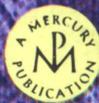


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Fantasy AND

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AUGUST

50¢

THE PRODUCTIONS OF TIME

by John Brunner

ISAAC ASIMOV

JUDITH MERRIL

ROBERT E. HOWARD



Fantasy and Science Fiction

AUGUST

Including Venture Science Fiction

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That the antics of lunatics can provide some unusual theatrical effects was recently demonstrated in a play by Peter Weiss ("Marat/Sade")—a play based on the fact that the inmates of Charenton Asylum did perform "therapeutic" theatrical entertainments (in the early 1800's) which were, in fact, devised and directed by the notorious Marquis De Sade (himself an inmate). This story is about the creation of a most unusual play. The props are mysterious; the playwright is an enigmatic genius, apparently a contemporary Sade; and, although the players are not lunatics, neither are they exactly "normal" (producing an effect more powerful, because more involving). The result is John Brunner's brand-new novel—an impressive and inventive science fiction thriller.

THE PRODUCTIONS OF TIME

(1st of 2 parts)

by John Brunner

Eternity is in love with the productions of time.

—Blake: *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

I

PRECISELY BECAUSE THE IDEA made him nervous, Murray Douglas rang the Proscenium Restaurant and booked a table for one o'clock before going to bail out his car. His hand was shaking as he cradled the phone.

It had been a long time. It had been an eternity.

To bring himself back under control he drew a deep breath and

let it out slowly. Then he picked up his travelling bag and went down to the street to find a taxi.

The garage, at least, hadn't changed. Tom Hickie was still in his little glass-sided office; phone in one hand, he glanced around as Murray slid back the door. For a moment he was puzzled. Then he caught himself.

"Oh, Mr. Douglas! It's been such a long time, sir, I almost didn't recognise you."

"You got my letter?" Murray said roughly. He didn't like to think about people not recognising him. The mirror had told him too much already. Last time he called here, he had already begun to lose his youthful handsomeness, but now he had really changed. There was slack skin along his jaw, there were furrows in his forehead, and his scalp was showing at the crown. Murray Douglas, at thirty-two, looked fifty and felt a hundred.

"Yes, sir—the boys are bringing your car out now." A glint of curiosity showed in Hickie's eyes. "I gather you've been ill, sir. I was very sorry to hear—"

Abruptly Murray was sick of the polite fiction his agent had circulated. He said, "The hell! I haven't been ill. I've been in a sanatorium to stop me drinking myself to death."

Hickie's mouth, opening to say something else, stayed open for a long moment. But he was saved further embarrassment by the arrival of a mechanic at the door.

"The Daimler's ready, Mr. Hickie!" he called.

"How is it?" Murray demanded.

"Your car, boss?" The mechanic turned to him. "We had a fair amount of work to do on it. Excuse my saying so, but you drive your cars damned hard."

"I used to," Murray muttered. "I used to drive myself, too . . . How much do I owe you for storage, Tom?"

At first, hearing the beautiful even purr of the V-8 under the downswept hood served to mask the painful knowledge that Hickie had literally not known who he was. He drove through the West End towards St. Martin's Lane and the Proscenium.

But things had changed here, too. There were new one-way routings, and parking meters had sprouted. By the time he had wasted half an hour in search of a vacant space, he was back in the depression where he had spent most of the past months. What was the point of going to the Proscenium, anyway? A bloody silly theatrical gesture!

Blazes, but I'm going through with it anyway. I've backed down and backed out too often.

He made his way, sullen-faced, to the restaurant.

Emile, the head-waiter, recognised him all right, but even he of the professional smile could not wholly hide his shock at the change a year had wrought. And he had another reason for distress.

"I'm very sorry, Mr. Douglas! But your reservation was for one o'clock, and when at half past one you had not arrived. . . .!"

You wouldn't have dared do that in the old days. Now you think I'm washed up, you—

Murray forced himself to swallow his resentment. He said, "Never mind. You can fit me in somewhere, I guess."

Emile pointed towards the back of the crowded restaurant. "There is our only table empty, Mr. Douglas. Yes, Mr. Crombie, I'll be with you in a moment!"

Puzzled glances ("I'm sure I know him, but—!") followed him through the room. None of the people who looked up was known to him; there were several people he did know, of course, but he was glad all those former friends were too busy talking to notice him. The table he was given was blessedly inconspicuous, half-screened by a bank of indoor creepers. At the next table, around a corner and in an alcove, were two men whose voices he immediately recognised—Pat Burnett, drama critic of the *Gazette*, and Ralph Heston-Wood of *Acting*. They were deep in discussion of a rehearsal they had just seen. Murray sat listening with intense concentration.

God, but he missed it all! Why had he come here alone, instead of maybe ringing his agent? Roger would have been glad—

No, probably he wouldn't. Not after the endless loans, the savage complaints, the moans of despair.

Since coming out of the sanatorium, Murray Douglas had become far better acquainted than ever in his life with Murray Douglas. And he didn't like himself very much.

He picked favourites from the menu: avocado pear, *truite au bleu*.

"And for wine?" the wine-waiter was saying.

"Apple-juice," Murray said curtly. "Chilled." He lit a cigarette and leaned back. Now the critics behind the screen of plants had switched to a different subject. Hearing what it was, he became all ears.

"What do you make of this man Delgado, Ralph—this Argentinian that Blizzard's got hold of?"

"Didn't you see the thing he did in Paris with Jean-Paul Garrigue?" Heston-Wood countered. "*Trois Fois à la Fois?*"

"No," Burnett grunted. "And from all accounts it wasn't my cup of tea."

Heston-Wood gave a chuckle. "Yes, I still remember what you had to say about *The Connection*, Pat!"

"Don't change the subject. Seriously, what's the point of all this nonsense? If you have a play you have a play and there's an author who put it together. But from what I can gather there *isn't* a play. There's a fast-talking Dago who's conned Blizzard into vouching for him and someone else into putting up a lot of money, and a gang of dead-beats and has-beens scraped off the bottom of the barrel because no one in his right mind will touch the job."

Murray felt anger close around his heart.

"Pat, you carry this theatre-for-the-masses pose too far." Heston-Wood drank noisily. "The play Delgado did with Garrigue af-

forded me my most stimulating evening since *Godot*."

"It didn't run," Burnett said.

"No. Well, there was Garigue's suicide, you know."

"Yes, but—rest in peace, and and all that bunkum—why didn't it pick up with a replacement?"

"Because the piece was created around a specific cast. There is a point to the idea—you just won't see it."

"I know all about that. Saroyan tried the same thing at Theatre Workshop, remember? I thought it was abysmal nonsense." Clinking glass as Burnett poured more wine. "You get your cast together, you work up dialogue co-operatively, and you call the result a play. But out of this bunch of second-rate hams you get a masterpiece? Why, there's nobody better in the whole gang than Murray Douglas, and he's turned into such a gin-swilling sot there isn't a producer in London who'll look at him. And he never had talent anyway—just a pretty face."

Murray stood up. He didn't bother to push the table away; it tilted and spilled a couple of knives off its edge. Face absolutely white, he went around the concealing greenery.

There was a clang as Heston-Wood dropped his fork. It was the last noise. A total silence invaded the restaurant. Burnett stared up at Murray as though at a ghost. He was a burly man whose gim-

mick was what Heston-Wood called "theatre for the masses," and the picture at the head of his column showed him grinning around a Priestley-type meerschaum pipe.

"Get up," Murray said.

"Now—now look here, Murray!"

Murray's rage lent him strength which, after the wreck he had made of his body, he was not entitled to. He dragged Burnett to his feet and hit him under the jaw.

The burly man staggered backwards and collapsed on the table of another party. Ignoring the cries of alarm which now went up, Murray drew a deep breath.

"Someone ought to have done that to you years ago! You're not a critic and you never will be. You're a foul-minded gossip-columnist with the bad taste of a whole hen-party of Aunt Ednas! I didn't dare kick your teeth in when I was on top of the tree because of the power your column gives you. Now I'm in the gutter you can't hurt me. But you go on trying, don't you? You called me a gin-swilling sot—now's your chance to say it again *knowing* I can hear you!"

"Mr. Douglas! *Bon Dieu*, what have you done?" From the front of the restaurant came an agitated Emile.

"It's all right, Emile. I'm leaving. If I'd known I was going to be under the same roof as Burnett I wouldn't have come." Murray spoke with the full resonance of

his trained voice, and knew everyone could hear every word.

Turning his back, he walked slowly towards the street. *The best exit I've made for a long while*, he thought bitterly.

"Murray!"

He glanced around. At a table near the door sat Fleet Dickinson, who was more on top than anybody, the full charm turned on high.

"Murray, congratulations on what you just did to Patsy-boy! What are you doing at the moment? Hardly heard a word of you since—you know." A twist of a graceful hand.

"Since they wrung the gin out? Why, I've been resting. On doorsteps, mainly. One of them was yours, by the way."

A flicker of well-controlled embarrassment. "Well, Murray, you know how it is when something like this happens."

"I know only too intimately how it is. Don't let me spoil your lunch, will you? So long."

"Uh—Murray, if you're really in difficulties. . . ?"

"Not any more, thanks. Blizzard picked me for this collection of dead-beats and has-beens he's assembling for the new Delgado play. See you in the stalls when we open."

That was a childish sort of jab to end with. But the damnable thing was that he was just as suspicious as Burnett of the Delgado

project, and if his agent had been able to find him anything else at all he wouldn't have considered it even for the fantastic rates of pay.

II

Stopping only to buy a sandwich in place of the good lunch he'd abandoned, he picked his way north through London towards the M1 motorway. At first he drove cautiously; he hadn't touched the wheel of anything but a slowpoke saloon since his breakdown. Once on the motorway, however, he deliberately took the car up to the maximum of its performance, holding third gear until the hundred showed and then letting her roll.

Even if it was only for advancing him the cash to ransom the car, he was grateful to Manuel Delgado.

He hadn't disposed of the Daimler because it was a symbol to him. The registration plates said *I MQD* for Murray Quest Douglas and people recognized it on the street.

Maybe he'd been bloody-minded not to sell it. At least he wouldn't have had to eat so many meals out of cans. Roger Grady had told him he was a fool to let the storage charges mount; he'd still been going on about it when he broke the incredible news about Delgado.

His mind roamed back over that curious talk with Roger.

He'd heard of Delgado, naturally. There had been a movie, at a time when the only South American name to ring bells with the *cognoscenti* in London had been Leopoldo Torre-Nilsson. Murray hadn't seen it, but people who had said it was phenomenal—a *comédie noire* to end *comédies noires*.

On the strength of that he'd come to Europe and Jean-Paul Garrigue, one of the finest young actors in France, had taken the lead in the production Burnett and Heston-Wood had been discussing. Murray hadn't seen that, either; he'd been in the sanatorium by then. But some of the notices had been raves. Then there was Garrigue's suicide, and a sensation, and silence. As though Garrigue's depression had been contagious, Delgado no longer seemed to enthuse anyone.

And then Roger's news.

"Will I accept?" Murray echoed. "Blizzard asks for me personally and I'm going to hesitate? Are you crazy?"

"I know some people who would," Roger said after a pause.

"But they were wild about Delgado in Paris last year!"

Roger gazed at the end of his cigar intently. "Yes . . . Look, Murray, if the project's a success no one could possibly deserve it more than you after the way you've pulled yourself together. But I wouldn't be honest if I didn't warn you that there are people around

who wouldn't take a part in a Delgado play for a thousand a day."

"Why on earth not?"

"Because Garrigue killed himself. Because Léa Martinez went into an asylum. Because Claudette Myrin tried to murder her baby daughter." Roger's voice was level.

"Did you ever know me to believe in jinxes, Roger?"

"No." Roger sighed. "It so happens, though, I was talking about this with someone only yesterday, and got a flat no before I made any offer at all. I wasn't going to make an offer. Blizzard has some screwball idea of who he wants—"

"Meaning me?" Murray cut in.

"No, I'm sure you have it in you to get back to the top—and maybe do even better because you won't have your handsome juvenile face to cover your failings." Roger could speak to Murray more frankly than anyone else. "But you're the only one who strikes me as being on the credit side. Still, Blizzard has a hard head, and even if the damn' thing folds after four nights it's a chance to turn in something the critics will notice."

"At least it'll stop me pestering you, you mean."

"You have been a bloody nuisance," Roger agreed.

"All right, can it," Murray said harshly. "Give me the details. The pay doesn't matter—right now, I'll take a second standard-bearer at minimum rates."

"Oh, there's money in this, boy.

Blizzard's taken over a bankrupt country-club called Fieldfare House, up Bedford way, and he plans to have the cast there—all expenses paid—until he brings the show to London. The idea is for it to follow *Amaranth* into the Margrave. If there's time, there'll be a week's pre-London try-out at the New Brecht, but more than likely you'll be at the Margrave four weeks from now."

"Did you say *four weeks*?"

"No, Blizzard said. You take it up with him, boy, when you go to this club of his. On Friday."

III

Friday, an hour earlier than expected because he had gone without his lunch, Murray swung up the winding gravelled drive of Fieldfare House. The grounds were so elaborate they might well have played a part in reducing the club to bankruptcy; he saw a maze of box, peonies, rhododendrons, and—around the corner of the house—the high board of a swimming pool. The house itself was a rambling structure with a pillared porch boasting seven stone steps. It had an empty air.

He switched off the engine and in the sudden silence had to repress a wild thought: that this was an alcoholic delusion and he had come to a deserted house.

He snatched the key from the ignition and jumped out. With as

much noise as possible he slammed the car's door.

"You will be Mr. Murray Douglas."

He started violently. At his elbow a man of indeterminate age and nationality, wearing a black suit and a black tie, had appeared like a conjuring trick. Conscious of prickly sweat on his spine, Murray said, "Ah—yes, I am!"

"My name is Valentine, sir. I am the head steward. May I take your bag and show you to your accommodations?"

The extraordinary Victorian phrase heightened Murray's sense of unreality. He stared at Valentine's pale, ageless face, the immaculate suit like a funeral mute's, the high-sided black leather boots in which the legs terminated.

"Your bag, sir?"

"Oh—here you are. Is Mr. Blizzard here yet?"

"No, sir. You are the first. I expect Mr. Blizzard and Mr. Delgado at six o'clock. The rest of the company will be arriving at various times this afternoon or this evening. Please come this way."

Feeling as though he was walking beside a ghost, Murray accompanied him up the steps, through a vestibule and into an enormous hall. It reached up to an arched ceiling and a domed skylight. A gallery serving the upper rooms ran around it from a curving staircase. The country club's ornaments and decorations were every-

where: sporting prints, horse-brasses, a tiger-skin in front of the roast-an-ox fireplace.

Instead of turning along the gallery, Valentine opened a green baize door at the head of the staircase and went through. Beyond stretched a long light corridor, with panels of glass let into its ceiling and numbered doors either side. This must be a newly built wing jutting from the back of the house.

"Your room, sir," Valentine said, putting a key in the furthest door. "Number fourteen."

There was a room thirteen adjacent, Murray noticed. He wondered whether it was going to be vacant, in view of the number of theatre people who were superstitious, or whether he was going to find himself with a doggedly sceptical neighbour. Then he forgot his question.

Many London hotels would be glad of rooms like this. Plain, square, low-ceilinged, it was panelled with maple and pine. A low double divan with a smoke-grey cover was flanked by bedside tables of which one bore a phone, the other a vase of flowers. A full-size Picasso reproduction was centered over the bedhead. The windows ran the length of the outside wall and gave on to a lawn and dark woods beyond. There was a TV set, an easy-chair, a shelf bearing books and back numbers of *Acting*.

Add one to the reasons why the club went broke. Murray gave an impressed nod. Then, as Valentine made to open his bag, he turned to prevent him.

"I'll stow my own gear," he said. "Uh—" He felt in his pocket for a tip, but Valentine raised a pale-palmed hand.

"Mr. Blizzard is giving me a very generous retainer, sir."

Murray shrugged and dropped the coins back. "Say, what's the routine going to be—have you a timetable?" He took the first few items from his bag and began to sort them.

"Tonight there is to be dinner at seven-thirty, sir, after which Mr. Delgado wishes to make the acquaintance of everyone present and there will be an introductory discussion."

"I see. Are you left over from the country club, by the way?" Murray picked up a suit and headed for the built-in wardrobe beyond the bed.

"No, sir. I am specially retained by Mr. Blizzard."

Murray made to close the wardrobe door; in the act, he froze, staring at something half-seen on the lowermost shelf at the side of the cupboard.

"Is something wrong, sir?" Valentine ventured.

"Yes," Murray confirmed grimly. "This!" He tugged open the other door of the wardrobe and handed Valentine a bottle of White

Horse. "And this, and this, and this!" Booth's Dry London gin, Lemon Hart rum, Cognac Hennessy! There were glasses there, too, soda, lime and orange squash—but those were safe. He was sweating as he faced Valentine again.

"Was it part of Blizzard's orders to lay in that stuff?"

"Mr. Blizzard did require me to provide suitable refreshment in the visitors' rooms, yes."

"Well, suitable refreshment for me is—oh, damnation! Just get me a dozen cans of fruit juice."

"Very good, sir." If Valentine understood why he was being snapped at, he didn't let it show. "Will that be all?"

"Yes. Definitely all."

It was going to be tough. But he'd always known that. They'd told him it might be years before he dared take even a glass of beer. They'd said, in so many words, that if he swallowed a drop of alcohol before he'd put five years of professional success and personal adjustment behind him, he would go to the gutter and stay there. Murray Douglas didn't like Murray Douglas much. But in the gutter he'd hate him.

He had a store of tranquillisers they'd given him at the sanatorium. He washed one down with water from the hand-basin in the corner and felt better in a few minutes.

The rest of his gear, he decid-

ed, could wait. For the moment he wanted to get closer acquainted with the setup.

Valentine had left the key in the outside of his door. He turned and pocketed it and set off on a tour of inspection.

The big hall he had come through gave on to a dining-room, a lounge with a bar, a reading-room, and several other rooms whose doors were locked. Another door gave access to kitchens and store-rooms. He left till last the door which led back into the new wing; beyond that, he found not the corridor he had expected but a complete small theatre with about sixty seats, a projection-booth, and a very decent-sized stage.

He whistled. So Blizzard did know what he was doing! Facilities like these weren't found under bushes. Abruptly the idea of high-pressuring a London production from scratch didn't seem so ridiculous after all. He cocked an eyebrow at the little theatre and went out again.

In the hall he caught a glimpse of a man he took at first to be Valentine but who he realised after a second must be another "steward," slightly taller, in identical mourning-black clothes. The front door was ajar. He passed through it and went around the house to look at its grounds.

He crossed a long lawn, put his head into a dusty shed full of sports equipment, wandered to the

edge of the swimming-pool, and came at last to the woods he had seen from his room. About fifty yards more, and he reached an eight-foot fence of wire netting topped with barbed wire, installed presumably to prevent the club's members wandering on to other people's land. He shrugged and turned back.

It was a hell of a shame he had to come here to work. This would have been a great place to rest up after his spell in the sanatorium—if he'd had the money for it.

He was getting close to the house when he heard a car approaching. He hurried his steps; he was eager to know who else Blizzard had roped in to enjoy such unasked-for luxury.

IV

Bracing himself, he'd refused all offers of a drink to celebrate when the dozen-odd members of the company came together for dinner. But by half past eight, when they adjourned to the lounge for the "introductory discussion," he was really tempted to drown his sorrows.

The bar stock was visibly lower already; the air was thick with smoke; someone had found records and put them on the player, and the chatter was loud and bright. It was more like the start of a party than a business meeting.

Only Murray sat sombrely by

himself, brows ferociously drawn together as he looked and listened.

Most of the talk was commonplace scandal. No one had mentioned Murray's assault on Burnett, and he was glad. It would get to people as gossip eventually, but at least it couldn't have made the evening papers.

Occasionally there was a burst of argument concerning a subject of real interest: the value of collective improvisation as the basis for a play. Murray had been expecting to discuss that seriously. But right now he lacked the heart. He'd seen whom else Blizzard had collected.

Blizzard and Delgado hadn't been at dinner. Valentine had conveyed that they were dining in another room to talk over last-minute problems. That rang false to Murray. It seemed more probable that Delgado was trying to build a phoney aura of mystery around himself.

His eyes roamed the room. The noisier of the two groups into which they had sorted themselves numbered five, and included four people with whom he had previously worked. There was red-haired Ida Marr, still slim but showing her age around the eyes; she was posing consciously—but then, she was never really off-stage. On one side of her, Gerry Hoading, looking younger even than his actual twenty-four; he presumably was going to be their

designer. He had considerable talent, undoubtedly, but . . .

On the other side of Ida, Adrian Gardner, running a little to fat. Murray had worked with him in *Skeleton* and knew he was a good average actor. Again—but . . .

He'd worked with Constant Baines in rep, nearly ten years ago. He had stayed in rep when Murray reached the West End. It had been something of a shock to meet him here, and their greeting had not been cordial.

And the last of the five: the girl sitting on a cushion at Ida's feet. Her latest conquest, presumably. Murray's scowl deepened. He imagined the girl must be from a provincial rep somewhere. He had heard her addressed as Heather. She would be no older than twenty. Her hair was raven-black, and her face was just imperfect enough to be piquant, and her figure was extremely interesting.

Shame.

There was a sudden stir. Blizzard had come in, followed by a sallow man who could only be Manuel Delgado himself. Portly, dark-suited, the director plunged forward distributing greetings like largesse, but no one paid more than mechanical attention. They were staring at Delgado.

He had a sort of reptilian tautness, as though his dark eyes were lidless. He was of medium height, medium build; he wore a dark blue jacket, charcoal pants and a

grey and white tie. He held himself easily. One might have taken him more readily for an actor than—say—Constant, who looked like an unsuccessful clerk.

"All right, everybody!" Blizzard parked himself on a large chair behind a table across which he could face the others. "Manuel?"

And, as Delgado took a place next to him, he continued: "Well, I bet you think this is a crazy set-up. Hey?"

A nervous giggle from the girl Heather.

"I suspected as much." Blizzard's tone hardened. "As of now you stop thinking so. This place may still look like a country club, but it happens to be the ideal place for our *work*. How many of you have seen the theatre? I thought you would have, Murray—you have a trouper's nose."

"Next week: Murray Douglas in Osborne's *Entertainer*," muttered Constant. Nobody laughed.

"Only Murray? Jesus. Go and take a look afterwards, then. Okay, let's get on. We're here to try something which isn't easy, but which Manuel has done before with the kind of success some people get once in a lifetime and die happy."

"Jean-Paul Garrigue!" Constant murmured. He timed the words perfectly. Everyone looked at him.

"That isn't funny," Adrian said in a strained voice.

"I didn't mean it to be," Constant grunted.

"I'm sorry about that, Manuel," Blizzard muttered with a glare at Constant. Delgado pulled himself forward on his chair. He took out and lit a king-size cigarette.

"Am I supposed to mind?" he said. His voice was low and his English accent good. "Make no mistake, if Jean-Paul had not already been on the edge of suicide he would not have made *Trois Fois* the success it became."

He cocked his head. "You know nothing about me, any of you. Some of you have perhaps seen a film I made. None of you have seen *Trois Fois*. If you had, you would not be here. I am uninterested in repeating myself. I am interested in one thing only. Listen, and I will tell you what it is."

It wasn't the words. It was their delivery—the conceit, the weight of meaning loaded on a single syllable every time he said "I"—which took their attention. Murray hunched forward on his chair, scalp prickling. He had been in the presence of competence all his working life, talent more times than he could remember, and arrogant genius perhaps half a dozen times in all. *Add one.*

"All the time we are told, and we know it is true: we are in a period of decay. Not decadence—decay. Here is a man in this age which prides itself that the individual is important." The thin upper lip curled. "This man is a dummy, and inside he is foul. Do

you know him? He has no goals. He is soft crumbling dirt inside, and ashamed to want what he wants which is relief from the need to make up his own mind. He will copy his neighbours to save making a decision; he will take his neighbour's wife to bed to save mending his marriage. He will have children because he hopes to rescue a shadow of himself from the wreck of his youth, and will drive them to wreck their youth in turn. He will resort to drink"—he looked at Murray and Murray felt like a small boy who has misbehaved in school.

"Or drugs! Or the lying consolation of religion which tells him when he dies he will be rewarded for being a creep. There are millions of him, armoured with washing-machines, shod with three-hundred-horsepower winged sandals. He is Phaeton, so conceited he has stolen the sun's chariot. He is Andromeda's father, so proud of his daughter's beauty the gods compel him to chain her to a rock for a monster to devour, while he wrings his hands and moans—what did I do, what did I do?" His voice slid up to a parody falsetto.

"He makes me sick. Everyone knows him but nothing is done about him. *That* is what interests me, and that is what is going to interest you. I make myself clear?"

There was a silence. Finally Ida stirred and spoke.

"Are we to take it that the form

you wish to give the result of our —our collective work is that of social criticism?"

"If you mean: it will contain a plea for reform, the answer is no. I am an artist, not a doctor. My speciality is cancer and gangrene, at the stage where the disease is past hope of cure."

He stubbed his cigarette and rose.

"We will assemble for preliminary thematic discussion at nine-thirty tomorrow morning. Good night."

V

After that, Murray wanted fresh air. He slipped outside. There was a stone plinth in front of the porch which was a convenient height; he perched on it and lit a cigarette.

He was completely lost in his own thoughts when a voice spoke hesitantly from behind.

"Mr. Douglas? You are Murray Douglas, aren't you?"

It was Heather.

"Oh, hullo. Ida let you off the leash?" He hadn't meant to say anything as cutting as that—the gloomy drift of his musings dictated the words.

"I'm sorry? I don't quite—?"

"Never mind. Yes, I'm Murray Douglas." He tossed his cigarette into the darkness. "Why?"

"I thought you were, but—" The girl gave a nervous chuckle. "I can't get used to what's hap-

pened. I feel I ought to be going around asking for autographs."

"Have half a plinth," Murray suggested, and she sat down next to him. Excitement colouring her voice, she went on.

"I can't get over this! I remember seeing you in *Skeleton* when I was at school, and—here I am, so soon afterwards!"

Five years ago, Murray reminded himself. *So soon!*

"What do you think of all this, Mr. Douglas?" she asked after a pause. "I've never heard of anything quite like it."

"Stop calling me mister," Murray said. "I probably look old enough to be your father, but I'm not."

A startled hiss of indrawn breath. "I—I'm sorry!"

Murray hesitated, and finally gave a laugh. "Forget it. What's your name, by the way? Nobody told me."

"Heather Carson."

"And how did you get mixed up in this, Heather?"

"I don't really know. I've been in rep at Southampton since I finished at the Gourlay School. I suppose I must have impressed Mr. Blizzard. He came to see us a couple of months ago, and then—well, I got this invitation."

Clearly Murray had been wrong to suspect Ida's influence, or she would have mentioned it. He lit another cigarette, and she repeated her original question.

"I'll tell you what I think of it so far," Murray said. "Delgado knows what he's doing. Sam Blizard doesn't. I heard Burnett of the *Gazette* say he'd collected a gang of no-goods, and with the exception of yourself he was right."

There was a stunned silence. Finally she said, "But there's yourself, to start with. I mean, you're a star!"

"Past tense. Excuse me for saying it, but I have to. Who do we have here? Me, the guy who drank himself from West End leads to the line outside an agent's office in six months. Ida, who—ah, skip it. You'll find out about Ida soon enough. Adrian Gardner, who's lucky not to be in jail. I don't care about people's private lives if they stay private, but Ade's doesn't. And then there's Gerry Hoading. He was a boy wonder like me. Why do you think he's here instead of lounging around a Mayfair apartment saying, 'Sorry, too busy!' whenever the phone rings?"

"W-why?"

Abruptly Murray was hating himself. It wasn't fair to spew out his miserable ideas at this girl's feet.

"Skip it. I don't want to play holier-than-thou."

"No, you mustn't just leave it there!"

Murray said tiredly, "I guess not. Okay, the poor bastard is hooked. He's a junkie. Without his stuff he doesn't produce any-

thing; with it, he's so unreliable no one can afford to take him on. Satisfied?"

There was no answer. Feeling as though he had just kicked a kid's toy to pieces, he grunted a good night and went up to his room, to shower and rinse the bad feeling off his body.

Just before turning in, he checked the wardrobe to see if Valentine had carried out his instructions. He had. The shelf now held assorted cans of fruit juice. So far, so good. He put out the light and lay down.

He had nightmares.

The bedside phone brought him out of uneasy slumber. Valentine's voice informed him that breakfast was served from eight until nine. He muttered thanks and swung his feet to the floor.

He hadn't finished unpacking yesterday; his shaving tackle was still in his bag. When he'd shaved, he opened the mirrored cupboard above the wash-basin meaning to put his things away. There was half a bottle of Scotch in the cupboard.

He stared at it. Then a wave of rage darkened his mind. He seized the bottle and let the contents down the drain. The smell sickened him. He went to the phone.

Shortly, he heard Valentine. "Yes, Mr. Douglas?"

"Why the hell was there whiskey in my medicine cabinet?"

"Whiskey, sir? I'm very surprised to hear that."

"Are you? Well, get this. If I find any more liquor in this room I shall force it down your throat and push the bottle after it. Do you understand?"

"Very good, sir. Ah—perhaps I should remind you it is now twenty-five minutes past eight o'clock."

"Oh, go to hell!" Murray said, and slammed down the phone.

He made a minute check of the room, looking in all the places where he had once hidden his own liquor from friends and doctors. Finding nothing, he relaxed and began to dress. Most of his clothes were also still in his bag, and would have to stay there until later, but he rummaged to the bottom of it for a favourite sweater, and underneath that he found another bottle of whiskey.

He seized it by the neck and a whisper of terror went across his mind. Had he himself—?

No, by God, I didn't!

He hurled the bottle fair at the wall over the washbasin. There was a vast brown splash as the whiskey gushed down the drain.

He pulled on the sweater and made for the door.

All right, Blizzard, damn you. You've got some explaining to do!

VI

But Blizzard wasn't in the dining-room. There were two young

men he knew only by sight sitting together at the far end of the long table, but everyone else appeared to have finished except Heather. There was an unused place-setting next to her; Murray took it.

"Morning! Seen Sam?"

"Oh, good morning, Murray." She seemed preoccupied. "I—uh—I was going to keep that place for Ida. She asked—"

"Skin Ida," Murray said. "Have you seen Sam?"

"Well, yes. He went out a few minutes ago. Is something wrong?"

"Nothing to do with you," Murray grunted. A black-clad steward handed him orange juice; he gulped it, and in imagination it filled his throat with the hotness of whiskey. He said under his breath, "God damn."

"Well, well! Morning, Murray! Is that the place you were going to keep for me, Heather darling? Never mind, there's one opposite." On stage as ever, Ida swept around the table. She had on black jeans and a black sweater. She looked tired. "My fault for being late! Thank you"—to the steward bringing orange juice. "Dry toast after this, and a gallon of coffee. What's up, Murray? Hangover?"

Murray didn't say anything.

"Not funny?" Ida said brightly. "Never mind, you'll be over it by lunchtime."

"Stow it," Murray said. "I'm on the wagon and you know it."

"So you were telling us last night. That's why I thought it was so peculiar when I passed your room. The door was open and one of these vampiric valets was clearing up some kind of mess. There was a stink of Scotch you could cut with a knife."

She smiled with honey and venom. Murray's appetite vanished like a flame blown out.

"This isn't a country club," he said, standing up. "It's an asylum. Or it will be if we go on like this. Don't let me interfere with your new romance, will you?" he ended savagely as he spun on his heel.

She deserved that for the crack about a hangover. But I wish Heather didn't have to be there and hear me.

Nine-thirty, and everyone in the miniature theatre apart from Delgado and Blizzard. Last of the other arrivals was Lester Harkham, the lean, forty-ish lighting expert who almost always worked on Blizzard's productions.

Jess Aumen was sitting at a piano alongside the stage, moving one hand idly over the keys. He was a sleek young man with the artificial good looks of a male model, but he was a good composer.

Lester, Jess, Blizzard and Gerry Hoading if he could be kept on the rails: as good a supporting team as you could hope for. Then why hadn't Sam lined up more talent to put on stage? Apart from

those Murray knew, there were only the two young men—Rett Latham and Al Wilkinson—and a girl called Cherry Bell about whom he knew nothing.

Blizzard and Delgado appeared from backstage, Blizzard carrying chairs which he set down facing the others over the footlights. The author took out another of his cigarettes and lit it with a flourish. Today he had put on a shark-skin jacket and fawn trousers.

"Okay, let's get on," Blizzard said. "First—"

"First, Sam!" Murray hauled himself to his feet. "I want you to tell me why you told your slimy creature Valentine to scatter liquor all over my room!"

Delgado's eyes fixed on Murray. An expression of interest developed slowly around them, like an image on a photographic film.

"You must be crazy," Blizzard said. "I suppose what you mean is that I told Valentine to leave some drinks in people's rooms and forgot to warn him to skip yours."

"Not good enough. I had him take those away. But this morning I found a bottle in my medicine cabinet and another at the bottom of my travelling bag."

Blizzard scowled. "Murray, I think it would be a damned good idea if you sat down before I told you the only way I can think of for a bottle to get into your bag!"

Murray hesitated, calling himself every kind of fool for not wait-

ing till he could get Blizzard alone.

"No, don't sit down, Douglas!"

Delgado leaned forward. "You begin to be interesting. You suggest a theme. A persecution. If I understand, you are saying someone is attempting to make you drink when you are forbidden to."

"I'm saying nothing of the sort," Murray snapped.

"Now consider this," Delgado said, as though the denial hadn't been spoken. "Cherry, come up here."

The girl about whom Murray knew nothing climbed on the edge of the stage and sat with legs swinging. She put a shorthand pad on her knee and slipped a pair of glasses on.

Oh. Murray had assumed her to be a member of the cast. But plainly her function was to note suggestions and presumably type up scripts from them.

"Consider persecution," Delgado said. "By advertisement, for instance—you don't have this gewgaw, you're a slob."

"Chasing people who already have serviceable objects to replace them with new ones," Constant put in. "That's a kind of persecution, if you're looking at it your way."

"Right. More?"

It grew incredibly. They could barely drag themselves away for lunch. Even Murray was forced out of his angry withdrawal. By

afternoon they had stepped through half a scene, about forty extemporised exchanges that served to delineate a pair of characters, and Jess Aumen was improvising angular chords. Also improvising in his own way was Gerry. He had clearly got his supply from somewhere; his face was flushed and his voice kept sliding up the scale. But before they stepped through the brief action he chalked out the stage for them and laid out with gestures an entire two-level set.

At five o'clock Delgado told Cherry to type up her notes and disappeared backstage with Blizzard. The others drifted away to the lounge, and the arguments went on all evening.

It was a long time since Murray had seen enthusiasm of this order generated so quickly. And it was due to Delgado, no one else. Even though he was working in a foreign language his ear was sharp enough to catch and correct the least infelicity in a proposed line, and his corrections were so transparently right not even Ida had tried to argue.

How long would it last? By this time next week, Murray judged, tiredness would be competing with enthusiasm. But by then they might have a complete outline, and presumably it would take Delgado a few days to organise and edit his script. *Oh*, it was beginning to look feasible.

When the talk lost its intensity and one or two people—Heather, Jess—had drifted to bed, he decided to do the same. Gerry Hoad followed him into the hall.

"Murray, mind if I have a private word with you?" the designer said. "Keep walking—I'm turning in, too. Look, we've worked together before, so I guess you know my trouble."

"Yes, I know about it. Why?"

"Well, I—I have enough of the stuff to keep me going. I found it in my room when I got here, the way you found liquor, and I wasn't complaining. I've been taken off the stuff once and it nearly killed me, so I'm stuck with it."

They reached the head of the stairs and turned into the new wing.

"This is my room—number ten," he went on. "I must be over the middle row of seats in the theatre. Crazy thing to find, isn't it? A private theatre equipped like that! Come in." He shut the door and stood twisting the key in his hands.

"What I'm trying to say is this. You must have some kind of guts that I don't have. So—"

He tugged open a drawer and produced a two-ounce jar full of fine white powder.

"I've never seen so much at one time!" he almost whispered. "Heaven knows what it cost! Because it isn't cut—it's pure heroin. And if I—well, when things . . .

Oh, *damn!* Murray, will you take charge of it for me? Things have gone well today. If they turn sour, I know from experience I won't have the patience to load myself and wait for the stuff to hit. I'll go crazy waiting and take on a second load, and I'll probably make it a bigger one, and when I do that I'll kill myself. Here!"

He thrust the jar towards Murray. "Keep it for me! Don't tell me where you're hiding it. Never let me take more than three grains at one go, got that? Not even if I come *crying* to you, don't let me take more than three grains!"

Murray nodded, hefted the jar, and turned to the door. As he reached for the handle, Gerry spoke again.

"Murray, I'm—I'm very grateful. I haven't any right to ask you this. If there's anything I can do in return. . . ?"

"Sure," Murray muttered, and went out.

VII

Murray looked around **his own** room ruefully.

God, was there ever such a spavined, windbroken, knock-kneed string put together as this bunch here?

But at least the experience was improving Gerry. From previous acquaintance Murray wouldn't have credited him with so much self-control. Now: where to hide

the stuff? How about inside the TV set? That had been one of his own most successful inspirations when he was hiding his liquor.

This was a modern slim-line set, though. When he peered through the ventilation slits in the back, he couldn't see a space large enough to accept the bottle. Besides, the back was fixed with some special kind of fastening, not screws he could remove with his pocket-knife.

He thought of his travelling bag, but on checking discovered he'd forgotten to bring the key and couldn't lock it. The hell. Gerry's stuff would simply have to go under the mattress for the time being.

He pulled back the bedding. Under the bottom sheet, the mattress, resting on the box-like divan base. And embroidered on it a curious complex design in metallic thread, running the width of the mattress and eighteen inches in depth.

Odd! Never seen a mattress like that before.

He gathered a fistful of ticking and lifted the head of the mattress with a grunt. A hinged panel was revealed, let into the base.

What the—?

He managed to get the mattress off entirely and let it slide to the floor. Something went *twang*, and a glint caught his eye. He put out a cautious hand and located a metal thread as fine as gossamer running from the embroidered pattern

on the mattress into the side of the hinged panel. The fall of the mattress had stretched it taut and then broken it.

He opened the hinged panel with his fingernails. Below, he found a tape-deck. At first glance it looked quite ordinary. It wasn't switched on. There were two professional-size spools of oxide-coated tape; about a third had wound from the left-hand spool to the right. A second glance revealed that there were no controls.

Murray studied it for a while, then shrugged. He knew from nothing about tape recorders except to switch them on and off. He very much wanted to know, though, what this one was doing in his bed. Another of the country club's facilities—soothing music under your pillow? All right: then where was the speaker, and how did you turn the music off?

He wasn't going to be able to lie on this bed until he'd asked a few pertinent questions. First, however, he'd better hide Gerry's horse. A possibility occurred to him. There was a pelmet along the curtain rail. It might just be roomy enough to take the bottle.

It was. He drew the curtains back and forth to make sure he wouldn't dislodge the bottle; satisfied, he went out.

At the same moment, Gerry emerged from the toilet at the far end of the corridor and started back to his room.

"Gerry!" Murray said. "Mind if I check up on something? I'd like to look at your bed!"

Bewildered, Gerry watched as Murray peeled back his bedding and revealed first the metal-thread embroidery, then an identical hinged panel opening above an identical tape-deck.

"What's that for?" the designer said blankly.

"I haven't the slightest idea."

"I suppose you found yours while hiding my—my stuff." Gerry gave a weak chuckle. "Well, that's one place I needn't bother to look, anyway."

"That's right." Murray felt for the fine metal thread linking the mattress with the base, which he had been careful not to snap.

"Do you suppose it provides lullaby music?" Gerry ventured. "This club must have been a pretty sybaritic place."

"I thought of that. Trouble is, I can't see any sign of a speaker." Murray peered into the cavity holding the tape-deck.

"Wouldn't the speaker be in the mattress?" Gerry suggested, poking at the metallic embroidery.

"What did you do?" Murray exclaimed. "Do it again!"

"I was only touching this embroidery," Gerry said.

"That's it! Look, when you press on part of the pattern, the tape starts to run." The turrets were turning steadily. "Well, where's your music?" Murray added.

"That's odd," Gerry muttered. "Do you suppose the tape's been wiped by accident?"

Murray dusted his hands together. "It *might* have. Do you know which is Lester's room? I imagine he's the only person here who knows about electronics."

"No, I don't." Gerry licked his lips. "Murray, aren't you making rather a big thing out of this? Surely it doesn't make any odds one way or the other. Suppose you do find one which plays music—so what?"

Murray wasn't listening. He was experimenting with the embroidery on the mattress. It only took a light touch to start the spools turning; presumably it was meant to respond to the weight of the sleeper's head on the pillow.

Footsteps came from the corridor; a door opened and closed.

"There's somebody," Murray said. "Come on."

Puzzled, Gerry complied. Out in the corridor, however, it proved impossible to tell which room the owner of the footsteps had entered. Murray put his ear to number eleven, the next one to Gerry's, then to twelve, and shook his head.

"There's nobody in thirteen," Gerry said with a forced chuckle. "I asked Valentine."

"And fourteen's mine. Let's try nine."

Beyond that door he caught a faint sound of conversation. He knocked.

"Who is it?"

Heather. How interesting. Murray laid a small bet with himself. Aloud, he said, "Murray here. Gerry Hoading's with me. Can we come in? It's important."

"All right—the door's open."

Heather was sitting up in bed, a satin bedjacket over her black nightgown. In the easy-chair was Ida. Murray paid out on his bet.

"Well!" Ida drawled. "To what do we owe this honour?"

"Heather, does music come from your pillow when you lean on it?" Murray said.

Heather gave a giggle and shook her head.

"All right, what's the punch-line?" Ida demanded.

"If Heather will hop out of bed, I'll show you."

In bewilderment, Heather sighed. "Very well, Ida darling, give me my dressing-gown, will you?"

She slid deftly out from between the sheets with decorum to satisfy the Lord Chamberlain, and Murray proceeded to reveal the embroidery, the connecting metal thread, and the hidden tape-deck.

Even Ida was startled out of her cynical manner. "I see what you mean about music from the pillow," she admitted. "But no sound comes out when you start the spools, does it?"

It occurred to Murray that there was a condition in which a tape recorder never made a noise: when

it was recording, not playing back. He had no idea why the point should make his skin crawl.

"Any idea where I can find Sam?" he asked. "I'm not likely to sleep till I get to the bottom of this."

Ida laughed. "You're a screwball, Murray. So long as the one in my bed is as quiet as this one I'll sleep fine! But if you really want to beard Sam in his den, I think you'll find him and Delgado in the room on the right of the dining-room. They're using that as an office. Me, I'm going to call it a day. 'Night, Heather sweetie."

She went out. After a pause, Gerry did the same.

"Murray, I wish you hadn't made me know about this thing," Heather said, staring at the tape-deck. "It's absurd, but it makes me feel creepy—it being there for no reason . . . Is there a reason?"

"I don't know, darling," Murray said grimly. "But I'm going to try and find out, and if I do I'll come back and let you know—okay?"

VIII

The door of the room to which Ida had directed him was locked. He could hear the purr of an electric typewriter and a mutter of voices. He knocked.

Shortly, Blizzard opened to him. "Oh, it's you, Murray. What do you want?"

"Do I have to talk through the door, or can I come in?"

Blizzard shrugged and drew back. Murray went past. This would have been the secretary's office in the country club, perhaps; there were file cabinets, a desk and a duplicator. Cherry Bell sat at the typewriter, fingers flying over the keys. In an easy-chair, Delgado was turning over typed pages.

"Is it something important, Murray?" Blizzard pressed.

"It's about the tape recorders hidden in our beds."

Murray was delighted to see an expression of dismay fleet over Delgado's beautifully controlled visage.

"What on earth are you talking about?" Blizzard snapped.

"Delgado knows what I mean. Don't you, Delgado?"

"Yes, I know." The author put his pile of papers on the corner of Cherry's typing table. "It's part of my method of working, about which you've learned practically nothing."

Murray had an indefinable feeling that Delgado was improvising his answer, but there was nothing to prove it.

"Go on," he challenged harshly.

"Do you understand the meaning of the word *hypnopaedia*?"

"You mean this notion which keeps cropping up about getting a higher education painlessly in your sleep? I've heard of it. And I'm also aware it doesn't work."

"Have it your way." Delgado made a graceful gesture. "For me, it works excellently. I am not satisfied with a cast that puts on a rôle for a few hours in the theatre and for the remainder of the day reverts to totally different behaviour. I require a degree of identification which not even the Method provides. Hypnopaedia offers a technique for achieving this. That's all."

"I'm not clear what you're talking about," Blizzard put in.

"Then listen," Murray said. "There are hidden tape-decks in our beds. They're connected to a switch in the mattress; when you lie down, they begin to run. Delgado is trying to say they're for perfecting a rôle during sleep—that you get your lines or something repeated and repeated to you. What lines are you thinking of giving Gerry, Delgado? He's a designer, not an actor!"

"I didn't install those recorders specially," Delgado countered. "They were intended to play soothing music to the users of the country club. They are in all the beds."

"Really! Then explain why there's no sign of a speaker with any of them. And no music on the tapes!"

"Oh dear." Delgado made the words bear a weight of exaggerated patience. "Murray, I simply had the instruments reconnected to see if they are operating properly. Accordingly I had a spool of

blank tape put on each. As for the speakers, they are inside the mattress. Moreover, even when instruction tapes are used, the sound is at the very limit of perception—in fact, subliminal. If it were louder it would risk disturbing the sleeper. Now are you satisfied?”

Blizzard bit the end off a cigar. He said, “Why didn’t you mention this to me, Manuel? It’s interesting, but—”

“Because the existence of tape-decks already in the beds meant I did not have to ask you to go and hire me a dozen of them. Is this really worth so much fuss?”

“I guess not. But if you have any more surprises like this to spring on the cast, it might be better to let them know.”

“Positively not. As it is, I am a little annoyed that Murray has stumbled on this. There may be a tendency to resist subconsciously the effect of the tape. However, we shall see.”

A few moments earlier, Cherry had removed the last sheets of paper from her typewriter. Into the pause following Delgado’s remark, she said, “Finished, Mr. Blizzard.”

“Good girl.” Blizzard seemed to pull himself together. “Give the last page to Mr. Delgado and you can turn in. Was that all you wanted, Murray?”

“Not by a long chalk, but I guess it’ll have to do for now.”

He knocked on Heather’s door to tell her what Delgado had said

but got no answer. He went on to his own room with his face set in a frown. Before putting the bed back together he pulled free the fine wire from the mattress; there was a good twenty yards of it.

There was no point of attachment. There was no speaker inside the mattress. Delgado was lying.

But if there was no speaker, equally there was no microphone—just the wire. Could that serve as a mike, or speaker, by itself? He had no way of telling.

The hell with it. He put the bed roughly back together and climbed in. Eventually sleep came, like a switch being turned.

He had no immediate chance of questioning Lester Harkham next day. None of the other three who knew about the tape-decks seemed particularly concerned. Heather did ask what he had learned, but for her it was enough that Delgado had furnished some kind of explanation; the point that it could not have been the whole truth she dismissed with a shrug.

By evening, Murray was wondering whether it mattered. Under Delgado’s guidance form was already emerging from the chaos of rival ideas. No doubt about it—this man was *good*.

Who the hell cared how he chose to get results? Let him use black magic if he wanted to! It was clear that no one liked him much, but he was generating immense respect.

As yesterday, he stopped everything at five o'clock. They looked around as if startled to discover themselves back in the little theatre, then began to disperse, declaring extreme exhaustion and the desperate need of a drink.

Jess stayed at the piano, experimenting with a progression he could not get right; Gerry jumped up on the stage with a steep tape in his hand, making notes for his proposed set, and Lester Harkham—who had been playing the compact yet extensive lighting system like a musical instrument—remained in the aisle, his expression thoughtful.

Maybe it did feel absurd to make such a fuss about the tape recorders, Murray decided, but there was an indirect approach he could try . . .

"Lester, can you spare me a few minutes? Look, keep this to yourself, but—Gerry has asked me to look after a jar of horse for him, because he's afraid if he gets depressed he may overdose himself. The best place I've ever found to hide something like that is inside a TV set. But I can't get the back off mine, and I don't want to foul up the machinery. Could you give me a hand?"

Lester looked blank. "That's about the oddest request I've ever had!" he exclaimed. "But I can find my way around a TV set okay. I'll be with you in a moment."

So far, so good. Now Murray could bring up the matter of the tape-recorders casually. And he was looking forward with some eagerness to hearing Lester's comments.

IX

"Got those don't-do-it-yourself fastenings, I see." Lester bent to inspect the TV set, fishing in his hip pocket. He produced a multi-purpose electrician's screwdriver and set to work. "What do you make of this affair so far, Murray? Bit of a phenomenon, our friend Delgado, isn't he?"

"I'm impressed," Murray admitted. "Though there's a lot more I want to know about him."

"Don't we all!" Lester twisted the first of the fastenings loose and attacked the next. "You know, when Sam first put the plan up to me, I told him he was off his nut. But now I'm beginning to think he wasn't so stupid. Take me, for instance. Normally I'd just be sitting in the back row chewing my nails. As it is, what I'm doing is definitive, apart from changes Gerry may want for—*Jesus God!*"

He snatched his hand away from the TV set.

"This damned thing's live! I got the healthiest shock I've had in years." Shaking his hand as though to cool it, he inspected the on-off knob, then went into a string of technicalities about live chassis

and condensers not discharging which Murray didn't attempt to follow.

"Want me to unplug it?"

"Yes! I ought to have done that myself." Lester put his hand on top of the set. "Funny—it's stone cold, and if there were current passing you'd expect it to smell warm, at least."

Murray traced the thick cable leading from the set to the floor. It vanished at the edge of the fitted carpet; he dropped on one knee and turned the carpet back.

"Curiouser and curiouser," he murmured. "Lester, this flex goes under the skirting board. Look here."

Close to the wall, a piece of floorboard had been cut away and the cable led down through the slot so created. The wood was clean and white; the work had been done recently.

"It must be a rediffusion system," Lester said with half-hearted optimism. "Though you usually have an external selector with rediffusion, and sound as well as the TV channels. Let me take another look, if I can avoid getting shocked again."

He removed the rear panel of the set and peered inside. He gave a whistle.

"Something else funny?" Murray suggested, unsurprised.

"Very. I've never seen a clutter of circuits like this before. The basic stuff's here—I think—but a

gang of extra stuff's been added. Murray, was that story you spun me just an excuse to have me investigate?"

"Now why should you think that?" Murray countered.

"Something Ida was saying over lunch about you finding weird electronic gadgets in your bed."

"Oh! Well, I'm glad you've heard about it, anyway." He ran quickly over the events of last night. Lester, listening, poked around in the TV set with his insulated screwdriver.

"For sleep-learning, hm?" he commented at length. "Well, that's garbage for a start. Still, if Delgado likes to kid himself that it's useful, it won't do any harm."

"Without a speaker for the sound? I told you—all the wire came off my mattress. It wasn't connected to anything."

"Well, there are some experimental installations—" Lester checked. "No, it's ridiculous. They cost about five hundred apiece. Can I have a look at this gadget?"

"What's left of it," Murray said. "You can see the wire embroidery on your own mattress, I imagine, but—" He broke off. He had turned down the bedding, and the embroidery was back.

"Delgado must take this seriously," he said with forced lightness. "He's supplied a replacement!"

Lester inspected it, heaved up the mattress and satisfied himself about the tape recorder.

"Tell you one thing," he said harshly. "This stuff on the mattress couldn't possibly act either as speaker or mike."

"Then what's it for?"

"If I had to make a guess . . ." Lester bit his lip. "I'd say it was some kind of field-sensitive antenna." He made compasses of thumb and forefinger and measured off sections of the embroidery. "There's definitely a harmonic ratio involved in the design. The straight runs might form a dipole—like a TV aerial." He shook his head.

"Could there be a connection?" Murray snapped, pointing at the open back of the TV set.

"No idea. The tangle inside that set would take hours to sort out, and with the HT load it's carrying I don't fancy the job."

"Have you no idea what's been added?"

"None at all. Tell you one thing, though—there isn't room for Gerry's stuff. I'd better put the panel back."

"Are you going to ask Delgado about it?"

"You want my honest opinion?" Lester said slowly. "I don't believe it would be worth the trouble. I think it'll turn out that Delgado has a streak of cockeyed mysticism which he's ashamed of. Nowadays a lot of people who don't know a diode from a horse's ear fall for slick operators mouthing high-sounding phrases about tuning in on the cosmic wavelengths. They

hang their tongues out and buy a black box for a hundred quid and slick operator bows out chuckling. My guess is that Delgado uses his halfway convincing excuse about sleep-learning to cover for a bit of pure nonsense."

Murray hesitated. That was plausible; he'd once worked for a few weeks with someone who was paying out fat fees to a charlatan for minerals to improve the colour of his aura, but hated to admit the fact.

"At first glance," Lester continued, "that pattern makes a sort of sense. But on close inspection it doesn't figure. It's got just about the right half-baked quality."

"And the stuff in the TV set, too?"

"More than likely. But as far as I'm concerned Delgado can believe in table-turning if he chooses." Lester clapped Murray on the shoulder. "I'd have thought you were glad enough to be here without bothering about Delgado's cranky notions. Not meaning to be rude."

Murray forced a smile. "You're quite right. Better this than the breadline."

Murray lit a cigarette and stared at the mattress.

Sure. Very plausible. But—I think it goes deeper.

He came to a decision. It was on the level of poking a stick into a hornets' nest to see what would

happen, but he was growing impatient; these irksome problems were destroying his concentration, his ability to sink himself in the creation of the play.

Once more he pulled the metal thread off the mattress and balled it up. Then he picked the TV set up with a grunt—it was much heavier than it looked—and carried it across the room.

When the cable was taut, he took a fresh grip, and lunged forward, expecting the cable either to break or pull loose. It did neither. Another six or seven feet of it emerged from the hole in the floor, and from beyond the wall—in room thirteen—there was a monumental crash.

A smile quirked Murray's mouth. He restored the television set to its stand and turned back the carpet over the extra length of cable.

Then he opened the door a quarter-inch and waited, eye to the narrow slit. Shortly, he was rewarded by seeing the normally imperturbable Valentine come down the corridor at a dead run.

The door of room thirteen opened and closed. He put his ear to the dividing wall. All he heard, though, was a tinkling and clanging as though Valentine were picking up the pieces.

Good enough. Now to find out what Delgado's reaction was. He left the room and went whistling downstairs.

X

The reaction came, but Murray had to wait until an hour after the end of dinner.

Rain rattled at the windows. Keeping up a desultory conversation with Adrian Gardner, he was struck by a casual thought. The group was becoming positively agoraphobic. No one had suggested exploring the local pubs or even walking around the grounds. The shower might have been an Arctic snowstorm.

Go for a drive tomorrow, maybe. Don't want to box in my mind completely. . .

"Excuse me, Ade. I'd like a private word with Murray."

With a start Murray returned from his private musings. Blizzard had appeared and taken a chair facing him.

"Yes, Sam—what can I do for you?" Murray said.

"You can stop being a damned nuisance," Blizzard answered. He bit the end off a cigar and spat it into an ashtray.

"Sam, if you're trying to get my back up I warn you you won't like it when you succeed," Murray murmured.

"Have you been mucking about with your TV set?"

"I thought I might prefer it on the other side of the bed," Murray said blandly. "I confess to that cheerfully."

Blizzard glowered at him, but

his professional mask was proof against the scrutiny. Finally the director sighed.

"Well, don't do it again. Valentine came to me practically in hysterics. All the sets upstairs are connected to a rediffusion system. Apparently you hauled on your flex and it pulled over a stand and smashed about fifty quid's worth of equipment. I don't have to tell you there's more money behind this venture than anything else I've ever tangled with, but its' not a bottomless supply."

"So it's supposed to be a rediffusion system," Murray nodded. "How odd. Lester didn't think it was."

"Lester! So that was your doing, too. Murray, is your vanity hurt, or something? Because if you don't like it here—"

Murray cut in. The passion in Blizzard's voice had taken him aback. "What am I supposed to have done to Lester?"

"He came to me before dinner with a solemn warning about Delgado. He thinks he's a crank because of these tape recorders in the beds. Murray, will you please do me a favour and shut your big mouth?"

"Sam, are you trying to run this place like a concentration camp? Are you putting a ban on curiosity? You know the people we have here! You want hysteria?"

"Listen to me, Murray. We know each other pretty well, so you

won't misunderstand me unless you want to. I'm no happier than anyone else with this notion of cramming a dozen highly-strung people under one roof and working them up to fever-pitch. But it happens to be Delgado's method of working, and if he wants it I want it. What's your impression of him?"

"I'm still working it out."

"I've been involved with him for four or five months. I know what I think about him. The man is a twenty-four-carat genius. Ever hear me say that about anyone else?"

"No."

"He has fantastic talent. He has incredible money behind him, from an Argentine billionaire who wants to prove some point about his country's culture. I have to keep this gang of neurotics under control—ah, sorry! It slipped out."

"We're all neurotic," Murray said without humour.

"Yes. The point is, I don't want irrelevancies to foul us up. If Delgado believes in sleep-learning, neither you nor Lester will make me interfere. But I'm not 'banning curiosity'! I'm trying to keep the project on the rails."

Murray hesitated. He felt slightly ashamed of himself. He said at length, "You could have started off better, Sam. Don't think I'm ungrateful—I'm glad to be involved—but on the strength of Delgado's film, and his work in Paris, you could have asked for Fleet Dickin-son or . . . Or could you?"

He hadn't meant to finish in those words. But a memory of what Roger Grady had said crossed his mind.

Fortunately Blizzard took the question at face value. "No. Delgado is authoritarian as hell. He does it cleverly, and so long as you're caught up in his enthusiasm you don't mind. But I've worked with Fleet more times than I can remember—and he's used to being boss."

He broke off. "Murray, it just hit me. This is the first time I've seriously talked about what we're doing with anybody except Delgado. I don't know what's come over me."

"He's come over you," Murray said. "I'm worried. I mean, it's good to know you have such confidence in the guy, but for Christ's sake don't lose your objectivity. I can see us going up with a stinker and we'll all be drunk on it and think it's a masterpiece."

"I'm doing my best. But until we have our completed script I'm more of a housefather than a director, aren't I?"

Murray frowned. "Yes . . . You know, in spite of what Roger Grady told me, I expected at least to be given a plot and then maybe build dialogue around it. I was thinking okay, it's experimental, but it might be an oddball success like—say—Cassavetes's *Shadows*. I surely was not expecting to find we had nothing at all."

"But we have something now!"

Blizzard made the words a challenge. "And after only two working days!"

"Oh, granted!"

"I was concerned, too," Blizzard admitted after a pause. "Still, it's the way he works . . . That was another reason for not trying to get Fleet or someone like him. Fleet is very choosy; not even Delgado's reputation would make him buy a part sight unseen."

"Especially in view of the way Delgado's mind works."

"How's that?"

"He said it himself—cancer and gangrene. I thought it was a form of words designed to shock us. But he means it. And it makes me feel a bit dirty."

"Come off it," Blizzard said. "We do have a sick society. And I can't imagine you making the same comment about Genet."

Murray stared past Blizzard, hunting words. "It's not the same. Genet is obsessed with things that are intrinsically unattractive—buggery and petty theft . . . Whereas Delgado has this knack of making things which are perfectly respectable stink in your nostrils. You know what I mean."

He checked for a moment, then went on in a lower tone. "Sam, is part of Delgado's method of working to coop us up together like a real-life *Huis Clos* until we're ready to scream, and then put the screaming on the stage?"

Blizzard sidestepped the ques-

tion. "What gives you that idea, Murray?"

"Two things. One is what Delgado said about wanting an identification deeper than Method stuff. The other is the crowd you picked. Me and liquor. Gerry and horse. Ade and his pretty little boys. Constant grabbing his first chance out of rep and into the West End—and probably his last, too. People who can't afford to lose their tempers and walk out, because this is the make-or-break opportunity."

"Any time you want to you can get in your car and go wherever you like," Blizzard said stiffly. "If that's cooping you up I'm a Dutchman."

"I think I shall do exactly that. The rain's stopped. Some fresh air won't do me any harm."

He was out in the hallway before he realised Blizzard hadn't given him a straight answer. He was debating whether to go back for one, when Valentine materialised from the dining-room.

"Are you going out, sir?" he inquired.

"Why do you want to know?" Murray countered.

"I have been requested by Mr. Blizzard to close the main gate at eleven, sir. But I can arrange for it to remain open if you wish."

"No. No, that won't be necessary. I've changed my mind."

"Very good, sir." Valentine gave a hint of a bow.

"But do me a favour, will you?"

Stop saying 'Mr. Blizzard told me'. I know as well as you do that Delgado gives the orders around here, not Sam Blizzard."

"I don't know what you mean, sir." Valentine's voice was plausibly coloured with surprise, but he shifted his weight from foot to foot.

"Then you'd better find out," Murray suggested, and made for his room.

Crazy damned setup . . . Poor Sam's in a flat spin. But he's right: I'm apt to make things worse if I go on about the tape recorders and the junk in room thirteen . . . I'll pipe down.

But even having reached that decision, he went through what threatened to become a nightly ritual and stripped twenty yards of fine wire from his mattress before he got into bed.

XI

"Okay, break now! See you back at ten to two!"

"Break, he says," Ida stage-whispered with *Maria Marten* force. "Me, I'm broken already. *Foof!*"

Murray made a sort of mental check on a calendar in his head. *Thursday: Sam gives the order to break instead of Delgado. Maybe we're really going to have a play.*

There was even a title now. Nobody had picked it—just suddenly it had been used. *Upstream*. Not bad.

It's moving. We have a set of

characters. *We have Gerry out the back somewhere making canvas flats. . .*

His recital of items on the credit side stopped abruptly. He had spotted a figure in shadow alongside the projection booth. *Heather. Good God, she isn't in here yet!*

He jumped from the stage and went up the aisle to her. "Hello," he said. "Where've you been?"

She forced a smile. "Oh, I went to give Gerry a hand."

Half the story, Murray decided. The rest was in the redness of her eyes. Been having a quiet private mourn. No, this wasn't fair. Now he cast his mind back, it struck him that no one—not even Ida—had attempted to draw Heather into either discussion or the extemporisation sessions.

"Why?" he said finally.

"Well, I seem to be sort of surplus to requirement."

"What requirement? You were hired, weren't you? So it's your business to remind us that you're here."

She looked alarmed.

"Oh, grief," Murray muttered. "I'm not snapping at you—just advising you to push a bit. Come on, let's have lunch."

"No—uh—no, I don't feel hungry. I think I'm going for a breath of air instead."

"You know, that's not a bad idea. We've got three-quarters of an hour. Let's go and have a sandwich in a pub."

He smiled and took her arm. They had just reached the hall when Ida caught them up.

"Well, well! Is this a private party or can anyone come? Going to lunch, Heather honey?"

Self-consciously, the girl freed her arm. "Murray suggested going to a pub for a sandwich."

"In his two-seater car, no doubt." Ida tossed her head. "Watch it—don't you know what happens to Murray's women?"

There was an electric silence. Murray turned to stand square to Ida, his hands folding into fists like rocks.

"I'd beat the hell out of you if you were a man," he said at last. "But you don't carry things quite that far, do you?"

It was clear to Ida she'd overstepped the mark, and she was afraid to reply. She spun around and marched away.

As they passed through the front door, Heather said, "Murray—what did Ida mean?"

"You don't have to pay attention to everything she says."

"Murray, I don't want to be nosy. But what she said hurt. You couldn't hide it. I don't want to say anything by mistake which might upset you. Does that sound silly?"

He opened the door of the car for her, got in himself, and sat for a few seconds in silence. Then he shrugged.

"What's the good of kidding myself? It's been gossiped around for

ages." He drew a deep breath. "My wife went out of her mind. She walked off one night when I was at the theatre. They found her two weeks later in a house in Poplar with a couple of tarts and one of London's most prosperous pimps. The only blessing was that she'd given an invented name. She's in a bin and she'll never come out. Satisfied?"

"Oh, my God." There was no voice behind the words—just breath. "Was that why you . . .?"

"Drank?" Murray started the engine. "Not really. I started drinking to quiet my conscience. If I hadn't treated her like a wilful child when what she needed was psychiatric help, she might be well by now. Murray Douglas is a bastard. Bear that in mind."

He spun the wheels on the gravel so that stones rattled under the body like hail. At the gate, he spoke again.

"And my other bad characteristic is self-pity. Suppose we change the subject, okay?"

Yet by five that afternoon he was preparing to thank her for bringing the matter up. Paradoxically the old bitterness benefited his acting during the rest of the day's work.

During the lunch-break Gerry had carried in four flats, the paint still wet on them, and had arranged tables and chairs into a sketch for his projected two-level set. He was grinning like an ape; his exhilaration was astonishing to

Murray because he had not come to ask for a shot of his drug since Monday night.

He wasn't the only one feeling good. Murray began the first run-through of what was shaping into a complete first act unaware of how his mood was colouring his performance; then he started to catch on, because he was in turn stimulating Ida. His bitterness felt *right*; it didn't belong to him, but to the man he was creating.

It was a tremendous advance on anything earlier. But when Blizard, looking pleased, gave Delgado a questioning look, the only comment he received was brusque.

"Again, from the start. Cherry, let me see your notes."

Back to first positions. During the repeat, Murray's mind began to drift away from his body, something that seldom happened before a run reached the point where the character had taken over his face, voice and gestures. Now he could already consider lines of development for the second and last act.

Odd . . . Fifty similarities, but nothing derivative. Hints of Miller, Tennessee Williams—transmuted! This man, me, Arch Wilde, this curious allusive way my family is a microcosm—of course, it's the two sons, Al and Rett, which suggests Miller—of a corrupt world when there's not one word to make corruption explicit, only situations any audience will recognise and yet the whole will turn

their stomachs . . . Subtler than Williams. Like nightmare. God, it's frightening.

He didn't dare consider what Delgado's mind must be like.

Never thought I'd be glad to look so much older than I am, but to have two sons that age I must be forty-five and I haven't had to think myself ahead those dozen years, I've grown into them . . . It's crying out for overt nightmare now, a Bloomsday treatment with characters assuming grotesque proportions and we can use Heather somewhere . . . Hell of a note if her first big chance goes phfff—

"Stop!"

What? Everyone looked at Delgado. Blizzard was the first to find his tongue; he had not been snatched back from the deepest level of characterisation anyone on stage had ever achieved.

"Manuel, why in heaven's name —?"

"I said stop. That's enough. You are beginning to have some idea, so tomorrow we will begin and make the real play."

Blizzard got up, fuming, amid a chorus of support. "You can't mean to throw away a week's work when we're running smooth as butter!"

"You think so? There is nothing in it worth keeping. This Murray Douglas you sold me with such fine words is betraying the concept—not feeling, but acting. He is a shell and the effect is buffoonery."

"That's a damned lie for a start!"

Astonishingly, it was Ida who spoke out. She planted her hands on her hips, glowering at Delgado. "Jesus, I'm not exactly in love with Murray, but he's turning in the best performance I've ever seen from him, and you bloody well know it. What's the idea? Are you poking pins in us to make us squirm?"

"If you are insensitive to what I am talking about," Delgado said with a sneer, "apparently you are not fitted to my needs either. Tomorrow when you've recovered from your tantrums we can get down to some work. Right now—Cherry, your papers, please."

The girl handed him the file in which all the notes and drafts had accumulated; they were working from memory and a prompt copy, but there hadn't been a line fluffed this afternoon.

"So!" Delgado said, getting up. "You see I am serious."

He took the file, which held a good hundred sheets of paper, in both hands. He tore it in half, put the halves together and tore them. In spite of everything, those watching gasped at this display of strength.

"Now go away," Delgado said, letting the scraps fall in a white shower. He strode up the aisle.

Blizzard hurried after him, shouting, and vanished. Murray looked around.

"Think he means it?" Adrian said nervously.

"Of course he means it," Murray snapped. "And the hell of it is, there's not one of us who can afford to spit in his face and walk away. God damn the man!"

XII

There was a pause. Murray became aware of an incomprehensible fact. The faces turned to him were incredulous.

"Walk out?" Constant said. "Who said anything about walking out? Just because he tore you off a strip there's no need to go high-horse on us."

"Wait a moment! What are you snapping at me for? This idiot Delgado—"

"I heard what he said, I heard what Ida said, and the fact remains he didn't like what you were doing and because of that we have to start over. Fact?"

Jess slammed his hands down in a jagged chord, jumped up and headed for the exit. Lester followed him, shoulders hunched dejectedly.

"Maybe he just wants to shake us up," Adrian suggested.

"I think you're kidding yourself," Ida muttered. "The guy's a nut case, and you have as much chance of persuading him to change his mind as making the Thames flow backwards."

"I don't know what's made you take Murray's side," Constant said. "That was a pretty speech you

made, but you were dazzled by going through the motions and Delgado was watching from out front."

"I—I thought it was very good." From halfway to the back of the auditorium, Heather's voice came uncertainly.

"Be quiet!" Constant rapped. "You've been a complete passenger so far, so keep out of it, will you?"

"Constant's right," Rett Latham said. "Delgado will stick by what he said, and what made him say it was Murray's performance, and we've wasted a week's work. Makes me sick."

There was so much hostility battering Murray's mind he could think of nothing to say. While he was tongue-tied Gerry Hoadling came on stage. He drew and opened a knife. Face dead white, he slashed across his painted canvas flats. That achieved, he also strode out.

"Well, there's one of us who takes it seriously," Al Wilkinson said. "Rett, let's get out of here."

One by one they moved away. Ida was the last. Before going she spoke to Murray barely above a whisper.

"Delgado is a nut case! But I guess you'll have to figure out what it was he didn't like."

Murray shrugged. If he'd been acting well enough to provoke approval from Ida, he hadn't been deluding himself. Therefore Delgado's outburst had had nothing to do with his performance.

Which leaves personal animosity. But why me? Because I've asked awkward questions?

In the aisle, Ida paused and and looked towards Heather. "Sweetie, let's go and settle accounts with Constant for what he said to you," she suggested.

"It was true, wasn't it?" Heather answered in a subdued voice, but she moved to fall in disconsolately at Ida's side. That left Murray alone.

He'd predicted that this place was going to turn into an asylum. Could anyone have picked a surer way of bringing that about? God, it was going to be hell tonight!

He left the stage, wondering how he could escape the worst of it. No good just going out for the evening—things would be still worse tomorrow if Delgado stuck to his word. . . .

He had reached the rank of seats where Heather had been. A bit of white caught his eye: a handkerchief forgotten on the seat. He picked it up, feeling it damp as though with tears. Poor damned kid. Why had Blizzard hired her and then left her out in the cold? It almost suggested that she was laid on for Ida in the same way that a supply of horse had been provided for Gerry—

Faint but distinct, he heard a door closing overhead, and instantly every other thought was gone from his mind.

Gerry had said his room must be

over the middle row of seating. That was Gerry's door.

"God's name!" Murray said, and left the theatre at a run.

There was no answer when he rapped on the designer's door. He went to his own room and felt along the pelmet; the little jar of heroin was still there, and the level didn't seem to have gone down. Yet he still had a sense of foreboding. He went back to put his ear against the panels of Gerry's door.

A tinkle, metal on metal. Another, probably glass on metal. The sound of a match being struck. The sounds built so vivid a picture that he was frightened.

"Gerry!" he shouted, and began to beat on the door like a drum.

"Murray, what are you playing at?" Suddenly the harsh voice of Constant broke on him; he had emerged from the next room, number eleven.

"Give me a hand to break in this door!" Murray rapped.

"Are you crazy?"

"You idiot! Gerry's overdosing himself with horse—you going to stand by while he lies dying?"

Constant's face paled. He answered by crossing the corridor to stand beside Murray.

"On three," Murray said curtly. "One—two—three!"

The lock ripped jaggedly from the wood of the jamb. There was a long second in which Gerry was turning from the table on which lay his tackle—a dish with a sy-

ringe in it, a jar of white powder, and a spirit lamp. In his hand was a spoon with the handle oddly bent; his left sleeve was rolled back.

Then Murray had snatched at the spoon and was forcing the hysterical man back towards the bed. He shrieked and struck out at random till Constant managed to pinion his arms.

Murray pointed at a tiny smear of blood already oozing on the left one. "So it was going to be your second shot!"

"Damn you," Gerry said thinly. "Get out. Both of you."

"Not yet," Murray said, and as Gerry slumped back picked up the jar of heroin. "Constant, make sure there isn't any more of this stuff in here."

"Isn't that enough? I've never seen so much of it!"

"He gave me another jar to hide for him. Where there are two there may be a dozen. Start looking."

"Get out," Gerry said again, but didn't move. Sweat was running like water on his face.

Murray checked every place he could think of. He drew a blank, as did Constant. Gerry's eyes were closed by the time they finished. The first shot had hit, and he would sleep for an hour or so.

"I guess he'll be all right," Murray said. "But let's take his gear in case he's shamming." He picked up the dish with the syringe and blew out the lamp. Constant followed

him into the corridor. He spoke with difficulty.

"Uh—Murray, I guess I should apologise. I don't see why Delgado was so angry. Sorry I jumped down your throat."

"If I hadn't been so taken aback, I'd have jumped down his first," Murray said. "But thanks anyway."

"I—uh—guess you saved Gerry's life. That right?"

"I don't know," Murray said uncomfortably. "Possibly. There's enough to kill a regiment in here. He said he was getting it uncut, and you know Will Rogers killed himself with a shot of uncut horse, when he wasn't used to it."

"But where did he get the stuff? He couldn't afford that much!"

Murray was on the point of answering. He checked. He had just spotted, through the open door of Constant's room, a book lying on the bedside table.

"May I look?" he said, and without waiting for permission went in. He turned to the title page and read aloud.

"Justine: or the Misfortunes of the Virtuous, by the Marquis de Sade, newly done into English by—" He stared at Constant before resuming. "By Algernon Charles Swinburne. With one hundred illustrations by various hands. London, privately printed, 1892."

Constant flushed. "It's not mine," he said self-excusingly. "I found it here. Some of the drawings look like Beardsley."

Murray dropped it and bent to examine a shelf similar to the one in his own room. Its contents were very different. *Juliette* was here, and the *120 Days*, Miller's *Rosy Crucifixion*, a handsome *Fanny Hill*, and a dozen more he'd never heard of, with titles like *Flagitiosa* and *Put it Down to Exqueerience*.

"You're welcome to borrow any of them," Constant said.

"No thanks." Murray straightened. "I have enough trouble with my own weaknesses without acquiring someone else's."

"Don't be so bloody superior, Murray!" Constant said with a flash of his usual acerbity.

"Sorry. But you were asking how Gerry got his horse. The same way you got those books. He found the stuff in his room. The same way I found enough liquor to tempt a saint. You know something? If you opened up Delgado's skull, I think you'd find a sewer instead of a brain."

XIII

Murray balanced the dish and the second jar of heroin behind the pelmet. Letting his hands fall to his sides, he was abruptly aware of great weakness. The shoulder with which he had charged the door ached, and the trend of his thoughts grew dark.

Tomorrow, will one of those stewards leave another jar and another syringe for Gerry to find?

What other explanation was there? Gerry couldn't have afforded to buy it. It was on the house.

He felt sick. There was a calculated nastiness in this affair which he was sure could only have originated with Delgado. "His method of working"—faugh! What did it really consist in: rubbing the nerves of his actors raw?

For the first time he began to consider the chance of contacting someone who had worked on *Trois Fois a la Fois*.

Yet some of the cast seemed eager to jump when Delgado cracked his whip. Take the way Constant had joined in blaming Murray for the catastrophe. He'd apologised, but it had taken the shock of seeing Gerry in danger to make him think of being ashamed. Even Adrian, the most experienced member, hadn't contradicted Delgado. Only Ida had done so—and Heather; but she was irrelevant. . . .

Back in the theatre, he'd been telling himself it was as though Heather were merely "on the house" for Ida, like liquor, heroin and pornography. The idea figured. Except—what was the purpose behind it all?

Oh, damn Delgado! Murray strode to the bed. There was only one thing he'd been able to do so far to kid himself he was hitting back, and that was his nightly routine of stripping the embroidery off the mattress. Just as regularly,

each morning it was replaced or a new mattress was found. It had happened again: there was the tracery of wire.

He ripped it off. Then he twisted the spools off the tape-deck, went to the window, and tossed them out like carnival streamers. It made him feel better, but it was still a childish gesture. He took a grip on himself.

Unless he made sense out of what Delgado was doing before tomorrow, there would be hell to pay. The resentment against him—conjured up on the author's say-so, but fierce enough—had only started to smoulder. If tomorrow's work went badly it would blaze. It might ruin the entire venture. And Murray had an obscure conviction Delgado wouldn't care.

So what was he after? Was he not interested in the play? Was he a character out of one of Constant's books, getting his kicks by making people squirm, with enough money behind him not to worry if thousands of pounds were squandered?

No, it was too far-fetched. He'd made a success of his film, as well as *Trois Fois a la Fois* . . .

Memory interrupted in Roger Grady's voice: "Because Garrigue killed himself. Because Léa Martinez went into an asylum. Because Claudette Myrin tried to murder her daughter."

Would Roger be saying, next year or the year after, "Because Murray Douglas started drinking

again. Because Gerry Hoading overdosed himself with horse. Because—"?

No.

He drove his mind back to immediate problems. Suppose he found himself in this spot without having annoyed Delgado, without knowing about tape-decks or TV sets?

It didn't figure. There wasn't any other reason why Delgado should abandon a play that was going like wildfire except sadism or annoyance with the person he'd attacked. And Murray knew exactly how he'd upset Delgado.

He was going to probe a bit further. Where to begin? How about room thirteen? But the cable of the TV was secured now—he'd checked—and the door was always locked. . . .

Got it. He craned out of the window. Yes, if Gerry's room was over the middle of the seating in the theatre, and his own was over the greenrooms, then room thirteen must be over the stage.

He wondered if he could get to its window, but there was nothing to give him purchase, not even a drainpipe. So downstairs.

He peered up into the deep shadow between the curtain and the flies. Was that some kind of grille over the ceiling? By adding one more chair to the chairs and tables from which Gerry had improvised his two-level set, he could get up there and check. He pro-

ceeded to do so. There was a grille. Beyond it, something glinted. Bare wires—or metal rods, perhaps; they were quite thick. By the wan flame of his lighter he peered and poked with his finger between the bars of the grille.

Nothing he recognised. It was something akin to the embroidery on the mattresses. Curves, straight lines, spirals, threw light back at him. They wove between the grille and ceiling over the entire stage, as far as he could tell—

“What do you find so interesting, Murray?”

Murray started and almost fell off his high perch. On the floor of the auditorium stood Delgado, sallow face dark with rage. Murray gathered his wits.

“If you don’t know, nobody else around here is likely to!”

Delgado took half a pace back. “Come down at once! There’s delicate equipment up there, and you’ve smashed up quite enough already with your damned inquisitiveness!”

“Okay, I’ll make a bargain with you. Tell me what this stuff is, and I’ll stop prying. But I want the truth, mind!”

Delgado’s response was to mount the stage and lay one hand on the leg of a table supporting Murray. “If you don’t come down, I’ll pull this over and *bring* you down.”

Remembering the casual strength with which Delgado had torn

hundreds of sheets of paper, Murray recognised the value of the threat. There was no alternative to compliance.

“I’m getting very tired of you,” Delgado went on. “You seem to enjoy being a nuisance too much to appreciate that you’re here, receiving excellent pay, with the chance of partaking in something which will make theatrical history—”

“Did you write your speech yourself?” Murray broke in. “Or is it collectively improvised?”

For the second time in minutes he had the satisfaction of discomfiting Delgado. The voice grew shrill.

“Why have you been destroying things that don’t belong to you? Why are you trying to make trouble?”

“Because you’re a bad liar and a worse actor.” It was heartening to be able to assume command of the situation, and Murray seized the chance. “First lie: your story about sleep-learning. Second lie: your accusation this afternoon, so dishonest even Ida saw through it. Third lie: this crap about theatrical history. I don’t believe you give a damn about creating a play. You’re an evil little man with a lust for power, and it means more to you to have people dance when you pull their strings than to achieve something artistically worthwhile. I agree with Sam: you do have talent enough to

build a masterpiece out of your material. But you won't get me grovelling to you either with threats or bribes. You can feed Gerry his heroin and Constant his dirty books and maybe they'll think you're doing them a favour. But if you put mumbo-jumbo trickery in my bed and stuff mysterious gadgets in my TV set, you won't stop me digging for the truth about them. Not until you level with me. Do I make myself clear?"

Delgado heard him out, his self-possession seeping back. He gave a short laugh.

"You're very insecure, aren't you?" he said. "You have to talk loudly to reassure yourself. You are afraid something is going on that you don't understand, and the idea scares you. So you break things. You can't afford to run away, but breaking things gives you a sense of comforting power. And you shift blame to me because you can't face your own inadequacies. Though I'd have thought they were obvious even to

you—after all, it wasn't my fault you drank yourself into the gutter. Still, you have some trace of spirit left. If not, I would tell Blizzard to get rid of you."

"Your technique is showing," Murray said with scorn. "To dodge straight questions, you toss out insults, hoping I'll be distracted by a fit of temper. It won't work. You're doing something for which the play is only an excuse, and just so long as you deny it I'll go on trying to prove it."

"You're obstinate," Delgado said. "But I know what I'm doing and you don't. I don't have to wonder which of us will yield first. As you wish, then. You will certainly suffer, especially when it becomes clear to your colleagues that you are being deliberately obstructive. However, I can afford to throw you and anyone else aside."

He gave a sleepy smile. "And you can't afford to do anything. I'm your last hope, Murray. On your head be it."

(to be concluded next month)

COMING NEXT MONTH

The startling conclusion of JOHN BRUNNER's new novel, **THE PRODUCTIONS OF TIME**; a new story of The People by ZENNA HENDERSON, **TROUBLING OF THE WATER**. (Watch for the September issue, on sale August 2.)



"Look—in this world you don't get something for nothing!"

Joan Patricia Basch was born some 35 years ago in Brooklyn, was brought up in Brazil, and now is back in Brooklyn. She writes that she "studied for the theatre, appeared in Off-Broadway productions, fragmentary film and T. V., wrote parables and drew cartoons. She soon found, however, that these outside interests conflicted with her primary aim: schizoid withdrawal." We've since received coherent communication from Miss Basch, so we trust that her goal will be put off indefinitely, and that we will have the opportunity to present more good stories like the one below.

MATOG

by Joan Patricia Basch

TIMES WERE NOT EASY FOR Pieter Schnapps, who, in the fashion of other scholars in the sixteenth century, had taken the Latin name of "Virgilius." He and his fifteen year old daughter (appropriately called "Camilla" after the heroic maiden in Virgil's epic), were destitute. Arriving on foot at the village of Dumpf, which consisted of an inn, they were forced to accept the charity of the inn-keeper, Johannes.

A short, chubby man with a glowing child-like face, Johannes conferred charity upon them as one accepting favors. Virgilius had some small fame which had at one time reached the inn-keeper, who was fond of saying that he had been educated above his station. He suffered from the lack of sublime con-

versation, and Virgilius seemed a heaven-sent source of supply. According to Johannes, those who usually came to his inn were not truly alive; they merely had insomnia.

Eagerly, Johannes put the traveller's little donkey in his stable, transferred the cartload of books and alchemist's retorts to the wine cellar, and set a fine roast before the dusty pair. His wife, Lotte, a great freckled, carrot-haired woman, made a row. (She treated Johannes as if he were her precocious child, scolding and complaining to his face, and then dotingly confiding to others the inexplicable marvels of his mind and heart.) Upon the advent of Virgilius and his daughter, hungry and penniless, she called Johannes a fool and

a dupe, cried out that he would impoverish them both, threw a pan at him, and flung off to their room. There, she knelt before a statuette of the Madonna and murmured, moist-eyed, that she was married to a saint.

Gazing worshipfully upon Virgilius' majestic person as that bearded sage bolted his food, Johannes ventured: "The Lean Years are upon you, Meister?"

"When were the Fat ones?" Virgilius retorted bitterly, attacking his refilled plate with the air of one making provision for winter.

"Meister, I have information which may have a bearing upon the . . . misfortune to which you allude. . . . I had meant to refer to it casually, with no coarse hint of its—ah—*lucrative* aspects. . . ."

Privation had thinned Virgilius' patience. He snapped, "Speak out, man! I know you were educated above your station!"

Johannes did not take offense. He said, "You know these are the lands of the Baron von Stellwiper von Vloy von Von?"

"His castle does not fade into the landscape."

"Imposing, is it not? An aerie, one might say, for an eagle like yourself." Virgilius tried to acknowledge the compliment while downing a mug of ale. Johannes planted his elbows on the table, and, leaning forward, whispered excitedly: "Chimaerus, Court Astrologer, Alchemist in Waiting,

Necromancer in Chief, Protegee and Pet Charlatan of His Affluence the Baron, has flown the coop."

"Incredible!" exclaimed Virgilius, who was well informed as to the reputations of his colleagues. "From such a fine situation for one so inept! Confidentially, he had no more ingenuity than the shade of Sisyphus."

Johannes raised his plump hands, fingers spread.

"Ah Meister!" he protested. "Say Chimaerus had no talent. Say he had no learning. Say he had no scruples. But do not say he had no ingenuity!"

True enough," Virgilius drawled. "One might even say that he succeeded in discovering the Philosopher's Stone, since he managed to transform the lead of his brain into the gold of the Baron's purse. Why, in the name of undeserved Fortune, did he leave the Baron's service?"

Johannes again adopted his conspiratorial air. "The question is not 'Why?', but 'How?'" His eyes sparkled. "For two years Chimaerus tried to conjure up a demon, fiend, devil for the Baron to look at. The Baron expects value, and prefers spectacle, which he can see, to speculation, which he can't grasp. He would well nigh give his fortune for the sight of genuine devil."

"He has only," Virgilius said significantly, "to wait." Johannes scarcely paused in his narration.

"A week ago, the labors of two

years bore fruit. A devil actually *did* appear to Chimaerus . . . and it carried him off."

Virgilius guffawed. Johannes smiled demurely and continued.

"They were both gone so fast the Baron did not see either of them. He missed the treat."

"However, it might be accounted at least a Pyrrhic Victory for poor Chimaerus," Virgilius observed generously. "I suppose the Baron's laboratory is well equipped?"

"Many-tongued Rumor indicates it."

"I have put much study into an attempt to conjure up the fiend Matog," said Virgilius thoughtfully. "He cannot withstand my spells much longer. And now I shall know what to do with him when he does arrive." He glanced at Camilla, who had fallen asleep with her head on her arms, and rose.

The wine cellar was cavernous, with an earthen floor. It boasted little wine, but had a stove, safely apart from the barrels. The stove was lit, and two straw pallets, with blankets, were set on either side of it. Camilla barely woke as her father half carried her down and tucked her in. Virgilius himself did not retire until he and Johannes had put up a trestle table, upon which the alchemist's mystical hardware was lovingly set.

The following morning, Camilla went to the castle with a basket over her arm. Throughout their

joint lives, her father had made sporadic attempts to turn to account various remedies he had devised for ailing live-stock. Usually this was only a last resort against starvation, but Camilla felt that Lotte, after all, gained little from Virgilius' conversation and dangerous experiments to compensate for the inroads upon her larder.

The castle, built to be threatening, stood upon a rocky hill. Its towers were wreathed with flights of birds, like calligraphy inked upon the transparent gray sky. The road, winding among fir trees and stunted oaks, was quite steep, but the thin cold air, the early morning chatter and twittering of the birds, the silvery mists evaporating in the rise of the pale sun, all filled her with a mysterious sense of anticipation and anguish. Life might be beginning, at last.

Camilla was a tall, slight girl with a wilderness of curly pale brown hair and enormous grey eyes, an oval face and cleft chin. She seldom thought of her appearance, beyond seeing that her one gown, of faded blue, was kept neatly patched and clean, but on this morning she felt beautiful. It was like a sign of Grace.

Wandering like a gypsy for as long as she could remember, sleeping in palaces and by the roadside, Camilla's religious education (the only kind that mattered among women) was strangely neglected. She did not know that she was

many kinds of heretic, well qualified to be burned at the stake, and was on friendly, informal terms with God. Camilla's mother had been a lady, fastidious and no longer young, who had loved the resident scholar-magician and died of it, assisted by the inopportune arrival of her daughter. Virgilius left her family's manor in haste, taking the evidence with him. Sheltered through infancy among the large brood of an accommodating peasant family, Camilla was reunited with her father almost as soon as she could walk, and she had walked a great deal since; barefoot and in wooden shoes, occasionally in pretty slippers.

In this chilly dawn with its mood of awakening, there came cantering up the road a man on a black horse. Coming abreast of Camilla, who flinched from the thudding hooves, he pulled up. He was quite young and well dressed, with a drooping feather in his maroon cap. His olive skinned face was fine and handsome, with gentle dark eyes and lines like commas by his mouth. He raised his eyebrows and smiled at Camilla, and she was proud and happy because she felt beautiful that day, and it would have been a discord if such a man had met a homely girl on such a morning.

He greeted her with grave courtesy, and when she explained her errand, introduced himself as the Baron's steward, Hans, and bought

some remedies from her. He politely questioned her, and Camilla, encouraged for the first time in her life to talk about herself, chattered breathlessly. She even divulged that the remedies were the creation of Virgilius, although this was absolutely forbidden. Virgilius regarded these medicines as the product of his baser, peasant nature, and he tacitly disassociated himself from their production, and even from Camilla when she sold them.

As they parted, Hans doffed his cap. Camilla returned to the inn with an empty basket and restocked fancy. Her fancy had always been her true reality, and now it was inhabited by the image of a person of flesh and blood, who had told her she was beautiful (with his eyes as much as in words) and a lady born. Around this fragment her secret reality formed a pearl which enclosed her so completely that meeting a fiend did not flurry her at all.

The fiend arrived that night.

Camilla lay on her pallet pretending to sleep as her father muttered, chanted, and scratched pentagons on the earthen floor, among the vials and retorts whose multicoloured contents glowed in the dark and gave off phosphorescent vapours. In their illumination, cast luridly upwards, Virgilius' craggy face with its fierce brows and flowing white hair and beard, hovered like that of some sinister prophet.

(His hair and beard had turned white from shock, alchemy and black magic being a metier full of surprises. This venerable whiteness gave the impression that he was twice his actual age, which, in conjunction with a fifteen-year-old daughter, enhanced his reputation for arcane knowledge.)

Virgilius collected all his forces and cried: "APPEAR!"

There was a disappointing puff of smoke. Virgilius looked around hopefully, but he did not see what Camilla saw—an attenuated black figure decorated with small antlers and a bushy tail, mincing on tip-toe towards the stove.

Drowsy and entranced, Camilla remained still, watching the scene with detachment, from inside her pearl. The creature raised his finger to what might be his lips—his face was concealed by a mop-like orange mane, the same fore and aft—when he saw he was observed. There was something endearing in this unlikely complicity.

When Virgilius, discouraged, left the cellar for a drink and conference with Johannes, the fiend emerged shivering from the stove. "I can't bear it," he said. "Why can't they leave me in peace?"

"I'm sorry," said Camilla.

"Just let me wait it out in the stove. My name is Matog. Until the spell wears off."

"My name is Camilla; how do you do. I can't, Matog. Papa would be so angry."

"Camilla, I implore you."

"All right, Matog. Although I shouldn't."

"Promise? Sacred and Infernal?"

"Promise," said Camilla, touched and impressed.

The same thing happened the following night, and the night after that. Matog would be conjured up, hide, and Virgilius would leave, discouraged. Camilla, who had met Hans twice again on her way to the castle and was wholly absorbed in the aura of these overtly inconsequential meetings, made Matog her first confidant. She crouched close to the stove, whispering and enjoying his unsympathetic comments. They were addressed directly to her, and this was a delightful novelty.

"Dear Fiend," she whispered. "It is hard for me to speak of it . . . it is something . . . so . . . silly but, I thought, since you seem kindly disposed towards me . . ."

"Cut the preface," Matog interrupted, "and get to the narrative."

"I am in love."

"It's all your imagination," said Matog.

"Oh, I know!" Camilla gasped. "It's just that it *feels* so real to me. *Oh*," she sighed, "it's as if I had a fountain in me, a fountain that could cure sickness . . . if I touch something I feel as if I had healing hands . . . you know? And something else. I feel so alive that I think that if a leaf touched me, it would leave a bruise . . . and I

feel like a vase which is carrying something so precious I walk carefully so it doesn't spill . . . Oh Matog, if you knew what a *relief* it is to talk about him!"

"You seem to be talking about yourself."

"Was I? I *thought* I was talking about him."

"Who is this nervous seizure?"

"I can't come out and say, Matog. I know you don't mind. I even hate it when other people mention his name, although I listen hard. Oh Matog, I feel as if I had been holding my breath all my life . . ."

The next day, Camilla heard Johannes, in gossiping with Virgilius, say that the Baron's steward, Hans, although of humble birth, had risen to his present eminence through being honest, trustworthy, and laughing at the Baron's jokes.

"A flatterer, then?" inquired Virgilius, while Camilla gazed fixedly at her sewing.

"Oh no," said Johannes. "He really thinks they are funny. It is a quirk," he explained, "such as any might have." He went on to say that Hans had risen so high as to marry an ill-natured niece of the Baron's, of small dowry and less beauty, but still, a step up in the world. Camilla went on sewing, as her fountain dried and her flesh turned to insipid clay and a numbness filled her head.

Walking to the castle the next day with a fresh supply of medicine, she told herself that it had

been indeed "a nervous seizure." In any case, she had never believed that life would ever begin in earnest, that anything could really change, or even that this would be at all desirable. She thought of many things as she walked along, until taken aback by the violent beating of her heart. For a moment she thought she might be ill, and then realized that she had passed a spot where she had stopped to talk to Hans, and that had caused the beating. The enchantment had dissolved, leaving heaviness and apathy in its dregs, but desire remained. It was no longer the element in which she lived, but an isolated, aggravating hunger.

Since she no longer wove fantasies around Hans (for that seemed to her to be taking a liberty), she was able for the first time to consider her father and his predicament. Lotte kept threatening to evict her husband's pets, in spite of the money brought in by the medicine . . . they could not stay at the inn forever . . . Johannes was losing some of that adoration in which Virgilius basked and throve, and Virgilius was becoming desperate. How selfish she had been! Further, when she entered the inn she found a scene of consternation. A message had come. The Baron might call that very night, expecting a demonstration.

That night Camilla feigned sleep as before, as Virgilius went through his usual rituals. Again,

his eyes glassy with discouragement, Virgilius flung up his arms at the conclusion of the invocation and cried: "APPEAR!" Again Matog materialized behind his back, dodged lithely as Virgilius peered around, and escaped into the stove. After Virgilius, in despair, tottered upstairs to rejoin Johannes and drink ale spiked with powdered bats, Matog emerged and prowled restlessly about. "How long can this go on?" he demanded rhetorically.

Camilla clasped her hands. "Please, please, Matog. Don't keep me to my promise. I was sorry for you but I didn't realize how much it meant to Papa. The Baron may come tonight! It changes everything!"

Matog whirled to face her, tail bristling. "It changes nothing for *me*!" he said between what she assumed were his teeth. "It will be the same as always for *me*. FIRST, there will be panic. Then lofty questions Satan himself couldn't understand, much less answer. But it's DONE. It's the CUSTOM. How do they think them up? *Why*?"

"Just get it over with, Matog dear."

"I know what to expect from these meddling pedants," he cried. "They weave spells and concentrate darkly until they've materialized one of us, and then, and then . . ."

"What, Matog?"

"Then it's: 'BEGONE, INFAMOUS FIEND! TEMPT ME NOT!' Matog paused and looked

at Camilla with impersonal curiosity. "Do I tempt you?"

Camilla searched for a tactful reply. "I think you're very interesting," she said delicately. "And *unusual*."

Matog suddenly shouted, waving his long thin arms and stamping his long prehensile feet. "I have NEVER, in my wildest dreams of infamy, thought of myself as tempting in ANY WAY WHATSOEVER! But 'Tempt me not!' they screech. Obviously set on being tempted in *some* odd way. And the *self-righteousness* of it! 'Begone, unclean Spirit, in the name of the Heavenly Powers!' . . . followed by a flood of abuse in Latin, abominably pronounced. 'Abominable'—that's another one. 'Abominable Fiend.' But if they cast the spell, we HAVE to come! We have to come—from home, and peace, and comfort. *And we can't leave until the spell wears off!*" His voice rose hysterically. "It's MADDENING, I TELL YOU!"

"Just this once, Matog."

"They can't wait," he fumed on, "to get a little bit of Hell within reach—they'll all but kill themselves to do it, evil-minded brutes—and then it's all *horror*" (he spoke mincingly) "and *indignation*. And exorcisms. With Bells. Tinkle-tinkle. Ugh."

Camilla said eagerly, "But Papa will be *glad* to see you!"

Matog turned on her again. "He'll try to strike a bargain for *his*

soul, wait and see. I have done more asinine bargaining for the asses' souls of more bearded blockheads—not your father, of course, Camilla—than any demon save Mephistopheles. And Mephistopheles enjoys it. He's mainly a Human concept anyway, the poseur."

"Matog . . ."

"And never once was it my idea!" he bleated. "And, of course, very proper they feel about *cheating*. With Them, it's not how you cheat, it's *who* you cheat. And They talk about Hell. Why, we frighten our imps with tales of where *they* will go if they don't behave."

"Papa only wants to show you to the Baron," Camilla pleaded. "You only have to stand there and *pose*, for just a minute."

"There would be trouble, mark my words," retorted Matog. "Only the other day I had an ink bottle heaved at me by some reforming theologian. Just showed my face, and ZINGO!—No Camilla, I don't go out of my way for that sort of thing. It just isn't good enough. And Mynheer Virgilius has never been aught but a trial to me." He sat down, his rage exhausted. "No. I hold you to your promise. But you may tell me more about your anonymous lover, if that's any consolation."

"Oh," said Camilla, "that doesn't count any more."

Matog pricked up his ears—literally. "How so?"

"Having the feelings I did about

him was very wrong. *Mistaken*, rather, because truly I didn't know."

"Know what?"

"I might as well tell you who he was, since of course it doesn't matter now. He was the Baron's steward, and is honorably wedded."

Matog's ears twitched uneasily. "Camilla," he said slowly, "I wish you hadn't told me all this. The situation you describe might, if you lived at the castle, lead to serious trouble. This places me under a Moral Obligation to get you there."

Camilla stared at him dumbfounded.

Suddenly there was an uproar: the sound of hooves, Lotte shouting that the inn looked like a pig-sty, the excited voices of Virgilius and Johannes as they all but tumbled into the cellar.

"You must have an apparition. Any apparition," Johannes jabbered. He saw Matog, and stood transfixed, finger pointing, jaws moving soundlessly.

"Camilla, my Robe," ordered Virgilius, struggling to keep his head and not noticing Matog until Camilla, running up with his seedy star-strewn Robe, took him by the shoulders and turned him to view her prize. "Look, Papa!"

Matog obediently struck a pose; very elegant, and still as a statue.

Virgilius gave a great cry and staggered backwards. Reaching out wildly, he seized a bronze ink-pot from the trestle and hurled it. It

ricocheted off Matog's head, dousing him in ink.

"I knew it," whispered Matog. He began to shout. "I *knew* it! I **KNEW IT!**"

"Foul Fiend Avaunt!" cried Virgilius. "Exorciso te . . . oh merciful Heaven, I've forgotten the words."

"Papa! Don't be frightened! Matog has been here for days and days and . . ."

"My little daughter! At the mercy of a devil from Hell!"

"PAPA!" Camilla moaned.

Matog drew himself up with dignity, blotting ink with his tail. "You seem to be singularly ill-informed," he said with icy precision. "I am not a devil, I am a Fiend. Furthermore, I am not, as you seem to fear, the Demon of Lechery, Asmodeus. MY function," he added bitterly, "seems to be serving as target for the inkpots of high-strung metaphysicians."

Unmoved by this reproach, Virgilius groaned. "In one instant I knew all of pain and grief. Remember, Johannes, last year, when six maidens in Pfaff were possessed by a devil? Poor unfortunate young creatures."

"Knowing as you do," said Matog cuttingly, "the intensity of concentration required to call up a devil, I marvel at your saying, 'Poor young creatures.' Poor *Asmodeus*."

Johannes exclaimed, "No no. I

shall never forget how, after three days, a voice burst simultaneously from all six, beseeching the mercy of exorcism."

Matog glared at him. "That was *Asmodeus*. Six at a time is certainly absurd."

There was a pounding at the door, voices at the top of the cellar stairs. Flustered, Johannes rushed over to Matog and began fluffing up his fur. He found a comb in his enormous apron. Reaching up, trembling violently, he feverishly applied it to Matog's mane. Matog obligingly held still, but said coldly, "You are gilding the lily."

It was Hans who descended first. He raised his eyebrows upon seeing Matog at his toilette, but remained superbly unshaken. He smiled covertly at Camilla. She could not meet his eyes, and her face felt rigid and heavy. Her mouth and throat were so parched she could not swallow.

Hans announced: "The Baron von Stellwiper von Vloy von Von."

The Baron was portly and florid, in his sixties, with a bristling blonde mustache turning gray. He was sumptuously clad and carried a magnifying glass, being extremely short-sighted. Under the impression that the kneeling Johannes was a child, he patted him on the head and gave him a sweet. He gave Camilla a sweet. He investigated Virgilius' beard through his glass, and, satisfied by this identification, greeted him. "As you have

doubtless surmised," he said, at the conclusion of formalities, "I have come to consider you as successor to poor Chimaerus. (I had Paracelsus in mind, but no matter.) Doubtless you have heard of the end of poor Chimaerus?" Virgilius opened his mouth, but the Baron continued. "I was approaching his quarters one fateful day, when I heard his triumphant shout of 'EUREKA!' Then there was an indignant cry, a shriek, and, just as I entered, a red flash up the chimney. I thought at once of you, good Virgilius. Poor Chimaerus lacked a certain *je ne sais quoi* . . ."

While talking, the Baron had wandered over to Matog. "And this is. . . ?" Then suspicion dawned. Matog wearily held his pose again while the Baron, aghast, went over him with his magnifying glass. When he realized who, or what, it was, he tottered backwards with a blood-curdling scream.

He flailed his arms.

He crashed through the glass and crystal of Virgilius' equipment.

He howled, "POWERS OF DARKNESS BEGONE."

He panted, "Exorciso te, spiritus imundus, Spiritus malefico . . ."

"No," said Matog with decision. "This is too much. The irony of it." He sprang, giving off blue sparks, and missed. He gnashed unsuspected fangs. The Baron's agility was phenomenal. He was out of the cellar in a trice, and so was Ma-

tog, in a comet of sulphurous smoke. Hans followed. There was a clap of thunder.

"I hope the Baron is pleased," Johannes said doubtfully. There seemed little else to say.

"Pray God you are right, Johannes," muttered Virgilius. "The old fellow is quick on his feet, what? I hope he hasn't joined Chimaerus."

That he had not, was thanks only to the spell's wearing off. Matog vanished in a clap of thunder, after chasing the Baron around the inn, playing cat and mouse with him. The Baron rushed into the kitchen and Lotte slammed the massive door behind him, shutting out a nice fireworks display but not the smell of sulphur. The Baron stumbled to the head of the cellar stairs, just as Johannes was saying, "After the Baron waited so long, just to see a devil would not have been enough. This was better."

"SPAWN OF HELL!" shouted the Baron down the stairs. "ASSASSINS! I banish you. You and your ill-starred little ones." He caught sight of Johannes, who was standing now. "That one has grown," he said, mystified. His voice again rose to a bellow. "Begone from this village ere the sun sets again, and never return to spread the contagion of superstition among the lower orders." He mopped his brow. "If I had not led a blameless life . . . but it is not to be thought of." Hans gently took his arm and led him away. He and

Lotte persuaded the Baron to rest upstairs before attempting the ride back to the castle. Lotte exercised her seldom used but very considerable gifts of pleasing, and plyed him with strong ale and savoury meat.

Unaware of the pacific scene above their heads, the trio in the cellar contemplated the enormity of their misfortune. Only Camilla, huddled by herself near the stove, could find consolation in knowing it to be all for the best.

"Banishment!" mourned Johannes. "And you tried so hard."

"We've nought before us but starvation or charity," said Virgilius. "To be sure, that is all we had before, but I had hoped."

"Ah Mynheer!" cried Johannes, with passion. "It is enough just to *know* Hope for a sweet instant, without holding her to account like a creditor."

Virgilius did not heed him. "Each day," he said, "is a Philosopher's Stone in reverse, changing, hour by hour, all our gold to lead."

They wept together. Hans returned.

"Revered Sir," he said breathlessly, "I took the liberty of returning while the Baron rests, since I have news which may relieve your mind. I argued your cause to the Baron while he sampled a most excellent roast. He withdraws the sentence of banishment."

"God be praised!" cried Johannes.

"And, while the Baron has renounced all that smacks of the Black Arts, he would still solicit your services . . ."

"Ha!" said Johannes proudly. ". . . as a veterinarian."

"Camilla!" Virgilius roared. "I TRUSTED YOU!"

"I reported to the Baron," Hans went on calmly, "upon your miraculous remedy which checked an epidemic of hog cholera."

Virgilius declaimed: "Days of affliction have taken hold upon me! They chase mine honor as the wind . . ."

Hans went on imperturbably. "You would, of course, reside in the castle—in the same tower as the laboratory. The Baron has sworn a solemn vow to never approach that tower again, but doubtless you can find it in yourself to be reconciled to that. The living quarters are quite luxurious, and you will of course dine with the Baron, and be shown all due honor. He has great reverence for learning and for the arts of healing, especially when applied to animals. They were his chief interest in life before the advent of the ill-fated Chimaerus. Here is gold in advance." He departed in a confused exchange of compliments.

"Master Virgilius," pleaded Johannes, with tears in his eyes. "Are you not happy?"

"I have fled this all my life, Johannes. Yet this ignoble destiny lay in wait for me even while I dis-

tilled the learning of the stars."

Johannes straightened up. His eyes were shining now. "But I, Meister," he said, "will go to my grave rejoicing that I knew one like unto the blessed St. Francis—one who distilled the learning of the stars, to heal the suffering beast; the wisest and humblest of philosophers, gentle Virgilius."

Johannes knew his friend well.

Virgilius instantly responded. His face lit up, his shoulders straightened. "Certes," said Virgilius. "It is a great trust. Pray for me, Johannes, that I may not grow vain-glorious."

As they climbed from the cellar, Camilla curled up on her pallet, feeling tired and strange to herself. Something was going to Happen. Tomorrow, life would begin.



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BOOKS



ALMOST FIFTEEN YEARS AGO, IN a critical essay on science fiction¹ as yet unsurpassed for acute analysis or predictive accuracy, Reginald Bretnor amused some readers, antagonized others, and drew vigorous agreement from a few, when he said of s-f:

It is not a genre. Its scope is universal. It holds the promise of an entire new literature.

He based his statement on a careful survey of contemporary writing and thinking, in and out of the science fiction field. I can not take the space here to review Bretnor's article in full; I commend it heartily to anyone who can find a copy. But I want to quote two passages here in preface to a discussion of two new books which stand, I believe, at the opening gate to that 'new literature':

In writing, as in the other arts, there have been a number of responses to the problem posed by the new complexity of knowledge and the breakdown of the older synthesis. Characteristic of almost all of these, especially in this cen-

tury, is a peculiar process which can quite accurately be called the intellectual renunciation of 'the intellect.' Actually, this rebellion against 'reason' is a revolt against the scientific method, reason's cold instrument in the old scheme of things. It is a revolt prompted by the failure to understand, and by a fear of the un-understandable. It has varied in degree; it has been more or less conscious, more or less deliberate. It has included such seemingly diverse phenomena as the complete Dadaist denial, the Existentialist dramatization of fashionable despair, and a highly verbalized insistence on restrictive neo-Aristotelian frames of literary reference which themselves are a retreat from the Aristotelian balance of the Renaissance. The trend, in our most 'serious' fiction, has been increasingly toward a focus of all emphasis on 'the emotions,' on 'feeling' rather than on 'thought'—as though the two were mutually antagonistic and mutually exclusive.

And later:

To science fiction, man is the

¹"The Future of Science Fiction," by Reginald Bretnor, in **MODERN SCIENCE FICTION**, ed. Bretnor, Coward McCann, 1953.

proper study of the writer—man, and everything man does and thinks and dreams, and everything man builds, and everything of which he may become aware—his theories and his things, his quest into the universe, his search into himself, his music and his mathematics and his machine. All these have human value and validity, for they are of man.

Bretnor spoke of science fiction as "integrative . . . not self-restrictive . . . not a literature of false dichotomies, conventionalized . . ." In this, as in much of what he had to say about the specialty field *per se*, he was writing more of what science fiction should and could be than what it ordinarily is. As it turned out, his predictions concerning the move towards s-f by 'mainstream' writers and publishers, and by the reading public in general, were startlingly accurate, and much more so, it has seemed, than his expectations for what would happen in the field itself. But the premises underlying his argument were more significant than any of his conclusions, and they concerned the moving spirit of our age, from which all expression in art and literature must eventually flow: the revolution in scientific thought which has replaced mechanics with dynamics, classification with integration, certainly with relativity, dualism with monism, facts with probabilities. In the arts, as

in the sciences, and in our whole culture, the conflict between response to the new challenge and reaction away from it, is still raging, and within the growing ranks of those who have begun to accept the new concepts there is further inevitable experimental dissension.

But, dimly, not yet the actual shapes, but the foreshadows of emergent forms are beginning to make themselves felt. In literature, at least English-language literature, the reactive forces have been vigorous and effective, but in the last decade or two, even the literary Establishment has loosened its grim clutch on dying 'realism'—while within the enclave of American science fiction, where the first efforts had been made, a backwater reactive swirl seemed for a while to be burying all that was original or truly speculative in a flood of polished mediocrity and formularized paperback pap.

This is still largely the case; most of even the best writers in the field do no more in the way of idea-originating than filling in intricate detail on their 'new maps'. The literary explorers here are mostly 'fringe people': writers who neither identify themselves with s-f, nor align themselves against it, but make use of its unique properties when and as needed. For various reasons, the situation in England is different: the 'realism'

reaction was never as strong; major writers and thinkers there began making use of s-f techniques in the thirties, instead of the fifties; the specialty field grew up in the shadow, if not the smile, of literary respectability.

Whether such background distinctions provided a more favorable atmosphere for the development of a writer like J. G. Ballard, or whether Ballard himself was a prime factor in keeping the British field from following the lead (or tail) of the regressive movement in the previously-dominant American magazines, is not even a matter of importance. What does matter is that at least one fully qualified writer has now developed to occupy the position for whose description we have as yet no adequate critical language—a literary outpost rather closer to the lonely prominences of the Argentinian, Borges, the Parisian, Jarry, the Swede, Martinson, than to his closest English-language neighbors (Kurt Vonnegut, William Burroughs, Cordwainer Smith, Joseph Heller, David Bunch, Anthony Burgess, are among them); somewhere in the direction that Kuttner and Moore were perhaps the first to point to from inside science fiction; the ground Sturgeon and Miller approached and abandoned; from

which Aldiss and, more often, Leiber, have brought back magical reports; where McKenna had only begun exploring when he died; where, perhaps, Zelazny, Disch, Lafferty, and a growing school of young British writers (with perhaps Langdon Jones and George Collyn at the fore), may find their way.

(My apologies for any notable omissions; I did not set out to compose an honor roll, but to describe a rough circle.)

A year ago in this space, reviewing *THE DROWNED WORLD* (July, 1965) I said I thought Ballard "well on his way toward becoming the first truly conscious and controlled literary artist s-f has produced." It is time now to dispense with cautious qualifiers. With the publication of *THE CRYSTAL WORLD*² and *THE IMPOSSIBLE MAN*³ (his fourth novel and seventh short story collection—five in this country), Ballard climaxes his first decade as a writer—and, in another sense, the first phase of his career—at a point where the criteria of genre criticism are totally inadequate to judge his work; and while most of what he has done in the last two years comes off satisfactorily (and occasionally brilliantly) under examination by the established

²THE CRYSTAL WORLD, J. G. Ballard; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966; 210 pp; \$4.50.

³THE IMPOSSIBLE MAN, J. G. Ballard; Berkley #F1204, 1966; nine stories, 160 pp.; 50¢.

rules of 'serious' literary criticism, those rules are themselves far short of satisfactory for examination of most of his work. In the phase he now seems to be entering (to which "Terminal Beach" was a preliminary—as, five years earlier, was the far less complete "Voices of Time"), either set of standards will be about as useful as one axis on a sheet of linear graph paper for charting the course of a rocket: by using *both* axes, we can determine two dimensions of the trajectory; without some fairly sophisticated mathematics (the as-yet unformulated critical vocabulary) we have no way of indicating the third dimension.

In a brief discussion of *THE DROUGHT* here (Jan., 1966), I said it was "a more easily readable book than *THE DROWNED WORLD*, and almost certainly a better *novel*. Whether it is a better book—because Ballard does not really write novels anyhow—will take time to determine; the significance seems to keep seeping up to the surface of the mind for a long time after the book is closed." I started to write the same opening comments, almost word for word, in regard to *THE CRYSTAL WORLD*, until memory nagged, and I checked the earlier review. The only differences would have been in the omission of the parenthetical phrase, disqualified by the publication of *cw*, which is in-

deed—among other things—a novel, and a good one; and in the closing thought, which would have related more to another comment in the same review: "It is becoming almost impossible to review a new book of Ballard's all by itself. The author is building from book to book, and from story to story, in such a way that although each unit is meaningful on its own terms, it assumes full dimensions only in the context of the whole body of work." This is true to varying degrees for all but a double handful of the short stories—and a first novel (*THE WIND FROM NOWHERE*, *F&SF* "Books", July, 1965) which one assumes to have been Ballard's only major experiment with "writing for the market." In general, it is the richest and most rewarding stories that gain most from associative reading—and this applies above all to the curious thematic-trilogy of (for want of a better word) novels, in which *THE CRYSTAL WORLD* serves as bridge and climax to *THE DROWNED WORLD* and *THE DROUGHT*. (And by the way, for what it's worth, my feeling six months later—with only minor seepage still going on—is that *DROUGHT* was indeed the "better book.")

cw is emphatically the best novel of the three, not only because of an observable increment in both craftsmanship and maturity, but because of its particular

function in the trio. Where **DROWNED WORLD** examined time-past in terms of psychophysical and geophysical evolution—a return to the womb-of-the-world—and **DROUGHT** explored the drying-up of life in time-future from the platform of the culture-complex of man's accomplishments till now, **CW** presents us with a (literally, physically) crystallized pattern of time-now—the frozen present, infinite moment, immortality in the instant of *I am*. In the first book, archetypal figures were moved by powerful blind biopsychic forces to fulfill—or reenact—their mythic roles; in the second, elaborately evolved and multi-faceted allegorical personae picked their way through an elegant/decadent choreography of desuetude and devolution on a dying earth; the third book is actively inhabited by individuals entirely alive and aware in the only moment of reality we know at all—the eternally passing present we call *now*, where the focus in space expands as time narrows down, and action shots of life-in-process are not only possible, but inevitable.

The twentieth-century novel is primarily concerned with the interplay of immediacies and intimacies in interpersonal relationships; in these terms, **CW** is a brilliant success compared to its companion pieces—and a respectable accomplishment relative to the general body of contemporary

literature. As a speculative work—and it is that—only the most superficial part of its content is self-contained; the larger, and deeper, statements are to be found only in the dynamics of its relationships with the other two books—and to lesser degrees, with some of the short stories.

The closely timed publication of **THE IMPOSSIBLE MAN**, containing as it does a near-complete sampling of the spectrum of Ballard's work of the last four or five years, serves as a tidy complement to the new novel. It seems unlikely that this was purposeful on the part of the publishers, since the book is obviously a cleaning-up collection (leaving only two of the first-decade stories not yet in book form: "The Singing Statues," which will be in a forthcoming Doubleday collection, and a fragment, really, called "Prisoner of the Coral Deep"), but it was most fortuitously done for my purposes here, and I recommend reading them together—if of course you know where to find Berkley books. (In view of some of my recent remarks about Berkley, I should mention here that I *did* receive a review copy in advance of publication—and then of course I waited to discuss it in connection with the novel . . .)

The collection includes nine stories, three of them new, and only three previously published in

this country. Between them, they cover almost all of Ballard's stylistic range, from the literary-conventional "Drowned Giant" up to, but not including, the earlier examples ("Terminal Beach," "Voices of Time," etc.) of the experimental forms of his newest work; and provide a remarkably inclusive set of views of the vivid/haunting, grotesque/stark, fearsome/beautiful prospects and images of Ballard's unique and persuasive inner landscape. Here are the sand beach and desert, the waiting ocean, patient river basin, echoing wind-carved rock galleries, dark grottoes and sunlit gardens; the crumbling mansions and abandoned hotels, streaming high-speed highways and jostling crowd bodies; the stalled ship-turned-dwelling, the sand-drifted ruins. Of the most familiar sights, only the biological laboratory, and the billboards and white masonry block buildings are missing, but there is a hospital, and giant canvas screens stand in for the geometries of blocks and boards. Here too are the hypnotic, brilliant insects, soundless snakes, and frightening birds; the prismatic brights and darks, the inversions of light and time and mortality. Every major theme of that first decade is somewhere here, emerging as topic in one story, deep underlay in another; almost all of them interwoven with symbols, ideas, images relating to the three novels.

It is no happenstance that the least 'related' story is not only the best piece of proper fiction in the book, but probably (technically and artistically) Ballard's best short story to date. "The Drowned Giant" is almost a model of the contemporary-conventional concept of short fiction. Indeed, there is a quaint academic-literary rhythm to the prose, and a formality in the narration (neither one, oddly enough, unusual for Ballard) quite sufficient to eliminate that "contemporary," if it were not for the effective use of superimposed mythical and naturalistic symbology ("Modern" since Kafka and the Melville renaissance) and, more importantly, the altogether mid-century cultural mold of the community in which the drowned giant is cast up.

The story has already been selected for two major anthologies; I expect it will make itself at home in a good many more, not limited to s-f. In fact, I confess myself bewildered at its selection by the members of the SFWA for the first Nebula Awards collection, supposedly limited to 'science fiction'. It is a remarkably good story: superior symbolic—but not speculative—fiction, and neither by the literary snob's nor the sci-fi fan's definition, conceivably 'science fiction'.

"Giant" is significant *within* the context of Ballard's work primarily as an index of his literary de-

velopment. Almost as though he were testing himself from time to time, a small but consistent part of Ballard's output has fallen into a special group of what can only be regarded as exercises in formal fiction. Usually on traditional 'gothic science fiction' themes (appropriately updated in rationale, costume, fittings, setting, and dialogue), most of them contain rather more scientific/technological furniture than "Giant"; some of them completely satisfy the specific demands of 'solid science fiction'; but where the speculative element remains, it is carefully limited: the themes are either small chunks broken off the main body, or—as with "Giant"—completely separate one-time ideas.

There have been perhaps ten such stories in the ten years (and that first, learning, novel). The other one in the current collection is "Rites of Passage", and a comparison of the two gives a clear picture of the gain in craftsmanship and control during the four-or-five year interval between them. In the meatier stories, where other kinds of impact are involved, this kind of progress is far less consistent.

It is quite reasonable to assume that the surface of the prose was best tended in these more formal stories simply because they are closer to the surface—intellectualizations of concepts, rather than dimensional images, the al-

most single-handed work of the Professional who is one of the essential personalities of the complete writer. It is the Prophet whose vision informs the work, the Poet who conveys the vision; the Professional (if he is strong enough) maintains a balance between them, and (if he is even stronger) learns enough from both of them so that he is increasingly able, on occasion, to function without their active participation. (When he starts feeling too strong, he sometimes decides to do without the others altogether—but *that* lecture is for other authors, not Ballard.)

"Passage" and "Giant" are the only stories in the book that are less than uniquely and specifically (the composite) Ballard. On the opposite end of the spectrum are "The Gioconda of the Twilight Noon" (1964) and "The Impossible Man" (new in this book), both containing some of the most powerful symbolic punches Ballard ever pulled: or perhaps 'pulled' is the wrong word. The title story is sharply thought-provoking, and "Gioconda"—almost a straight interior-fantasy 'psychological story'—is powerful, ugly, fragmentary, and unforgettable. But both are extreme instances of the 'incomplete' story—perhaps 'unbalanced' is most accurate, in terms of my Poet-and-Prophet analogy—and in both cases, I believe, for the same reason: these stories belong the-

matically to the 'second phase,' which Ballard is only now beginning to be able to cast into appropriate forms. (There is a string of these irritating, fascinating, *almost* and *a-bit-too-much* stories, going back at least six years to "Manhole 69" and "The Waiting Grounds." These, more than any others, enrich each other, and gain both abstract meaning and human impact from relation to each other, and to the main body of work.)

Because he has borrowed so much from the surrealists, and works for direct conveyance of concepts (however abstruse) through imagery, sensory clues, symbology, and associative language and structure, rather than overtly verbalized intellectualizations, it is easy to think of Ballard as the unconscious purveyor of potent magic-in-fantasy. To some small extent, this is probably true, in the side-stream of 'pre-writings' represented most powerfully here by "Gioconda." But for the most part, he is an intensely conscious and purposeful speculative writer, and the modes he elects to use are those best suited to his vital interest in the philosophic basis of the contemporary revolutions in both scientific thinking and artistic expression. He is concerned with relationships, rather than isolated definitions; with the synthesis of varieties of acquired knowledge, rather than the further dissection

or analysis of the parts; with the opposites to be found in apparent equalities, and the identities to be derived from contrasts. The most recent stories are reaching toward a slightly different area of exploration and experimentation, but the main focus of the first ten-year phase was on Time—most specifically, man's orientation in the universal flow of event, the place of the hour, or flower, or single human consciousness, in the birth-to-death movement of cosmos, planet, species, culture.

"The Reptile Enclosure" (1963), "The Delta at Sunset" (1964), and "Storm-bird, Storm-dreamer" and "The Day of Forever" (both new here) are all directly in this central flow, each closely related in theme, structure, imagery or style to one or more of the three novels. "Storm-bird" actually takes some of the same characters and one setting from *THE DROUGHT*, engaging them in an entirely different symbolic expression of the same compression of future-time:

At dawn the bodies of the great birds shone in the damp light of the marsh, their grey plumage hanging in the still water like fallen clouds. Each morning when Crispin went out on to the deck of the picket ship he would see the birds lying in the creeks and waterways where they had died two months earlier, their wounds cleansed now by the slow current,

and he would watch the white-haired woman who lived in the empty house below the cliff walking by the river. Along the narrow beach the huge birds, larger than condors, lay at her feet. As Crispin gazed at her from the bridge of the picket ship she moved among them, now and then stooping to pluck a feather from the outstretched wings. At the end of her walk, when she returned across the damp meadow to the empty house, her arms would be loaded with immense white plumes.

The same boat, the same river, the same woman with even the same name, Catherine York—though Quilter of the book becomes Quimby here, and Crispin is not at all Dr. Ransom. Feathers for sand drifts, and a chain-reaction of hormone-forced crops and giant birds instead of a molecular chain sealing off the seas—how many ways to tell evolutionary time? But it is a different world, and suddenly, it is *not* after all the same woman who bears the same name and appearance.

If you have not read **THE DROUGHT**, I imagine you will find "Storm-bird" exotic, exciting, provocative, chilling, and memorable. If you have read **THE DROUGHT**, you may well feel as I did, naggingly irritated at first, partly with what seems sheer author's laziness, partly at the off-center, out-of-focus feeling each time something different turns out the same, or

something clearly the same proves different after all; but sometime before you have finished, the new and old have vibrated into place together, leaving a slight double-vision blur whose net effect is somehow to intensify credibility far beyond the limits of sharp clarity of visualization; and you will approach the final impossible confrontation with almost unbearable awareness of the loving urgency of loneliness in guilt on one side, and the unmoving ineradicable hope of the hopelessly victimized, across the river. The effect is purely explosive.

"Enclosure" and "Delta" are less closely aligned to any one of the novels, though both are closer to the regressive **DROWNED WORLD** than the **DROUGHT** end-game. I would venture a guess that "Enclosure" was written a good bit earlier than its 1963 publication (as "The Sherrington Theory") in *Amazing*: the idea so dominates the treatment that it seems much more like one of the 'unbalanced' first approaches than something written *after* the return-to-the-sea of **DROWNED WORLD**. As for "Delta"—I have read this story at least half a dozen times since I first saw it in the British **TERMINAL BEACH** collection last fall, and I still do not know what it *is*, in a story that seems unextraordinary *between* readings, that moves me as strongly each time.

"Day of Forever" appears to be a

variant handling of the basic concepts of CRYSTAL WORLD, somewhat after the manner of "Storm-bird" and DROUGHT, but except for some vivid scene setting and evocative premise-stating (*At Columbine Sept Heures it was always dusk. . . . the time whose hands were almost frozen on the dozen clocks . . . The dead clocks that stared down from the municipal towers and deserted towns were the unique flora of the desert, the unused keys that would turn the way into his dreams . . .*) it seemed to me that all the author had to say had already been stated more strongly, and more subtly, in the novel, or for that matter in the earlier novelette, "The Illuminated Man" (*F&SF*, Jan., 1964) that was actually the first version of CW.

In many ways, the story that has most to offer toward an enhancement of the values of the novel is the much earlier "Screen Game"; but it would not matter which novel I was talking about, because this is a Vermilion Sands story.

Nothing I have said about the development of Ballard's work applies here.

It is not uncommon for a young writer, in his first or near-first work, to produce one piece far beyond his actual capacity, not to be equalled or surpassed until years and volumes have gone by. And if he has the patience and persistence to work back to a conscious,

controlled, possession of that initial power, it often turns out on later analysis that the early reputation-maker had somewhere in it the seeds of every mode, thought, construct, in the author's later work. The phenomenon is, for some reason, unusually apparent in science fiction.

Ballard has come a long way in ten years. He has already regained and passed by his first burst of power. His very latest stories even show indications of style, and perhaps content as well, that were not germinating ten years ago. But in all the work of that first ten years, I do not think one can find anything that did not first see the light of print in Vermilion Sands.

It was inevitable, I suppose, that if other authors write one such story, Ballard would write five; but he was traditional enough at least so that his first published story was one of the five: "Prima Belladonna" (which I am happy to say introduced Ballard to American readers, in my Second Annual SF) began:

I first met Jane Ciracylides during the Recess, that world slump of boredom, lethargy and high summer which carried us all so blissfully through ten unforgettable years . . .

In the first page, the Vermilion Sands atmosphere is indelibly established. The narrator owns a "music shop" just off Beach Drive. He is sitting on the balcony of his

apartment, upstairs from the shop, with two friends, an architect and a ceramicist, . . . yarning and playing i-Go, a sort of decelerated chess which was popular then . . . I usually put a couple of hours in at the shop each morning, getting off the orders and turning the beer.

One particularly hot lazy day I'd just finished wrapping up a delicate soprano mimosa wanted by the Hamburg Oratorio Society when Harry phoned down from the balcony.

"Parker's Chloro-Flora?" . . .

As for Jane: The gossips at Vermilion Sands soon decided there was a good deal of mutant in her, because she had a rich patina-golden skin and what looked like insects for eyes. . . .

If you do not already know the story, it is in Berkley's 1962 collection, *BILLENIU*M, and will be reprinted next year in Doubleday's Vermilion Sands collection. Meantime, we have "Screen Game", and Emerelda, whose insects were real, and jewelled, at Lagoon West, where the highway forks to Red Beach and Vermilion Sands . . . Only a year earlier this had been a well-kept private road, but the ornamental gateway lay collapsed to one side, and the guardhouse was a nesting place for scorpions and sand rays.

. . . we followed the road as it wound like a petrified snake above the reefs. . . A few ab-

stract sculptures stood by the roadside. Once these were sonic, responding to the slipstream of a passing car with a series of warning vibrators, but now the Lincoln passed them unrecognized.

. . . the tires cut softly through the cerise sand, and soon we were overrunning what appeared to be the edge of an immense chessboard of black and white marble squares . . . the huge wreck of Lagoon West passed us slowly on our left. Its terraces and balconies were deserted, and the once marble-white surface was streaked and lifeless. Staircases ended abruptly in midflight, and the floors hung like sagging marquees. . . .

Ballard once described Vermilion Sands as an "exotic suburb" of his mind; if so, he is an exotic suburbanite (which is not far from the truth either), because here above all is where we find the merging-place of all the extremes and opposites in the sand-sea, light-dark, freezing-burning alternatives of Ballard's 'inner landscape'. In Vermilion Sands, the weather is always brilliant or storm-wracked, or both at once, but never mild, and all vistas are surrealist compositions. In "Screen Game" in particular—besides Emerelda, the woman-on-the-balcony, the sensual-untouchable, ice-sheathed sex-symbol of *DROWNED WORLD*—the shifting screens and painted flats deceive the eye (and "I") in preparation for the flat-walled

bunker-maze in "Terminal Beach"; the double-level allegorical-character construction of *THE DROUGHT* starts here with Charles Van Stratten's reasons for financing the avant garde film, *Aphrodite '70*; and insects head-set with rubies and emeralds presage the trees and birds and fabulous crocodiles of the *THE CRYSTAL WORLD*.

It would seem time, and past time, to say something about *CW* itself. I have done nothing else, really. Its significance as a speculative work—or as science fiction, if you prefer, because both in the basic Bretnorian sense, and in the casual meaning of the term, it is that—is to be found essentially in its position in relation to the other work I have discussed. Its peculiar enchantment can no more survive discussion and dissection than can any magic. I have marked endless passages in the book for quoting—but it seemed more important to use the space in other ways. Many of you will already have read "The Illuminated Man", in which the novel itself was almost entirely undeveloped, but the images, the settings and symbols, the taste and texture were already close to complete. Two brief bits, then—the one the author himself chose to preface the book with, and one on that crazy crocodile:

By day fantastic birds flew through the petrified forest, and

jeweled crocodiles glittered like heraldic salamanders on the banks of the crystalline river. By night the illuminated man raced among the trees, his arms like golden cartwheels, his head like a spectral crown . . .

. . . As he paused by the boat, feeling the crystals along its sides, a huge four-legged creature half-embedded in the surface lurched forwards through the crust . . . Its jaws mouthed the air silently as it struggled on its hooked legs, unable to clamber more than a few inches from the hollow trough in its own outline now filling with a thin trickle of water. Invested by the glittering light that poured from its body, the crocodile resembled a fabulous armorial beast. Its blind eyes had been transformed into immense crystalline rubies. It lunged toward him again, and Dr. Sanders kicked its snout, scattering the wet jewels that choked its mouth. . .

As for the usual reviewers' things to say, I could tell you that this is a book about the transformation of time and light into matter, or about the psychophysiological implications of leprosy (Dr. Sanders, the protagonist, is a doctor attached to a leprosarium) or discuss the sharp divisions into black-and-white, dark-and-bright, that run through the book. I could tell you about Dr. Sanders' relations with the two women (dark and bright), or talk about the con-

flict between the desire for immortality and the drive to self-immolation. But to expand on these is not only unnecessary, it is destructive. Ballard's particular artistry is his ability to present composites, to work with harmonics. Rephrasing his statements, recasting his images, isolating individual notes, can do nothing but reduce their effectiveness.

I could make critical noises, admiring his phrase, "the dark side of the sun," deploring his reliance on certain descriptives (most notably, "like a Faberge gem"), or discuss his relationship to Hawthorne, for instance, or his debt to the Surrealists. But these are trivia—the sort of thing scholars may find it worth saying in twenty years, if Ballard goes ahead as he now seems to be going. I have already said everything important except this:

If you don't want to bother

reading any of the rest, read **THE CRYSTAL WORLD** anyhow. If you have liked Ballard before, this will delight you; if you have not, it will probably surprise you.

—JUDITH MERRIL

The earlier Berkley short story collections, all I believe still available from the publishers at 50¢ each, are **THE VOICES OF TIME** (1962), **BILLENIUM** (1962), **PASSPORT TO ETERNITY** (1963), **TERMINAL BEACH** (1964). The British hardcover collection also titled **TERMINAL BEACH** only slightly overlaps the Berkley book, and is an unusually good selection (Gollancz, 1964, 18 shillings). **THE DROWNED WORLD** has been published here by Berkley at 50¢, and by Doubleday in a combined volume with **THE WIND FROM NOWHERE** (1965, \$4.50). **THE DROUGHT** can be had from Jonathan Cape, London (21 shillings, 1965), or in a slightly different version, as **THE BURNING WORLD**, from Berkley (1964, 50¢).

REPRINTS

THE MIGHTIEST MACHINE, John W. Campbell; Ace F-364, 1966; 220 pp.; 40¢. (copyright 1947; no publisher given). Novel.

THE KING IN YELLOW, Robert W. Chambers; Ace M-132, 1966; 253 pp.; 45¢. (copyright 1895; no publisher given). Novel.

THE LAND OF TERROR, Kenneth Robeson; Bantam E3042, 1966; 155 pp.; 45¢. (copyright 1933, Street & Smith). Novel.

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AN INDEX TO THE BRITISH EDITIONS OF THE MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION, compiled and published by A. J. L. Durie; \$1.00 or 6/- from: K. F. Slater Esq., 75 Norfolk St., Wisbech, Cambs., England. Index through June 1964, with a cross reference to the American edition.

Mose Mallette tells us that he's 26, married, lives in Atlanta, attended M. I. T., U. of Chattanooga, Georgia State College, and then brings us up short with a real eye-opener of an odd job: "fallout shelter analyst for Civil Defense." He calls this story "'Galactic' humor because, whether limited to our galaxy or not, the action is always galloping through a stretch of space vaster than the solar system, and the unexpected bursts in through four or more dimensions." A good description and a good story. If this dizzying view of the universe(s) upsets you, please turn to Dr. Asimov's column for a more rational discussion of cosmogony. We call that 'editorial balance.'

THE SEVEN WONDERS OF THE UNIVERSE

by Mose Mallette

EARLY IN THE CENTURIES OF Inanity, Professor D. K. G. Plockett announced, on the basis of his study of sacred chickens, in which he had deep knowledge, that the radius of the universe was 50 billion light-years. Newspapermen then had to spend thousands of words explaining that Dr. Plockett did not mean that a brick wall stopped you after traveling 50 billion light-years, but merely that the curvature of space could be represented by that figure. Shortly

after this, the great cruiser, *Entropy At Last*, using the newly perfected Cherry-Pit Drive* to push back the frontiers of explored space, smashed bow foremost into what appeared to be a brick wall, of considerable extent, about 50 billion light-years from the Central Suns. Masons, rushed to the disaster scene, shook their heads sadly at the wall's obviously bad construction. Dr. Plockett retired into the Sacred Henhouse and refused to comment. Curiosity-seek-

**Trans. note.* This depends on viewing the universe as an infinite pit surrounded by a finite cherry.

ers placed their ears against the wall's numerous cracks and claimed to hear sounds of a large party in progress on the other side. It was plain that our ideas about the "universe" were going to have to be revised. Cosmography got organized again after regular communication with the other universes was established, which followed quickly on the exchange, through one of the larger cracks, of a dry martini for the delightful beverage known as *swizz*.

Such was our introduction to that greatest arena of anxiety, the society of universes. After the customary six months of "initiation" war, designed to see if we could take care of ourselves in the usual border conflicts, we were accepted as a member in good standing. As civilization crawled back from the Stone Age on a million planets, an enlightened business leadership arose, looked about itself, and asked, "Where are the tourists?" Meaning, of course, the tourists we had fully expected from the other universes. But the tourists had come, had found Alligator Wrestling and Historic Birthplaces, had known horror, and had gone.

To entice them back, local businessmen decided to choose seven outstanding curiosities and promote them intensely—seven, because certain old legends spoke of an original Seven Wonders, such things as the Hanging Clotheslines

of Brooklyn, the Whorehouse of Alexandria, the Mausoleum of the Empire State Building, and others yet more obscure. In the beginning some bad choices were made—the Thing That Grows never should have been exhibited, and hurt business a lot until messages stopped coming from that galaxy. And the Cosmic Drain and the Clusters of Madness both set off an unexpected amount of panic. But finally, after years of alternation between dullness and disaster, the present Seven emerged, the equals, we believe, of any wonders anywhere in the known plenum. The final line-up, as given in the authoritative *Dictionary for Dort-Worshippers* (Vertebrates' Edition) is as follows:

1. The University of Lesser Balak
2. The Copulation Pits of Venus (eastern section)
3. The Great Bearded Kumat of Lagesh
4. The Copulation Pits of Venus (western section)
5. The Brass Nodes of the Universe
6. The Copulation Pits of Venus (middle section)
7. The Crystals of Lalande

(Some people have said that this choice of wonders places too much emphasis on sex. But in truth the emphasis is merely on copulation, which, as Herzenstube the De-

proved has repeatedly testified*, is altogether different, and in any case admits of more variety.)

Probably the event that did more than any other to bring our Seven Wonders to plenum prominence was the epic series done on them by the magazine *Ylem*. Hours after the first issue hit the stands, travel bureaus, churches, and bars were besieged by an aroused public. Many were the attempts to explain those days of militant tourism on psychological and other grounds, but I think we need look no further than the Wonders themselves. Read now excerpts from the text of *Ylem's* classic articles*, and judge for yourself . . .

THE UNIVERSITY OF LESSER BALAK

Lesser Balak is a bleak, smallish mass of dead rock revolving, from time to time, around Greater Balak, a bleak, smallish mass of dead rock, of, however, somewhat larger dimension than Lesser Balak. Or so it is believed. Landings on the two Balaks are recorded as early as the 14th Pelargonium, although it was not until three hundred years later that the system came to cosmos-

wide prominence when Dr. Loup-Garou established his "health institute" there. Crust analysis by Moldewy shows the usual amounts of the lighter elements, anomalous concentrations of lutetium, erbium, and astatine, and a trace of that still unidentified substance that had such an unhappy effect on Moldewy. However, all this is quite irrelevant, since the University of Lesser Balak is not located in the Balak system and never was. The title was chosen by one of the Founding Fathers of the University, after much study of the Kako-Gastric languages, for the sake of euphony. Or so it is believed.

The Lesser Balak officials, when I finally discovered the whereabouts of their university, proved most cordial and cooperative. They gave me the run of the classrooms, arranged interviews with the faculty, and domiciled me in a small steel room, into which, on my first night there, concealed jets began to pour a mixture of phosphine, arsine and hydrogen cyanide. It seemed to me they were going to a lot of trouble to provide me with the atmosphere of my native planet. Then I realized—this was a mani-

* See, for example, Herzenstube vs. Metagalaxy, or his books, *Some Things Worth Doing* and *God Proposes, the Id Disposes*.

* Written by the greatest and most adventurous traveler in the continuum, the Immortal Pim. (It was Pim, you'll recall, who spent seven years in the Citadel of Terror disguised as a defective vacuum cleaner.) Unfortunately, the Immortal Pim met his end last year, when, returning to his home planet, he was shot as an undesirable alien.

festation of hostility. Quickly, I reviewed the relevant passages of Pentley's *Modes of Death*. I coughed, convulsed, rigidified, and slid agonizedly to the floor. Soon blowers cleared the room and a troop of men entered. I exhaled the breath I had been holding, whereupon the men coughed, convulsed, rigidified, and slid agonizedly to the floor. I made my escape, but necessarily had learned little about the University. However, I will reproduce my few notes for readers interested in an institution for which I can feel little fondness:

This is probably an example of the famed Balak lecture-demonstration method.

The instructor began dramatically, "Why did mighty Anukabet fall? How did it go, in a single instant apparently, from the thriving capital of the Ennius sector to a heap of shards and splinters? Azel-frage didn't know, Lisspun didn't know, not even Futtermassel knew. But today, thanks to the Noncebottle of Professor Sebut, we are going to find out. We are going to view Anukabet, from the safety of our seats, just minutes before the disaster is calculated to have occurred. Professor Sebut is shaking up the Noncebottle now, and in just a moment—ah, there it is, Anukabet in all its glory. What spires, what streets, what wise and gracious people! . . . You know, instead of just waiting and observing, I think I'll step into the Noncefield and

speak to a few of the inhabitants. It would be interesting to know if they had any forebodings of the doom about to fall on them. So I'll just—"

"Professor . . ."

"Yes, Professor Sebut?"

"I don't think you undershtand vhat my Noncebottle does. There iss a mutual—"

"Oh, I can see what it does, Professor. Wonderful! Marvelous! Now if you'll just stand aside . . . There's a knowledgeable-looking gentleman walking along. Sir, sir, could you tell me—"

"Don't move!"

"What?"

"Don't move until you've seen Sally. I could tell, my good man, that you are a connoisseur of women. Sally is the girl for you. Long of leg, short of brain—and her motto is, 'Do Anything You Like and Like Anything You Do.' Sally! Here's one of your admirers!"

"But that's not—"

"Oh, a cheapskate, eh! Well, on your way, buddy, on your way."

"My goodness! I suppose a superior civilization does produce unusual tensions, but—? Well, here's someone else. Please, could you tell me—"

"Don't talk to *me*! I am a rantry-squeezer. A rantry-squeezer squeezes rantries. It is enough."

"How odd—he's running away! Frankly, students, I'm feeling a bit out of place here. I'm going to make one more attempt with this intense-

looking fellow striding along toward me. Hey there, I was wondering—”

“Korec!?! You dare to walk abroad! You eluded me once, but this time I, Mutagalla, will serve you well—”

“No-o! You’ve made a mistake! My name is William G. Frogpump, Professor of Enigmatic History at the University of—”

“Yes, Korec, you were ever one for devious mouthings. Don’t look so frightened, Korec! I shall treat you honorably. I shall put your heart on my mantelpiece, where it will beat in sorrow beside that of your accursed brother. Ah, don’t back away, my friend—it is too late. It was too late when you were born. Now, if you’ll stand just so—yes, how very accommodating of you—”

“PROFESSOR SEBUB! !
HELP! !”

Professor Sehub rushed forward, tripped over the Noncebottle, and smashed it into shards and splinters . . .

Here are some sidelights on the only ULB faculty member I got to meet.

The students’ favorite is of course colorful old Dr. Gallinule, who before coming to the University was better known as Marash the Feral, Torturer Extraordinary to the Unappeased Maw. In this latter capacity, Dr. Gallinule enjoyed a long career of public service, and the book he wrote upon his retirement,

Mind and Body—Their Weaknesses, showed such sound scholarship and unexampled mastery of the subject that the University felt it could do no better than to have this great authority head the School of Medicine. It’s hard to believe, after watching the old gentleman buckle on his galoshes, and totter leisurely across the Quad amid the bright hellos of his students, that this is the legendary figure who reduced Gron the Insensate to puling supplication, and who frustrated a germ-warfare attack by frightening away the enemy’s germs. (“Fear is not a monopoly of the higher beings alone; appropriate stimuli will often rouse apprehension in the lowliest organisms,” was the way Dr. Gallinule explained this latter feat.)

The ULB Library.

Undoubtedly the oddest thing about the ULB Library is that one does not consult the card catalog to find a desired book; one consults the books to find a desired catalog card. You see, what is spoken of as a “card” is actually, in most cases, an immense reference work, of much greater length and scope than the original item itself. This is because the ULB librarians do not consider a book properly catalogued until they have re-created its author’s mind, noted the potentialities therein, and made an exhaustive commentary thereon. Naturally, this usually involves printing the complete text of every book which

the author in question has written or will write—after which, of course, the author is apprised of his superfluity and told of the virtues of agriculture. Notwithstanding the generous land grants made available by the University, this policy has resulted in a certain amount of rancor.

Another odd thing about the ULB Library is that, unlike most university libraries, it is open to the public. However, the public never makes use of it. Nor, for that matter, do the University students. Nor the University faculty. This curious circumstance is accounted for by the fact that in the library lobby there is maintained a choice selection of time-tested pornography. Anyone is free to browse there and take any book he likes. In spite of this, no book has ever had to be replaced. "The really good books," the Director explains, "can take care of themselves." The only people who get past this psychological barrier (the others forget what they came for) are a few old scholars who never speak but occasionally exchange knowing glances. I asked the Director, a man of mature but not immemorial years, how he had resisted the distraction of the pornography. "I wrote it," he said.

In view of this demonstrated broad-mindedness, I felt I could ask the Director to let me see some of the really racy items, the books

that weren't displayed even in the lobby. "You'll be disappointed," he warned. "We only possess the catalog cards, and although they contain a work's total essence, and more besides, you will find them very different from what you expect." Nevertheless I persisted, and called for the card on Ho Tarkee's *How To Do with Those That Do Too*, that most degraded of all literary productions, for which Tarkee* was finally banished to the Null Class. The card was brought, and I was stunned to see that it was nothing but a little slip of white paper on which was written, "A sound mind in a sound body."

"Well, what did you expect?" the Director consoled me. "We are always interested in making a psychologically representative statement, and Tarkee was so healthy and guileless that there was nothing else to say. Now if you had called for the card on *Toby and Susie Learn about Growing Up*, you would have been brought a multi-volume treatise of such unrelieved depravity that the 300 scholars who collaborated on it voluntarily committed suicide, after their task was done, 'so that others might not be polluted,' as the epitaph has it. Frankly, though, for sheer old-fashioned smut you still can't beat Northcote's *Table of Elliptic Integrals*. But for a real tour de force of filth I recommend . . ."

* Also the author of *Pleasures That Can Only Be Experienced Once*.

THE GREAT BEARDED
KUMQUAT OF LAGESH

On the plain of Lagesh squats the Great Bearded Kumquat. ("Gah! Bearded! Disgusting!" was heard on all sides.) The Great Bearded Kumquat answers any questions that visitors are imprudent enough to put to it. Some fault has been found with these answers, but the Great Bearded Kumquat never has found any fault with its visitors, whom it pronounces "uniformly delicious."

THE BRASS NODES OF
THE UNIVERSE

The wonder about the Brass Nodes isn't the Nodes; it's that anybody goes to see them. They're housed in a big canvas tent, right between the All-Night Revival and the Mad Caterpillar. Inside there's nothing but these two big brass cylinders hanging in the air. People come up, and pat them, and gawk at them, and then kind of sheepishly make their way to the refreshment stand, as though they realized they'd been taken, which of course they have been. Occasionally some old prophet will flop on his feet before them, and confess his sins, or somebody else's, or swear eternal obedience to the Nodes, and promise to preach their message through all the starways. But about this time it dawns on the old geezer, what is their message, anyway? and he ends up at the refreshment stand, looking more sheepish than most.

THE CRYSTALS
OF LALANDE

The Crystals of Lalande seem to have been the outcome, according to the histories that have survived from those sunless days, of the encounter between the Ultimate Torpidity and the Boundless Potency. The ensuing necrona produced a number of grievous artifacts, among them the Crystals. If skillfully tickled, the Crystals apparently have the property of answering any question whatsoever, though always with greater or lesser derangement to the questioner's nervous system. If unskillfully tickled, they do their will, and on this even the Nodar are silent. It is sufficient to cite the case of Captain Weatherby, their discoverer, who, mistaking them for the Crown Jewels of Szoloi, swept them into his palm, clasped them avidly, fell back, screamed once "The Others! The Others!" and immediately relapsed into that state which caused his remains to be committed to the Deeps.

THE COPULATION PITS
OF VENUS

The Pits are rectangular, square, hexagonal, spherical, hollow, solid large, small, bright, dark, and, well—accounts differ, since those emerging from the Pits are not in an eminently coherent state. On the day I arrived, there was even more confusion than usual—a riot

had broken out at the Altar to the Unknown Phallus, and a rumor was being spread that Suvallah the Chaste was due to be offered at the Eastern Pits in twenty minutes. I mingled with the crowd, refused several offers of obscure intent, and made my way to the hut of my old friend, Theodosius the Troglodyte, whose job it is to emerge every half hour, cry "Doom, Doom!" in an apocalyptic voice, and retreat into his hovel again. When I got there Theo threw down his copy of *Real Life Sex Stories* and greeted me warmly.

"Pim, how are you!"

"Oh, all right," I flapped back at him. "What's on the schedule for today?"

"Oh, the usual slack-season fillers. The All-Enfolding Node will sweep away the first lucky 900 into Pit 39, a new shipment of retired schoolteachers will be stripped, greased, and made to confront the Unmentionable, and those whose names begin with—let's see, what is it today . . . oh, yes, "R"—will be declared Fair Game. And this evening Pilagor the Polyhedral Perverse is doing the Rape of Rome in the Arena of Lust, playing all the parts himself of course—you know how versatile Perry is."

Suvallah dropped in; she's a nice kid really, but what these slaving Terrans see in her I'll never know. Theo reminded her, "Sue, you're due to be offered up at the East Pits in a couple of min-

utes, better hot-foot it over there."

"Oh, damn," she groaned, "again? That's the third time today."

"Sue's getting a little snooty this season," Theo informed me after she had left. "It really went to her head when they built that 400-mile-high nude statue of her and the entire nation of Celibatia went mad from seeing it on their horizon."

"Yes," I mused, "these humanoids are frail vessels. What Arthur C. Clarke saw in them I'll never know. Thank the Pulsating Nexus that you and I were born *gnuteries*, and right-thinking *gnuteries* at that."

Since, after all, my assignment was to report on the Pits proper, I decided to stroll over that way and see as much as was safe. As I neared the entrance, that great motto, known to all space and time, glowed up over my head:

OH! OH! OH!

Speculation on the significance of these syllables has long been rampant, but within my own lifetime Ma'avranui, keenest of all philosophers, finally thought through to their inmost meaning. I was with him at the time when, perched on the sprinkler pipe in his office, as was usual with him during deep thinking, he announced to his breathless secretary, "The motto is, obviously, a simple palilogetic formula used to indicate—" but then he lost his grip on the pipe and fell head foremost onto his desk. After

this unfortunate accident Ma'avranui showed no sign of his former near-infinite intelligence and had to take a job as slush-pusher in a slook mill. He has, I believe, made himself a modest reputation as a singer of Early Glornesian* Folk Songs, but I fear that the university's Goodberry Chair will never again be so illustriously tenanted.

At the gate of the Middle Pit some sort of dispute was going on. A female humanoid was brandishing an umbrella and being told by the gatekeeper, "Lady, you can't take that thing inside"—but too late, the Handler had her, and she was pulled into the Mouth, leaving nothing behind but a long-drawn-

out "Wa-alter-r-r-r," which probably has some erotic significance. But the real drama takes place at the Pits' debouchments, where a host of dazed and damaged life-forms can be found at any hour of the day. No one can pass through and be wholly unaffected. Today, picking my way carefully along the outskirts of this detritus, I sighted uncountable quivering humanoids curled into fetal balls, scores of Rhabdomanth's with all hearts desynchronized, numerous Pandari showing the characteristic filigree of *wootlee*-starvation, several Hincnophores with dangerously distended norkles, and one poor Tegmite who had just turned bright blue, which means that his days of

* *Trans. note.* The Principate of Glornesia was discovered in the extensive stamp collection of Boyken R. Philpotts, when that famous explorer and philatelist lost his fortune and had to be put up for auction. Unfortunately Glornesia itself has never been located—Mr. Philpotts is being held incommunicado by his present owner—but the stamps themselves are so engrossing that a rich culture has sprung up around them. Not a year goes by without at least one aspiring author trying his hand at the Great Glornesian Novel, and Saviors of Glornesia declare themselves and are stoned with monotonous regularity. Illuminated volumes of Hackworth's massive *Rise and Fall of the Glornesian Principate* are to be seen in every cultivated home, and all the more patriotic history books contain a chapter on "Heroes of Old Glornesia." However, the discriminating reader will bear in mind, while enchanted by Hackworth's ponderous yet facile prose, and ravished by Finley's vaulting paeans in "Glornesia, My Glornesia"—that these and all similar works derive ultimately from but three genuine Glornesian stamps: the 1-*mufti* Rutabaga Yellow, the 2-*mufti* Peat Moss Green, and the many-*mufti* Bog Slime Gray. The last named, depicting an unidentified animal eating a mail-sack, is most esteemed by philatelists, but your translator favors the 2-*mufti* green, which portrays what is assumed to be a Glornesian, naked on a couch, above a legend reading, "Tootsie—She Put Out." The insipid 1-*mufti*, illustrating as it does "A Real Cup of Coffee," can safely be left out of aesthetic consideration.

nitrogen-fixation are over. And, of course, the usual number of slumped bodies showing no response at all. What really happens to these poor creatures inside the Pits is an utter mystery. Some years ago the DVFC (Disabled Veterans of Foreign Copulation) agitated for an investigation of the subject, and government psychiatrists interviewed 42,318,204 speaking survivors of the Pits. The result was 42,318,203 different stories. The lone correlation was elicited, not by the psychiatrists, but by Dr. Bascom Fishfoot, the great detective and sometime crime-czar, renowned for his incisive questioning of criminals and law officers. Dr. Fishfoot revealed this important and unique datum in Volume 406 of his masterwork, *Psychology of the Habitual Law-Abider*, but strange to say, Volume 406 has disappeared from all libraries, and Dr. Fishfoot was himself kidnapped some while back by a nebulous dark shape.

The spectacle I had just witnessed made me rather sick, and I was very glad to sit down for a few moments on a cool grassy bank beside the Fornication River. Lying there, watching the colorful slime floating by, I wondered what the great appeal of the Pits was. Even *gnuteries* have been tempted to give them a try. Fortunately, no *gnutery* has ever gone through with it—most of us have been devout dort-worshippers since earliest *gnewk-*

hood, and accept the traditional view that this amusement is forbidden by the words in the Book of Dort that run, "A goblet, a goblet, yea, even a hoop, the eyes of time their seasons savor, and all things flow yet who can know, but such is life, business is business, and dort is not mocked, yea, yea." Still, there have been dissenters, and only last year Dyb, son of that warm-blooded cretin Gik, had the bad taste to stand up at the Council of Yar itself and suggest a rival interpretation. Of course he received the Three Frowns and retired in confusion, but the damage had been done, and now many of the newly hatched have departed from the path of right *mirgling*, right *ginzeating*, and high *hysm*. The thought of this made me feel so low that I suddenly had a great need for Theo's cheerful conversation. But when I got back to his hut I found him absorbed in trying to come up with the day's Third Rumor. (Theo is required to spread at least three Disgusting Rumors every day.) This evening it just wouldn't come, and he finally decided to take a chance on consulting the Crystals of Lalande. Under Theo's skillful tickling they stirred ominously, and when I picked him off the floor he told me he had the answer. After wording it for maximum effect, he leaned out into the walkway and hissed, "Say, buddy." Immediately a large, skinny life-form detached itself from the

crowd, ran over, and said, "So you're the one who sells filthy pictures! I've been looking all over for you. Well, here's what I like—"

"No, no, friend, you've got me wrong," Theo managed to interpose. "I was just about to let you in on my patented method for increasing—say, what do you want filthy pictures for, anyway? Have you seen the Temple of Total Release?"

"Yes."

"The Four-Day Orgasm of the Giant Fungus?"

"Yes."

"The Difficult Union of the Seven-Sexed Koor Creatures?"

"Yes."

"The Burying Alive of the Lost Tribes of Israel?"

"Yes."

"The Fertilization of Squalodon in the Averse Position?"

"Yes."

"The Talking Spermatozoa of the Over-Educated Yorb?"

"Yes."

"The Mating Chambers of the 90-ton Frog-Thing? The Indecent Pulsations of the Hrno Mass? The Engorged Ovipositors of the Anomalous Annelid?"

"Yes. Yes. Yes."

"Well, what do you want filthy pictures for, then?"

"Oh, they just make me go all squishy inside."

"Disgusting," Theo said and closed the door.

It was night now, and the howls from the Arena of Lust had begun,

so, since Theo and I couldn't hear ourselves talk anymore, we got out our machiavelli sets and prepared for an evening's amusement. The origin of this game is lost in dim antiquity. It is played with 44,404 little living figures, partly controlled by the player to whom they belong, partly capable of thinking for themselves. Over a lifetime, a superior player can so educate his figures that they finally exceed his own ability; then he can retire and live on their winnings. This is the hope of every serious practitioner of the game. However, Theo and I had always played just for fun, and in consequence our little creatures knew nothing of those troubling innovations that so exercise our modern masters. We began the game in traditional fashion, with the Dubrovsky Gambit (Misunderstood), which consists in one side reading a proclamation, the other side reading a proclamation, each building a walled city, retiring into the walled city, holding a festival, and then each reading a proclamation again, in which the statements of the previous proclamation are denied in as sly a manner as possible. This is expected to sway the advantage one way or the other. But Theo and I had been through all this many times before, and through the succeeding stages too—debasement of the currency, kidnapping the Sacred Ibis, hexing the royal beer, and unmasking the Mixchievous Jongleurs. In the end, as

usual, Theo's Purple Corybant seduced my Red Queen, who prevailed on the Playboy King to treat with the Decrepit War Minister, who was actually the Embittered Sophist in disguise, and this resulted in voluntary stalemate.

We got the pieces back in their boxes again with only the usual amount of resistance—they do so love to build walled cities—and went outside to look at the beautiful mile-high flames rising from sacked and pillaged Rome. "Very neat," Theo remarked. "Tomorrow there won't be a single trace of tonight's activities in the Arena, except for the corpses of the few thousand spectators who tried to get in the act. Perry worked for six years, and burned up half the planet, before he perfected the distension of his body into a controllable flame. But this is nothing. You should have seen the Thanaturian Games in 1212, when Perry's father, Ha'an the Unspeakable, hypnotized an audience of seven million into thinking that they were each individual cells of a *ruchbah* in heat, and it destroyed four suns looking for a mate."

We killed a couple more hours this way, exchanging reminiscences

of the old days when great things were done, and quietly letting our pipes smoke us. Sue got in late, said, "Phew, they're sweaty in summer," and started leafing through Theo's *Real Life Sex Stories*, exclaiming "Gee!" every once in a while.

It was time for me to go. I surmised that I had collected enough material for my article, so I bid Theo and Sue goodbye—they were married last year you know (Sue said nothing but a *gnutery* or a stone would let her sleep at night)—and walked out into the dark midway. As I expected, several foot-pads descended on me, but I gave them one of the Lesser Frowns and they began to gibber pleasantly. The light in the Unmentionable's cage was still on, and I heard soft voices—probably he was conversing with his keeper on the Nature of the Good, a favorite topic of his for some years. When I reached the tubeway to the spaceport, I turned back to give the Pits and vicinity one last look. Far in the distance, the day's quota of lost children were being rounded up and herded into pens for next week's Amateur Night, but otherwise all was still.



Robert E(rvin) Howard was born in 1906 at Peaster, Texas and lived in the Lone Star state for all of his short life. He began to write at the age of 15, made his first professional sale to Weird Tales in 1925, and thereafter wrote prolifically—historical, western, detective fiction as well as fantasy. His best known creation was Conan the Cimmerian. When told that his mother had entered her final coma, Howard shot himself with a pistol (June 11, 1936); this couplet found in his typewriter after his death: "All fled—all done, so lift me on the pyre;/ The Feast is over and the lamps expire." This short story was found only last year among Howard's papers. This is its first appearance anywhere.

FOR THE LOVE OF BARBARA ALLEN

by Robert E. Howard

*T'was in the merry month of May,
When all sweet buds were swellin',
Sweet William on his death-bed lay
For the love of Barbara Allen.*

MY GRANDFATHER SIGHED AND thumped wearily on his guitar, than laid it aside, the song unfinished.

"My voice is too old and cracked," he said, leaning back in his cushion-seated chair and fumbling in the pockets of his sagging old vest for cob-pipe and tobacco. "Reminds me of my brother Joel. The way he could sing that song.

It was his favorite. Makes me think of poor old Rachel Ormond, who loved him. She's dyin', her nephew Jim Ormond told me yesterday. She's old, older'n I am. You never saw her, did you?"

I shook my head.

"She was a real beauty when she was young, and Joel was alive and lovin' her. He had a fine voice, Joel, and he loved to play his gui-

tar and sing. He'd sing as he rode along. He was singin' 'Barbara Allen' when he met Rachel Ormond. She heard him singin' and come out of the laurel beside the road to listen. When Joel saw her standin' there with the mornin' sun behind her makin' jewels out of the dew on the bushes, he stopped dead and just stared like a fool. He told me it seemed as if she was standin' in a white blaze of light.

"It was mornin' in the mountains and they were both young. You never saw a mornin' in spring, in the Cumberlands?"

"I never was in Tennessee," I answered.

"No, you don't know anything about it," he retorted, in the half humorous, half petulant mood of the old. "You're a post-oak gopher. You never saw anything but sand drifts and dry shinnery ridges. What do you know about mountain sides covered with birch and laurel, and cold clear streams windin' through the cool shadows and tinklin' over the rocks? What do you know about upland forests with the blue haze of the Cumberlands hangin' over them?"

"Nothing," I answered, yet even as I spoke, there leaped crystal clear into my mind with startling vividness the very image of the things of which he spoke, so vivid that my external faculties seemed almost to sense it—I could almost smell the dogwood blossoms and the cool lush of the deep woods,

and hear the tinkle of hidden streams over the stones.

"You couldn't know," he sighed. "It's not your fault, and I wouldn't go back, myself, but Joel loved it. He never knew anything else, till the war came up. That's where you'd have been born if it hadn't been for the war. That tore everything up. Things didn't seem the same afterwards. I came west, like so many Tennessee folks did. I've done well in Texas—better'n I'd ever done in Tennessee. But as I get old, I get to dreamin'."

His gaze was fixed on nothing, but he sighed deeply, wandering somewhat in his mind as the very old are likely to do at times.

"Four years behind Bedford Forrest," he said at last. "There never was a cavalry leader like him. Ride all day, shootin' and fightin', bed down in the snow—up before midnight, 'boots and saddles', and we were off again.

"Forrest never hung back. He was always in front of his men, fightin' like any three. His saber was too heavy for the average man to use, and it carried a razor edge. I remember the skirmish where Joel was killed. We come suddenly out of a defile between low hills and there was a Yankee wagon train movin' down the valley, guarded by a detachment of cavalry. We hit that cavalry like a thunderbolt and ripped it apart.

"I can see Forrest now, standin' up in his stirrups, swingin' that

big sword of his, yellin' 'Charge! Holler, boys, holler!' And we hollered like wild men as we went in, and none of us cared if we lived or died, so long as Forrest was leadin' us.

"We tore that detachment in pieces and stomped and chased the pieces all up and down the valley. When the fight was over, Forrest reined up with his officers and said, 'Gentlemen, one of my stirrups seems to have been shot away!' He had only one foot in a stirrup. But when he looked, he saw that somehow his left foot had come out of the stirrup, and the stirrup had flopped up over the saddle. He'd been sittin' on the stirrup leather, and hadn't noticed, in the excitement of the charge.

"I was right near him at the time, because my horse had fell, with a bullet through its head, and I was pullin' my saddle off. Just then my brother Joel came up on foot, smilin', with the mornin' sun behind him. But he was dazed with the fightin' because he had a strange look on his face, and when he saw me he stopped short, as if I was a stranger. Then he said the strangest thing: 'Why, granddad!' he said, 'You're young again! You're younger'n I am!' Then the next second a bullet from some skulkin' sniper knocked him down dead at my feet."

Again my grandfather sighed and took up his guitar.

"Rachel Ormond nearly died," he said. "She never married, never looked at any other man. When the Ormonds come to Texas, she come with 'em. Now she's dyin', up there in their house in the hills. That's what they say; I know she died years ago, when news of Joel's death came to her."

He began to thrum his guitar and sing in the curious wailing chant of the hill people.

*They sent to the east, they sent to
the west,
To the place where she was dwell-
in',
Sweet William's sick, and he sends
for you,
For the love of Barbara Allen.*

My father called to me from his room on the other side of the house.

"Go out and stop those horses from fighting. I can hear them kicking the sides out of the barn."

My grandfather's voice followed me out of the house and into the stables. It was a clear still day and his voice carried far, the only sound besides the squealing and kicking of the horses in the stables, the crowing of a distant cock, and the clamor of sparrows among the mesquites.

Barbara Allen! An echo of a distant and forgotten homeland among the post-oak covered ridges of a barren land. In my mind I saw the settlers forging westward from the Piedmont, over the Alleghenies and along the Cumber-

land River—on foot, in lumbering wagons drawn by slow-footed oxen, on horseback—men in broadcloth and men in buckskin. The guitars and the banjos clinked by the fires at night, in the lonely log cabins, by the stretches of river black in the starlight, up on the long ridges where the owls hooted. Barbara Allen—a tie to the past, a link between today and the dim yesterdays.

I opened the stall and went in. My mustang Pedro, vicious as the land which bred him, had broken his halter and was assaulting the bay horse with squeals of rage, wicked teeth bared, eyes flashing, and ears laid back. I caught his mane, jerked him around, slapping him sharply on the nose when he snapped at me, and drove him from the stall. He lashed out wickedly at me with his heels as he dashed out, but I was watching for that and stepped back.

I had forgotten the bay horse. Stung to frenzy by the mustang's attack, he was ready to kill anything that came within his reach. His steel shod hoof barely grazed my skull, but that was enough to dash me into utter oblivion.

My first sensation was of movement. I was shaken up and down, up and down. Then a hand gripped my shoulder and shook me, and a voice bawled in an accent which was familiar, yet strangely unfamiliar: "Hyuh, you, Joel, yuh goin' to sleep in yo' saddle!"

I awoke with a jerk. The motion was that of the gaunt horse under me. All about me were men, gaunt and haggard in appearance, in worn grey uniforms. We were riding between two low hills, thickly timbered. I could not see what lay ahead of us because of the mass of men and horses. It was a dawn, a grey unsteady dawn that made me shiver.

"Sun soon be up now," drawled one of the men, mistaking my feeling. "We'll have fightin' enough to warm our blood purty soon. Old Bedford ain't marched us all night just for fun. I heah theah's a wagon train comin' down the valley ahaid of us."

I was still struggling feebly in a web of illusion. There was a sense of familiarity about all this, yet it was strange and alien, too. There was something I was striving to remember. I slipped a hand into my inside pocket, as if by instinct, and drew out a photograph, an old-fashioned picture. A girl smiled bravely at me, a beautiful girl with tender lips and brave eyes. I replaced it, shaking my head dazedly.

Ahead of us a low roar went up. We were riding out of the defile, and a broad valley lay spread out before us. Along this valley moved a train of clumsy, lumbering wagons. I saw men on horseback—men in blue, whose appearance and whose horses were fresher than ours. The rest is dim and confused.

I remember a bugle blown. I saw a tall, rangy man on a great horse at the head of our column draw his sword and stand up in his stirrups, and his voice rang above the blast of the bugle: "*Charge! Holler, boys, holler!*"

Then there was a shout that rent the skies apart, and we stormed out of the defile and down into the valley like a mountain torrent. I was like two men—one that rode and shouted and slashed right and left with a reddened saber, and one who sat wondering and fumbling for something elusive which he could not grasp. But the conviction was growing that I had experienced all this before; it was like living an episode forewarned in a dream.

The blue line held for a few minutes, then it broke in pieces before our irresistible onslaught, and we hunted them up and down the valley. The battle resolved itself into a hundred combats, where men in blue and men in grey circled each other on stamping, rearing horses, with bright blades glittering in the rising sun.

My gaunt horse stumbled and went down, and I pulled myself free. In my daze I did not take off his saddle. I walked toward a group of officers and men who were clustered about the tall man who had led the charge. As I approached, I heard him say: "Gentlemen, it seems the enemy has shot off one of my stirrups."

Then before I could hear anything else, I came face to face with a man I recognized at last. Yet like all else he was subtly altered. I gasped: "Why granddad! You're young again! You're younger than I am!" And in that flash I *knew*, and I clenched my fists and stood dumbly waiting, frozen, paralyzed, unable to speak or stir. Then something crashed against my head, and with the impact, a great blaze of light lighted universal darkness for an instant, and then all was oblivion.

*Sweet William, he has died of
grief,
And I shall die of sorrow!*

My grandfather's voice still wailed in my ears, faint with the distance, as I staggered to my feet, pressing my hand to the gash the bay's hoof had laid open in my scalp. I was sick and nauseated and my head swam dizzily. My grandfather was still singing. Less than seconds had elapsed since the bay's hoof felled me senseless on the littered stable floor. Yet in those brief seconds I had travelled through the eternities and back. I knew at last my true cosmic identity and the reason for those dreams of wooded mountains and gurgling rivers and of a brave, sweet face which had haunted my dreams since childhood.

Going out into the corral, I caught the mustang and saddled him, without bothering to dress my

scalp-wound. It had quit bleeding and my head was clearing. I rode down the valley and up the hill until I came to the Ormond house, perched in gaunt poverty on a sandy hillside, limned against the brown post-oak thickets behind it. The paint on the warped boards had long ago been worn away by rain and sun, both equally fierce in the hills of the Divide.

I dismounted and entered the yard with its barbed wire fence. Chickens pecking on the porch scampered squawking out of the way, and a scrawny hound bayed at me. The door opened to my knock and Jim Ormond stood framed in it, a gaunt, stooped man with sunken cheeks and lacklustre eyes and gnarled hands.

He looked at me in dull surprise, for we were only acquaintances.

"Is Miss Rachel—" I began. "Is she—has she—" I halted in some confusion. He shook his bushy head.

"She's dyin'. Doc Blaine's with her. I reckon her time's come. She don't want to live, noway. She keeps callin' for Joel Grimes, pore old soul."

"May I come in?" I asked. "I want to see Doc Blaine." Even the dead can not intrude uninvited on the dying.

"Come in," he drew aside, and I went into the miserably bare room. A frowsy-headed woman was moving about listlessly, and

cotton-headed children looked timidly at me from other doorways. Doc Blaine came out from an inner room and stared at me.

"What the devil are you doing here?"

The Ormonds had lost interest in me. They went wearily about their tasks. I came close to Doc Blaine and said in a low voice, "Rachel! I must see her!" He stared at the insistence of my tone, but he is a man who sometimes instinctively grasps things that his conscious mind does not understand.

He led me into a room and I saw an old, old woman lying on a bed. Even in her old age her vitality was apparent, though that was waning fast. She lent a new atmosphere even to the wretched surroundings. And I knew her and stood transfixed. Yes, I knew her, beyond all the years and the changes they had wrought.

She stirred and murmured: "Joel! Joel! I've waited for you so long! I knew you'd come." She stretched out withered arms, and I went without a word and seated myself beside her bed. Recognition came into her glazing eyes. Her bony fingers closed on mine caressingly. Her touch was that of a young girl.

"I knew you'd come before I died," she whispered. "Death couldn't keep you away. Oh, the cruel wound on your head, Joell! But you're past suffering, just as

I'll be in a few minutes. You never forgot me, Joel?"

"I never forgot you, Rachel," I answered, and I felt Doc Blaine's start behind me and knew that my voice was not that of the John Grimes he knew, but another, a different voice whispered down the ages. I did not see him go, but I knew he tip-toed out.

"Sing to me, Joel," she whispered. "There's your guitar hanging on the wall. I've kept it always. Sing the song you sang when we met that day beside the Cumberland River. I always loved it."

I took up the ancient guitar, and though I had never played one before, I had no doubts. I struck the worn strings and sang, and my voice was weird and golden. The dying woman's hands were on my arm, and as I looked, I saw and recognized the picture I had seen in the defile of the dawn. I saw youth and love everlasting and understanding.

*Sweet William lies in the upper
churchyard,
And by his side, his lover,
And on his grave grew a lily-
white rose,
And on hers grew a briar.*

*They grew, they grew to the church
steeple-top,
And there they grew no higher,
They tied themselves in a true lov-
er's knot,
And there remained for ever.*

The string snapped loudly. Rachel Ormond was lying still and her lips were smiling. I disengaged my hand gently from her dead fingers and went out. Doc Blaine met me at the door.

"Dead?"

"She died years ago," I said heavily. "She waited long for him; now she must wait somewhere else. That's the hell of war; it upsets the balance of things and throws lives into confusion that eternity can not make right."

TRICON, The 24th World Science Fiction Convention . . .

. . . will be held September 2, 3, 4, and 5, 1966 at the Sheraton-Cleveland Hotel in Cleveland, Ohio. Membership is \$1.00 for overseas fans; \$2.00 plus \$1.00 if you attend for all others. Make checks payable to: 24th World Science Fiction Convention, P. O. Box 1372, Cleveland, Ohio 44103. Toastmaster will be Isaac Asimov and the guest of honor is L. Sprague de Camp.

METEOROID COLLISION

by Theodore L. Thomas

SPACECRAFT ARE A COMMON thing these days, and so the time has come for one of them to be hit with a meteoroid of some size. Space in the vicinity of Earth does not abound in interplanetary debris, but it is not empty either. The things that traverse it are completely outside the experience of men. It has been necessary to open a few research programs and to coin a few theories to tell what will happen when a man-made object and a natural object finally meet in space.

The size range of the meteoroids is well understood; it varies from a mote so small you can't see or feel it to a giant weighing in at over a billion tons. The feature that is not understood about the meteoroids is their velocity. Now there's something awesome.

The maximum velocity of the meteoroids seems to be about 250,000 feet per second, although the average velocity is about 50,000 feet per second. But even the average velocity is well over the escape velocity of a body from Earth's gravity. No man has ever been able to set up a collision at such

an enormous velocity. The best that has yet been accomplished is 30,000 feet per second using a 2-stage gas gun, but things will get better.

Meantime, theories abound, such as the rigid projectile theory, the thermal penetration theories, the blast wave theory, and the hydrodynamic theories. They all deal with what happens at impact at enormous velocities when a tremendous amount of energy is suddenly released on a small area. Both the projectile and the impact area vaporize, but it is important to learn the exact mechanism in order that spaceship shields can be designed. It is recognized that if the meteoroid is large enough, no shield can be devised to stop it.

Perhaps the smaller impacts and collisions can be put to some use. Clothe the spaceship in a material whose crystals have no center of symmetry, like quartz. Such material would produce a piezo-electric effect; an electrostatic voltage would appear across it at each impact. The electrical charges thus generated could be used to do useful work aboard. All minor impacts

would generate welcome additions to the spaceship's power system.

As to major impacts, there would be only one.

LETTER TO A TYRANT KING

Dear Rex,

Things have changed
some

Since you were here:
Weather's colder for one thing.
Not as cold as it's been
But colder;
I can't get started, Rex—
For one thing there's
nothing to eat
Things are getting smaller
and a lot faster.

Since you've gone
Some of the trees have died off,
The rivers, lakes seem fewer;
Is there less water?

Some people, they're new
since you were here,
Have moved in—they're noisy—
I can't concentrate on this letter;
You'd like them, though,
But for their midget size.
It's not the same, Rex,
Since you were buried,
There are too many new people,
Diplodocus died off,
The forests have turned to coal.

Yours faithfully,
BILL BUTLER

"Organization Men never die," a friend once punned, sort of, "they're just filed away." Take Harold Carterson, for instance, Chief Methodology Coordinator (retired) for the Megalo Corporation and hero of the story below, who sets out to prove that there is always a top-drawer slot for an aggressive, hard-working company man—even in Hell.

A MATTER OF ORGANIZATION

by Frank Bequaert

AS CHIEF METHODOLOGY COORDINATOR for the Megalo Corporation, Harold Carterson always felt that he should not shirk from facing personally the most dangerous of assignments. Thus when it was reported to him that the underpinnings of a file bank in Paper Warehouse 7 showed signs of weakening, he hastened there in person. It was indeed a serious situation. Two of the support columns were twisted out of line, and the lower cabinets groaned menacingly under the tons of accounting forms in the upper files. Despite the pleas of his subordinates, Harold approached the critical area for a closer inspection. With a rending agony of ripping steel the whole

mass of files suddenly collapsed. Harold was crushed instantly to death.

Harold had been too busy with his work as Methodology Coordinator to worry about the state of his soul, and he was spirited directly to Hell. He found himself seated in an office not unlike the Personnel Department of the Megalo Corporation and facing a personable young man behind a desk.

"Harold Carterson?"

"Yes," said Harold, half dazed as he tried to get his bearings. Only the faint sulfurous odor in the air and the flicker of orange flames beyond the office window betrayed the fact that he had arrived in the nether regions.

"I am Demon Smythe," said the young man, extending his hand.

Harold shook hands cautiously.

"I like to get the name business straightened out right away," said the demon. "We've had some pretty bad mistakes in the past, doling out agonies to the wrong souls. The Chief doesn't like administrative errors."

"The Chief?" said Harold.

"The Devil himself," said Smythe. "I suppose you're a little upset at not having him speak to you in person? Most souls I interview seem to feel that way."

Harold thought quickly. It seemed clear that Demon Smythe would be doling out his punishments. It would not hurt to be in his good graces. "Oh, I'm not in the least upset," said Harold. "In fact it's good to realize that Hell is a well-run operation where responsibility is delegated to capable people."

The demon smiled. "You have no idea of the number of souls we have to process through here in a day. And the types we get. Certainly not the cream of the crop."

"I bet they're pretty self-righteous when they first realize where they are," said Harold. What was true for people was apparently true for demons, Harold realized. If he could get Smythe to talk about his work he might be in a pleasant mood when it came time to hand out his retributions.

"I'll say," said the demon. "The

women are the worst, especially the churchgoers. You never heard such carrying on. Even when you open the book and spread their sins in front of them, they won't admit them."

"Must be pretty difficult to handle," said Harold.

"You can say that again," Smythe agreed. "Some days I drag home from my shift swearing I'll never set foot in the office again. But in the morning I'm always anxious to get to work. I guess I just like working with souls."

"I bet it isn't every demon who gets the chance to do interview work," said Harold.

Harold noticed a definite expression of pride come over the demon's face. "You are right there," said Smythe. "Myself, for example. For eons I was just a pitchfork man in Heat Agonies. Then the foreman moved up the ladder, and they picked me as his replacement. I'd had my eye on that slot for a long time. Once I made foreman there was no stopping me."

"How's that?" said Harold.

"I'd kept my eyes open when I was prodding the sufferers. There were obvious ways of improving the efficiency of the operation. I put a few of my ideas to work, and within a century I had the anguish coefficient up to point-nine-two. The boys in the front office couldn't help but notice that."

Harold was fascinated. Hell, he was discovering, was not much dif-

ferent from the Megalo Corporation.

"Just what did you do?" he asked

"A number of simple things," said Symthe. "First I installed automated spits. Then I added bubbling clear mountain springs just out of reach."

"It's amazing how most operations profit when a man of imagination takes over," said Harold, swallowing hard to suppress his inner feelings.

The demon glanced at his watch. "How we have been chatting on," he said. "I'm afraid that it's time to get down to business." He opened a manila folder on his desk. "I'll bet you're curious about why you're here rather than"—and here he nodded his head toward the ceiling—"upstairs."

"It would be good to know," said Harold.

"Misdirected worship seems to be the main count against you," said the demon. "You know, rendering too much unto Caesar."

"I never really thought about it much," said Harold, "but I guess I did neglect the spiritual end of things."

"Then there's the matter of the girl."

"Girl?" said Harold, "What girl?"

The demon consulted a sheet in the folder. "Jane," he said, "a Jane Willoby."

"But that was a good fifteen years ago!" said Harold.

"Who was it who said 'Time does

not dim the devil's memory?'" said Smythe.

Harold forced a smile, "I guess you have a point there."

"It was very interesting reading," said the demon, as if to soothe Harold's feelings. "Nothing dull and prosaic about that sin."

"Is that all there is against me?" said Harold.

"That and the usual list of minor prevarications."

Harold was about to ask what there might be on the other side of the ledger, but he realized just in time that this would be exactly what the demon would be expecting. He was not getting as buddy-buddy with Smythe as he would have liked.

"What's your professional opinion," he asked instead. "How does my record chalk up against, say, the average sinner?"

The demon looked pleased. He had been expecting Harold to break down and plead the worth of his virtuous deeds.

"To be honest," said the demon, "I think your case could have gone either way. You came in at a bad moment, however. The mountain climbers pretty well overloaded today's quota for upstairs."

"Mountain climbers?" said Harold. "Quota?"

"I realize it's a little confusing," said the demon. "It was a rescue mission, thirty men all roped together going up Mt. McKinley to save two trapped on top. An ava-

lanche took them all. Deaths during errands of mercy automatically discredit all our claims. Those thirty filled up the quota and we got everyone else."

"It seems reasonable," said Harold. "I guess they deserved their reward."

"Sometimes one wonders," said the demon. "I was looking over some of their records, and I'd say a couple of them were pretty lucky to make it."

"Well," said Harold, "things would fall apart if we didn't all follow the administrative procedures."

"Right," said Smythe. "Which brings us to your agonies. I must admit that you've been quite a sport about the whole thing. I'm going to put you down for the minimum. A millennium of thirst, five centuries of hunger, and then a couple of decades of hot coals. After that we'll play it by ear."

Harold was not the least pleased with his future prospects, but he did not betray his feelings. "That's awfully nice of you to help me out this way," he said.

"We're not intractable," said the demon. "You play ball with us and we'll play ball with you."

Harold tried to think what he could say next. It was obvious he was about to be hustled out to begin his millennium of thirst, and he needed a drink very badly already. There was only one faint possibility of saving the situation.

"I have one more question," he said.

"Shoot," said Smythe.

"Those agonies of mine, to just what sins do they correspond?"

"I don't get you," said the demon.

"Is the thirst stretch for misdirected worship and the hunger for what I did to Jane, for example?"

"Oh no," said Smythe. "We never break it up that way. Just general punishment for all your sins."

Harold shook his head and tried to look very disappointed. "That's really too bad," he said. "I thought you ran things better than that."

"How's that?" said the demon. He sounded a little annoyed but very interested.

"It's pretty obvious that most people would suffer much more if there was a definite correlation between their particular momentary agony and a particular sin. It's pretty hard to regret sins in general."

"That's an interesting point," said Smythe. "But it would require changing the whole system around."

"I always said that administrative procedures are made to be changed if the change is for the better," said Harold.

"They're the Chief's procedures," said the demon. "He's pretty particular about having his ideas carried out."

"I'm sure if he saw the whole thing mapped out in an efficient

way he would heartily approve. And he'd remember the man . . . I mean demon . . . who suggested it. Time never dims the Devil's memory, you know."

The demon's eyes gleamed satanically. "You may be right," he said. "Why don't you rough in what you had in mind?"

"I don't think," said Harold, "that this is the sort of thing that can be put together in a rush. Give me a couple of decades and I'll whip together a plan that will really make your Chief sit up and take notice."

"I see the picture," said the demon. "A man can't think well when he's thirsty."

"Of course," said Harold, "your procedures may be so rigid that you can't make an exception. In that case, bring on the agonies."

The demon looked hurt. "Our system, like all good systems, has flexibility. It so turns out that there are a number of positions open for consultant demons. These positions don't promise any permanent respite from your agonies, but they do allow the right soul to delay his while he helps us out on some particular research or development project."

"That sounds entirely satisfactory," said Harold, with a long inward sigh of relief.

So Harold became a Research Associate. He was given an office of his own and a she-devil for a

secretary. He began to work out his sin accounting system.

Harold found he liked the pace of Hell. Demon Smythe looked in every year or so to see how he was getting on. Harold worked hard, not so much due to the prospect of the agonies awaiting him, but more because it was his habit to put the most of himself into his work.

He first tackled the sins themselves. It was obvious that they badly needed organizing. He found books and books full of them in the Hell library. They were categorized but in a terribly archaic way. There was hardly any cross referencing, and the numbering system was something of a cross between the Dewey Decimal System and the Zip Code. This did not surprise Harold, as he had long felt that both of these systems had been designed by the Devil himself. Harold immediately set to work creating a reasonable filing system. Each sin was placed in a generalized category, and each category was assigned a simple four-digit number. Harold set the she-devil to work allotting sins to categories. She turned out to be very good at the job . . . worked like a fiend at it as a matter of fact. In just a few decades they had all of the sins categorized and cross referenced.

Harold polished up his system with a sin-index and a number of quick reference charts. He then designed a number of sin accounting forms, and the job was done. Less

than fifty years after he started, he laid the finalized plans on Demon Smythe's desk.

"That was quick," said Smythe.

"I think you'll like it," said Harold. "Not only will it increase the sufferer's anguish coefficient across the board, but I think it will generally streamline operation for your whole office staff."

"Sounds good," said the demon. "How's it work?"

"These administrative procedures give the complete picture," said Harold, holding up an inch thick document. "But I'll run through the system quickly for you. The basic operation revolves about a central sin file where all of the suffering is filed by sin category. There will be monthly summaries by category number showing just how much suffering has been worked off toward each category."

"I don't get it," said Smythe. "What's the use of that?"

"Don't you want to know just how much suffering is going on for each sin category?" said Harold.

"It might be interesting," said the demon.

"Interesting!" said Harold. "I don't see how you people have run a reasonable temptation program up until now without such statistics. And it's obvious that you can't possibly be optimizing total agony with your present operation."

"I don't know about that," said Smythe. He went over and opened the window. The moans of the

damned filled the room. "Sounds pretty good to me."

"It's beyond my comprehension," said Harold, "why you people are so oriented toward the physical agonies. A good program of mental anguish would, in the long run, work so much more effectively. But such a program needs research, and research needs statistics."

"What do you mean?"

"If you know which sin categories have the highest quantity of suffering, you can direct your work toward agonies which will produce the maximum effect in those sinners. This will yield a maximum total suffering in the shortest possible time."

"I see your point," said Smythe. "And I like it. Keep talking."

"Of course we keep individual files on the damned with totals hour-by-hour of their agonies. I don't need to tell you how useful those files will be at millennium review time."

"Good, good," said the demon.

"We insure accurate reporting by the use of these agony report cards." Harold picked up a five-by-six white printed form and held it out for the demon's inspection. "This is an hour-by-hour report of the sufferer's agonies by sin category number."

"Who fills these out?" asked Smythe.

"The damned individual himself," said Harold.

"I'm not sure that's good," said Smythe. "I'm not one for having breaks in agonies."

"Look at that form again," said Harold.

The demon inspected it more closely.

"How would you feel about filling that out every shift?" said Harold.

The demon smiled. "A torture in itself," he said. "Harold, you're a soul in a million."

"Thank you," said Harold.

"You certainly are to be commended on your thoroughness," said Smythe. "Now you just leave the report and those charts here for me to go over, and I'll see about our presenting the matter to the Chief. I'll check back with you in a couple of weeks."

Harold went back to his office where he spent his time outlining his proposal for a complete revision in the temptation department. Just two weeks later Demon Smythe showed up.

"Well, I certainly want to thank you," he said to Harold. "The presentation went very well, and the Chief was very much impressed."

"Presentation?" said Harold. "I thought we were going to make a joint presentation."

"I didn't see any reason to bother you about it," said Smythe, with a definitely satanic smile. "You're so busy. All the material you gave me made the whole thing so clear that I was able to take care of the

presentation without even having to take up any of your time."

"Well," said Harold, "I'm glad it was so successful. Now I've been thinking about the temptation program, and I think I can recommend some definite improvements."

"That certainly is something worth thinking about," said the demon, "and I definitely want to read over whatever notes you've made, but I've got something special in mind for you."

"You have?" said Harold.

"Yes, I'm going to promote you to Field Research Observer. It's really a rather simple job, but I think you'll find it restful after all the hard work you've put in over the last few decades."

"Field Research Observer?" said Harold. He was beginning to be a little suspicious.

"Yes," said the demon. "You'll observe the effects of your new agony program and report them back to me."

Harold was now very suspicious. "Is that what the Chief recommended I should be doing?" he said.

"Actually," said Smythe, "in my meeting with the Chief your name didn't come up. I thought your ideas would sell a little better if, just for the present, we presented them as entirely Hell-originated. The Chief tends to frown on ideas with a mortal taint. It's very backward of him, I realize. If you want my own opinion, you mortals have

come up with some better ideas for agonies than he's ever thought of, but he is the Chief and I thought.

"You presented my ideas as your own," shouted Harold.

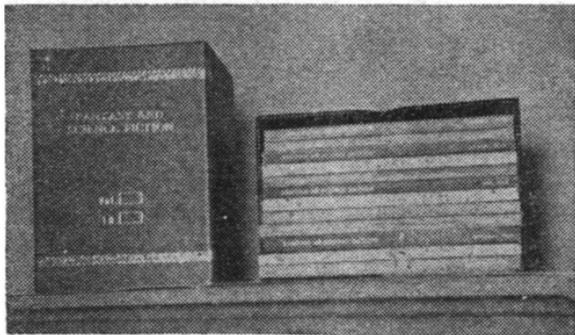
"Now I think that is a bit unfair," said Smythe. "Try to look at the big picture. What we've done is to take your ideas and present them with a number of minor but important changes that make the plan fit more into the overall spirit of Hell. I've knocked around this place for some time now, and I think that I can say without a bit of doubt that if I had taken your plan in to the Chief in the form you presented it to me, he would have rejected it outright. But they were essentially your ideas, and I think you'll be pretty pleased with

the way we're implementing them."

"This job you're 'promoting' me to," said Harold. "It's observing reactions to agonies. Just whose reactions?"

"Your own," said Smythe and his laughter echoed through the smoky corridors.

They chained Harold down to a bare rock in the endless heat of an artificial sun. A spring of crystal clear water bubbled up close by and gurgled down the rock, just out of reach. Each shift his hands were freed and he was allowed to fill in his time sheet allotting the various hours of agony to the atonement of his categorized sins. Between these breaks he had plenty of time to contemplate the fact that Hell was indeed very like the Megalo Corporation.



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Here is a short SF yarn which will probably be funny and a bit far fetched to readers who live outside urban areas. If you are a resident of New York, Los Angeles, or most any large city, you will find it entirely credible and maybe not so funny.

NEAR THING

by Robin Scott

IT WOULD IMPOVERISH THE planet for at least two generations, but the great search had to be made. The Garyoni were a vigorous young race; they bred well and frequently. Only their innate ferocity and love for personal combat had kept their population just short of the final explosion into starvation and oblivion. And even this fierce bloodthirstiness was losing ground before the onslaught of teeming new generations of tiny, hungry, omnivorous baby Garyoni.

And so a thousand automated probes were sent out to a thousand likely-looking stars, programmed to search until their fuel was exhausted, to search for that rare combination of solar radiation, atmosphere, and water that would mean the Garyoni had a new world to expand into.

Over nine-hundred came to the

end of their fuel, sent back a single faint negative report, and died in the fatal grasp of a strange star's gravity.

And then came a positive report. The telemetering equipment in Garos, the Garyoni capital, chattered with a new tone, and the excited technicians watching there flailed their tentacles as the message was deciphered: the third planet out from a negative-magnitude yellow sun of the proper radiation characteristics showed spectrographic evidence of abundant water and an atmosphere that matched very closely the oxygen-nitrogen-carbon dioxide atmosphere which supported life in such abundance on Garyon.

There was great rejoicing at the news in the streets of Garos. The Council decreed the Golden Ring of Honor for the aging chief of

the probe program, and every citizen was issued a supplementary concupiscence ration card for the first three *raals* of the new year. (However, to offset the untoward effects of this largess, the Council cut the price of firearms by one half and doubled the proof of all intoxicating beverages sold in the Council-controlled grogshops.)

The good news set in motion the next phase of the search program. Based on the strong probability that a planet which appeared capable of supporting Garyoni life was already adequately supplied with an indigenous life of its own, the Council ordered a heavy step-up in the production of weapons of mass destruction and the organization and training of a large planetary expeditionary force. Only very young Garyoni were chosen for this force, and only those with at least ten notches in their side-arms. There was plenty of time for training: the secondary probe—the probe which would land and make the final, definitive analysis of the new planet—would take seven years to reach its destination. Its report would take another seven years to reach Garyon. And the expeditionary force would be still another seven years reaching its target.

But the secondary probe was soon on its way, and the flow of life and death on Garyon went on at a heightened pace as it pursued its mission.

The secondary probe went into solar orbit, confirmed the happy report of its predecessor, and shifted inward to intercept the third planet in its orbital track. The confirmatory news brought new cheering in the streets of Garos. There was another supplementary ration issued, and Gehazil—the new young director of the probe program—was elevated to the rank of his predecessor.

Planetary orbit was achieved. Sensors reached for a land mass on the whirling planet below. The retro-drive fired, and the probe's instrumented capsule dropped screaming through the atmosphere and slowed to fall with a gentle thud in a dense patch of stunted jimpsion weed growing on the verge of a drainage ditch running along Federal Route 47, just where it climbs slightly to leap across the industrial wastelands along the Passaic river. It was rush hour in New Jersey, and the sound of the probe's arrival was lost in the drumming throb of a line of diesel trucks and impacted passenger cars crawling up the bridge approaches.

The capsule lay silent for a moment, carefully assessing its internal condition and readiness to carry out the rest of its programmed mission. All in order, it ejected a short antenna and spat its brief telling message back to the orbiting carrier for relay to the home planet. Seven years later, the news

of its safe arrival brought decorations to its designer and builder.

The capsule deployed its atmospheric analysis probe and began to sample the air about it, reporting its findings as it proceeded.

"Pressure: 97 *grugs* per square *klinz*," read Program Director Gehazil seven years later.

"Wonderful! Perfect!" chorused the technicians and councilmen gathered around the readout panel. Zingal, the designer of the atmospheric probe, exuberantly grabbed his assistant and expended half a *raal's* ration on the spot.

"Atmospheric content," read Gehazil.

"Oxygen: 738,954 parts per million.

"Nitrogen: 240,758 parts per million.

"Water vapor: 10,602 parts per million.

"Argon: 9,103 parts per million. . . ."

The telling reports slowed as the analysis of trace elements and compounds grew more complex. There was near hysteria in Garos. The results thus far showed a near perfect match with the Garyoni atmosphere. Only a sufficiency of carbon dioxide—which might indicate the presence of complex hydrocarbons and, most important, edible plant life—was as yet lacking to demonstrate a perfect atmosphere.

The capsule continued—slowly—to deliver its report.

"Carbon dioxide: 300 parts per million . . ."

The streets of Garos were scenes of orgiastic riot. Emptied ration books blew in the wind like leaves in October.

Then the blow fell:

"Carbon monoxide: 250 parts per million . . ."

The cheering crowds fell silent. There was stunned shock in Garos. Finally, old Saankel, chief of the Council's atmosphere committee, folded his tentacles in a gesture of hope and spoke of the possibility of filters, of the miracles to be wrought through "atmospheric engineering." He got few folded tentacles in answer. Still it could be worse . . .

Even more slowly, as the complexity of analysis increased, the capsule continued its report.

"Helium: four parts per million.

"Krypton: three parts per million.

"Neon and Xenon: each two parts per million . . ."

After the initial shock, the technicians were recovering. There were more and more folded tentacles, and a few optimistic individuals—still in a mood to celebrate—began to tot up their ration books. Orders were placed for filtering apparatus and masks to be used by the expeditionary force, now loading at the Garos space terminal. It was unlikely that any very dangerous form of life could

have evolved on a planet with that much carbon monoxide in its atmosphere, but you never could tell. Perhaps there was some sort of natural filtering system . . .

The capsule beside the highway began to report more complex compounds:

"Ethylene: two parts per million.

"Nitrogen dioxide: 1.75 parts per million.

"Hydrogen sulphide: 17 parts per million. . . ."

Zingal, the designer of the atmospheric analysis probe, was the first to go. He plunged forty stories from the chamber containing the readout panel to the crowded street below. The new order was stripped from the chest of Gehazil, and then his chest was stripped from the rest of him. The once-joyous crowds in the streets turned murderous in their disappointment, and the over-population problem of the Garyoni was—at least temporarily—solved.

At the barracks outside Garos, the Chief of Staff rescinded the order for filters and commenced disbanding the planetary expeditionary force. His aide questioned him: "Surely, Sir, we can build

filters for all that other stuff in the atmosphere?"

The Chief of Staff nodded wearily. "Perhaps. But you can't colonize a planet if you don't have a basically non-toxic atmosphere, at least an atmosphere that will support some sort of edible life. You couldn't grow a stunted *tameel* in air as foul as that."

The capsule had finished its analysis of the atmosphere. Unmindful of the fact that no one was interested in the rest of its programmed information-gathering, it went on about its task. It deployed a flexible, armored tube, headed by a water-sensing guidance system. The tube snaked through the jimson weeds to the verge of the Passaic and dived below the surface. Valves opened and a pump deep inside the capsule began to whirl. Passaic river water coursed upward and entered the capsule for analysis.

There was a sudden flash of badly overloaded components. The capsule heaved once, silently, and disappeared in a muffled blast. The sound was lost in the roar of diesels, and nobody in Garyon cared any longer anyway.





BB OR NOT BB, THAT IS THE QUESTION—

by Isaac Asimov

ALL SCIENTISTS HAVE FUN* BUT the ones that have the most fun are, in my own opinion, the cosmogonists. ("Cosmogony" is from Greek words meaning "universe-birth" so cosmogonists are obviously involved in the study of the origin and development of the Universe.)

Nobody was around at the origin, so there are no eye-witness reports. Cosmogonists can reach their conclusions only on the basis of some very subtle observations that are just barely within reach of modern instruments. This gives them vast scope within which to exercise their imaginations and a vast background—all of space and time—against which to exercise it. Who could resist?

No astronomer and hardly any non-astronomers. Certainly, not I.

If I am held back at all, it is that the task of working up a good cosmogony, a *good* one, requires a far greater knowledge of mathematics and of theoretical physics than I possess. However, while that inhibits me, it doesn't stop me cold. I have my opinions on the subject and if I were to try to bottle them up forever, the internal pressure might do damage to the speculative centers of my cerebrum. So here goes—

There are a number of Universe-models which describe, in the most general terms, the manner in which our Universe came to be organized into the fashion we now find it, and which predict how it may be expected to change further (or not change further) as we progress into the future.

* In their work, I mean. What they do outside business hours is their own concern, and I wouldn't dream of inquiring.

All the models have to fit one great overall observation. The most distant objects we can see, the galaxies outside our own local cluster, all show a "red-shift." That is, the characteristic lines present in their spectra, are displaced toward the red end of the spectrum in every case.

The usual interpretation of this red-shift is to the effect that the galaxies are receding from us. A receding object is known to show a red-shift in the light it sends us; and the greater the velocity of recession the greater the extent of the red-shift.

It so happens that the farther the galaxy (judging from its brightness and from some other considerations) the greater the red-shift, and this is what would be expected if the Universe as a whole were expanding. This picture of an expanding Universe is a convenient one, for it fits the equations worked out by Albert Einstein in his General Theory of Relativity. Nor could anyone suppose that Einstein had arranged his theory to allow for the expansion, for he announced it in 1915 without suspecting the existence of expansion, and the observational data that enforced acceptance of an expanding Universe became clear only in the 1920's.

Any Universe-model must, therefore, take the expansion of the Universe into account and explain it in physical terms if possible. If a Universe-model involves a non-expanding Universe, then some alternate explanation that will hold water must be found for the red-shift.

On the whole, the Universe-models may be put into two classes: 1) continuous creation, and 2) big bang. We can refer to them, conveniently, by their neatly alliterative initials, CC and BB.

According to the CC models, creation is continuing all the time, single atom by single atom, but so very slowly that no instruments in the armory of science could conceivably detect it now. Still, in the course of some billions of years, the amount of matter in the Universe would double as a result of this slow drizzle of creation.

However, the Universe is expanding and in those same billions of years, the galaxies would have moved apart to the point where the amount of space between them had doubled. Most of the new matter would form, on a purely random basis, in the vast spaces between the galaxies. There they would collect into new galaxies, so that the distance between adjacent galaxies would remain the same in the long run. Nor would there seem to be twice as many galaxies altogether because in the course of the expansion of the Universe, the more distant galaxies would be carried so far away that their red-shifts would become so extreme as to allow little or no light to reach us at all.

By the CC model, then, galaxies are being continually pushed beyond the detectable horizon, while new galaxies are continually being formed,

so that the overall order of the Universe does not change with time. There is no true beginning of the Universe, no true ending. The Universe is eternal and—in the large view—unchanging. Individual galaxies, such as our own, would change, to be sure. They would be collected from the gathering matter between galaxies, form stars, evolve, and, eventually, die; but the order-of-galaxies would remain unchanged.

According to the BB models, however, this is not so. The Universe has both a beginning and an ending, or at least there was a time long ago when it was radically different from what it is now and there will be a time in the future when it will be radically different again.

In the BB models, the expansion of the Universe is explained in a directly physical manner. If the Universe is expanding as though it were being blown apart, that is because something once did blow it apart.

Once long ago, all the matter of the Universe was crushed together into an incredibly concentrated mass something like one gigantic neutron star (see SQU-U-U-USH, *F & SF*, November 1965). This "cosmic egg" exploded and out of its remnants were formed the galaxies, which are still flying apart against the pull of mutual gravitational attraction in response to the force of that tremendous long-ago explosion.

Which is it, then, CC or BB? Continuous creation or big bang?

The Universe as it exists today is consistent with either type of model, but this is not so of the Universe as it exists all through time.

By the CC model, there is *no* overall change with time. Old galaxies recede and new ones form in such a way that galaxies are strewn through space with the same thickness now, a trillion years in the past, and a trillion years in the future. Furthermore, the new galaxies mix with the old ones in purely random fashion, so that at any point in time, any given galaxy will be surrounded by galaxies in all stages of development from the very new to the very old.

By the BB model, there *is* an overall change with time. Billions of years ago, all the galaxies were crowded together and all were young. Billions of years from now, all the galaxies will be spread widely apart and all will be old. Furthermore, at any given moment of time, any particular galaxy will be surrounded by others of like age.

This means that we can distinguish between the CC and BB models by building a time machine, travelling into the far past or far future and taking a quick look at the Universe.

And we can do that—after a fashion. Light cannot travel faster than 186,282 miles per second. This is fast on the terrestrial scale but it is a mere creep in the cosmos as a whole. Light from the more distant galaxies takes a billion years or more to reach us. This means that what we see

when we look at the very distant galaxies is the Universe as it was billions of years ago.

All we have to decide, then, is whether what we see far, far away is essentially the same as what we see in our own neighborhood. If it *is*, then the BB model is eliminated; if it is *not*, then the CC model is eliminated. (Notice that I only mention the eliminated; I don't say that anything is established. To eliminate the BB model does *not* establish the CC model for it is not an either-or proposition. *Both* models may be wrong. Similarly, to eliminate the CC model does not, of itself, establish the BB. Nevertheless, elimination is a great step forward; at least there is one wrong road we need explore no further.)

Of course, there is a catch. It is very difficult to see things beyond the billion light-year mark. Small differences between there and here are bound to escape our notice if only because we can't possibly see the very distant galaxies in any detail. If there is a difference at all, we can only hope that it is a great, big difference that shows up very clearly even across billions of light years of space.

Astronomers could scarcely believe their luck when exactly that happened.

It seems that certain stars which had appeared to be dim and undistinguished members of our own Galaxy, suddenly gained notoriety at the very end of the 1950's by turning out to be sources of radio waves.

Now there are lots of radio-wave sources in the Universe, but only one of them had appeared to be an ordinary star. That one exception is our own Sun and we detect its radio-wave radiation only because it is so close to us. If it were merely as far off as the nearest star, its radio-wave radiation would become undetectable. The radio waves we do detect from beyond the Solar system come from remnants of supernovae, or (if outside our Galaxy altogether) from unusual catastrophes such as exploding galaxies (see *A GALAXY AT A TIME*, *F & SF*, December 1964).

Here, however, were radio-sources that seemed to be ordinary stars of our own Galaxy.

Astronomers turned their full attention to these stars and found faint little wisps of nebulosity attached to some of them, so it began to look as though they might be stars, but not ordinary ones. Secondly, their spectra showed lines that could not be identified and were not like those of any other object. They might be stars but, far from being ordinary, they began to seem most extraordinary.

Then, in early 1963, it was noticed that some of the lines had the spacing of certain hydrogen lines, except that those hydrogen lines ought to

be in the ultraviolet. Could the lines have shifted red-ward into the visible region? That would be a red-shift with a vengeance. Other lines became familiar, too, if that same red-shift were allowed. But if such a red-shift were allowed and the stars were assumed to possess them because they were participating in the general expansion of the Universe, they would have to be far off indeed. To be at the place where general expansion was carrying them away from us at *that* rate, they would have to be at perfectly enormous distances—over a billion light-years away.

If that were so, the stars could not be stars at all, ordinary or extraordinary, for nothing the size of a star could be seen at such distances. They were “quasi-stellar” (that is, “star-like”) radio sources. In no time, the ugly term “quasi-stellar” was shortened to the even uglier “quasar.”

By now, about a hundred suspected quasars have been discovered and some thirty have had their spectra studied in detail. All thirty have enormous red shifts. The quasars all seem to be beyond the billion light-year mark and a couple have been placed at a distance of possibly eight billion light-years. (These are the farthest objects known.)

For quasars to appear as bright as they do, even though at such enormous distances, they must be luminous indeed. The average quasar must be some hundred times as luminous as the average galaxy.—And yet they are not a hundred times as large as the average Galaxy; if they were, they would have visible shapes instead of being mere points of light—even at their huge distances. In fact, astronomers have reason to suspect the quasars to be no more than a very few light-years in diameter (compared to our own Galaxy’s 100,000 light-year span.)

Astronomers are driving themselves to distraction these days trying to figure out how an object can be only a few light-years across yet shine with the fury of a hundred galaxies? What is the source of the energy? How is it tapped? What starts a quasar? What ends it?

This sort of worry we can put to one side for the moment. Regardless of what makes a quasar tick, let us simply concentrate on the fact that it exists and that it is radically different from anything in our own neighborhood.

Assuming that the quasars are really very distant—billions of light-years away—then the light we see them by left them billions of years ago, and those quasars inhabit a Universe billions of years younger than our own.—And, on the other hand, there are no quasars near us.

It follows, then, that billions of years ago there existed a Universe relatively rich in quasars, whatever they are, and now we live in a Universe that has no quasars. The logical conclusion is that there is a broad and marked distinction between the past and the present; that the quasars

represent short-lived objects that could exist only in a young Universe. It is not necessary to know what the quasars are in detail to see that this eliminates the CC models which insist on a Universe that is unchanging in its broad aspects.

We are then left with the BB models which may be wrong also—but which may be right.

But wait, not so fast. All this depends on the quasars really being located at billion-plus light-year distances. What says they are? Only the red-shift?—Well, perhaps the red-shift has some other explanation and the quasars are, after all, exactly what they appear to be—dim stars of our own Galaxy.

Ah, but the red-shift isn't quite all. One of the quasars (the best studied one, in fact) rejoices in the name 3C273* and lies in the direction of a cluster of galaxies in the constellation Virgo. This cluster is surrounded by a cloud of hydrogen and the light from 3C273 shows spectral lines that would indicate that some of its radiation has been absorbed by hydrogen. It seems natural to suppose that the light from 3C273 has passed through the cloud surrounding the Virgo cluster on its way to us and that 3C273 must therefore lie beyond the cluster. Right?

Well, the Virgo cluster is known to be 40,000,000 light-years away so 3C273 must be farther away than that. And 3C273 is the nearest of the known quasars. At least, it has the smallest red-shift.

This seems to eliminate the chance that the quasars are really peculiar stars of our own Galaxy. Quasar 3C273 certainly isn't and if one quasar is a large, distant, super-luminous object, why should all the other objects that resemble it be small, close-by, stars.

On the other hand, even if the quasars are far away, are they *very* far away? The Virgo cluster is 40 million light-years away, and maybe 3C273 is only 50 million light-years away. Maybe other quasars are only 10 million light-years away.

If the distance of the quasars is in the millions, rather than in the billions, of light-years, then they don't have to be so luminous to appear as bright as they do. They might be only as bright as 1/100 of a galaxy instead of 100 galaxies. An object 1/100 as bright as a galaxy would be far easier to explain and astronomers could breathe more freely. Furthermore, quasars that close and dim would mean that quasars probably exist at greater distances, too, but then become too dim in appearance to detect. In that case, it would be reasonable to suspect that quasars are quite

* Because it is the 273rd object listed in the Third Cambridge Catalogue of Radio Sources.

a common phenomenon, spread out all over the Universe with only the nearest being detectable. The Universe would then appear to show no startling differences past and present and the CC model would no longer be eliminated.

But if quasars are comparatively close to us, we are still left with an over-riding problem—why the enormous red-shift? As far as I know there are three causes for a red-shift; two legitimate and one doubtful. Let's consider the doubtful one first.

Every once in a while someone suggests that light loses energy as it travels and gradually increases in wavelength, thus shifting toward the red. The red-shift then becomes evidence for what is called "tired light." According to that view, the Universe need not be expanding at all. The more distant the galaxy, the more tired the light after its long travels and the redder; that's all.

The catch to this theory is that no one has ever been able to give a good mechanism whereby such a tired-light red-shift can take place. If the light loses energy, that energy must be gained by something else (according to the law of conservation of energy). What else? No one knows.

It might be that we're just not smart enough to know what is picking up the energy, or it might be that the law of conservation of energy doesn't work under all conditions after all. But then, we should be able to measure the slight tiredness of light originating from the stars of our own Galaxy; maybe even in the course of laboratory experiments—and we don't.

In short, there is no theoretical justification or observational evidence for the tired-light red-shift, so let's eliminate it.

That leaves the two legitimate explanations for a red-shift. One of these involves a gravitational field which, according to Einstein's General Theory of Relativity (and backed by observation) would reduce the energy of light leaving a body.

But for the red-shift of the quasars to be caused by gravitation, so huge a gravitational field would be required, and, therefore, so huge and dense a mass, that astronomers would be deeply in trouble. It would be just as difficult to explain a huge, super-dense nearby quasar as a huge, super-luminous distant quasar.

In fact, I think most astronomers would prefer the problems of super-distance to those of super-gravitation any day.

That leaves us with the explanation of the red-shift by rapid recession, but if so, need that recession be interpreted as part of the general expansion of the Universe? Is that the *only* possible type of recession?

Suppose the quasar were near by, can't we have it receding at a sizable fraction of the speed of light just through some explosion on a galactic

scale—a kind of “little-bang” hypothesis? Its rapid recession, misinterpreted as part of the general expansion of the Universe, might then cause astronomers to take the object as a thousand times more distant than it really is. Just this month, in fact, an astronomer at Stanford reported that at least five quasars seem to be suspiciously near “peculiar galaxies”; galaxies which may have undergone some catastrophe and been left with atypical shapes.

And yet—if galactic explosions produced quasars in the shape of million-star fragments, should not some of them have been hurled in *our* general direction and not yet have passed us? Should not some of them be approaching us, rather than receding from us? Should not *one* of them be approaching?

An approaching quasar would show a huge shift of spectral lines in the opposite direction—toward the violet. And yet not one quasar, not one, has been found to possess a huge “violet-shift.” Thirty quasars are receding rapidly; not one quasar is approaching.

Galactic explosions that hurl everything in the direction opposite us and nothing toward us are too much to ask of coincidence.

Another possibility is that the quasars are not ejected at super-velocities and are not moving very rapidly at all. They might, however, be collapsing at enormous rates. The surface of the object, which is radiating light toward us, would then be pictured as moving inward toward the center of the object and away from us. It would be this “recession” that would then be responsible for the red-shift. In that case, it wouldn't matter whether the quasars were moving slowly away from us or slowly toward us; the super-rapid collapse would swallow up everything and it would always appear to be a recession and would always produce a red-shift.

Yet such collapses would involve the motion of matter toward a center that could not be more than a light-year or so distant, at best. At the indicated speeds of recession (large fractions of the speed of light) such collapses couldn't last more than a few months. Strange that we should catch so many bodies in the midst of such an evanescent stage of evolution. That, it seems to me, is also asking too much of coincidence.

So it's my own opinion that we are left with one explanation only of the red-shift—enormous distance on the part of quasars and participation in the general expansion of the Universe. And that means that the CC models of the Universe are eliminated.

We are left with the BB models—the big bang—which may also be wrong, but which may be right.

Suppose, then, that the Universe *did* begin as a vast single mass of tremendously dense matter, and that that cosmic egg exploded. At the moment of explosion it must have been tremendously hot—one estimate, advanced in 1965, was that the initial temperature was 10 billion degrees absolute ($10,000,000,000^{\circ}$ K) or 18 billion degrees Fahrenheit.

If so, then if our instruments could penetrate far enough into the vast distances of space, they might be penetrating deeply enough into the past to catch a whiff of the radiation that accompanied the big bang. At the temperatures indicated for the initial fireball, that radiation should be in the short-wave x-ray region. However, at such distances, the red-shift would be so extreme that the radiation would be pushed far, far toward and beyond the visible red into the microwave region of the electromagnetic spectrum. It would then give the kind of radiation that would be expected of an object at a temperature of merely 10° K (that is, ten degrees above absolute zero).

Early this year, a general background of microwave radiation was indeed detected, radiation of a type quite similar to the kind predicted, except that the distribution of wavelength was equivalent to a temperature of only 3° K. This means that astronomers may have detected what might be called the birth-cry of the Universe. The unexpectedly low temperature to which the microwave radiation is equivalent leads astronomers to suspect that the initial fireball was cooler than expected and this may require some juggling which we need not go into since it would not affect the main problem—BB or not BB.

Between the quasars and the birth-cry, I am now sold on the BB models. And this isn't a glad decision for me, either because I consider the CC model (continuous creation) much more satisfying from a purely emotional viewpoint.

If we accept a BB model, we are forced to ask an embarrassing question. This huge cosmic egg that exploded to form our Universe—where did it come from?

One way of answering that question is to shrug and say, "It always existed."

But if it always existed, why did it suddenly explode? If it existed for an eternity without exploding, what kicked it off all of a sudden?

Let's consider—Some BB models visualize a single explosion and a perpetual recession. All the clusters of galaxies would recede from each other until the distances separating them were so vast that no one cluster could be detected from any other. When that day comes, our Uni-

verse would consist of our own Galaxy, the Andromeda galaxy, and about a dozen additional small members of the Local Cluster. That's all. And by that time, the Cluster would be dying; our Sun would be a white dwarf.

This is rather disheartening to envisage, even though all of us will be safely dead long before such a denouement.

On the other hand, there is also a possibility that the initial explosion was not strong enough to hurl the galactic clusters apart indefinitely. Rather the velocity of recession is being slowly cut down by the unwearying force of mutual gravitation among the pieces of the Universe. Eventually, then, like a ball thrown upward, the exploding Universe would slow to a spent halt, and then start to fall together again, faster and faster and faster. Its matter would drive together and form the cosmic egg again, which would, of course, explode again at once and start the cycle over.

This is what is called the "oscillating universe" and it has recently been suggested that the period of oscillation from one cosmic egg to the next is a little over 80,000,000,000 years.

If this is so, then we don't have to wonder how a cosmic egg can exist for all eternity and then suddenly explode. It doesn't exist for all eternity at all. It exists only for a short period every eighty billion years; forming and exploding—forming and exploding—forming and exploding—

But the material making up the cosmic egg—the material that is now spread out into the matter and energy of the Universe as we know it—where did that come from?

Ah, now we are ready for my own cosmological theory, or we would be if space had not run out.

But never fear—I planned it this way.

Last month I discussed antiparticles and the conservation laws (BALANCING THE BOOKS, *F & SF*, July 1966) and this month I discuss the creation of the Universe. Next month I combine the two, talking about the creation of the Universe in the light of the conservation laws and it will be then that I present my own views.

I don't know about you, of course, but I can hardly wait—



SPECIAL ISAAC ASIMOV ISSUE

A healthy portion of F&SF's October issue will be by and about the best known writer of contemporary science fiction and science fact—Isaac Asimov. Contents will include:

- **THE KEY**, a brand-new science fiction novelet by Isaac Asimov. New fiction by Dr. Asimov is in short supply, and you will not want to miss this suspenseful SF-detective story.
- A profile of Isaac Asimov by friend and colleague **L. Sprague de Camp**, in which the writer offers a few observations on what makes Isaac tick.
- Dr. Asimov's usual monthly column, in which he turns from a discussion of the universe (see this and next month's *Science*) to answer some personal questions, such as: "What got you started writing?"
- A comprehensive bibliography of his writing—fiction and non-fiction—which is absolutely unavailable anywhere else in the world.
- All the above, plus our usual assortment of fiction and features, including a new story by **Brian Aldiss**.

The October issue will be on sale September 1. If you are a subscriber, you will receive your copy earlier. If you are not, the coupon below may interest you. New subscriptions will start with the Asimov issue.

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Peter S. Beagle was born and brought up in the Bronx, spent a year in Europe, and then returned to the U. S., where he made a cross-country trip by motorcycle. The latter trip was recorded in his most recent book, I SEE BY MY OUTFIT. Mr. Beagle's first novel was A FINE AND PRIVATE PLACE; and his credits include several short stories, including this account of the wealthy Lady Neville, who gave the finest and most fashionable parties in England, but who was not, herself, entertained—until she invited the one guest that no one could possibly find boring—Death.

COME LADY DEATH

by Peter S. Beagle

THIS ALL HAPPENED IN ENGLAND a long time ago, when that George who spoke English with a heavy German accent and hated his sons was King. At that time there lived in London a lady who had nothing to do but give parties. Her name was Flora, Lady Neville, and she was a widow and very old. She lived in a great house not far from Buckingham Palace, and she had so many servants that she could not possibly remember all their names; indeed, there were some she had never even seen. She had more food than she could eat, more gowns than she could ever wear; she had wine in her cellars that no one would drink in her life-

time, and her private vaults were filled with great works of art that she did not know she owned. She spent the last years of her life giving parties and balls to which the greatest lords of England—and sometimes the King himself—came, and she was known as the wisest and wittiest woman in all London.

But in time her own parties began to bore her, and though she invited the most famous people in the land and hired the greatest jugglers and acrobats and dancers and magicians to entertain them, still she found her parties duller and duller. Listening to court gossip, which she had always loved, made

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her yawn. The most marvelous music, the most exciting feats of magic put her to sleep. Watching a beautiful young couple dance by her made her feel sad, and she hated to feel sad.

And so, one summer afternoon she called her closest friends around her and said to them, "More and more I find that my parties entertain everyone but me. The secret of my long life is that nothing has ever been dull for me. For all my life, I have been interested in everything I saw and been anxious to see more. But I cannot stand to be bored, and I will not go to parties at which I expect to be bored, especially if they are my own. Therefore, to my next ball I shall invite the one guest I am sure no one, not even myself, could possibly find boring. My friends, the guest of honor at my next party shall be Death himself!"

A young poet thought that this was a wonderful idea, but the rest of her friends were terrified and drew back from her. They did not want to die, they pleaded with her. Death would come for them when he was ready; why should she invite him before the appointed hour, which would arrive soon enough? But Lady Neville said, "Precisely. If Death has planned to take any of us on the night of my party, he will come whether he is invited or not. But if none of us are to die, then I think it would be charming to have Death among us

—perhaps even to perform some little trick if he is in a good humor. And think of being able to say that we had been to a party with Death! All of London will envy us, all of England!"

The idea began to please her friends, but a young lord, very new to London, suggested timidly, "Death is so busy. Suppose he has work to do and cannot accept your invitation?"

"No one has ever refused an invitation of mine," said Lady Neville, "not even the King. And the young lord was not invited to her party.

She sat down then and there and wrote out the invitation. There was some dispute among her friends as to how they should address Death. "His Lordship Death" seemed to place him only on the level of a viscount or a baron. "His Grace Death" met with more acceptance, but Lady Neville said it sounded hypocritical. And to refer to Death as "His Majesty" was to make him the equal of the King of England, which even Lady Neville would not dare to do. It was finally decided that all should speak of him as "His Eminence Death," which pleased nearly everyone.

Captain Compson, known both as England's most dashing cavalry officer and most elegant rake, remarked next, "That's all very well, but how is the invitation to reach

Death? Does anyone here know where he lives?"

"Death undoubtedly lives in London," said Lady Neville, "like everyone else of any importance, though he probably goes to Deauville for the summer. Actually, Death must live fairly near my own house. This is much the best section of London, and you could hardly expect a person of Death's importance to live anywhere else. When I stop to think of it, it's really rather strange that we haven't met before now, on the street."

Most of her friends agreed with her, but the poet, whose name was David Lorimond, cried out, "No, my lady, you are wrong! Death lives among the poor. Death lives in the foulest, darkest alleys of this city, in some vile, rat-ridden hovel that smells of—" He stopped here, partly because Lady Neville had indicated her displeasure, and partly because he had never been inside such a hut or thought of wondering what it smelled like. "Death lives among the poor," he went on, "and comes to visit them every day, for he is their only friend."

Lady Neville answered him as coldly as she had spoken to the young lord. "He may be forced to deal with them, David, but I hardly think that he seeks them out as companions. I am certain that it is as difficult for him to think of the poor as individuals as it is for me. Death is, after all, a nobleman."

There was no real argument among the lords and ladies that Death lived in a neighborhood at least as good as their own, but none of them seemed to know the name of Death's street, and no one had ever seen Death's house.

"If there were a war," Captain Compson said, "Death would be easy to find. I have seen him, you know, even spoken to him, but he has never answered me."

"Quite proper," said Lady Neville. "Death must always speak first. You are not a very correct person, Captain." But she smiled at him, as all women did.

Then an idea came to her. "My hairdresser has a sick child, I understand," she said. "He was telling me about it yesterday, sounding most dull and hopeless. I will send for him and give him the invitation, and he in his turn can give it to Death when he comes to take the brat. A bit unconventional, I admit, but I see no other way."

"If he refuses?" asked a lord who had just been married.

"Why should he?" asked Lady Neville.

Again it was the poet who exclaimed amidst the general approval that this was a cruel and wicked thing to do. But he fell silent when Lady Neville innocently asked him, "Why, David?"

So the hairdresser was sent for, and when he stood before them, smiling nervously and twisting his

hands to be in the same room with so many great lords, Lady Neville told him the errand that was required of him. And she was right, as she usually was, for he made no refusal. He merely took the invitation in his hand and asked to be excused.

He did not return for two days, but when he did he presented himself to Lady Neville without being sent for and handed her a small white envelope. Saying, "How very nice of you, thank you very much," she opened it and found therein a plain calling card with nothing on it except these words: *Death will be pleased to attend Lady Neville's ball.*

"Death gave you this?" she asked the hairdresser eagerly. "What was he like?" But the hairdresser stood still, looking past her, and said nothing, and she, not really waiting for an answer, called a dozen servants to her and told them to run and summon her friends. As she paced up and down the room waiting for them, she asked again, "What is Death like?" The hairdresser did not reply.

When her friends came they passed the little card excitedly from hand to hand, until it had gotten quite smudged and bent from their fingers. But they all admitted that, beyond its message, there was nothing particularly unusual about it. It was neither hot nor cold to the touch, and what little odor clung to it was rather

pleasant. Everyone said that it was a very familiar smell, but no one could give it a name. The poet said that it reminded him of lilacs but not exactly.

It was Captain Compson, however, who pointed out the one thing that no one else had noticed. "Look at the handwriting itself," he said. "Have you ever seen anything more graceful? The letters seem as light as birds. I think we have wasted our time speaking of Death as His This and His That. A woman wrote this note."

Then there was an uproar and a great babble, and the card had to be handed around again so that everyone could exclaim, "Yes, by God!" over it. The voice of the poet rose out of the hubbub saying, "It is very natural, when you come to think of it. After all, the French say *la mort*. Lady Death. I should much prefer Death to be a woman."

"Death rides a great black horse," said Captain Compson firmly, "and wears armor of the same color. Death is very tall, taller than anyone. It was no woman I saw on the battlefield, striking right and left like any soldier. Perhaps the hairdresser wrote it himself, or the hairdresser's wife."

But the hairdresser refused to speak, though they gathered around him and begged him to say who had given him the note. At first they promised him all sorts of rewards, and later they threatened

to do terrible things to him. "Did you write this card?" he was asked, and "Who wrote it, then? Was it a living woman? Was it really Death? Did Death say anything to you? How did you know it was Death? Is Death a woman? Are you trying to make fools of us all?"

Not a word from the hairdresser, not one word, and finally Lady Neville called her servants to have him whipped and thrown into the street. He did not look at her as they took him away, or utter a sound.

Silencing her friends with a wave of her hand, Lady Neville said, "The ball will take place two weeks from tonight. Let Death come as Death pleases, whether as man or woman or strange, sexless creature." She smiled calmly. "Death may well be a woman," she said. "I am less certain of Death's form than I was, but I am also less frightened of Death. I am too old to be afraid of anything that can use a quill pen to write me a letter. Go home now, and as you make your preparations for the ball see that you speak of it to your servants, that they may spread the news all over London. Let it be known that on this one night no one in the world will die, for Death will be dancing at Lady Neville's ball."

For the next two weeks Lady Neville's great house shook and groaned and creaked like an old

tree in a gale as the servants hammered and scrubbed, polished and painted, making ready for the ball. Lady Neville had always been very proud of her house, but as the ball drew near she began to be afraid that it would not be nearly grand enough for Death, who was surely accustomed to visiting in the homes of richer, mightier people than herself. Fearing the scorn of Death, she worked night and day supervising her servants' preparations. Curtains and carpets had to be cleaned, goldwork and silverware polished until they gleamed by themselves in the dark. The grand staircase that rushed down into the ballroom like a waterfall was washed and rubbed so often that it was almost impossible to walk on it without slipping. As for the ballroom itself, it took thirty-two servants working at once to clean it properly, not counting those who were polishing the glass chandelier that was taller than a man and the fourteen smaller lamps. And when they were done she made them do it all over, not because she saw any dust or dirt anywhere, but because she was sure that Death would.

As for herself, she chose her finest gown and saw to its laundering personally. She called in another hairdresser and had him put up her hair in the style of an earlier time, wanting to show Death that she was a woman who enjoyed her age and did not find it necessary

to ape the young and beautiful. All the day of the ball she sat before her mirror, not making herself up much beyond the normal touches of rouge and eye shadow and fine rice powder, but staring at the lean old face she had been born with, wondering how it would appear to Death. Her steward asked her to approve his wine selection, but she sent him away and stayed at her mirror until it was time to dress and go downstairs to meet her guests.

Everyone arrived early. When she looked out of a window, Lady Neville saw that the driveway of her home was choked with carriages and fine horses. "It all looks like a great funeral procession," she said. The footman cried the names of her guests to the echoing ballroom. "Captain Henry Compson, His Majesty's Household Cavalry! Mr. David Lorimond! Lord and Lady Torrance!" (They were the youngest couple there, having been married only three months before.) "Sir Roger Harbison! The Contessa della Candini!" Lady Neville permitted them all to kiss her hand and made them welcome.

She had engaged the finest musicians she could find to play for the dancing, but though they began to play at her signal not one couple stepped out on the floor, nor did one young lord approach her to request the honor of the first dance, as was proper. They milled together, shining and murmuring, their

eyes fixed on the ballroom door. Every time they heard a carriage clatter up the driveway they seemed to flinch a little and draw closer together; every time the footman announced the arrival of another guest, they all sighed softly and swayed a little on their feet with relief.

"Why did they come to my party if they were afraid?" Lady Neville muttered scornfully to herself. "I am not afraid of meeting Death. I ask only that Death may be impressed by the magnificence of my house and the flavor of my wines. I will die sooner than anyone here, but I am not afraid."

Certain that Death would not arrive until midnight, she moved among her guests, attempting to calm them, not with her words, which she knew they would not hear, but with the tone of her voice, as if they were so many frightened horses. But little by little, she herself was infected by their nervousness: whenever she sat down she stood up again immediately, she tasted a dozen glasses of wine without finishing any of them, and she glanced constantly at her jeweled watch, at first wanting to hurry the midnight along and end the waiting, later scratching at the watch face with her forefinger, as if she would push away the night and drag the sun backward into the sky. When midnight came, she was standing with the rest of them, breathing

through her mouth, shifting from foot to foot, listening for the sound of carriage wheels turning in gravel.

When the clock began to strike midnight, everyone, even Lady Neville and the brave Captain Compson, gave one startled little cry and then was silent again, listening to the tolling of the clock. The smaller clocks upstairs began to chime. Lady Neville's ears hurt. She caught sight of herself in the ball-room mirror, one gray face turned up toward the ceiling as if she were gasping for air, and she thought, "Death will be a woman, a hideous, filthy old crone as tall and strong as a man. And the most terrible thing of all will be that she will have my face." All the clocks stopped striking, and Lady Neville closed her eyes.

She opened them again only when she heard the whispering around her take on a different tone, one in which fear was fused with relief and a certain chagrin. For no new carriage stood in the driveway. Death had not come.

The noise grew slowly louder; here and there people were beginning to laugh. Near her, Lady Neville heard young Lord Torrance say to his wife, "There, my darling, I told you there was nothing to be afraid of. It was all a joke."

"I am ruined," Lady Neville thought. The laughter was in-

creasing; it pounded against her ears in strokes, like the chiming of the clocks. "I wanted to give a ball so grand that those who were not invited would be shamed in front of the whole city, and this is my reward. I am ruined, and I deserve it."

Turning to the poet Lorimond, she said, "Dance with me, David." She signaled to the musicians, who at once began to play. When Lorimond hesitated, she said, "Dance with me now. You will not have another chance. I shall never give a party again."

Lorimond bowed and led her out onto the dance floor. The guests parted for them, and the laughter died down for a moment, but Lady Neville knew that it would soon begin again. "Well, let them laugh," she thought. "I did not fear Death when they were all trembling. Why should I fear their laughter?" But she could feel a stinging at the thin lids of her eyes, and she closed them once more as she began to dance with Lorimond.

And then, quite suddenly, all the carriage horses outside the house whinnied loudly, just once, as the guests had cried out at midnight. There were a great many horses, and their one salute was so loud that everyone in the room became instantly silent. They heard the heavy steps of the footman as he went to open the door, and they shivered as if they felt the cold

breeze that drifted into the house. Then they heard a light voice saying, "Am I late? Oh, I am so sorry. The horses were tired," and before the footman could re-enter to announce her, a lovely young girl in a white dress stepped gracefully into the ballroom doorway and stood there smiling.

She could not have been more than nineteen. Her hair was yellow, and she wore it long. It fell thickly upon her bare shoulders that gleamed warmly through it, two limestone islands rising out of a dark golden sea. Her face was wide at the forehead and cheekbones, and narrow at the chin, and her skin was so clear that many of the ladies there—Lady Neville among them—touched their own faces wonderingly, and instantly drew their hands away as though their own skin had rasped their fingers. Her mouth was pale, where the mouths of the other women were red and orange and even purple. Her eyebrows, thicker and straighter than was fashionable, met over dark, calm eyes that were set so deep in her young face and were so black, so uncompromisingly black, that the middle-aged wife of a middle-aged lord murmured, "Touch of the gypsy there, I think."

"Or something worse," suggested her husband's mistress.

"Be silent!" Lady Neville spoke louder than she had intended, and the girl turned to look at her. She

smiled, and Lady Neville tried to smile back, but her mouth seemed very stiff. "Welcome," she said. "Welcome, my lady Death."

A sigh rustled among the lords and ladies as the girl took the old woman's hand and curtsied to her, sinking and rising in one motion, like a wave. "You are Lady Neville," she said. "Thank you so much for inviting me." Her accent was as faint and as almost familiar as her perfume.

"Please excuse me for being late," she said earnestly. "I had to come from a long way off, and my horses are so tired."

"The groom will rub them down," Lady Neville said, "and feed them if you wish."

"Oh, no," the girl answered quickly. "Tell him not to go near the horses, please. They are not really horses, and they are very fierce."

She accepted a glass of wine from a servant and drank it slowly, sighing softly and contentedly. "What good wine," she said. "And what a beautiful house you have."

"Thank you," said Lady Neville. Without turning, she could feel every woman in the room envying her, sensing it as she could always sense the approach of rain.

"I wish I lived here," Death said in her low, sweet voice. "I will, one day."

Then, seeing Lady Neville become as still as if she had turned to ice, she put her hand on the old

woman's arm and said, "Oh, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. I am so cruel, but I never mean to be. Please forgive me, Lady Neville. I am not used to company. and I do such stupid things. Please forgive me."

Her hand felt as light and warm on Lady Neville's arm as the hand of any other young girl, and her eyes were so appealing that Lady Neville replied, "You have said nothing wrong. While you are my guest, my house is yours."

"Thank you," said Death, and she smiled so radiantly that the musicians began to play quite by themselves, with no sign from Lady Neville. She would have stopped them, but Death said, "Oh, what lovely music! Let them play, please."

So the musicians played a gavotte, and Death, unabashed by eyes that stared at her in greedy terror, sang softly to herself without words, lifted her white gown slightly with both hands, and made hesitant little patting steps with her small feet. "I have not danced in so long," she said wistfully. "I'm quite sure I've forgotten how."

She was shy; she would not look up to embarrass the young lords, not one of whom stepped forward to dance with her. Lady Neville felt a flood of shame and sympathy, emotions she thought had withered in her years ago. "Is she to be humiliated at my own ball?" she thought angrily. "It is because

she is Death; if she were the ugliest, foulest hag in all the world they would clamor to dance with her, because they are gentlemen and they know what is expected of them. But no gentleman will dance with Death, no matter how beautiful she is." She glanced sideways at David Lorimond. His face was flushed, and his hands were clasped so tightly as he stared at Death that his fingers were like glass, but when Lady Neville touched his arm he did not turn, and when she hissed, "David!" he pretended not to hear her.

Then Captain Compson, gray-haired and handsome in his uniform, stepped out of the crowd and bowed gracefully before Death. "If I may have the honor," he said.

"Captain Compson," said Death, smiling. She put her arm in his. "I was hoping you would ask me."

This brought a frown from the older women, who did not consider it a proper thing to say, but for that Death cared not a rap. Captain Compson led her to the center of the floor, and there they danced. Death was curiously graceless at first—she was too anxious to please her partner, and she seemed to have no notion of rhythm. The Captain himself moved with the mixture of dignity and humor that Lady Neville had never seen in another man, but when he looked at her over Death's shoulder, she saw something that

no one else appeared to notice: that his face and eyes were immobile with fear, and that, though he offered Death his hand with easy gallantry, he flinched slightly when she took it. And yet he danced as well as Lady Neville had ever seen him.

"Ah, that's what comes of having a reputation to maintain," she thought. "Captain Compson too must do what is expected of him. I hope someone else will dance with her soon."

But no one did. Little by little, other couples overcame their fear and slipped hurriedly out on the floor when Death was looking the other way, but nobody sought to relieve Captain Compson of his beautiful partner. They danced every dance together. In time, some of the men present began to look at her with more appreciation than terror, but when she returned their glances and smiled at them, they clung to their partners as if a cold wind were threatening to blow them away.

One of the few who stared at her frankly and with pleasure was young Lord Torrance, who usually danced only with his wife. Another was the poet Lorimond. Dancing with Lady Neville, he remarked to her, "If she is Death, what do these frightened fools think they are? If she is ugliness, what must they be? I hate their fear. It is obscene."

Death and the Captain danced

past them at that moment, and they heard him say to her, "But if that was truly you that I saw in the battle, how can you have changed so? How can you have become so lovely?"

Death's laughter was gay and soft. "I thought that among so many beautiful people it might be better to be beautiful. I was afraid of frightening everyone and spoiling the party."

"They all thought she would be ugly," said Lorimond to Lady Neville. "I—I knew she would be beautiful."

"Then why have you not danced with her?" Lady Neville asked him. "Are you also afraid?"

"No, oh, no," the poet answered quickly and passionately. "I will ask her to dance very soon. I only want to look at her a little longer."

The musicians played on and on. The dancing wore away the night as slowly as falling water wears down a cliff. It seemed to Lady Neville that no night had ever endured longer, and yet she was neither tired nor bored. She danced with every man there, except with Lord Torrance, who was dancing with his wife as if they had just met that night, and, of course, with Captain Compson. Once he lifted his hand and touched Death's golden hair very lightly. He was a striking man still, a fit partner for so beautiful a girl, but Lady Neville looked at his

face each time she passed him and realized that he was older than anyone knew.

Death herself seemed younger than the youngest there. No woman at the ball danced better than she now, though it was hard for Lady Neville to remember at what point her awkwardness had given way to the liquid sweetness of her movements. She smiled and called to everyone who caught her eye—and she knew them all by name; she sang constantly, making up words to the dance tunes, nonsense words, sounds without meaning, and yet everyone strained to hear her soft voice without knowing why. And when, during a waltz, she caught up the trailing end of her gown to give her more freedom as she danced, she seemed to Lady Neville to move like a little sailing boat over a still evening sea.

Lady Neville heard Lady Torrance arguing angrily with the Contessa della Candini. "I don't care if she is Death, she's no older than I am, she can't be!"

"Nonsense," said the Contessa, who could not afford to be generous to any other woman. "She is twenty-eight, thirty, if she is an hour. And that dress, that bridal gown she wears—really!"

"Vile," said the woman who had come to the ball as Captain Compson's freely acknowledged mistress. "Tasteless. But one should know better than to expect taste from

Death, I suppose." Lady Torrance looked as if she were going to cry.

"They are jealous of Death," Lady Neville said to herself. "How strange. I am not jealous of her, not in the least. And I do not fear her at all." She was very proud of herself.

Then, as unbiddenly as they had begun to play, the musicians stopped. They began to put away their instruments. In the sudden shrill silence, Death pulled away from Captain Compson and ran to look out of one of the tall windows, pushing the curtains apart with both hands. "Look!" she said, with her back turned to them. "Come and look. The night is almost gone."

The summer sky was still dark, and the eastern horizon was only a shade lighter than the rest of the sky, but the stars had vanished and the trees near the house were gradually becoming distinct. Death pressed her face against the window and said, so softly that the other guests could barely hear her, "I must go now."

"No," Lady Neville said, and was not immediately aware that she had spoken. "You must stay a while longer. The ball was in your honor. Please stay."

Death held out both hands to her, and Lady Neville came and took them in her own. "I've had a wonderful time," she said gently. "You cannot possibly imagine how it feels to be actually invited to

such a ball as this, because you have given them and gone to them all your life. One is like another to you, but for me it is different. Do you understand me?" Lady Neville nodded silently. "I will remember this night forever," Death said.

"Stay," Captain Compson said. "Stay just a little longer." He put his hand on Death's shoulder, and she smiled and leaned her cheek against it. "Dear Captain Compson," she said. "My first real gallant. Aren't you tired of me yet?"

"Never," he said. "Please stay."

"Stay," said Lorimond, and he too seemed about to touch her. "Stay. I want to talk to you. I want to look at you. I will dance with you if you stay."

"How many followers I have," Death said in wonder. She stretched one hand toward Lorimond, but he drew back from her and then flushed in shame. "A soldier and a poet. How wonderful it is to be a woman. But why did you not speak to me earlier, both of you? Now it is too late. I must go."

"Please stay," Lady Torrance whispered. She held on to her husband's hand for courage. "We think you are so beautiful, both of us do."

"Gracious Lady Torrance," the girl said kindly. She turned back to the window, touched it lightly, and it flew open. The cool dawn air rushed into the ballroom, fresh with rain but already smelling

faintly of the London streets over which it had passed. They heard birdsong and the strange, harsh nickering of Death's horses.

"Do you want me to stay?" she asked. The question was put, not to Lady Neville, nor to Captain Compson, nor to any of her admirers, but to the Contessa della Candini, who stood well back from them all, hugging her flowers to herself and humming a little song of irritation. She did not in the least want Death to stay, but she was afraid that all the other women would think her envious of Death's beauty, and so she said, "Yes. Of course I do."

"Ah," said Death. She was almost whispering. "And you," she said to another woman, "do you want me to stay? Do you want me to be one of your friends?"

"Yes," said the woman, "because you are beautiful and a true lady."

"And you," said Death to a man, "and you," to a woman, "and you," to another man, "do you want me to stay?" And they all answered, "Yes, Lady Death, we do."

"Do you want me, then?" she cried at last to all of them. "Do you want me to live among you and to be one of you, and not to be Death anymore? Do you want me to visit your houses and come to all your parties? Do you want me to ride horses like yours instead of mine, do you want me to wear the kind of dresses you wear, and say

the things you would say? Would one of you marry me, and would the rest of you dance at my wedding and bring gifts to my children? Is that what you want?"

"Yes," said Lady Neville. "Stay here, stay with me, stay with us."

Death's voice, without becoming louder, had become clearer and older; too old a voice, thought Lady Neville, for such a young girl. "Be sure," said Death. "Be sure of what you want, be very sure. Do all of you want me to stay? For if one of you says to me, no, go away, then I must leave at once and never return. Be sure. Do you all want me?"

And everyone there cried with one voice, "Yes! Yes, you must stay with us. You are so beautiful that we cannot let you go."

"We are tired," said Captain Compson.

"We are blind," said Lorimond, adding, "Especially to poetry."

"We are afraid," said Lord Torrance quietly, and his wife took his arm and said, "Both of us."

"We are dull and stupid," said Lady Neville, "and growing old uselessly. Stay with us, Lady Death."

And then Death smiled sweetly and radiantly and took a step forward, and it was as though she had come down among them from a great height. "Very well," she said. "I will stay with you. I will be Death no more. I will be a woman."

The room was full of a deep sigh, although no one was seen to open his mouth. No one moved, for the golden-haired girl was Death still, and her horses still whinnied for her outside. No one could look at her for long, although she was the most beautiful girl anyone there had ever seen.

"There is a price to pay," she said. "There is always a price. Some one of you must become Death in my place, for there must forever be Death in the world. Will anyone choose? Will anyone here become Death of his own free will? For only thus can I become a human girl."

No one spoke, no one spoke at all. But they backed slowly away from her, like waves slipping back down a beach to the sea when you try to catch them. The Contessa della Candini and her friends would have crept quietly out of the door, but Death smiled at them and they stood where they were. Captain Compson opened his mouth as though he were going to declare himself, but he said nothing. Lady Neville did not move.

"No one," said Death. She touched a flower with her finger, and it seemed to crouch and flex itself like a pleased cat. "No one at all," she said. "Then I must choose, and that is just, for that is the way that I became Death. I never wanted to be Death, and it makes me so happy that you want me to become one of yourselves. I have

searched a long time for people who would want me. Now I have only to choose someone to replace me and it is done. I will choose very carefully."

"Oh, we were so foolish," Lady Neville said to herself. "We were so foolish." But she said nothing aloud; she merely clasped her hands and stared at the young girl, thinking vaguely that if she had had a daughter she would have been greatly pleased if she resembled the lady Death.

"The Contessa della Candini," said Death thoughtfully, and that woman gave a little squeak of terror because she could not draw her breath for a scream. But Death laughed and said, "No, that would be silly." She said nothing more, but for a long time after that the Contessa burned with humiliation at not having been chosen to be Death.

"Not Captain Compson," murmured Death, "because he is too kind to become Death, and because it would be too cruel to him. He wants to die so badly." The expression on the Captain's face did not change, but his hands began to tremble.

"Not Lorimond," the girl continued, "because he knows so little about life, and because I like him." The poet flushed, and turned white, and then turned pink again. He made as if to kneel clumsily on one knee, but instead he pulled himself erect and stood as much

like Captain Compson as he could.

"Not the Torrances," said Death, "never Lord and Lady Torrance, for both of them care too much about another person to take any pride in being Death." But she hesitated over Lady Torrance for a while, staring at her out of her dark and curious eyes. "I was your age when I became Death," she said at last. "I wonder what it will be like to be your age again. I have been Death for so long." Lady Torrance shivered and did not speak.

And at last Death said quietly, "Lady Neville."

"I am here," Lady Neville answered.

"I think you are the only one," said Death. "I choose you, Lady Neville."

Again Lady Neville heard every guest sigh softly, and although her back was to them all she knew that they were sighing in relief that neither themselves nor anyone dear to themselves had been chosen. Lady Torrance gave a little cry of protest, but Lady Neville knew that she would have cried out at whatever choice Death made. She heard herself say calmly, "I am honored. But was there no one more worthy than I?"

"Not one," said Death. "There is no one quite so weary of being human, no one who knows better how meaningless it is to be alive. And there is no one else here with the power to treat life"—and she smiled sweetly and cruelly—"the

life of your hairdresser's child, for instance, as the meaningless thing it is. Death has a heart, but it is forever an empty heart, and I think, Lady Neville, that your heart is like a dry riverbed, like a seashell. You will be very content as Death, more so than I, for I was very young when I became Death."

She came toward Lady Neville, light and swaying, her deep eyes wide and full of the light of the red morning sun that was beginning to rise. The guests at the ball moved back from her, although she did not look at them, but Lady Neville clenched her hands tightly and watched Death come toward her with her little dancing steps. "We must kiss each other," Death said. "That is the way I became Death." She shook her head delightedly, so that her soft hair swirled about her shoulders. "Quickly, quickly," she said. "Oh, I cannot wait to be human again."

"You may not like it," Lady Neville said. She felt very calm, though she could hear her old heart pounding in her chest and feel it in the tips of her fingers. "You may not like it after a while," she said.

"Perhaps not." Death's smile was

very close to her now. "I will not be as beautiful as I am, and perhaps people will not love me as much as they do now. But I will be human for a while, and at last I will die. I have done my penance."

"What penance?" the old woman asked the beautiful girl. "What was it you did? Why did you become Death?"

"I don't remember," said the lady Death. "And you too will forget in time." She was smaller than Lady Neville, and so much younger. In her white dress she might have been the daughter that Lady Neville had never had, who would have been with her always and held her mother's head lightly in the crook of her arm when she felt old and sad. Now she lifted her head to kiss Lady Neville's cheek, and as she did so she whispered in her ear, "You will still be beautiful when I am ugly. Be kind to me then."

Behind Lady Neville the handsome gentlemen and ladies murmured and sighed, fluttering like moths in their evening dress, in their elegant gowns. "I promise," she said, and then she pursed her dry lips to kiss the soft, sweet-smelling cheek of the young lady Death.



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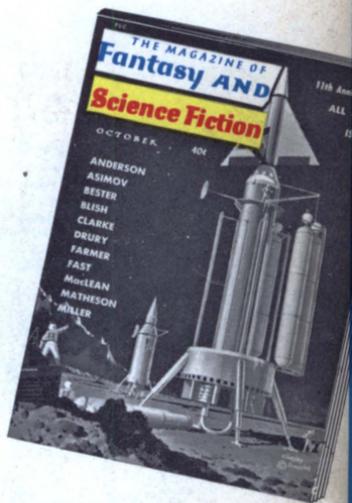


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