began to see that this

opposability of the two types was one of the great driving forces of the people.

In the evening I was transported to the night club and I was a success. I would not entertain them with blue jokes or blue lyrics, but the patrons seemed fascinated by my simple imitations of all the instruments of the orchestra and my singing of comic ballads that Eustace had taught me in odd moments that day. They were also interested in the way that I drank gin—that is, emptying the bottle without breaking the seal. (It seems that the grub-people are unable to absorb a liquid without making direct contact with it.)

And I met Margaret, one of the "girl" singers.

I had been wondering to which type of people I might show affinity. Now I knew. I was definitely a Beta type, for I was attracted to Margaret, who was unmistakably a Gamma. I began to understand the queer effect that these types have on each other.

She came over to my cage.

"I want to rub your head for good luck before I go on," she said.

"Thank you, Margaret," I replied, "but that is not my head."

She sang with incomparable sadness, with all the sorrow and sordidness that appear to be the

lot of unfortunate Gammas. It was the essence of melancholy made into music. It was a little bit like the ghost music on the asteroid Artemis, a little like the death chants on Dolmena. Sex and sorrow. Nostalgia. Regret.

Her singing shook me with a yearning that had no precedent. She came back to my cage.

"You were wonderful, Margaret," I said.

"I'm always wonderful when I'm singing for my supper. I am less wonderful in the rare times that I am well fed. But are you happy, little buddy?"

"I had become almost so, till I heard you sing. Now I am overcome with sorrow and longing. Margaret, I am fascinated with you."

"I go for you too, blob. You're my buddy. Isn't it funny that the only buddy I have in the world is a blob? But if you'd seen some of the guys I've been married to—boy! I wouldn't insult you by calling them blobs. Have to go now. See you tomorrow night—if they keep us both on."

NOW there was a problem to face. It was necessary that I establish control over my environment, and at once. How else could I aspire to Margaret?

I knew that the heart of the entire place here was neither the bar nor the entertainment there-

in, nor the cuisine, nor the dancing. The heart of the enterprise was the Casino. Here was the money that mattered; the rest was but garnish.

I had them bring me into the gambling rooms.

I had expected problems of complexity here with which the patrons worked for their gain or loss. Instead there was an almost amazing simplicity. All the games were based on first aspect numbers only. Indeed, everything on the Planet Florida seemed based on first aspect numbers.

Now it is an elemental fact that first aspect numbers do not carry within them their own prediction. Nor were the people even possessed of the prediction key that lies over the very threshold of the second aspect series.

These people were actually wagering sums—the symbols of prosperity—blindly, not knowing for sure whether they would win or lose. They were selecting numbers by hunch or at random with no assurance of profit. They were choosing a hole for a ball to fall into without knowing whether that was the right hole!

I do not believe that I was ever so amazed at anything in my life.

But here was my opportunity to establish control over my environment.

I began to play the games.

Usually I would watch a round first, to be sure that I understood just what was going on. Then I would play a few times . . . as many as it took to break the game.

I broke game after game. When he could no longer pay me, Blackjack closed the Casino in exasperation.

Then we played poker, he and I and several others. This was even more simple. I suddenly realized that the grub-people could see only one side of the cards at a time.

I played and I won.

I owned the Casino now, and all of those people were now working for me. Billy Wilkins also played with us, so that in short order I also owned the Reptile Ranch.

Before the evening was over, I owned a race track, a beach hotel, and a theater in a place named New York.

I had begun to establish control over my environment . . .

LATER. Now started the golden days. I increased my control and did what I could for my friends.

I got a good doctor for my old friend and roommate, Pete the python, and he began receiving treatment for his indigestion. I got a jazzy sports car for my friend Eustace imported from

somewhere called Italy. And I buried Margaret in mink, for she had a fix on the fur of that mysterious animal. She enjoyed draping it about her in the form of coats, capes, cloaks, mantles and stoles, though the weather didn't really require it.

I had now won several banks, a railroad, an airline, and a casino in somewhere named Havana.

"You're somebody now," said Margaret. "You really ought to dress better. Or are you dressed? I never know. I don't know if part of that is clothes or if all of it is you. But at least I've learned which is your head. I think we should be married in May. It's so common to be married in June. Just imagine me being Mrs. George Albert Leroy Ellery McIntosh! You know, we have become quite an item. And do you know there are three biographies of you out—*Burgeoning Blob*, *The Blob from Way Out*, *The Hidden Hand Behind the Blob—What Does it Portend?* And the governor has invited us to dine tomorrow. I do wish you would learn to eat. If you weren't so nice, you'd be creepy. I always say there's nothing wrong with marrying a man, or a blob, with money. It shows foresight on the part of a girl. You know you will have to get a blood test? You had better get it tomorrow.

You do have blood, don't you?"

I did, but not, of course, of the color and viscosity of hers. But I could give it that color and viscosity temporarily. And it would react negative in all the tests.

She mused, "They are all jealous of me. They say they wouldn't marry a blob. They mean they couldn't . . . Do you have to carry that tin ball with you all the time?"

"Yes. It is my communication sphere. In it I record my thoughts. I would be lost without it."

"Oh, like a diary. How quaint!"

Yes, those were the golden days. The grubs appeared to me in a new light, for was not Margaret also a grub? Yet she seemed not so unfinished as the rest. Though lacking a natural outer casing, she had not the appearance of crawling out from under a rock. She was quite an attractive "girl." And she cared for me.

What more could I wish? I was affluent. I was respected. I was in control of my environment. And I could aid my friends, of whom I had now acquired an astonishing number.

Moreover, my old space-inaptitude sickness had left me. I never felt better in my life. Ah, golden days, one after the other like a pleasant dream. And soon I am to be married!

IV

TH**ERE** has been a sudden change. As on the Planet Hecube, where full summer turns into the dead of the winter in minutes, to the destruction of many travelers, so was it here. My world is threatened!

It is tottering, all that I have built up. I will fight. I will have the best lawyers on the planet. I am not done. But I am threatened. . .

Later. This may be the end. The appeal court has given its decision. A blob may not own property in Florida. A blob is not a person.

Of course I am not a person, I never pretended to be. But I am a *personage!* I will yet fight this thing. . .

Later. I have lost everything. The last appeal is gone. By definition, I am an animal of indeterminate origin, and my property is being completely stripped from me.

I made an eloquent appeal and it moved them greatly. There were tears in their eyes. But there was greed in the set of their mouths. They have a vested interest in stripping me. Each will seize a little.

And I am left a pauper, a vassal, an animal, a slave. This is always the last doom of the marooned, to be a despised alien



at the mercy of a strange world.

Yet it should not be hopeless. I will have Margaret. Since my contract with Billy Wilkins and Blackjack Bracken, long since bought up, is no longer in effect, Margaret should be able to handle my affairs as a person. I believe that I have great earning powers yet, and I can win as much as I wish by gambling. We will treat this as only a technicality. We shall acquire new fortune. I will reestablish control over my environment. I will bring back the golden days. A few of my old friends are still loyal to me, Margaret, Pete the python, Eustace. . .

Later. The world has caved in completely. Margaret has thrown me over.

"I'm sorry, bobby," she said, "but it just won't work. You're still nice, but without money you are only a blob. How could I marry a blob?"

"But we can earn more money! I am talented."

"No, you're box-office poison now. You were a fad, and fads die quickly."

"But, Margaret, I can win as much as I wish by gambling."

"Not a chance, bobby. Nobody will gamble with you any more. You're through, blob. I will miss you, though. There will be a new blue note in my ballads when I sing for my supper, after

the mink coats are all gone. 'By now."

"Margaret, do not leave me! What of all our golden days together?"

But all she said was "'By now,' And she was gone forever.

I AM desolate and my old space-ineptitude has returned. My recovery was an illusion. I am so ill with awkwardness that I can no longer fly. I must walk on the ground like one of the giant grubs. A curse on this planet Florida and all its sister orbs! What a miserable world this is!

How could I have been tricked by a young Gamma type of the walking grub? Let her crawl back under her ancestral rocks with all the rest of her kind. . . No, no, I do not mean that. To me she will always remain a dream, a broken dream.

I am no longer welcome at the Casino. They kicked me down the front steps.

I no longer have a home at the Reptile Ranch.

"Mr. George Albert," said Eustace, "I just can't afford to be seen with you any more. I have my position to consider, with a sports car and all that."

And Pete the python was curt. "Well, big shot, I guess you aren't so big after all. And you were sure no friend of mine.

When you had that doctor cure me of my indigestion, you left me with nothing but my bad conscience. I wish I could get my indigestion back."

"A curse on this world," I said. "World, world, water, water, slug, slug," said the turtles in their tanks, my only friends.

So I have gone back into the woods to die. I have located my ejection mortar, and when I know that death is finally on me, I will fire off my communication sphere and hope it will reach

the galactic drift. Whoever finds it—friend—space traveler—you who were too impatient to remain on your own world—be you warned of this one! Here ingratitude is the rule and cruelty the main sport. The unfinished grubs have come out from under their rocks and they walk this world upside down with their heads in the air. Their friendship is fleeting, their promises are like the wind.

I am near my end.

—R. A. LAFFERTY



FORECAST

In the wide-open pages of a magazine the size of *Galaxy* (biggest in the field at any price, we like to keep reminding you) is room for many stories. This is a good thing, because we've got many stories (and fine ones) in the bank to draw on, and we're splurging them out to you as fast as we can. We don't know for sure everyone who will show up next issue. But we have in inventory first-rate yarns by Robert Bloch, Margaret St. Clair, J. F. Bone, R. A. Lafferty, Fritz Leiber, Mirriam Allen deFord, Edward Wellen, Allen Kim Lang and Algis Budrys . . .

We do know that Jack Vance will be with us in August. This is a 1-o-n-g novelet called THE

MOON MOTH, with the sense of wonder and touch of strange that Vance knows how to give. Is the Moon Moth a person? No. Is it an animal? No. It's — well, read the story, and then you'll know better than we can say.

Also J. T. McIntosh is on the docket, with a fine, moving novelet about two men who had to be enemies but could not help being friends: THE GATE-KEEPERS. It's one of McIntosh's best — and that's very good indeed.

For the shorts we can promise you Lester del Rey and Judith Merril, and maybe a clutch from the illustrious lineup above . . . and the usual features, of course!



GALAXY'S 5 Star Shelf

The Vortex Blaster by E. E. Smith. Gnome Press.

"DOC" SMITH ruled the SF roost for a decade and a half during the years surrounding the Troubled Thirties. Each magazine installment of his *Skylark* and *Lensman* stories was breathlessly awaited by Space Opera addicts (and, in those days, who wasn't one?)

The *Vortex Blaster*, the latest of the Lensman sagas, is as tremendously broad in scope as its famous predecessors and, also

like them, on occasions painfully coy.

Synopsis: Atomic vortexes, raging areas of destruction, are blighting the surfaces of numerous planets. Inherently unstable, they must be quenched by an exactly calculated blast at a precise instant of time. Computers have been unable to supply data fast enough to do the job. Ergo, the *Vortex Blaster*, a mental freak with a combination of Univac and Superman condensed into the brain of one man. It is he who discovers the vast plot

against civilization masked by the immediate peril of the vortexes.

Plotwise composed of pure nostalgia, it is easy to see how the modern trend of SF has passed good Doc Smith by. But hang me for a Boskonian zwilnik and also by the great god Klono if I didn't get a huge bang out of his super-duper yarn.

Rating: (auld land syne) ****

Agent of Vega by James H. Schmitz. Gnome Press.

"SUPER-SCIENCE FICTION in the grand manner," brags the blurb in what turns out to be almost an understatement. This lineal descendant of the Doc Smith sagas fittingly follows the old master's latest and points up the "new look" of S. O.

This is Space Opera composed by a Space-Wagner, for a universe-wide stage and a chorus and orchestra of ET's. Three novelettes from *Astounding* and one from *Galaxy* present a picture of titanic conflict against ruthless enemies. Zone Agents — supermen and women of the Eliot Ness ilk — are forced to conduct their campaigns against evil on a sub-rosa level due to the restrictions of interstellar agreement and laissez-faire. However, their mental, physical and mechanical equipment are such that

it hardly remains a fair fight. The space ships of the agents themselves are telepathic and omnipotent. Even E. E. Smith never had it *that* good!

What places Schmitz's work above run of the mill S. O. is the quality as well as breadth of his imagination, but most of all his touch for characterization — which suffuses even his ET's and super-mechanisms with the (sometimes incongruous) flush of humanity.

Rating: ****½

A Guide to the Stars by Patrick Moore. W. W. Norton & Co., Inc.

IN CONTRAST to the views of a noted British professor of astronomy, Moore believes that popularizations excite interest so that the non-scientific layman can follow up his thirst for knowledge with more authoritative information. Moore does well by his audience.

Though his book contains "no new theories or world-shaking pronouncements," he writes with skill sufficient to engross even a merely superficially interested reader.

First Men to the Moon by Wernher von Braun. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.

VON BRAUN'S book is double-

barreled. The central core is a fictional story of the adventuresome voyage of the first two men to reach the moon. It is a highly detailed and absorbing blow-by-blow account of the 10-day agoray.

The secondary section of the book is a serious text explaining the technical points raised by the fiction, and is marginally placed on the identical pages so that reference can be immediate.

The illustrations are exceptional in lucidity, detail and abundance. Even the best grounded SF buff will find new and astonishing material over which to dream.

Conquest of Life by Adam Lukens. Avalon Books, N. Y. \$2.95

LUKENS SHOWED considerable originality in his first Avalon novel, *The Sea People*. Unfortunately that opus had little else to recommend it.

His present story concerns a future when Earthwomen, who outnumber males, are also murderously sadistic in their quest for entertainment. These delightful females purchase "reclaimed men", factory-rebuilt human robots fashioned from corpses, a la Frankenstein, as slave companions.

The story's prime mover is a former colonist of a distant star,

widowed on a primitive planet and unwilling inheritor of a reclaimed man. The yarn is concerned with her humanitarian attempt to eradicate the slave conditioning of the human robots.

Lukens's story is fast paced and cerebrally interesting but is plagued by an unfortunate inability to handle words.

Rating: **½

Star Surgeon by Alan E. Nourse, David McKay Co.

EARTH HAS been many things to many authors, but I believe that this is the first time that it has been the Hospital Center of the universe. Such a plot pivot is understandable, stemming from A. E. Nourse, M. D.

Dr. Nourse cuts a wide swath with his crusading pen: he attacks bigotry, nationalism and dependency with equal virulence. Bigotry he finds in the treatment of the only alien ever to attempt to earn his degree on Hospital Earth; nationalism in the desire of certain top officials to retain a monopoly of medical knowledge and skill for Earth alone; dependency of the alien on well-intentioned Terrans to an excessive degree, stultifying growth of character and self-reliance.

The story concerns the odyssey of the probationary three man crew of a General Practice patrol

ship to star systems covered by a sort of Blue Cross plan. The plot is predictable but credible, characterizations good, detail fine.

Rating: ****

The Challenge of the Sea by Arthur C. Clarke. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.

ARTHUR SEA CLARKE is back on the water wagon, interpreting the wet frontier in much the manner of his *Exploration of Space*. It is difficult to judge which of the two frontiers holds the greater attraction for him — or for us, for that matter. We are at the bare threshold of each and both hold mysteries and promises beyond our imagination.

More than just dealing with the obvious — we are rapidly depleting our land-based resources and must turn more and more to the sea for food, minerals and power — Clarke presents a plethora of fascinating fact interspersed with conjecture.

Item: "Six miles down, air is squeezed denser than water. A bubble would not rise but sink."

Item: In 1900, Greek divers found bronze fragments that hid their secret for more than 50 years. They are parts of an elaborate calculating machine . . . a computer built before the time of Christ!

The Fantastic Universe Omnibus edited by Hans Stefan Santessen. Prentice-Hall, Inc.

ALTHOUGH *Fantastic Universe* has joined the too-lengthy list of defunct SF Mags, the above anthology helps to perpetuate its title. There are a round score of stories, diversified in plot, treatment and quality.

Among the best of the stories, *Bounty Hunter* by Avram Davidson, a shocker; *A Thing of Custom* by L. Sprague de Camp, a sprightly bit of froth about extraterrestrial VIP's on a Cook's Tour of Earth; and *Exile from Space*, a long novelette by Judith Merrill, stand out above the rest.

The remainder of the yarns are uneven enough to earn an overall.

Rating: ***½

Stadium Beyond the Stars by Milton Lesser. John C. Winston Co.

LESSER'S JUVENILE is a two-tone account in black and white of mankind's first interstellar Olympiad, twenty generations after colonization of Proxima Centauri.

Although melodramatic hogwash plotwise, the story contains enough action and originality for

Rating for youngsters: **½

—FLOYD C. GALE