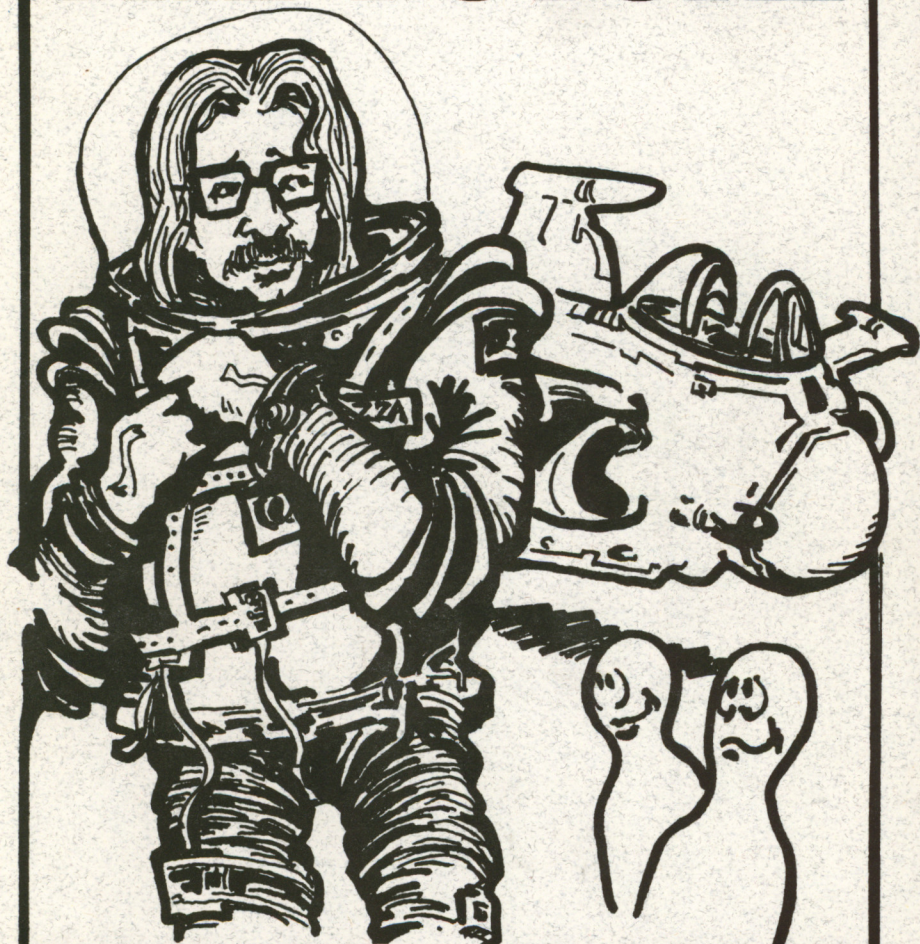


THE MAN OF THE FUTURE



EDWARD BRYANT

Illustrated by DAN SIMMONS



Simmons

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Roadkill Press
Arvada, Colorado

FIRST EDITION

"The Man of the Future"
originally appeared in the October 1984 issue of
"The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction,"
in somewhat different form

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Arvada, CO 80004

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Edward Bryant

D. A. Simmons

*For Don. C. Thompson
writer, teacher, friend*



I

Gregory Corazza was not the only xenopsychologist in Denver; however he was the only one to have received his Ph.D via correspondence lessons. He was ahead of his time. It was a signal distinction little known or regarded by Corazza's few friends. To them – most of whom were fellow members of the Sanctioned Vicarious Violence Association – Corazza's great achievement was devising an entirely new blitzkrieg board game called Nuclear Pre-Empt ("Win in the first thirty seconds – or forget it!"). Turned down by the major game manufacturers, Nuclear Pre-empt never replaced Dungeons and Dragons. His more conservative friends continued to love it.

Corazza was also a poet of sterling soul and mediocre talent.

In addition he was fascinated by the concept of synchronicity. He *knew* something bigger was going on, if he could just see the patterns.

The point of all this is simply to indicate that, in the eyes of his culture, Corazza was considered a bit odd. He couldn't keep a steady job. He was the only member ever expelled from the American Fortean Society for holding unorthodox views.

Once upon a time, Corazza had aspired to be someone others considered unexceptional. The world apparently would not allow it. To some extent, he blamed his parents.

When he was six, his parents had separated and disappeared on individual missions. Reputedly his father was at present studying the deviated wapiti migrational patterns south of Prudhoe Bay; his mother was reported racing wankel bikes down the Baja Peninsula. Now and then, whispered the family grapevine, they exchanged roles.

Corazza was reared through adolescence by his Aunt Thea in Starbuck, a small mountain community perched in the Front Range west of Denver. Aunt Thea considered herself "an herbal ablationist" by trade, not an altogether legal profession, but certainly a lucrative one so long as Coloradans kept snakes as pets. She was a sensible and optimistic lady: "Gregory," she often said, "you're going to go places. High places. Strange places. But you're going to go. You're as smart as I've seen; and what's more, you're plugged into the universe in ways that are going to scare the crap out of you, but you won't regret it. Are you ready for that?"

"No," he would say. But when he was fifteen, Aunt Thea decided the time was right and politely kicked him out. Corazza hiked down the mountainsides into Denver. He abandoned slab rock and the unceasing winds for the cob-webbed closeness of basement apartments.

He found temporary jobs where he could. An introverted boy, he forced an artificial extroversion on himself as a man. His ursine body was bulky and deceptively clumsy. Hirsute, slow in movement and speech, naturally he was the mark for every bar sharpie from Wazee Street to Colfax. Of course he made a pretty good living:

"Man, you tellin' me you can tell which drop gonna get to the bottom first?"

"Yes. I can do that. Every time."

"Well, you crazy. Here's ten says you can't."

And since Corazza was the only man in the men's room who had spent a basement winter studying polytropic poly-

mers, liquid tensions, relative viscosities, peculiar characteristics of albumin and sugar content, and the highest technology of vitreous china . . .

"Go, baby! Go! Go! Go . . . Dammit!"

"Thanks for the ten. Want to try another one?"

"Can't til I chug another brew."

It was a living.

Corazza's great disappointment one winter was that he had not been born Irish or even Welsh. He toiled at his epic sonnet sequence about quasi-stellar radio sources and wished he could write like Yeats, or even Rod McKuen. After brooding for a while, he felt more Russian than Celtic. Corazza wanted justification for a melancholy soul. He spent three months studying Slavic languages, but all he learned to say was, "Why is my film always scratched?" and "Is there in this place a dealer in photo requisites?" Since he did not own a camera, he went back to being an Irish poet.

As he entered his thirtieth year, he wondered whether the stereotype of passage would affect his psyche. It didn't. He also wondered, remembering Aunt Thea, whether after all these years something splendid would happen to him. It did.

II

They were later called shmoids by their nostalgic human perceivers. The aliens were elongated bowling pin creatures whose method of precarious locomotion was rolling along their axis of greatest circumference. Uniform in size, at least to Earthly observers, the average shmoid possessed the mass of an AMF league pin. The creatures seemed divided into three color groups: red, yellow and blue.

Shmoids were termed Shmoids because they closely

resembled the shmoo, the graphic invention of a popular cartoonist of decades past. (Shortly after the shmoid ships had appeared in major cities around the globe, the appearance of their pear-shaped crews had been hailed by science fiction writers as yet another valid prediction of their peculiar literary mode. "Coincidence," scoffed the authorities. "The *China Syndrome* syndrome," answered the writers. "Sheer coincidence," repeated those who knew better.

Regardless, the shmoids' spherical ships appeared simultaneously over one hundred urban cores. The city centers being largely deserted, there was a perceptible lagtime between arrival on Earth and official contact between natives and visiting species. The shmoids used this respite to initiate clandestine inquiries into the personnel files of multinational computer banks.

They knew whom they wanted. It wasn't coincidence.

As they were somewhat uncomfortable in a twenty per cent oxygen atmosphere, the shmoids wore light and form-fitting protective suits. Though transparent, the suits were fabricated from metal alloy. While rolling along any hard surface, the shmoids generated a noise similar to that of a bowling ball proceeding down its lane; with one difference—the vibrating, rolling rumble was never capped by the crash of scattering pins. For many human perceivers, the sensation was very much akin to listening to a single shoe drop, except in Marin County and Boulder where observers welcomed the aliens with zen perception.

III

At first Corazza thought he was hearing low thunder rolling from the western storm front. Then he idly wondered whether one of the upstairs tenants might be moving a refrigerator on a dolly. It did not occur to him to compare the

sound with the background noise of a bowling alley. He rarely spent time in bowling alleys; and then, usually only in the restroom.

He heard a series of thumps from the direction of the stairwell. Perhaps tenants were moving surplus furnishings into one of the storage rooms. Corazza's low-ceilinged apartment shared the basement with a pair of raw-concrete storage areas and a brontosaurian furnace. The thumping stopped. The rumble cycled up again and ceased outside his door. Puzzled, Corazza set down the copy of Loewenthal's *Snoutlings*. He heard a tap-tap, tap-tap at the door.

When he opened the door, he saw no one.

"Down *here*, Earth person," said a metallic monotone. Corazza looked down and saw two bowling pins on their sides in front of his toes. One pin was red; the other, blue. "We are sentient extraterrestrial beings," said the red pin. "May we come in and talk with you?"

"Well, ah—" Corazza stared down at them for a moment. Aunt Thea had taught him manners. "Yes, of course, come in." He stepped back from the door and the objects rolled into his kitchen.

"Do not think of us as bowling pins," said the blue one.

Corazza did not take his stare away from them. "No. No, of course not."

"You may refer to us as shmoids," said the red alien.

"Shmoids?"

"Your term. A superficial resemblance only, I assure you. Would I attempt to dissemble? Of course you don't know. We possess a synchronistic correspondence with a mythological Earth creature."

Corazza shook his head slowly. "Am I your first contact?"

The red alien bobbed its narrow end. "That is our equivalent of an affirmative nod." The voice issued from a

grill in the base of the alien's broader end. "You may address me as Lucy. My companion is Ricky. We learned your language from electronic broadcasts. Does this make you feel at ease?"

"You really are extraterrestrials?" said Corazza, ignoring Lucy's questions. "This isn't someone's elaborate joke?" Lucy wagged enthusiastically. Wonder infused Corazza's voice. "Where are you from? Why are you here? For how long? Why did you contact me first?"

"We will satisfy your curiosity," said Ricky in a voice that sounded identical to Lucy's. "Please allow us time between your questions for answers." Corazza hunkered down and looked at the aliens expectantly. "First, our journey has involved many segments, the last of which was a thousand light year jump to your world. Our home lies in the system of a G-type star in what you call the constellation Cygnus."

Corazza said, "So how did you get —" He interrupted himself. "Okay, I'll shut up and listen."

"Thank you, Earth person," said Ricky. "I will answer all your queries."

"It's a test, isn't it?" Corazza bounced on the balls of his feet. "You're testing us for eligibility to join a galactic federation —"

"As it happens —" Ricky started to say.

"Actually," Lucy said, "we are here because your world is the only abode of sentient life in this star system. We came because we wish to ask the intelligent species of Earth to participate in our spawn-parent's fusion celebration. We shall stay only as long as the mission requires."

"Fusion celebration? Is that like a birthday?"

"It would be difficult to explain in Earth terms of sufficient nuance, but your birthday analogy is not utterly inaccurate. Suffice it that we are paying homage to the paramount



value of our society."

"And you're inviting us on Earth to celebrate too?"

Lucy said, "To participate, yes. We have already asked the other intelligent species on Earth. The dolphins said --"

"The *dolphins*?"

"-- that they would agree to whatever you humans decided. It was all right by them, they indicated. They determined a group decision that translates idiomatically, I believe, to 'anything for a lark.' Actually what they said was not 'lark' but the name of a small fish which transliterates as--"

"I understand," said Corazza. "You know that I've had training as a xenopsychologist?" Lucy and Ricky bobbed. "It was mostly theoretical, but . . ." He trailed off. "For my final project, I did a linguistic breakdown of whistle pigs. Is that why you made first contact with me? I mean, because of my degree?"

"Partially," said Ricky. "That and your sheer good fortune." Corazza looked puzzled. "We determined to contact a native who was both intelligent and not completely absorbed into the mainstream of its society. Primarily we wished to speak with an individual who tapped into the synchronistic patterns of the universe. Finally we wanted a representative who stopped short of local standards of psychopathy."

"Thanks," said Corazza. "What's this about the synchronistic patterns?"

"We wanted a spokesnative who naturally would be in the midst of things without being imposed there."

"But I've never done much --" Corazza started to protest.

"Ah," said Ricky, "but you *will*."

"Plus," said Lucy, "you possess a desirable level of objectivity. This is essential since we hope you will make a

decision of enormous consequence."

Corazza felt that events were accelerating beyond his comprehension. "What kind of decision?"

"Only this," said Lucy. "You must decide whether we shall alter the fusion process of your sun and cause critical instability leading to an instant supernova."

Corazza gaped. "But that would mean –"

Lucy and Ricky bobbed. Ricky said, "Precisely. We refer to nothing less than destroying the Earth."

"And us . . ." Corazza swallowed with difficulty. His mouth and throat were dry. "And the dolphins. All of us, murdered."

"There is a subtle distinction. We are nothing if not a merciful sort. Prior to the supernova we would painlessly make extinct your species through the diligent application of neutrino bombs."

"But," said Corazza, "*why?*" A dim alarm rang somewhere distant in the back of his mind. He couldn't identify it.

"Mercy," said Lucy, "is a conceptual value shared by both our peoples."

"No, I mean that first thing – destroying the sun and the Earth. *Why?*"

Ricky's voice at last took on what Corazza interpreted as a happier tone. "It is – or will be – all part of the fusion celebration. We have carefully calculated the time it will take for the light of this supernova to blaze in the skies of our home world. How fortunate that your star is situated the right distance."

"Just a bloody candle on a cosmic cake," said Corazza, mildly outraged.

"You *are* a poet," said Ricky.

"Of course," added Lucy, "you have the option of deciding against this project."

"What do you mean?"

"Why do you so often answer our questions with yet other questions?" said Ricky.

"It buys time to think," said Corazza honestly. "You mean you're asking me to decide whether Earth lives or dies?"

"That sums it up nicely," said Lucy.

Ricky put in, "The dolphins said they would abide by whatever you decided."

Corazza got up, painfully stretched his locked knees, and then collapsed in his one overstuffed chair. He breathed deeply a few times. "Why me?"

"Why not you?" said Lucy. "It's individuals who finally have to make all significant decisions."

"Someone has to," Ricky said. "Feel fortunate that from all the billions of other human beings, you have been singled out to decide something important."

"I don't think I want this responsibility," said Corazza.

"But now you have it," said Ricky sensibly.

Corazza looked unsure. "Do I have to decide now? I mean, right this instant?"

"We are reasonable creatures," said Lucy. "You have twenty-four hours. Sooner, if you like. We'll keep track."

"And now," said Ricky, "our business done, would you mind kicking us out?"

"Pardon?"

"Is that not the correct expression?"

Corazza lurched to his feet, crossed the room and opened the door. The aliens remained immobile. "I thought you were leaving."

"We are, if you will be so kind as to kick us out." Lucy's voice sounded expectant.

"You mean --?" He raised his booted foot tentatively.

"Yes," said Ricky.

Corazza walked over the aliens and gingerly nudged



Ricky with his toe. "Harder, please." The man gave the alien a half-hearted tap. Ricky rolled a few revolutions closer to the door. "Harder!" Corazza gave it a healthy kick. Ricky sailed through the air and slammed against the opposite side of the hall. "Excellent, Earth person."

"Please apply your boot to me equally," said Lucy. Corazza kicked the red alien through the doorway.

"Good-bye," said the pair together. Ricky said, "We shall see you within the coming day." Tiny jets thrust from the major bulge of each body. On hissing columns of steam, the two aliens rose up the stairwell. Something scuttled back around the landing.

Corazza shut and locked the door to his apartment. He glanced at the telephone. Who would believe him?

The phone rang.

"See?" said Aunt Thea without preamble. "You *are* someone. You are a mensch."

"Why are you calling me at this precise moment?" said Corazza.

"Occult powers?" said Aunt Thea. "No. Coincidence."

IV

Corazza groggily sat up in bed. His dream had translated the sounds of someone banging on his apartment door as the shmoids kicking the door down. Then he remembered that the aliens had no feet. "Yeah, all right, I'm coming." He swung his legs off the bed and fumbled for the boxer shorts draped over his reading lamp. At the door, he snapped on the kitchen light.

"Mr. Corazza?" The voice sounded good-humored, controlled.

He opened the door and found an elderly man dressed in a conservative gray suit. "Hello," Corazza said. "What time

is it?" Aha, he thought. CIA? FBI?

"A bit past four," said the man. "May I come in?"

"Who are you?" Corazza stepped back from the door.

"Martinson," said the man. "Robert. Bob. I'm with the Smithsonian Institution's Institute for Short-lived Phenomena." He handed over a card.

"Yeah, I've heard of your outfit. I buy your yearbooks. Come on in. Coffee?"

Martinson shook his head and sank into the maw of the overstuffed chair. "This isn't, sad to say, a social occasion. Besides, caffeine keeps me awake." He seemed to reflect on that and added, "Not that I expect either one of us will be getting to sleep soon."

Corazza sat down in the director's chair he'd scavenged at the Salvation Army store. "I guess you're here about the, uh, shmoids."

Martinson nodded.

"How come there's just you? Where are the spooks in trench coats? The diplomats? The Marines and the tanks?"

"This is a sensitive matter. The government has opted to treat it delicately."

"Delicately?" said Corazza. "Or scared spitless?"

"Certainly the government does have some apprehensions. We postulate an interstellar capability for these creatures. Naturally there's a bit of fear that their advanced stage of technology could pose a threat to this nation, not to mention the rest of the planet."

"You don't know the half of it," said Corazza.

"Meaning what?"

"I'll tell you. Just hold on. But first I want to ask some things."

"Fair is fair." Martinson touched his thin gray moustache with an exquisitely manicured index finger. "I think you'll find the Institute more candid than most other federal

agencies."

"Okay, then. Why the Institute?"

"My colleagues in the Department of Defense, NASA and elsewhere feel that the Institute for Short-lived Phenomena has more experience with the new and what they term 'odd' than does any other government branch." Martinson allowed himself a quick smile. "I dare say they're right. Additionally it helps that the President himself chose us. I believe he hopes that the shmoids are yet another *ephemeral* phenomenon."

"Okay," said Corazza. "How did you find out that the shmoids were contacting me?"

"We – the government, that is – have computers that watch computers. The alarms went wild with unauthorized taps. At first we thought it was time-theft on an unprecedented scale; you know, kids in California, that sort of thing. Then the emergency evaluation teams started finding patterns, MMPI scores, grade files from the Sussex College of Science, membership registration in War Games, Inc., everything converged in one name; yours. This apartment was put under surveillance twenty minutes before the shmoids arrived. I was flown in from Washington."

"Did the computers tell you why I'm the contact?"

"We have speculated." Martinson looked uncomfortable, and paused.

"So? It can't be that bad."

The government man seemed to pick his words carefully. "As nearly as we can determine from the parameters of the shmoids' computer queries, they consider you the human most likely, in some special way, to understand their alien psychology. We suspect they're testing you. Or us."

"I guess that's a compliment." Martinson did not respond.

"Another thing."

"What?"

Martinson said, "You appear to be the right man in the right place at the right time. Patterns are focusing on you."

"So now what?"

"That depends. It's your turn."

"Okay. Fair's fair, but you won't like it." Then Corazza told him about Lucy and Ricky, about the fusion celebration, about the prospective supernova and the neutrino bombing of humankind, not to mention dolphinkind. About the decision. He noticed the ISLP man looking at him peculiarly and stopped the recounting. "What is it?"

Martinson said, "I detect an odd tone in your voice now that you're speaking of the decision to eliminate all life on Earth."

"Odd?"

"In a word, enthusiastic. There is what I would term a tone of prurient interest to your voice. It concerns me."

Corazza cocked his head and replayed mentally what he had been saying, how he had said it. "The idea is sort of appealing."

"Mr. Corazza, can you seriously consider the shmoid proposal?" Martinson sounded scandalized.

"Why not? Ricky told me it was one of the few opportunities I'd ever have to make a significant decision. I see its point."

"To make the decision, yes," said Martinson. "But surely you would never contemplate acceding to the proposal."

Corazza smiled dreamily, enchanted with the thought. "I don't know, I really don't. There's something dark and seductive about taking personal responsibility for blowing up a whole planetary system."

"You're mad!" Martinson struggled to his feet.

"You sound like a bad horror movie."

"So do you," said Martinson firmly.

"No, I'm just . . . curious."

Martinson stared at him and said slowly, "Somebody had to be alien enough to empathize with the aliens; *that's* what the parameters meant. I should have listened to the shrinks."

"Don't get me wrong," said Corazza, vastly amused and grinning now. "I'll certainly give balanced arguments due consideration."

Martinson put his hand inside his coat. "I'm afraid it's time your government took a firmer stance in this matter." He stopped, frozen in mid-motion.

After a moment, Corazza said, "Martinson?" There was no response. He touched the man's cheek; the skin was neither warm nor cold.

"It is a stasis field," said a reedy voice on the other side of the door. "Please let us in, Earth person."

Corazza crossed into the kitchen and opened the door. He looked down and said, "Ricky and Lucy?"

"Yes," said the blue shmoid. The aliens rolled over the threshold. "We apologize for immobilizing your fellow Earth person. We feared he was about to attempt to coerce you unfairly."

"Is he okay?"

"He is merely slower and quieter than he was."

Ricky said, "We have come to ask you back to our ship. You will be safe during the remainder of your decision-making time."

Corazza looked at the aliens thoughtfully. "Is it the right time for this?"

The shmoids said together, "If you decide so."

"And if I don't want to go?"

"Oh, you certainly do not *have* to," Lucy hastily said.

"I'll go."

Corazza checked Martinson's coat pocket on the way out. The ISLP man appeared to have been reaching for a briar pipe in a zippered suede case.

V

Once established in synchronous orbit, the shmoid ship hung effectively stationary above Denver – at least that was what Ricky told Corazza. Not that the human could tell. Beyond the optical viewport, the Earth looked like a melon, an overripe blue fruit covered with creeping white cloud-mold. Corazza spent most of the docking time gently massaging his belly through the lightweight spacesuit the shmoids had thoughtfully provided. The alien inertialless drive didn't seem to be everything it was cracked up to be. Blowing up a star system – and one's home, he thought – shouldn't hinge on dyspepsia.

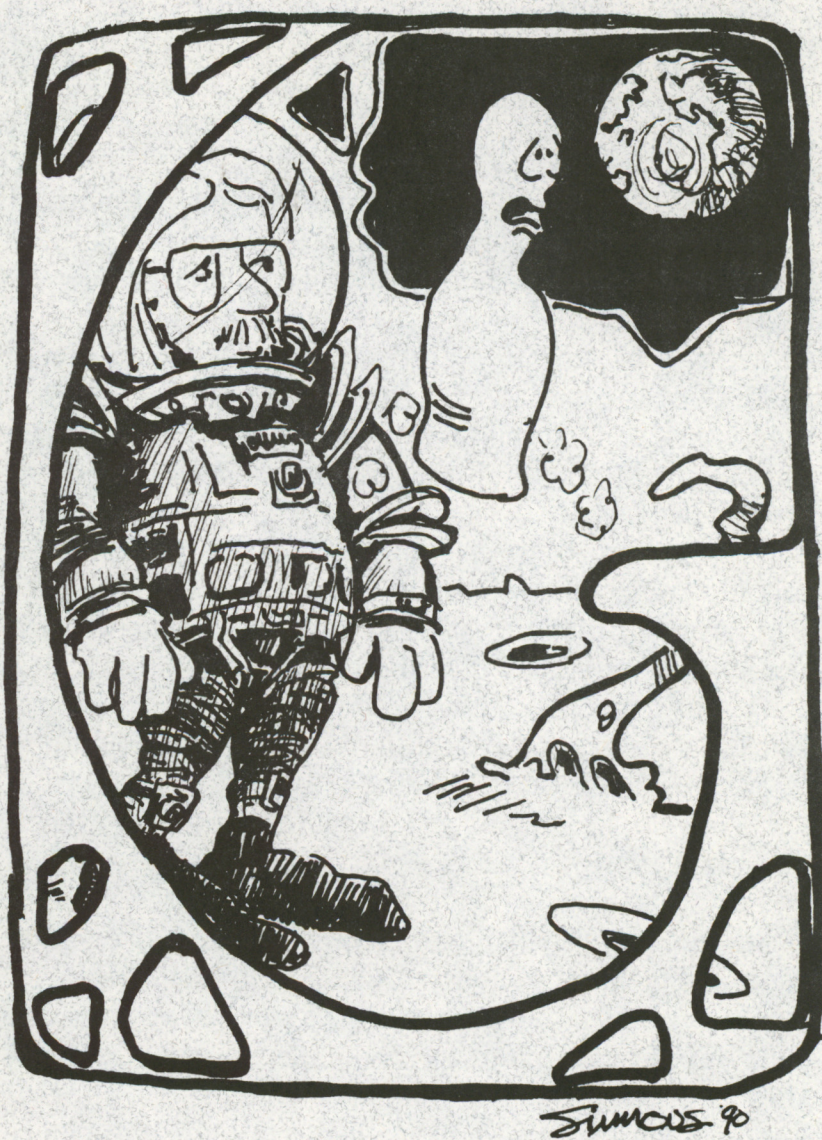
"Is it not beautiful?" said Lucy. Corazza nodded. "Most sentient creatures feel that about their home worlds. We don't. Our home is singularly ugly."

Ricky said, "You would doubtless compare it to the coloration of your Earthly dung."

"Yet our world would still compare unfavorably even to that," said Lucy.

Corazza turned away from the sight of Earth. Though the decks through which he had travelled to the observation dome had teemed with busy shmoids, only Lucy and Ricky had accompanied him here. Only the pair had spoken with him. Here in this spherical observation chamber, domed toward space, the man and two aliens were alone. The two shmoids had expressed a desire not to enter the dome, Corazza had insisted, and Ricky and Lucy had agreed.

"We find the concept of open space oppressive," Ricky had said.



"Thus conquering space was an onerous chore," Lucy added, "but we had to do it to fulfill our cultural quest."

"Into the dome," said Corazza firmly. "Keep me company." He didn't say 'please.' He had a hunch.

"Ah, that's better," said Ricky, rolling along behind.

When the shuttle had docked with the mother ship, Corazza had noticed that the skin was stippled with viewports larded as thickly as the textured colors on a Seurat Easter egg.

In the observation dome, Corazza gawked out at the Earth superimposed on the field of stars. Something occurred to him. "I'm curious about the color differences among you. Will I get to meet one of the yellow shmoids?" The yellow aliens had clearly made up a numerical minority.

"The leader-surrogates?" said Lucy.

"Aren't there actual leaders?"

"It's a matter of humility—" Lucy started to say.

"And low self-esteem," said a voice from behind them. Corazza turned and saw a yellow shmoid pausing at the entry.

"You may as well come on in," said the man.

"As you say," said the yellow shmoid, rolling in.

"So you're a leader?"

"Only a modest substitute."

"Who runs the show?" said Corazza.

"For now, we all—at least the yellow among us—share that terrible chore. We're hoping that perhaps you might help us out."

Corazza glanced back at the Earth. "How?"

"Did we mention that should you decide to accept our proposal about your world, you will be welcome to continue the voyage as our guest?"

He considered that. "You mean I wouldn't be required to join everyone else on the pyre?"

"Of course not," said the leader-surrogate.

"In fact," said Lucy, "we would be honored to offer you an integral position in the crew."

"As captain," said Ricky, so quickly that its words finished the first alien's sentence.

Isn't this a little precipitous?" said Corazza.

The leader-surrogate said, "Not at all. We have weighed this offer carefully."

"But why me?"

"Do we really have to answer that question?" asked the leader-surrogate.

"I guess not." Corazza rubbed his aching belly.

"Then it's decided?"

Corazza surveyed the three aliens. He was traveling now on both logic and instinct; skating, he thought, on a very thin surface. "If I go along with you, I'll lead?"

"Yes," said Ricky.

"And get to discipline you?"

"Indeed yes," said Lucy. "Oooh Rickiee!" she squealed.

"Loooooucie, yes!" her mate responded.

"And abuse you?"

"Oh yes, yes," said the leader-surrogate.

Corazza looked down at his scuffed space-boots. "Some kind of fun now," he said.

VI

"And so I had them bring me back down to Earth," said Corazza, finishing the account. "I ordered them to, kicked them when they lagged. They wanted it."

Martinson, the ISLP man, shook his head, apparently still groggy from the stasis field. "Couldn't they have been a bit more straightforward?"

Corazza was preparing hot Ovaltine. He shrugged and

said, "Speaking now as a newly blooded xenopsychologist, I think I did remarkably well just figuring out *what* they were doing. I'll keep working on the *why*."

Martinson took the Ovaltine and sipped gingerly. "It seems as though they could simply have told us that their single overriding cultural imperative was to be oppressed."

"Apparently the color taboos enter into it. The yellows, the leader-surrogates, are almost all bred out of the shmoid gene pool. They needed new governors, so they came here."

"But the circuitousness of their approach . . ." Martinson shook his head.

"They *did* give me all the clues," said Corazza. "It certainly was a test, after all. Remember the neutrino bombs which would annihilate all humans and dolphins? Neutrinos don't interact with solid matter. And the supernova . . . There isn't enough material in our sun to fuel one. It was all a sham."

Martinson looked skeptical. "How can you really be sure? They're aliens."

Corazza shrugged again. "I can't."

"What are you going to do now?"

Corazza smiled back at the ISLP man. "I'm not sure. What are you going to do?"

"Report to my superiors. Let them know the world has just been saved. Figure out how to tell them the human race now has a new subservient species to kick around, and that we're all to become benevolent sadists. There should be at least one shmoid for every inhabitant of an industrialized nation."

Corazza shrugged. "It's what they want."

Martinson looked at him intently. "I ask again, Gregory, What are you going to do?"

"Honest, I don't know. I'll just wait, I guess. My Aunt Thea has faith in me. I don't think the best thing's happened

to me that's going to happen."

The ISLP man put down his empty mug. "Satisfy my curiosity. If the shmoid proposal to turn the sun supernova had been legitimate, would you really have considered validating it?"

Corazza smiled and flicked his butane lighter. The flame hissed up. "Just kidding around," he said.

VII

Fortunate man, living in interesting times, Gregory Corazza sailed along the information lines of the universe. Patterns piled on quasars piled on "coincidences" overlaid on black holes wound around happenstance, permeating stars like grains of beach sand in old tennis shoes. Art and the real merged. Insights emerged. Just one example: the capybara is not only the largest rodent on Earth, but in the entire galaxy as well.

The shrill rodent screaming translated to the telephone bell as Corazza swam up and out of cosmic dream depths.

"Yeah?"

"Greg? Is that you?" The voice seemed vaguely familiar.

"Unh. Who is this?"

"It's Bob Martinson, Greg. Sorry to wake you – happens all the time, doesn't it?"

"Mmph."

"Well, my apologies. I wouldn't have called if it weren't urgent. I expect you're still feeling miffed because the government didn't use you in the shmoid pacification program."

That was true. "Unph." He finally cleared his throat.

"We were grateful for your suggestions," said Martinson. "The shmoids are especially happy in the bowling alleys – it's an orgasmic experience for them."

"I could have done more."

Martinson's voice was apologetic but hurried. "May I be candid? The administrators thought you were a bit erratic."

Corazza got out one indignant "But –"

"My apologies again for interrupting, but I have to change the subject," Martinson's voice switched timbre, sounded more solemn. "I have something for you," said the ISLP man. "William James wrote that human beings only really live when they live at the top of their energies."

"So?" Corazza said sullenly.

"I'll level with you. The world desperately needs a xenopsychologist with your qualifications again."

"The world?"

He detected urgency in Martinson's voice. "This time the event is not peculiarly American. We want you to catch a courier jet at Buckley – someone will pick you up in approximately seven minutes. You'll hop a military transport in Washington. You're going to England."

Corazza felt more alert. "Why?"

"To help the United Nations."

"For God's sake, Martinson, what about details? The event?"

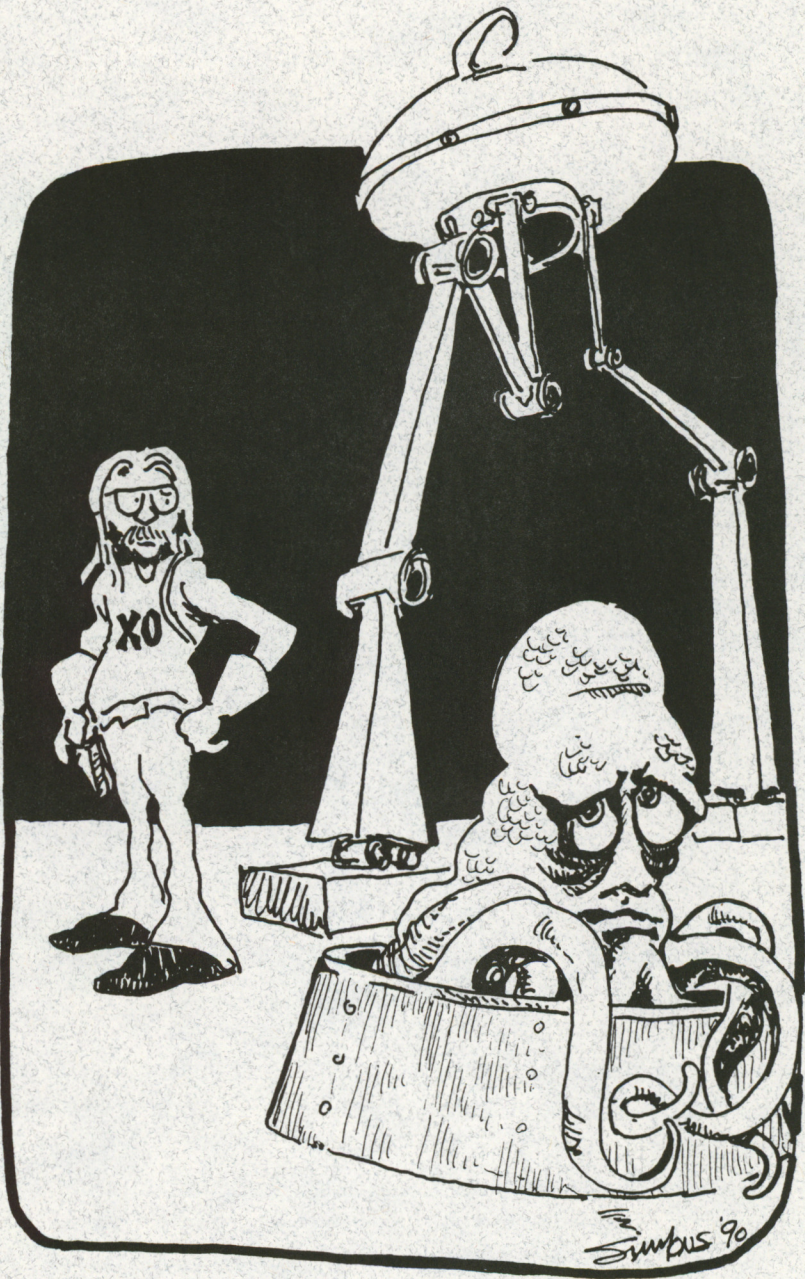
"Sorry," said the man in Washington. "Here's the scoop. Mechanical war machines on articulated, stilt-like legs are devastating London with heat rays."

"Huh."

"Don't give me flatness of affect, Greg. Britain hasn't faced such jeopardy since the years of the Zeppelin raids and the Hitler menace."

"Let me guess," said Corazza. "The machines are manned – or monstered, by leathery octopoid horrors."

"That's only the half of it," said Martinson. "Interpol computers indicate there have been massive thefts of stored



flu vaccine all over the globe."

Corazza scratched himself satisfactorily and let his legs tauten in a luxurious stretch. The patterns looked clearer. "Well," he said. "Well. I think probably I can help you." The universe flowed through him. Lines converged. He saw light beginning to shine through the east window well.

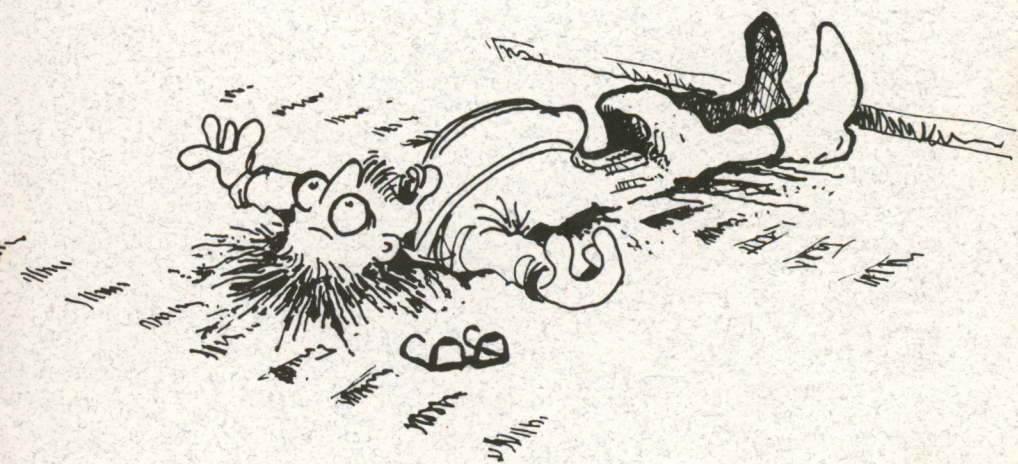
"Thank you," said Martinson. "The world thanks you."

Corazza slowly put the phone down. He felt happy. He knew it was time for Aunt Thea to call. It was good to be living in exciting times.

Again Corazza smiled. He was part of the future.

This first edition of
THE MAN OF THE FUTURE
was limited to four hundred copies
all signed and numbered by the
author and artist.

The paper is acid-free recycled stock
and the type is Century Old Style.
Designed by Doug and Tomi Lewis
Typeset by Ruben Sosa Villegas
Printed in Denver, Colorado



Roadkill Press
Arvada, Colorado

\$3.00