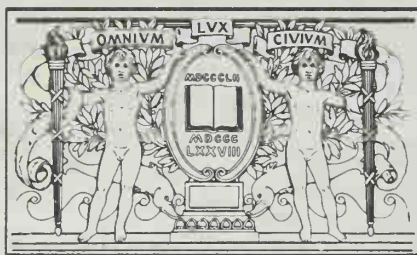


More Science Fiction Tales

CRYSTAL CREATURES,
BIRD-THINGS, & OTHER WEIRDIES



Edited by Roger Elwood
Introduction by Barry Malzberg



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Enter our time warp and find yourself in new worlds where crystal creatures attack in the night and robots rule mankind. Past and future collide as vampires rise up and UFO's seek help from earthlings. Even as you lie in bed, fast asleep, aliens in travel machines may visit you, and who is to say it is "just a dream." For when time bends, even the unimaginable becomes possible—as you will discover in *More Science Fiction Tales*.

Roger Elwood specially requested the stories in this collection from widely published writers of science fiction. And he is in a position to know—for as editor and writer, he has produced innumerable science fiction stories and articles. His books have been distributed by the Junior Literary Guild and the Science Fiction Book Club. Introduction to the stories was written by Barry N. Malzberg, the first winner of the John W. Campbell, Jr. Award for the best science fiction novel of the year, *Beyond Apollo*.



More Science Fiction Tales

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More Science Fiction Tales

Crystal Creatures, Bird-things
& Other Weirdies



Edited by Roger Elwood

Introduction by Barry N. Malzberg

Illustrated by Rod Ruth

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introduction: starting in the middle

by BARRY N. MALZBERG

Back in the Pleistocene, when I was about as old as most of you who are about to enjoy this book, there was no such thing as a collection of science fiction stories for young readers. There was barely such a thing as a collection of stories for *any* readers. In the postwar era, publishers were just beginning to discover the treasure which existed in the science fiction magazines. There were mostly just the science fiction magazines themselves, five or six of them a month. But in the first onset of discovery, five or six magazines were hardly enough to keep me going for a *day*. I needed more. More and more. I discovered a miracle known as the back-date magazine store.

The back-date magazine store had all the issues of the science fiction magazines that were no longer on the newsstands. That is, they were not current, and the better stores had the magazines dating back for years and years. It is not

to be described how it felt for an eleven-year-old in 1951 to hold in his hands, his very own hands, the August 1945 issue of *Astounding Science Fiction*. It had not been on the newsstands for *six* years and was as fresh and new, as mysterious and exciting, as the September 1951 issue which had not come through yet. Heady stuff indeed. Furthermore, it could become very exciting if the August 1945 issue had the first part of a serial that was to be continued the next month, but the September 1945, in the hit-and-miss fashion of some back-date magazine stores, did not seem to be around. Where is the September 1945? How did "The World of Null-a" come out? I'll bid fifty cents for a copy of the September 1945! As a magazine collector in the early 1950s, one perhaps knew everything that he would ever need to know about the capitalist system before he had reached the end of junior high school.

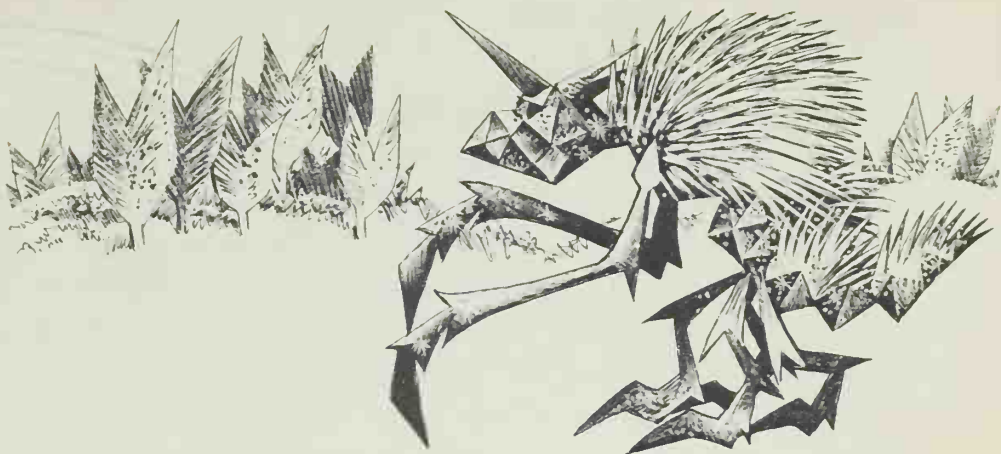
But this is to wander off the point somewhat. Older people often do, and you must be tolerant of them. Their minds, unlike yours, are not able to concentrate on a given issue for more than a very few moments, after which they are apt to wander off into stupefying anecdotes about their past. Regard them with a fixed smile, think about other things, and do not interrupt them. They will eventually end and get back to the subject and think the better of you for seeming to be attentive.

We were talking about a collection of stories for younger readers of science fiction—a fairly recent development in our field and, I think, a healthy one. Science fiction has a long tradition of wonderful juvenile *novels*—Robert Heinlein, Isaac Asimov, Andre Norton have done some of their best work for younger readers. But only in the last few years have enterprising and dedicated editors like Roger Elwood, with the help of good publishers, prepared collections of

juvenile short stories. This is a very good thing. Historically, the best science fiction has been in the shorter form for reasons which I could, and will not, go into now. (I try to keep my wanderings down to one per speech.) When some of our best writers work for young people within that form, the results can be breathtaking . . . as you will see herein.

Science fiction is a very important form of literature. I have devoted a good portion of my childhood to reading it, and a larger portion of my adult years to trying to write it well. I feel that I am just beginning to truly understand and appreciate it. It may well be, in ten to twenty years, the only form of literature that is being widely read. Because it is the one literary form that talks most directly to the world as it evolves past technological explosion and to people who are trying to make some connection between what our wonderful new machinery is doing to most of us, and how, in the presence of all this machinery, we are to remain truly human. It is, in that sense, a teaching literature, but of the best kind. For there can be no teaching without appeal, and the best science fiction has been, for more than forty years, the most entertaining of all literatures.

I think you will enjoy the stories that follow. Most of the writers herein are personally known to me, at least slightly, and I salute them, each and every one, for their efforts to write for the most important of audiences. And it is you, the young—that most important audience—who I salute as well. For it has been you we have been truly writing for through all the generations of our form. You have kept us well and optimistic and sure of that future to which we have dedicated ourselves.



the music of minox

by HOWARD GOLDSMITH

We had just pitched camp on the planet Minox when we heard the weird music that would forever haunt me. The sound was like a crystal chandelier tinkling in the wind.

"What was that?" I asked my father.

"I don't know," he said, obviously puzzled. He knit his brow.

"It sounds like someone strumming a harp through Hades," said Casey, our imaginative navigator. He scanned the dark horizon in concern.

"Knock it off," said Sloane, pilot of our spacecraft. "Let's not let our imaginations run away with us."

The cascade of tinkling notes suddenly doubled in volume. It surged about us, lapping at us from every side.

Even Sloane, who was said to have ice water in his veins, couldn't suppress an uneasy shudder.

I was beginning to wonder if coming along on this

scouting expedition had been such a good idea after all. Dad had turned me down flat when I had first proposed it.

"These mining expeditions are rather dull," he had said, stifling a yawn. "Nothing exciting ever happens," he added, trying to damp my enthusiasm.

"What about the time you were attacked by a herd of snarling gatus?" I challenged. "You confessed that you thought your number was up."

"Well," he said, rubbing his chin. He knew I had him there. What he didn't want to admit was his real concern for my safety. I knew as well as he that every unexplored planet harbored unknown dangers.

I kept pressing Dad on the point for weeks, until he finally exploded and gave a firm "thumbs down" sign of refusal. "Now bug off," he shouted, in no uncertain terms.

Dad was a difficult man to budge, but his bark was worse than his bite. When he was in a good mood, I managed to steer the conversation back to the trip again. After all, Dad recognized my keen interest in rocks and minerals. He knew I was cut out to be a geologist just like he was.

At last, after another week of my appealing looks and yearning sighs, Dad relented. I had known he would all along. He's really a good sort. As chief mineralogist and captain of the expedition to Minox, he had authority to hire anyone who could serve a useful function.

I was given the impressive title of "cabin boy." "And you better shape up, shavetail," my father said, with a severe look, "or it's back to home base with you." I knew he was putting on an act. I met his stern glance with unwavering eyes until we both cracked up and burst into laughter. He rumbled my hair and took me by the shoulders. "I can assure you this isn't going to be a joyride, son. You're going to earn your keep."

Now, as I stood outside the camp on Minox, listening to those eerie sounds swirl about us, I recalled my father's words very clearly. "This isn't going to be a joyride. . . ."

"You call the tune, Burt," said Morgan, our flight engineer, turning to Dad for instructions.

My father glanced at Nelson and Davis. "Okay, boys, you're elected for the first scouting patrol on Minox. I hope you realize it's a singular honor."

"One we would gladly do without," said Nelson, staring into the dark, forbidding underbrush.

"Just point us in a direction, O master," said Davis, raising his arms stiffly like a robot. "Your command is ours to obey."

"That's the right attitude," said Dad, with forced cheerfulness. He didn't relish sending two good men out into uncharted terrain. But there seemed no choice. The mysterious noise was growing so intense it rattled the utensils inside our tents. We cupped our hands to our ears.

Dad supplied the two men with lanterns. They were to radio back at the first sign of anything unusual. Without further word, they set off into the brush, their faces set in grim masks.

From a short distance we heard Davis croon, in a wobbly baritone, "It's off to work we go. . . ."

"Fa, la, la, la, la," chimed in Nelson.

We heard nothing further from them for fifteen minutes.

Then, suddenly, the radio crackled. A confused flurry of screams and shouts rang out.

"Burt! Arrgh! It got me!"

"Stand back!"

"Oww!"

A strangled cry tore the air, followed by scuffling,

thrashing sounds and moans of sudden, piercing pain.

Meanwhile, around the camp, waves of sharp, tinkling music rose in an ever-mounting crescendo of sound. We clutched our ears and sank to our knees in agony. Scores of icy, pointed darts seemed to penetrate our eardrums. Gusts of wind tore at us from every side.

Then, abruptly, the sound was reduced to a light, metallic tinkle. The winds subsided. We shook our heads and rose unsteadily. Our ears continued to ring.

My father shouted hoarsely into the radio transmitter, "Come in, Tom, Jeff. Can you hear me?"

There was no reply.

"Jeff, Tom, come in!"

Not a sound came back to us.

"What do we do?" demanded Casey. "We can't just stand here. Tom and Jeff might be wounded and lying helpless out there. We have to find them."

"It won't help them if we all go out and get killed," said Sloane. "Something's lying in wait out there, ready to spring. I say we wait half an hour. If the boys don't return by then, we take off."

"You self-centered, cold-blooded mutton!" cried Casey, advancing threateningly toward Sloane.

My father lunged at Casey's squat, sturdy figure, and taking him off-balance, threw a hammerlock on him. "Get hold of yourself, man," he shouted, as Casey struggled furiously.

"Sloane is right," said Morgan. "The sensible thing is to wait here. Our standing instructions are to return to home base whenever the crew is in jeopardy. Nelson and Davis are pros. They knew the risks involved in our mission. We'll give them every reasonable opportunity to return. Meanwhile, let's try to develop a rational plan."

Casey slowly simmered down. His taut body went slack.

My father released him.

"I'm sorry," said Casey, hanging his head. His face flamed. "I acted like a bloody fool."

He held out his hand to Sloane, who shook it firmly.

"Now let's get down to cases," said Dad. "The first thing to do is to stuff our ears with cotton. That will deaden the sound somewhat."

We proceeded to do this.

"Now to unpack our weapons," said Dad.

We uncrated small arms, laser guns, and poison-pellet rifles.

"Does anyone have any other ideas?" asked Dad.

Sloane spoke up. "Well, for one thing, the sound must issue from some distance, as we've seen no movements in the bushes."

"I agree," said Morgan. "And did you notice that it rose with the intensity of the wind and fell as the wind died?"

"Yes, come to think of it, it did," said Casey, scratching his head.

"So the wind was either causing the sound or carrying it here," concluded Dad.

Everyone nodded in agreement.

"Where does that leave us?" asked Casey.

"It leaves us with inadequate data to form a theory," said Dad.

We all shrugged our shoulders and stared into the dark, menacing brush. The answer lay there. It might be buried forever with Nelson and Davis. Or it might come crashing down upon us in an attack from some unknown creature or creatures.

We waited, our hearts tolling the moments in slow, throbbing beats.

Suddenly we saw a movement in the bushes. It was

accompanied by a rustling sound and the tread of slow, heavy footsteps.

We stood poised, our eyes straining into the darkness, our hands clamped tightly on our weapons.

A moan rang out. The bushes parted and Nelson slumped to the ground.

We rushed over to aid him.

His face was drained of color. His eyes were wide with terror. A deep, ugly gash extended across his forehead. His hands were a bloody, pulpy mass. With horror, I saw that three of the fingers of his right hand were missing.

We carried him into the camp. He was as limp as a loose-jointed puppet. It was obvious that he'd lost a lot of blood.

Sloane gave him a blood transfusion as Dad administered a pain killer. Then Dad cauterized his wounds and bandaged his hands. Nelson's eyes rolled back with a glazed expression. He passed out cold.

We watched anxiously for signs of his revival. Sloane continued pumping blood into his veins.

After a few minutes, Nelson's eyelids twitched open. His eyes were brighter now. He struggled to speak.

"Easy now, Tom," said Dad, in a soothing voice.

"The glass . . . the glass," Nelson stammered hoarsely.

We all looked puzzled.

"Glass? What about glass?" said Casey.

"Jeff! He's dead!" cried Nelson, in sudden recollection. His eyelids closed tightly, as if trying to blot out a horrible vision.

We stood frozen to the spot, numb with shock.

"Are you sure Jeff's dead?" Dad asked.

"Neck slashed," gasped Nelson. "Died instantaneously."

"Who—what—did it?" asked Morgan grimly.

"The glass . . . glass," answered Nelson, his voice trailing off into a moan.

"Tell us about the glass," Dad insisted.

"They came at us. Tinkling in the wind. Three of them. We could see right through them. Bodies segmented." His voice was gaining strength. He began to speak more coherently. "They were crystalline, composed of glass sections. They gave off dazzling flashes of light."

"The man's delirious," said Casey.

"No, listen, believe me," implored Nelson, straining to sit up. He fell back weakly.

"Okay, relax, we're listening," said Dad.

"Their bodies had smooth, glittering facets. When they attacked, sharp, retractible needles rose on their backs like spines on a porcupine. Jeff crushed one with his boot. It broke into jagged slivers. But another sneaked up on him and . . . and . . ." He choked back a sob.

"We know, Jeff's dead," Dad said, pressing a hand to Nelson's shoulder.

Nelson fought to compose himself. "I grappled with them. They're not large, about the size of raccoons. Their pointed spurs dug into my hands, slashing them to ribbons. I was gushing blood. I struck out wildly with my boots, smashing them to smithereens. Then I stumbled blindly through the brush, groping my way back to camp."

We stood in rapt attention, speechless. Then Casey said, "Well, one thing's for sure—there must be lots more of the spiky devils wherever those three came from."

"But is it really possible?" asked Morgan in disbelief. "Creatures made of glass?"

"Well," said my father, reflecting, "we know that liquid, glassy masses originally covered the Earth. They hardened to form the Earth's crust. Silica is the largest component of



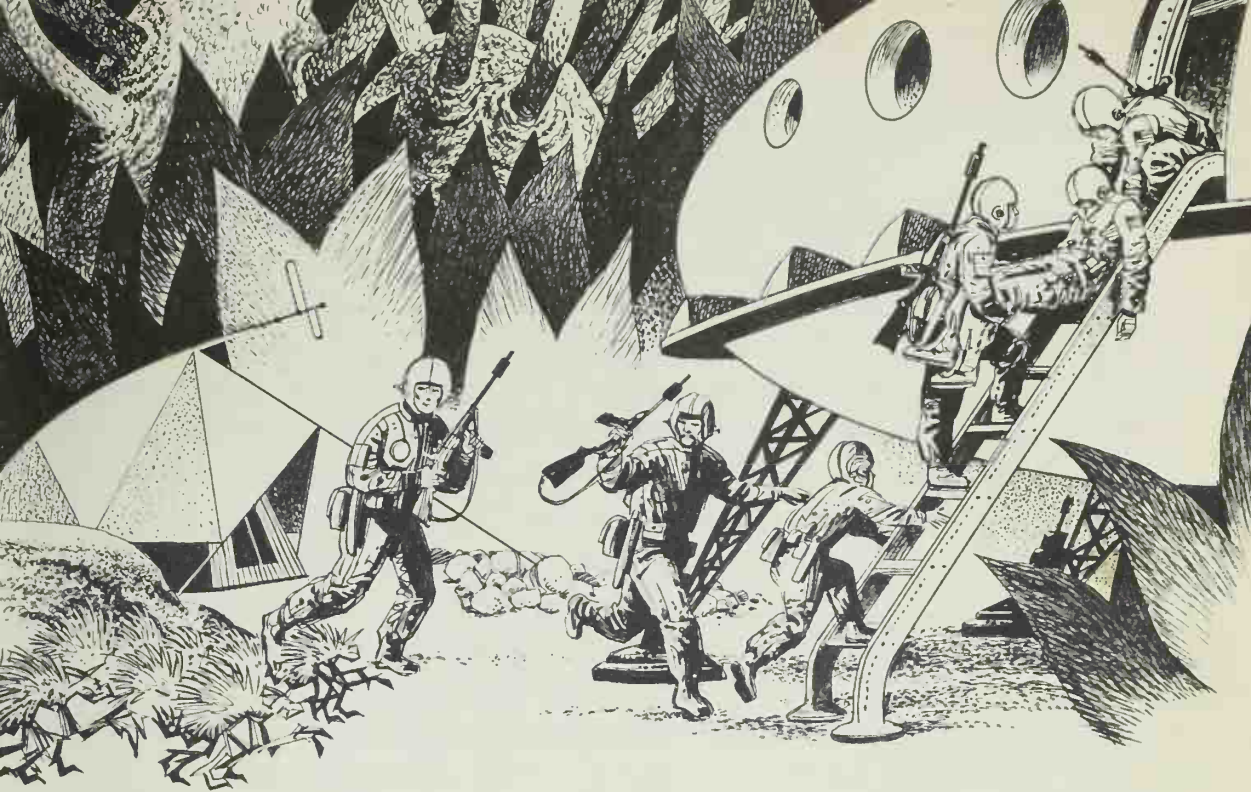
this crust. It's a compound of silicon and oxygen."

"Are you implying that life could arise from such silicon liquids?" asked Sloane.

"On Earth there is a tiny organism called the diatom," said my father. "It thrives in sea water. Oddly enough, its supporting structure is largely composed of silica."

"But you're not saying that a complex animal, with the ability to reason, could be entirely composed of such glassy compounds?" asked Morgan.

"Life takes strange forms," said my father. "Who could have predicted the countless forms of life that evolved on Earth, from the microscopic virus to the towering dinosaur? Naturalists still haven't catalogued them all. When Minox first came into being, some entirely unknown elements must



have combined with silicon, under conditions of extreme heat and pressure, to produce an intelligent form of life with a crystal structure.”

“Well, Tom has made *me* a believer,” said Casey. He viewed Tom’s bandaged wounds with concern.

“I say we hightail it straight out of here,” said Morgan.

“Agreed,” said the crew with one voice.

“Agreed,” I chimed in a split second later.

They all laughed. It afforded a momentary break in the tension.

We began gathering our most important gear together and stowed it hurriedly inside the spaceship.

Then we heard it—that ominous sound. It was like a thousand crystal chandeliers vibrating together in a roaring crescendo. The sound tore through our eardrums. We winced and cried aloud with pain. We dove for our helmets and pulled them down over our ears.

The sound was at least bearable now. We gazed about the camp. An incredible sight met our eyes. Thousands of glassy creatures encircled us, in columns of at least a hundred deep. Their eyes glittered fiercely like sharp-cut diamonds. Thin, pointed spurs stuck out of their bodies, quivering like spears. They reminded me of a tribe of warriors set to attack. The incessant tinkling sound they made resembled the music of a savage war dance.

As if with one mind, the creatures inched slowly forward. Daggers of light streamed from their sharp, chiseled facets. They moved with a jerky, jangling gait.

"Quick, into the ship!" my father ordered.

Without a moment to spare, we scrambled inside and sealed the hatch.

Instantly, the creatures swarmed over the hull.

My father seized a flame thrower. "Hurry, open the starboard portal!"

Sloane flipped a switch. The portal slid open.

My father poked the flame thrower through the portal. He aimed a jet of fire at the creatures.

Hundreds of them melted to a thick gel. They fused together into a grotesque mass of molten glass.

Hordes of them still clung to the opposite side of the ship. With a grinding, grating sound they scratched and clawed at the hull. They were trying to bore a hole through it.

"Close the starboard portal," shouted my father. "Quick, open the one on the port side!"

Morgan slid the portal open.

Dad shot a torrent of flames through the opening. The creatures scuttled off the hull, slipping and sinking into the seething pool of liquid glass formed by their fellows.

Hundreds of others still remained. They scattered

frantically in all directions. Slivers of glass peeled off their backs. They scampered for the safety of the bushes.

Dad sent a sheet of fire after them. The brush ignited into a towering wall of flames. Billows of smoke shot into the air. The creatures shrank back in terror as tongues of flame engulfed them in the blazing inferno that had erupted around them.

When the smoke had cleared, a pool of molten liquid lapped at our ship on all sides.

We didn't lose a moment in taking off. We had seen all we ever wanted to see of the planet Minox.

We rose in the sky with a roaring thrust of our rockets.

As we soared into space the eerie music of Minox still lingered in our ears.

Afterwards, when we had settled down for the return trip home, I nudged my father and asked, "Do you still claim nothing exciting ever happens on mining expeditions?"

"Well," said my father, with a twinkle in his eyes, "maybe our next expedition will have some excitement."

The word *next* stood out in big, bright letters. I flashed a happy grin.

"But it won't be any joyride, shavetail. *That* I can promise you."



werewolf girl

by NIC ANDERSSON

Professor Callicantzoros was a nut. Everybody kept insisting he was a scientific genius. But to Sybil Stewart, his blond, twelve-year-old, next-door neighbor, he was nothing but a fuzzy-headed, fuzzy-minded professor who threw rocks at Miff, her cat. And yelled at her when she went into his weed-choked backyard to look for her pet.

No question about it, she didn't like him. Nevertheless, every noon, her mother sent her next door with a tray of hot food "for the poor man who would starve if someone didn't bring him something to eat."

Most times he never thanked her, or even noticed her when she carried in the tray. Today, however, was a little different. Apparently he had just finished his work on the goofy machine he was developing and wanted to spout off to somebody about it.

fication device, she thought again how looney he really was. Looney! Completely off his bean! Foolish in the head!

It wasn't so much the machine itself, although to Sybil the whole thing looked like just a lot of pieces of scrap sheet-metal and loose, dangling wires hung around a big metal box. The professor had worked on the machine for five years, ever since he had retired as head of the anthropology department at the university.

What bothered Sybil was what the professor said it could do.

"Imagine," he said proudly in his squeaky, high-pitched voice, his eyes fairly popping out in his enthusiasm, "it can change one kind of animal into another. The machine is finished. It is now fully perfected. You would be amazed, my girl, at what I'll be able to do with it. I'll be able to turn a dog into a cat. Or a cat into a dog."

"Why would you want to do that?" Sybil asked, thinking how awful it would be to have her white Angora cat, Miff, turned into a dog.

"Why?" the professor exclaimed. "Don't you see? If I can do that, I can do anything. My theory is that every living thing has an original spark of life. What form it takes has been left up to Nature. Through the forces of evolution, creatures have changed from one form to another. What my machine does is speed up these changes. What Nature takes a million years to do, this machine will be able to do in seconds."

He patted the side of the metal box with pride. "With this, I can become the most powerful man in the world. Not just by turning animals into other animals. But by turning weaklings into superathletes. By transforming the stupid into geniuses. By making ugly people into beautiful people. Didn't you ever want to be somebody else?"

Sybil shook her head. She couldn't imagine being someone else.

Professor Callicantzaros glared at her with his mad, beady eyes. "No, I suppose you wouldn't. You're a nice young girl the way you are. But isn't there anything you ever wished you could be?"

Sybil thought for a moment. "I've always wanted to be a ballerina."

The professor smiled knowingly and turned back to the machine. "I suppose I'll have to start with animals. Later, when I know better what the machine can do, I'll try it on humans."

He looked quizzically at her. "Unless, of course, you would be willing to let me try it on you?"

"No thanks, Professor Callicantzaros. Not today. I think you should eat your lunch while it's still warm. I'll come back later for the dishes."

"Just think, Sybil," the professor continued. "I could turn you into a tiger or a deer or even a racehorse. Are you sure you wouldn't like to try it? You'd be the first human ever to know what it feels like to be an animal. And there's no risk. If I set the controls a certain way, you'll stay in the animal's form for only an hour. Then you'll return to your own form automatically."

Sybil shook her head. "I'm sorry, professor. I haven't time. I promised my mother I would help her with the cleaning. Anyway, I don't want to be an animal. I like being me."

The professor nodded his head and began to pace slowly around Sybil. Suddenly he stood stock-still in front of her. He peered deeply into her eyes. Deeper and deeper he stared as he waved his hands slowly before her face. Sybil felt herself drifting into a kind of wide-awake slumber. She

could see and hear everything about her, but she seemed to have no will of her own.

“Now,” Professor Callicantzaros murmured as he rubbed his hands with glee, “now my girl, we will see if my machine can do what I have designed and built it to do.”

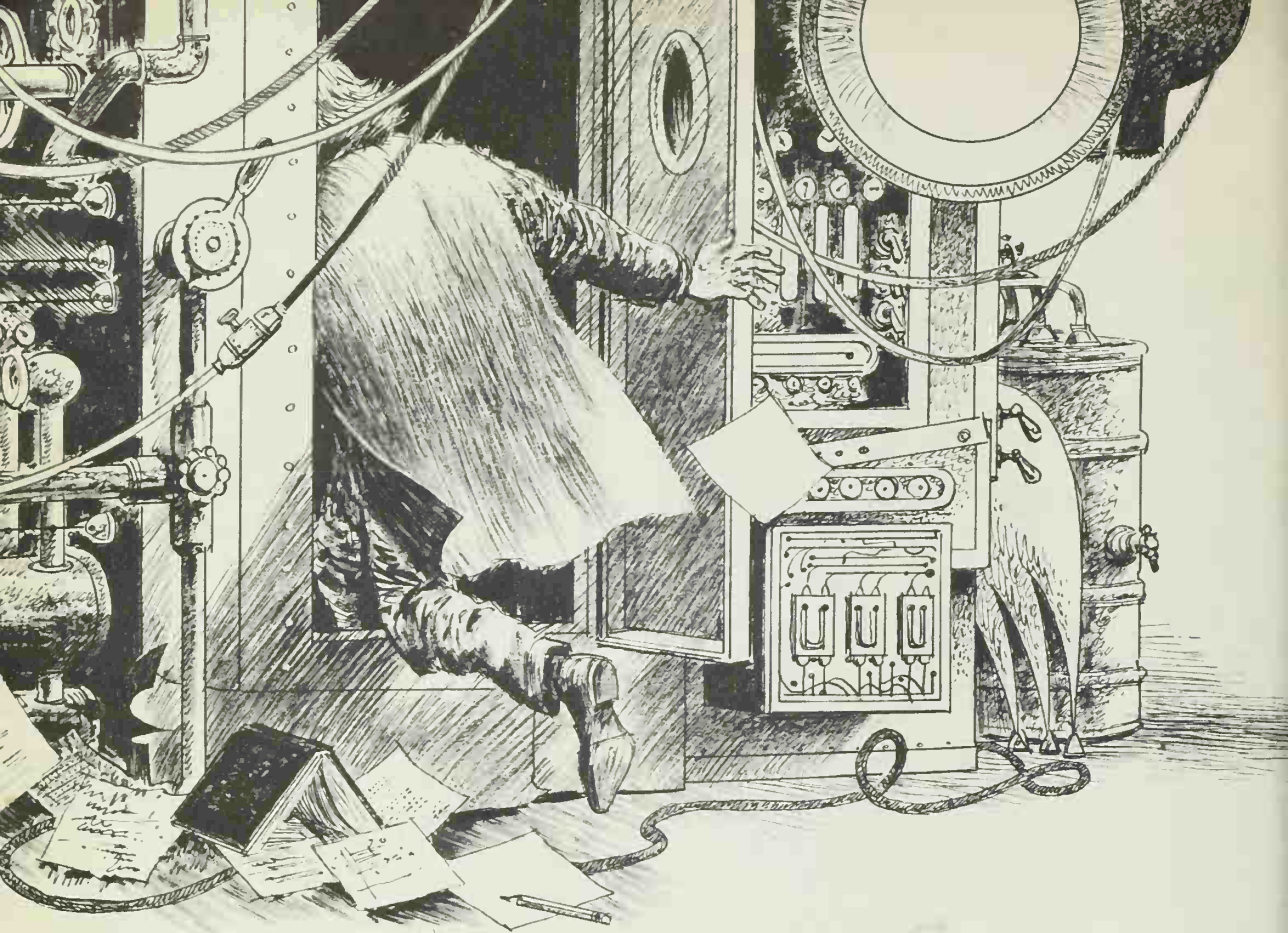
Strangely, terrifyingly, Sybil felt almost as though she were two people. One person was there inside herself. The other was somewhere outside her body, watching everything as it took place.

She felt—and watched—herself being led into the big metal box, and she couldn’t stop it from happening. She stood where the professor placed her, in the center of the machine, and she couldn’t move. All around her, on the ceiling, on the walls, was a maze of colored wires.

As the professor stood in the open doorway looking back at her, he chortled. “What should I make you? A leopard? A panda? A kangaroo? A unicorn?”

He laughed. “Wouldn’t my friends at the university be surprised if I could produce a real live unicorn for them.” He shook his head as he gazed pensively at the motionless girl. Suddenly his face lighted up with a new idea. “Ah, I know! A werewolf! A she-werewolf!”

He clapped his hands childishly at the thought. “That’s it, my dear girl. I shall turn you into a she-werewolf and settle once and for all time whether or not they ever lived. No need to have you drink water from a lycanthropic-tainted stream in the full moon at midnight. No need to have you swallow a potion of aconite, the witch’s brew. No need to have you smell the herb wolfsbane, or to use magical spells and incantations. All this I can do with my machine. Here, my dear, is my answer to the doubters who have laughed at my efforts for the past five years. You, Sybil Stewart, will now become a she-werewolf!”



As he closed the door of the metal box, Sybil tried to cry out. But no sounds came. She tried to move, but there was no response from her legs or arms. She was helpless. All she could do was wait.

Suddenly, a sharp pain ran through her body. Then another. And another. They were like jolts of electricity.

Something *was* happening to her. She felt herself changing. As the machine's action took effect, her body jerked and twisted. Moments passed and she felt herself slip out from under the professor's hypnotic spell. Now she could move her legs and arms, even cry out.

But, oddly, when she tried to call for help, the cry was not in her normal voice. It was more like a bark that wavered into a howl. She raised her arms and realized that her



clothes were hanging loose on her. Almost without effort she was rid of them. She felt herself. Where there had been soft, human skin there was now a thickening fur. She was covered with it!

Could it be true? Was this really happening to her? Had she actually turned into a werewolf? All she had ever read about them was that they roamed through the forests of old, killing sheep and young children, drinking their blood, eating their flesh, and then resuming human form at the first light of morning. Was that what she was now becoming—a blood-seeking werewolf!

On all fours, she began to pace around the narrow confines of the metal cabinet. There had to be a way out. Where was the door? She had to find it.

The door opened then, and the professor stood in the opening, peering in anxiously. Sybil, crouched low at the side, realized he didn't see her at first. When he did catch sight of her, his eyes widened with joy at the obvious success of his experiment.

Snarling with wolf-rage, she leaped at the man-figure in front of her. Frightened, he tried to slam the door to keep her inside. Too late!

Springing through the opening, she glared up at the man, her lips curled back to reveal sharp wolf-teeth. A low growl came from deep within her. She crouched for a leap at the hated figure in front of her.

She still retained remnant thoughts of herself as Sybil, the human girl. But, by the minute, she was more and more becoming a ravening werewolf. Not only her body had changed, but her mind was altered too. A lust for blood seized her.

She faced the now-terrified scientist. What she craved was to clamp her jaws around his throat and drink deep of the red blood she knew coursed there. As he backed fearfully away from her, she advanced slowly across the laboratory, her body almost touching the floor, her slitted eyes fixed on him with deadly intent.

Then she sprang. . . .

In her leap, however, she found she had misjudged the great strength of her new wolf-legs. She sailed over the head of the cowering professor.

Before she could turn to attack again, he scrambled into his transmogrification machine and slammed the door to protect himself from her bloodthirsty assault.

After scratching futilely at the panel for several minutes, the werewolf-creature that had been Sybil realized she had no way to get in. She began to claw at the rows of dials and control levers at the front of the machine. Using her strong teeth, she turned and twisted all the switches she could reach. A crackling sound came from the machine, as though electrical energy flowed through the wires. She had no idea what was happening inside the cabinet, and yet her animal cunning told her something *was* happening.

Satisfied, she trotted around the laboratory sniffing at the strange objects. Finally, she went through the house to the front door to look out.

The smells that came to her from the street outside were nauseous. She recoiled in disgust at the noxious fumes that filled her sensitive nose. But curiosity forced her back to the doorway.

Two small boys had just walked by, followed by a mongrel dog. The little black and brown animal was pushing its nose under some bushes right in front of the doorway where the she-werewolf crouched.

What a tasty morsel it would be, she thought. One fast dash out of the doorway, one swift crunch of her long, sharp teeth, and she would be drinking the small animal's warm lifeblood.

Just then the dog looked up. For a second it froze with fright. Then, with a yelp, its tail between its legs, it ran frantically after the two boys.

The she-werewolf loped slowly through the front yard, out to the sidewalk. The boys were looking back at her in bewilderment. She started after them. With a cry of terror, they ran down the street, their small dog racing ahead of them.

She would have continued the chase, but she could see

a huge truck coming, and something told her that this was a foe she could not contend with. Crouching low, she slipped back into the front garden and around the side of the professor's house to the rear. The yard, long a neighborhood disgrace, was rank with bushes and weeds.

For the moment, it offered her a refuge. It even felt good to pad around amid the wild undergrowth, feeling the rough branches of the bushes scrape against the fur on her hide.

When she was sure that the danger had passed, she cautiously resumed her prow. Instinctively she headed away from the street toward the gate at the back of the yard and then to the alley behind.

Off the alley, the people on both streets had installed garages for their family cars. She looked in each direction—nobody was in sight.

Staying close to the side of the alley, she moved along past the closed garages, using her keen sense of smell to investigate each gate leading into its own backyard.

At one, she paused, her nose telling her that beyond this gate was a potential enemy. She sniffed for a moment. Then she issued a growled challenge.

Out of the shadows of the house strode a huge black mastiff with broad, powerful jaws. Arrogantly it approached her, ready to defend the yard against any intruder. Three, or four steps from the gate it stopped. Only then did it realize what manner of beast it was facing. The black dog halted its advance. The challenging growl died in its throat.

The she-werewolf, whimpering with joy at the chance to battle with a worthy foe, pushed at the gate. It opened and she went through.

Slowly the mastiff backed up, its eyes fixed on the ap-

proaching animal, its hackles rising in fear.

Not to be cheated this time, the werewolf hurled her powerful body at the hated beast in front of her. There was a clash as the two bodies met. Rearing up, the mastiff attempted to defend itself against the deadly wolf-fangs. Its own teeth were trying for a hold on the stronger, quicker, more ferocious animal. Snarling and growling with fury, the gray-coated werewolf slashed and tore at her dog opponent. Savagely, she snapped at the other's throat. The big dog went down on its back, trying to use its four feet to keep the attacker away.

The she-werewolf paused to look around before she made her final kill. In that instant, the mastiff rolled away and leaped to its feet. With a yelp of pain and fear, it turned and ran around the side of the house toward the street in front.

There was the sound of a car in the alley. The motor raced and switched off. A door slammed. A man had gotten out of the car and was opening the door of the garage opposite where the werewolf was crouched, half-hidden by the gate.

She left her place of concealment and noiselessly slunk next to the car. The man turned to come back to it.

At that moment he caught sight of her. His jaw dropped. His hands intuitively came up to protect his throat.

She leaped at him!

With a cry of horror, the man stumbled back into the garage and pulled down the overhead door.

Foiled, the she-werewolf paced back and forth in front of the door for a few minutes. Sounds of another car turning into the alley sent her scurrying back to the professor's backyard. The ground there was more pleasing to her than the hard pavement in the alley.

For several turns around the untended area, she luxuriated in the wildness of it. She enjoyed feeling her paws on the half-rotted leaves and vegetation covering the soft ground. Her snout caught wisps of weedy odors that pleased her.

But suddenly, her nose picked up another scent. Then a flash of white caught her attention—a cat!

Of all her instincts as a werewolf, hatred of a cat was the strongest. She crouched behind a low bush waiting for the tiny animal to come closer. She would spring out and kill the cat with one crunch of her strong jaws. The killer lust filled her with a passionate joy. It was a heady feeling.

The white, furry Angora came closer. Only a step or two more, and the cat could not escape.

But, apparently, the cat too had an instinct for survival, for it stopped and turned its head to face the fearsome werewolf. With a screech of panic-stricken fear, it gave a sideways bound and hightailed it out of the yard.

Half-reluctantly, the werewolf loped around to the front. Across the street, the two boys she had seen earlier were talking to a man in a uniform and pointing in the direction of the professor's house. One of the boys was holding the black and brown mongrel in his arms, trying to comfort the still-quivering animal.

While a truck was going by, shielding her from their view, she slipped back into the house.

Once inside, she began to realize that strange new things were happening to her. A few minutes before, she had had only werewolf-thoughts and the werewolf-hunger for blood. Now, more and more, she began to think and feel as Sybil, the girl, would think and feel. Could she be changing again?

She remembered vaguely what the professor had said

—that she would probably stay in the werewolf form for only an hour or so and then return to her own form. It must be almost an hour now.

She peered down at her body. The gray, wolf fur was fading away and the soft, pink flesh returning. She was becoming Sybil again. She stood erect. Fully restored to her real self, her first thought was of how close she had come to killing Miff, her beloved pet Angora. Then she realized, with a start, that her clothes were in the cabinet. And so was the professor!

She rushed around and found an old laboratory smock and put it on. Full of worry over how he was faring, she hurried to the door of the cabinet and threw it open with her now-human hands.

At first she could see nothing. The professor was not there. Had he managed to get out while she was in the alley? But no, there was no way for him to open the door from inside.

Then, she heard a tiny squeak. She looked down. At her feet was a mouse—a tiny, helpless, forlorn, pathetic excuse of a mouse.

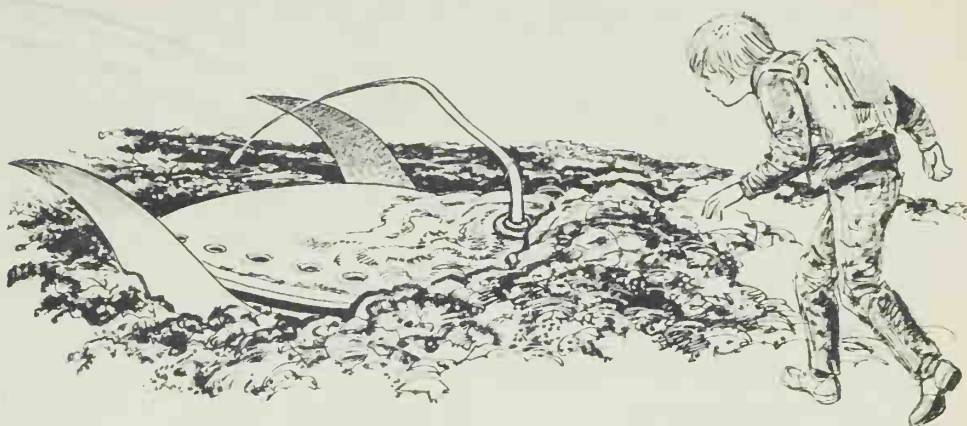
She reached down and picked it up. She looked into its pleading eyes.

“So, Professor Callicantzarus, you *would* turn me into a she-werewolf! Well, old fuzzy-head, how do you like being a mouse? All I can tell you is that I turned most of the dials. You had better hope that what happened to you wears off in an hour like it did for me. If not, who knows, you may have to stay a mouse for the rest of your life.” She smiled. “Which may be a very short life if Miff catches you.”

There was a loud knocking at the front door. She went through the house. It was the police officer she had seen with the two boys.

“There have been several complaints that there is a wolf or a big dog loose here, miss. Is that true?”

Sybil looked up at him and smiled. “No, officer, there is only my pet mouse and me.”



hide and seek

by MARIO MARTIN, JR.

The morning was cool and crisp and orange as Chucky made his way through the woods in search of the meteorite. He had just crossed the stream by traversing the fallen tree that had always served as a bridge for the guys in the neighborhood. Once past the stream, he started the long climb up the giant hill that everyone called Ickle Pickle. Chucky had often wondered why they called that thickly wooded hillside such a strange name. But no one seemed to know. This particular morning, the main thing on his mind was finding that meteorite.

He remembered the night before. He and his father had been out in the field behind their house, looking at the craters on the moon with his telescope. The sky had been a perfect swath of dark blue velvet, indented with shining gems that were really stars. Chucky was the one who saw it first—a yellow orange smear that sliced through the velvet

—and he knew it was a meteor. It was the first time he had ever seen a real one, although he had looked at pictures of meteors in his astronomy books many times. It was just plain luck that he and his father were out that night to see it. They traced its fiery path and judged that it had probably come down in the woods near their house. They watched to see if any fire started after impact, but there was none, so they went to bed.

The next morning Chucky had gotten up real early, eaten a quick breakfast of honey and oatmeal, and jumped on his bike. On his back he wore a knapsack crammed with some baloney sandwiches, a hammer, a chisel, ice tongs from his father's toolbox, matches, and a Thermos of hot soup.

He felt like an explorer or an investigator, like the men who worked for the *National Geographic Magazine*. Chucky imagined that he was trekking through unknown territory, pausing only to note new discoveries. Within an hour, he had worked his way to the crest of Ickle Pickle, and now he had only to comb through the several square miles of thickly wooded forest.

Hours passed as Chucky waded through the mounds of fallen leaves, patches of "sticker-bushes," and the occasional hidden tree roots that always threatened to trip him up. Finally, he paused for lunch, unpacking his knapsack and starting a small fire. He didn't really need the fire, but its presence made him feel like he was actually camping out. It was as he sipped his hot soup that he heard the voice.

But it wasn't really a voice. It was more like someone *thinking* to him inside his own mind.

Sitting very still, Chucky concentrated on the voice. *I am hurt. I need help. Please help me. I am hurt.*

"Who are you?" asked Chucky, turning around and

scanning the area but seeing nothing. "Where are you?"

As soon as Chucky spoke, the voice inside his head stopped. In the silence that followed, Chucky feared that he had scared it away. And then, suddenly, his mind was picking up the thoughts once more. *I am a . . . visitor to your world. My ship has crashed and I need help. Who are you?*

"I'm Chucky, Chucky Mills," he said, feeling strange talking to someone he could not see. He wondered what the voice had meant by "a visitor to your world." Did the voice belong to an alien? A being from another planet? If that were so, this was the fulfillment of one his wildest dreams. He remembered all the nights that he had stood in the field behind his house, peering up at the stars, wondering if there was anyone out there like himself.

Now it seemed as if there was.

Will you help me? the voice asked.

"Where are you? I can't see you anywhere," said Chucky.

Nor can I see you. I can only feel your nearness. Begin walking away from the sun. I will direct you.

As Chucky rose to comply with the alien's directions, the first suggestions of danger and doubt entered his mind. Suppose it was a trick? Suppose they were trying to trap him and capture him?

Please, said the voice, as if it sensed his doubt, *do not fear me. I will not harm you. Please come. I need your help.*

There was something about the voice in his mind that seemed sincere to Chucky, and he resisted the urge to run away or to go and tell his father what had happened. He doubted whether his father would believe him anyway. Stamping out his campfire and repacking his knapsack, Chucky headed off in the proper direction.

Several times he received new directions from the alien

voice. *Stop, to your left. Over now*, it would say. Or, *You are closer now. Straight ahead. Now turn*. This continued for several minutes until Chucky saw the wreckage of the ship.

He was surprised at the size of the thing. It was no larger than a soapbox racer, about five feet long, and it was shaped like a horseshoe crab—a dome with small fins flaring out along the bottom edge. The ground around the object was all plowed up and blackened, but the metal of the hull still seemed shiny and new. Except that the front part of the dome was crushed in like a cracked eggshell.

Chucky walked up to the craft. Upon closer inspection, he saw that parts of the ship were scorched, the metal discolored from fierce heat. He recalled what he had seen the night before—the streak of flame in the sky—and imagined what the fiery trip downward must have been like.

Peering inside the broken shell of the ship, he could see tiny rows of controls and things that looked like little television screens. Then he noticed a small wriggling shape that was lodged halfway back in the ship's interior. *Please do not be alarmed by what I look like*, said the thing inside. *I am hurt. You must help me*.

Chucky studied the alien creature. He looked like a big crab with his hard shell and many legs, only he was bigger than any crab Chucky had ever seen—over a foot long, he figured.

"What's the matter, can't you get out?" Chucky said as he gazed into the darkened depths of the ship.

No. A piece of the hull collapsed. I am trapped.

"You hurt bad?"

No. But I still need your help. Do you have any tools?

Chucky thought of his knapsack and the few things he had brought along. He pulled out the hammer and chisel

and attempted to chip a larger hole into the wreckage of the ship. After several blows the chisel was curled and worthless. "It's no good," said Chucky. "I can't break through."

Primitive materials such as yours will not help. The alien's words seeped into his mind. There was a finality about them, as if to tell Chucky that any further effort would be worthless.

"I'm sorry," said the boy. "I wish I could help you."

Perhaps you still can.

"How?"

I sense that you are a young member of your kind. Can you get help from your elders?

"My what?" asked Chucky, momentarily puzzled.

You would call them "grown-ups."

Chucky laughed softly. "Oh, yeah, I see what you mean. Well, yeah, I guess I could."

Then please do so. I must contact the leaders, the older members of your race. You must hurry. There is little time left.

"Time? Time for what?" Chucky felt shivers run up his spine, wondering what the alien creature really meant.

There is no time to explain. Please believe me that it is important.

The strange, crablike creature scraped his clawlike arms against the sides of the ship. All around the alien, instruments and blinking lights were still functioning. Chucky realized that he was dealing with something totally unknown, totally unfamiliar. There were many questions that he wanted to have answered before going on.

"I don't know," he said finally. "I think you'd better tell me what's going on first."

Very well. You are a determined young being. To begin, I am a member of a race from a place that is very far

from here. A planet which circles a star which you call Alpha Centauri. It is a world of harsh things—very different from here. My race is a harsh race. It has endured many difficult times. Now its members seek other worlds, kinder worlds, and they have chosen yours as one of them.

“Huh?” Chucky started. “You mean they’re coming here?”

No, not now. Not for a long time. They only wish to study this place. Test it. Sample its resources.

“Then what’re you doing here?” Chucky continued to peer in at the crab-thing.

There are members of my race who do not approve of conquering tactics. I am one of them. I escaped from my world to warn your people of what may come in the future. I have sacrificed myself for the good of something I believe to be greater than my one life.

Chucky wasn’t sure he understood everything the alien said, but he realized that something must be done. He would have to tell his father.

“All right,” he said after a pause. “I . . . I believe you. I’m going to get my father. Maybe he’ll know what to do.”

Yes. Please, go now. The alien’s voice was low and full of authority.

Chucky simply nodded his head, packed up his broken tools and started down the path through the woods. How would he tell his father what he had found! It all seemed so unreal, like a dream or a fantasy. What would his father say? Would he believe his son’s story?

Several minutes passed. He had cleared the rise of Ickle Pickle and was starting the long walk down to the stream, when the alien’s voice pounded once more in his brain. *Chucky Mills. Wait. You must return to me. Quickly.*

Sensing the urgency in the alien’s words, Chucky

turned and raced back through the woods. Errant branches scratched his face as he ran. Roots reached out, almost tripping him. But still he ran. Soon he could see the wrecked ship ahead of him. A strange, green light was emanating from within it.

Panting, out of breath, and somewhat scared, he peered inside. The crab-thing was bathed in intense light from several of the instrument panels. Lights were blinking furiously. "What's happening?" Chucky asked. "What do you want?"

They have come after me. Somehow they have traced my flight.

"Who's coming after you?" But Chucky already knew the answer to the question.

Members of my race. Your life is in danger here. But you could never get away in time. That's why I called you back. They are very close now—entering orbit above us. It will only be several minutes before they detect my position.

"What will they do to you?" asked Chucky, pushing a shock of dark hair from his eyes.

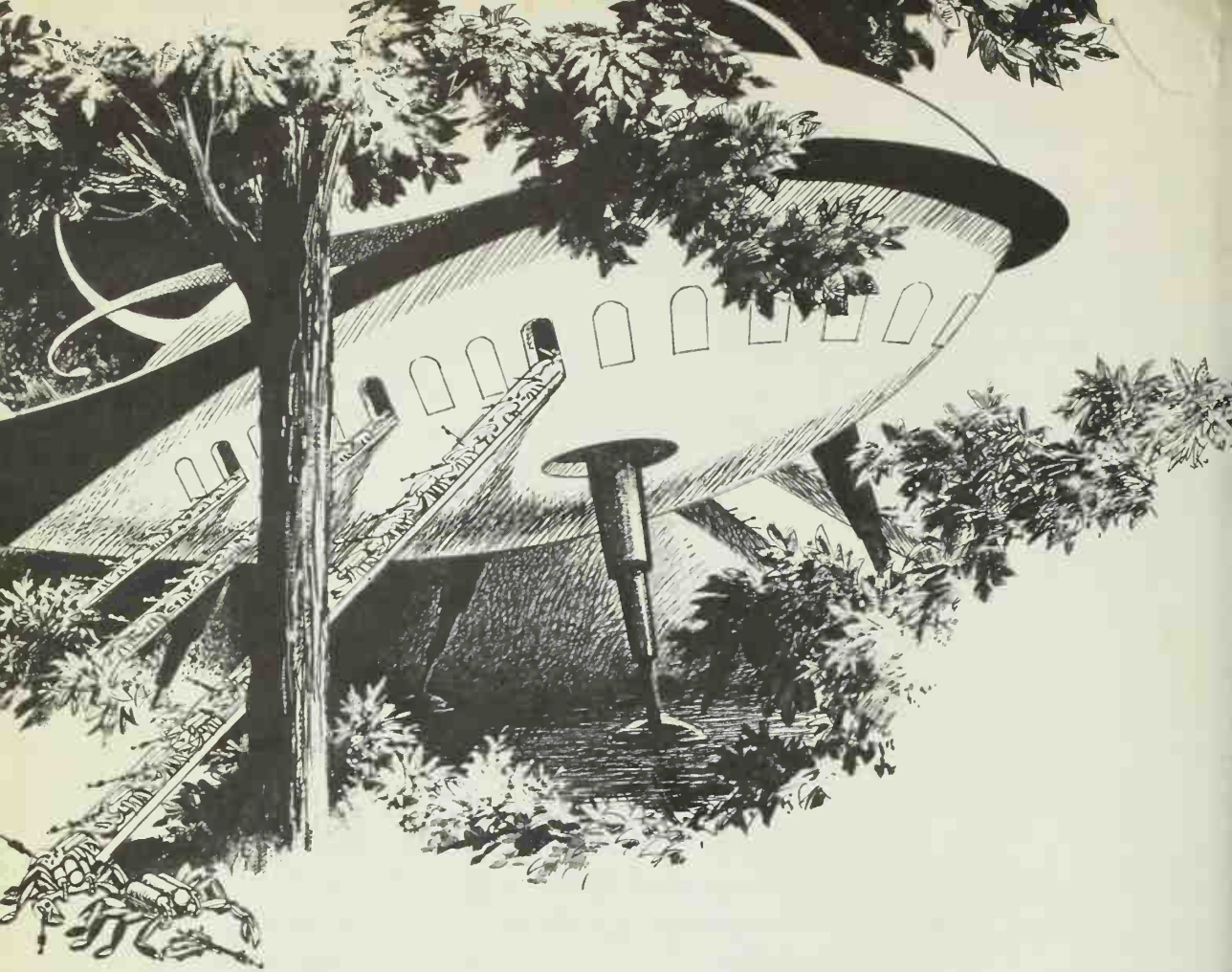
They will probably try to destroy me.

"You mean *kill* you?" The thought brought the utter reality of the moment to the ten-year-old boy.

Of course. And I fear that they will kill you too. Unless . . . The alien paused as his instruments began flashing new alarms. *They approach now! No more time for words. Listen to me. Do exactly as I tell you. It's our only chance.*

Chucky could only nod his head. He wanted to speak, but the words would not come. Looking up into the afternoon sky, he knew that an alien ship was streaking down upon them. Any second it might appear, ready to deal a death-laden blow.

The alien crab-thing was now struggling to extract a



small package from the quarters of the ship behind him. Presently, the creature extended one of his multi-jointed arms, holding what looked like a giant diamond in its claw. *Take this, Chucky. I am hoping that they will not detect your presence here immediately. Take this and get away from the ship—about one hundred of your measured “yards.” When they come down, hold the crystal at arm’s length. Concentrate all your thoughts into it. Try to will my attackers into nonexistence. Wish them to be destroyed. Can you do that?*

Chucky swallowed hard. He could hear a shrieking sound as something tore through the upper layers of the air. It was the alien ship. “I . . . think so. I think I can.” He



reached out and grabbed the strange diamondlike crystal from the alien's claw.

I hope you can, said the alien. And now, good-bye, my friend. Go now!

Turning and running, Chucky cleared the distance between the crashed ship and a thick clump of trees on the edge of the hill. He couldn't really measure the distance, but when he had huddled down in the heavy shrubbery among the trees, the alien's small ship was barely visible. He was covered with sweat. His chest was heaving as he strained for breath. The crystal in his hand grew slippery as he clutched

it tightly. He waited.

The ground shook as the alien ship came down. It sounded as if someone had ripped open the sky, letting all the thunder and lightning that was stored up in it come suddenly pouring out. Chucky sank lower into the moist autumn earth as he watched the ship lower itself to the forest floor. Unlike the smaller, wrecked craft, this one was immense. It was as big as a truck and shaped like a saucer.

Terrified, he watched four legs extend from the craft's underbelly to support its weight. Several ramps dropped down and almost at once, a horde of the crab-things came scuttling downward. Their motion was quick and jittery, and they looked like cheap, metal, windup toys. Only Chucky knew they were not windup toys, but deadly creatures. Each one of the crabs carried a weapon that looked something like a gun.

Suddenly, the first row of the creatures stopped their furious movements and extended their weapons toward the twisted, little ship. Chucky almost cried out as he saw needles of blue light stream from the nozzles. The beams struck the little alien ship. Instantly, it became a yellow orange fireball which shimmered, frozenlike, for several seconds before it faded away. The ship was gone. Nothing remained but a patch of scorched earth.

Chucky knew that the alien being was gone. A knot grew in his stomach as the knowledge crashed down on him. Gritting his teeth, he extended the crystal, pointing it at the great alien battle cruiser. Never before in his life had he felt what he did for those strange, scuttling creatures.

He wished them dead.

The crystal in his hand felt soft for a moment, losing its hard-edged, jewellike qualities. Then it regained its shape and grew warmer in his palm. The heat was almost

unbearable, like a candle flame or a hot pan from the oven. But Chucky held on, trying to concentrate on the aliens.

Just as the last row of creatures reached the lip of the boarding ramp, a burst of energy leaped from the crystal. Umbrella-shaped, the energy field enveloped the alien ship. Chucky let the crystal, now spent, drop from his hand as he witnessed the product of its awesome power. The crabs had frozen in their tracks. The hull of the ship began to glow a bright cherry red, and the air was alive with vibration.

Everything grew hazy as the alien ship and its crew started to shimmer like a mirage on a summer highway. Seconds ticked by—then the vibrations, the humming, everything faded away.

And the ship was gone.

No explosion, no flash of light, no sound. Nothing. It was as if the ship had never been there. Ever. It was like magic, only Chucky knew that it wasn't. His throat was as dry as the cracked autumn leaves all around him. His hands were trembling and his knees threatened to give way as he tried to stand up.

The crystal had lost its shining appearance. Its surface was black and dull. He picked it up and it began to melt into a thick, oily substance like old motor oil. He let go and it plopped heavily onto the dry leaves.

Slowly, he walked back to the spot where the little alien ship had been. The earth was singed, but other than that, there was no evidence that it had ever been there. Chucky thought about the strange little creature he had found there. It was funny how he looked just like the others who had come to kill him. Yet Chucky knew that he was in some way different. "Friend," thought Chucky. "He called me his friend." He knew now that the little alien creature had meant it, too.

The sun had slipped behind the clouds, and he became aware of the wind slicing through his jacket. Suddenly it was cold and growing darker. He wanted to be away from Ickle Pickle. He wondered if he would ever be able to come there again.

His father was raking leaves in the front yard when Chucky got home. "Well, son," he said, "find that meteorite?"

Chucky pushed down the kickstand on his bike and looked at his father. After a pause, he simply shook his head. "No, not exactly," was all he could say.

"Well, what did you find?" His father puffed on his pipe and smiled.

"A friend," said Chucky, trying hard to smile. "But he's not there anymore."



a thirst for blood

by ARTHUR TOFTE

He stood staring, horrified, down into his father's grave. . . .

In his hands were the iron spike, the mallet, the sharp-edged spade, and the canvas bag. He had been told what he had to do with them—but he could not do it!

In spite of what old Kalia said, his father was not a vampire. He had always been a good man, a *voyvode*, a leader of their horde, a kind father and a faithful husband, a *Rom* with the highest regard for Gypsy traditions and their common welfare.

Why did such a horrible tradition as this have to be carried into the modern world of 2040? It was something one could expect of Romany tribes in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But not in the twenty-first!

Just because little dark-eyed Tshaya, daughter of Stevo, had been found dead in the nearby forest with her throat torn open, leaders of the *kumpania* had met and de-

creed that Laetshi, dead a little more than ninety days, was a vampire and had come up out of his grave to drink her life-fluid. And now he, Alexandru, son of Laetshi and only fourteen years old, had been told what he must do to lift the curse of vampirism from the *kumpania* and from himself.

Only by descending into the grave and driving the iron stake through his father's heart, then cutting off his father's head with the spade, could he still forever the vampire his father had become. Then he would have to put the head in the canvas bag and that evening throw the severed head on the fire in the center of the encampment. Only in this way could the *kumpania* be sure that the vampire would never rise again. And equally important—that he, Alexandru, son of a vampire, would not become a vampire himself.

The boy looked around. The whole tribe had gathered in a circle fully twenty paces away to give him privacy for his ghastly deed. He was completely alone. He shivered with dread.

He had loved his father with all the love a Gypsy boy could give to the man who had taught him the joy of Romany life. From his father, Dru had inherited a driving need for freedom and a love of the open road. From his father, Dru had learned Gypsy lore. From him, he had learned the songs that his father's fathers had sung in their youth. And he had learned the ways to avoid the *Caje*, the strange, cruel, non-Romany people who hounded them from place to place.

No, Alexandru thought to himself, he could not do it. He looked over at old Kalia, who was motioning impatiently for him to descend into the grave.

The ground on top of the wooden coffin had been removed, and the coffin's lid loosened but not taken off. Soil

at the side of the coffin had been shoveled away and a short ladder put down.

Half in a daze, the young lad awkwardly made his way down the five rungs of the ladder. It was cramped at the bottom. There was just enough room for him to stand next to the coffin.

Slowly he pulled up the lid, just enough to peer within. It was too dark to see his father's features. Nor did he want to. More than anything else he wanted to remember his father as a laughing, hearty man with bold, flashing eyes, a handsome man, a born leader, a *boro rye*, a *tatcho Rom*.

Dru started to close the lid. The mere thought of driving the spike into his father's body made him shudder with horror. Then he stopped. . . .

What was this just under the lid? His mother's triple string of gold pieces! The envy of the whole tribe.

Slowly he pulled out the heavy chain of golden coins and looked at them through unshed tears. His mother must have slipped them into the coffin as her last tribute to her dead husband. And then, only two days later, in deepest grief, she had taken her own life, unwilling to face the future without her mate.

For a long moment Dru stared at the golden hoard. A fortune! And in that instant an idea came to him.

Yes, he would pretend to carry out old Kalia's orders. Then, that night, he would leave the camp. With both mother and father gone, there was nothing to hold him. With the *ari*, the gold wealth, he would make his way in the *Gorgio* world of non-Gypsies.

He hid the gold pieces in his jacket. Quickly he filled the canvas bag with chunks of soil. Then he used the mallet to pound tight the coffin lid.

He knew he would be allowed to carry the bag into the

camp. Later that evening, with all assembled, he would be expected to take his father's severed head out of the bag and hurl it into the fire. But before that moment arrived, he would have slipped away.

That part was easy. The next part would be much more difficult. Where could he go?

Not to another Gypsy group. They would only turn him back. That left only a life among the *Gorgios*. Could he live among them, hide among them?

Young Alexandru, dark-haired, dark-skinned, had lived all his fourteen years as a Romany boy. The thought of trying not only to live in the world of the *Gorgios*, with its hateful restrictions, but to hide among them, was frightening.

If it were only possible to go to *another* world! He knew from the talk around the campfires that the galaxy he lived in was large, had many worlds. Men of his *kumpania* had actually seen the long, slender, silvery spaceships that made their fabulous journeys to these far-off places. The Gypsy spirit in him had always thrilled at the thought of challenging the skies as his father and his father's fathers had challenged the roads of Earth. If only he could be the first Gypsy to travel to the stars . . . the first . . . the first. . . .

Before climbing back up the ladder, he looked at the open sky above him. His father had always told him to follow the Romany ways and to obey the Romany laws. What he was doing now was in violation of those ways and laws.

He was disobeying Kalia's instructions. He knew what that meant. Under Gypsy tradition, he would be followed wherever he went on Earth. There never would be a truly safe hiding place for him.

What was it old Kalia had said—that he, Alexandru,

as son of a vampire, would himself become a vampire if he didn't carry out the ritual! Well, he didn't believe his father had been a vampire.

As he climbed the few steps to the surface, he shuddered at the thought of challenging fate. If what old Kalia said was true, he might one day turn into a creature whose thirst could only be satisfied by sinking his teeth into a human throat and sucking warm, human blood. . . .

As he sat waiting for night to come, Dru looked down at the canvas bag that was supposed to be holding his father's severed head.

The *tiknos*, the noisy small boys who had been begging him to open the bag and let them take a "look," had run off when the big central fire was started. For the moment he was alone.

Swinging the bag over his shoulder, he strolled as casually as he could toward the horseyard. With a twist of his wrist, he tossed the bag into a bush.

Crouching low, he worked his way between the animals until he reached the farthest edge of the horseyard. There, like Kalia himself, stood Kalia's black *grast*, calm and aloof.

The horse knew Alexandru and made no objection when he untied the halter. In the dark he led the animal back out to the lane that led away from the encampment.

Leaping up on the horse's smooth back, he nudged him gently with his knees. He would need *bacht* for the flight, luck. Luck and his best Romany cunning to escape the wrathful Kalia. He knew he must leave no *urma*, no trail marks, behind him.

He must not be caught. He dreaded to think what his punishment for not following Kalia's orders would be. His only hope was to reach the *boro-gavaste*—the big, sprawling

city of the *Caje*. There, perhaps, he could find safety.

The *kumpania* had made camp deep in the forest, far away from the city that now promised escape. He had a long journey ahead. Once away from the sounds of the encampment, he let the horse have its head.

Stealing a horse was a great crime. Stealing Kalia's horse—well, he couldn't think of anything worse. But this stallion was the only one that could keep him ahead of the pursuit that was inevitable.

It was after midnight when he reached the edge of the city. At an open spot, he slipped off the horse and tied its halter to a fence. The pursuers, when they came, would certainly see the animal there. Perhaps Kalia's anger would be lessened at regaining his prized stallion.

Dru then doubled around to the center of the city through back alleys and narrow passageways. The buildings grew taller and more crowded together. Looking at where these people lived and worked, he knew he could never accept such confinement. Even now, in the hour of dawn, with only a few solitary figures shuffling along to their tasks, he felt pressed down by all the massive, overwhelming structures around him. The very air had a nauseous, rank smell to it that all but gagged him. It was utterly different from the open road of his Romany ways. Too different. He knew that he could never adjust to this kind of life.

By the time daybreak came, he had found what he was looking for—a small shop that had all kinds of merchandise for resale, including old, used clothing.

Hiding behind a crate in an alcove, he waited for the store to open. With one gold piece concealed in his hand, he entered the shop and picked out a pair of trousers and a jacket such as city boys wore, a plain white shirt, a boy's

cap, a pair of hard shoes, and a small traveling bag. In addition he picked out a girl's drab, blue, wrap-around garment and a scarf, "for his sister," he said. The wizened, bent-over proprietor held the gold piece for some time. Dru could feel the sharp, old eyes peering over at him.

Dru knew this was the critical moment. He sighed inwardly with relief when the old man bit down on the coin, looked it all over again, and dropped it into his tunic pocket.

Dru hurried out, back to his earlier hiding spot in the *allicove*. Behind the crate he changed his clothes, stuffing the dress and scarf with his old things into the traveling bag.

With the cap pulled down over his eyes, he stepped out into the people-crowded thoroughfare. He could see that despite their lure, gold coins were perhaps not going to be the easiest kind of money to use. Taking a chance, he went back to the shop.

The old man's eyes lit up with surprise.

"I have another gold piece," Dru said, sensing the other's greed. "I know what you think, sir. But it is not stolen. I need regular money for it."

As Dru expected, the old man was eager to look over the second gold coin. Without a word, he opened a drawer and counted out a small pile of paper and silver money. Dru knew that it was only about half what the gold was worth. But he took it.

Once outside, he hurried down a passageway between glass-and-metal buildings toward the intercity transportation station. Dodging around a corner, he was not surprised to see two of the men from his *kumpania* standing at the side of the loading platform. They were obviously watching for him.

At that moment the hover train roared in, its air brakes screeching. Dru waited until the last possible instant, just

as the automatic doors were closing, and then ran at top speed to slide in.

Breathless, he found a seat as the car took off on its swift flight. The ticket taker said he should have obtained a ticket before boarding but accepted Dru's money with a shake of his head.

Dru knew his next problem was to evade capture when the car reached its destination, the great interstellar spaceport. He had never been there, but like every Romany boy, he knew about it and had dreamed and hoped to see it someday.

Although it had traveled many hundreds of kilometers, the air car hardly reached its top speed before it began to brake. In minutes Dru would have to leave the car. And by now, the men from his camp would have telephoned ahead. Gypsies had friends everywhere. He wondered if the girl's disguise would fool the sharp-eyed men who would undoubtedly be waiting for him.

Just as the car came to a gentle, if noisy, air-cushioned halt, he rushed to the tiny restroom, slipped the dress over his other clothes, and arranged the scarf to cover his head.

Then, hurrying out with the exiting passengers, he joined a family group with several children. He grabbed hold of one youngster's hand and helped him onto the platform. Keeping his head down, he moved along with the family to the exit. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw several men watching closely as the passengers filed out.

Dru lifted the young one into his arms and told his mother he would carry the child through.

It worked!

An hour later, with the girl's dress packed away in the bag, he was at the freight entrance to the spaceport. Behind the high gates stood a row of needle-shaped ships, waiting

their turn to take off on unbelievable voyages to the stars.

Now, the problem was how to get into one of those ships. Dru looked around the spaceport. Tele-communication machines announced ship arrivals and departures. Flashing signs reminded travelers to take nourishment before their long journeys. Dru realized that he hadn't eaten since the day before. He found an automatic food-vending building where the workmen ate.

The men who loaded the spaceships looked as if they themselves came from many other worlds. They were strange-looking humanoids, powerfully built, ideal for the loading work they were doing. Some had blue-tinged skin, others were orange colored. All were rough, sturdy, well-muscled men.

Dru listened to their talk, much of which he couldn't understand. One odd-looking creature at the next table was talking loudly and bitterly. "If I only had enough gold to buy passage, I wouldn't hang around in this pesthole another day."

He was a huge creature, more than a head taller than any *Rom*, with four long arms and strong, thick legs. His flat face showed little intelligence.

Dru waited until the man was alone. Then he went over to his table.

"Sir," he said, "how much gold does it take to buy passage?"

The man peered down at him. "More than you'll ever see, boy."

Dru looked around to be sure that no one was listening. "I want to get away too," he said. "If I gave you enough gold to pay your passage away from here, could you get me into one of the ships leaving soon? Even today?"

The man laughed. "If you have gold, which I doubt,

why don't you just buy your own passage?"

Dru thought for a moment. He knew that friends of Kalia would be watching for him at the passenger terminal.

"I have no papers," he said.

"You don't need papers to leave. Only when you arrive. What are you trying to put over on me, boy? Running from the law?"

The man started to stand up. Dru pulled out a gold piece and slid it across the table. The giant's eyes lighted up.

"I know where there are more gold coins like this," Dru said. "Lots more."

The man glared fiercely at him. "Come with me, boy. The police will want to know about this."

Dru pulled out a second gold piece. "Don't you want to hear why I want to leave? And where the rest of the gold is?"

The man sank back into his chair.

Dru would have preferred to make up a story. But he had no time to think of one that might be plausible. It had to be the truth. With fervor and obvious conviction, he told what had happened and why he was escaping the anger of his Gypsy leader.

The man grinned. "You almost make me believe you."

"Can you get me aboard one of the ships?"

The man thought awhile and then his stolid face broke into a smile. "There's a ship leaving tonight. I could carry you on in a bag. First let me see the rest of the gold."

Dru pulled out two of the three strings that had been his mother's proudest possession, the result of generations of her family's hoarding of gold pieces. He pushed them across the table.

"Yes, boy," the giant said as he scooped up the coins and hurriedly dropped them out of sight into a pocket.



He led Dru to a loading spot. Behind some bales, he slipped a heavy bag over the lad's body. The next thing Dru knew he was being toted on the big man's shoulder up a long ramp. Then he was dumped roughly on top of what felt like a pile of other bundles.

The blast-off when it came was more than Dru could stand. A crewman found him unconscious on the floor of the storage compartment and took him to the captain.

Although the captain raged at him, both knew there was no turning back. Begrudgingly, he was accepted. In the days and weeks and months that followed, he gladly, even eagerly, performed the menial chores given to him. He was on his way.

He had done it! He was truly free from the punishment old Kalia had said would be his . . . free of the long Romany arm of vengeance that would have followed and found him wherever he went on Earth.

But he was not on Earth! He was on Xylon, a planet many light years away from Earth. It had been colonized only recently by people from Earth, Dr. Zeller had told him. In six months Dru had traveled farther than any Gypsy who had ever lived, perhaps as far as all the Gypsies who had ever wandered the Romany *drom*, the open road.

And now, only a month after landing on this heavily forested planet, he had grown to appreciate its natural beauty. The air was cleaner, purer than on Earth. The gravity was slightly less, giving his young muscles a sense of buoyancy he had never experienced before. The colonists had welcomed him in spite of the way he had come to them. Even the natives were a delight—friendly, eager to do anything asked of them.

But somehow, he sensed things were not right!

The colonists seemed to be afraid of something.

They used the natives to help build their new homes, to cut down trees, to lay out paths, to plant seeds, to work on the dam. But at night, after the natives had gone back to their secret habitations in the forest, a fear seemed to settle over the Earth people.

"Why?" Dru asked Dr. Zeller one morning. "What's wrong? From what I've seen of them, the natives seem harmless. In fact, they seem like friends. Why are the people afraid of them?"

Dr. Zeller looked down at the lad who had been put under his charge. A young man himself, only in his late twenties, he had grown fond of the boy. He smiled. "I'm not sure our people are afraid of the natives. It could be something else. I'm not sure what it is."

He paused as he packed his medical bag. "We may know more this morning. I've just had a new call. It might be a good idea, Dru, if you came along with me. Maybe you can help. If you are to be my assistant, you'll have to see this sooner or later."

Of all the *Gorgios* Dru had ever had contact with, Dr. Zeller was one in whom he felt he could have utmost confidence and trust. He nodded eagerly as he followed him out of the colony's tiny infirmary.

"What you are going to see this morning," the doctor said as they hurried along, "is quite mystifying. It's something that has happened four times in the last month since the ship arrived. Do you know what mystifying means, Dru?"

"I think so, Dr. Zeller. Our *Romani*, our Gypsy women, do many mystifying things. My own mother was famous for her *dukking*."

"What's that, Dru?"

“Telling fortunes, looking into the future. It’s a gift many of our women have.”

“Do you really believe anyone can foresee the future, Dru?”

The Gypsy boy peered up at the other. He smiled and said nothing.

Arriving at one of the older and smaller huts that had been built for the earliest settlers—who had come nearly two years before—Dr. Zeller pushed open the door and walked in. Dru slid in behind him.

The hut was divided into three rooms. Half of the space was given over to a living-kitchen-dining area. The other half was separated into two small bedrooms. It was to one of these bedrooms that the doctor hurried, with Dru close behind him.

A middle-aged woman was lying on the bed. At the side of the bed was a young, fair-haired girl, weeping softly. Even in the dim light it was obvious that the woman was close to death. There was no color in her cheeks, no glow of life in her eyes. Her breathing was gaspy, as though she were struggling to stay alive.

With care, the doctor uncovered the woman’s neck area. Dru peered around the doctor’s arm and was shocked to see the two puncture wounds in the throat. Small drops of blood had dried around the wounds.

“Hand me my kit,” the doctor said to Dru. From it he took out a blood transfusion bottle, packed in its own box. Quickly he inserted a needle into the woman’s arm and told Dru to hold up the bottle.

When the bottle was empty, and the woman on the bed seemed to be resting, the doctor said he had to leave but would be back as soon as he could. As he and Dru left the cottage, the doctor shook his head in answer to the young

lad's question about the woman. "She may live. More likely she won't. She has lost a lot of blood."

"How would she lose it?"

"That, Dru, is the big question. How indeed? If I were superstitious or believed in the old legends, I'd say a vampire had attacked her."

Dru's eyes widened in horror. A vampire! That's what old Kalia had accused Dru's father of being. When Tshaya had been found in the woods with her throat ripped open, it was Laetshi, dead for three months, whose buried body was suspected of coming up and performing the dread act of vampirism. And he, Alexandru, son of Laetshi, was also doomed to be a vampire unless he followed the traditional Romany ritual which would stop the dead man's cursed thirst for human blood. Only Dru hadn't gone through with what old Kalia had ordered him to do.

Now this! Vampires on Xylon! It wasn't possible. And yet that woman the doctor had just treated displayed puncture wounds in her throat and had suffered great loss of blood.

Terror seized Dru. If the colonists ever learned why he had run away from his *kumpania*, they might easily believe that he was the vampire. The doctor had said this had been happening only since the ship he was on had arrived. Sooner or later someone would point a finger of suspicion at him.

Was it a curse? Or was it the Gypsy fate of always being accused when bad things happened? In his old life, he had often seen the whole tribe pack up and leave a pleasant camping area rather than face the unfair and unjust *Caje* accusations.

The Gypsy way, after centuries of persecution, was to flee. But for Dru there was no place on Xylon to go. Not even the colonists knew what lay out there in the almost

impenetrable jungle that surrounded them.

He trailed along behind his friend as the doctor headed back toward the infirmary, where other patients awaited him. One thing was certain in Dru's mind—he must keep his secret.

Throughout the day the doctor made several more visits to the ill woman to give her additional transfusions. Dru stayed in the infirmary. Early the next morning, he and the doctor made their way to the cottage. The doctor was obviously worried about what might have happened during the night. The blond girl opened the door for them. Dru could see that she had been crying.

The woman was still alive, but her breathing was shallow. She looked up at them with despair.

After Dr. Zeller had examined her, he said, "The colony leaders have delegated me to ask you what happened."

The woman shook her head. "I don't know what happened. I felt something at my throat. I woke up. I tried to call out. I was too weak."

"Did you see anything?"

Again, she shook her head. "I saw nothing." She looked over at the girl next to the bed. "What will happen to my daughter, Elissa, if I die?"

"Mrs. Skefly," the doctor said as he picked up her hand, "you now have a good chance for full recovery. Don't worry. I'm going to give you both a mild sedative. I suspect Elissa has been up all night with you. I'll leave Alexandru with you while you both sleep."

As he left, the doctor took Dru aside. "Let me know if you notice any change. I'll try to get one of the older women to come and relieve you."

Dru nodded that he understood. He returned to the task of watching the woman as she lay motionless on the bed. Several times he got up to make sure she was still breathing.

After an hour or so, a neighbor woman came. As Dru started to leave, the girl Elissa came out of the other bedroom. She followed him outside.

"Will my mother live?" she asked.

Dru took his first good look at the girl. She was very close to his own age, probably thirteen or fourteen. She had that deceptively fragile look that fair-skinned people often have. But he did admit to himself that she was very pretty. At least, she was quite different from the dark-skinned, dark-haired, fiery *chis* of the Gypsy camps.

Dru felt himself stumbling for words. "I'm only the doctor's helper. But I do believe he thinks she will recover."

He looked at her again. "My name is Alexandru," he said. "I live at the infirmary with the doctor. He calls me Dru. Your name, I know, is Elissa. How long have you been on Xylon?"

"Two years. My father died in that first terrible year we had when the colony was being established. I have no one else but my mother."

Dru waved his hand in a gesture that seemed to embrace the whole Xylon world. "It's all so peaceful, so beautiful. It doesn't seem possible that anything bad could happen here. What did happen?"

They walked for a few minutes in silence. Then she began.

"I was on the first ship to come here. My father was one of the leaders of the original colony. He was the first to make contact with the natives and to get their help in building our settlement."

"How did he die?"

“While building the dam in the river, he fell into the water. He never came up although he was a good swimmer. Since then, no one dares go in the stream. There is something dangerous there.”

“The natives?” Dru asked. “What are they like? I have only seen them at their work and have never really learned much about them.”

Elissa smiled. “Most of the colonists think they are wonderful. They do anything you ask them to do. They work hard. They are gentle and kind. And you must admit they are graceful, beautiful in fact. In a way they look like pictures I have seen of the kangaroos that used to live in Australia—only with heads like ours and long strong arms. They’re very intelligent, too. Already many of them have begun learning to speak our language—which is more than I can say about our learning to speak theirs.”

Dru had listened in silence, looking at the ground as they walked. Now he stopped and looked carefully at Elissa. He sensed something in her words, something that she wasn’t voicing.

“But you don’t really trust them, do you.”

“Trust? Yes. They are completely honest and trustworthy. Without their help the colony might have failed. And yet—”

“And yet what?” Dru pushed the question.

“And yet something did attack my mother. It’s the fourth such attack in the past month. It seems unlikely that anyone who came on that last ship is doing this terrible thing. You were on the ship. And you don’t look like a vampire to me.”

Dru turned away to hide his confusion. There it was! The first breath of suspicion. Elissa had denied it. But how about the other colonists? Would they be as kind? Wasn’t it

logical to suspect him? He was a stranger here.

After a moment of silence, he said, "I'd give anything to find out what really is happening. You think it might be the natives?"

"It just can't be," Elissa stated. "And yet it seems to be the only answer. I know a native boy and girl, brother and sister. I'd like you to meet them. Maybe they can tell us something."

By this time they had made the complete circuit of the settlement and were back at Elissa's cottage. "I'll see how mother is," she said.

In a moment she was back. "She's sleeping. If anything develops, I'll come to the infirmary. And, Dru, thanks for talking with me."

As he walked back to the infirmary, he thought fearfully of his situation. He was a Gypsy. A stowaway. A stranger to them all. He was the logical suspect. He had no defense if the colonists got the idea he was a vampire.

Well, there was only one thing to do—meet Elissa's native friends and try to find out if they knew anything about what was happening.

Two days later, with her mother well on the way to recovery, Elissa took Dru to meet the native youngsters with whom she had become friendly.

Dru liked them immediately, although he found them quite shy at first. By associating with Elissa, they had learned enough English to understand the colonists and be understood. But when Dru asked the boy what he was called in his own language, all he could get in reply was a long hissing sound. Dru laughed and said he'd call him Suss. The girl he dubbed Sis.

Both Suss and Sis showed their willingness to be friends.

Yet, when Dru asked if he and Elissa could see where they lived, the two looked at each other and giggled.

"Too far," Suss said.

"But you come every day to the settlement," Dru said. "It can't be very far."

Suss shook his head and pointed vaguely toward the great forest that surrounded the colony. "Too far," he repeated. "Trees too many."

Dru was puzzled by this refusal of his new friends. That night he asked Dr. Zeller if any of the colonists had ever visited where the natives lived.

"No," said the doctor. "There are no trails. Some of our men have tried to follow them when they leave here, but the woods are just too dense. The colony leaders finally decided that it was best to let well enough alone. The natives provide a free and willing labor supply. They are gentle and friendly and offer no threat to our safety."

"No threat?" Dru asked. "What if they are the ones who have made those four vampire attacks on the colonists?"

Wearily, Dr. Zeller passed a hand over his eyes. "Don't think I haven't considered that as a strong possibility. In fact the colony leaders have talked about it several times. They agree it is possible. But there is no proof. Most important, they want to do nothing to disturb the relationship with the natives. We need their help."

That afternoon something happened that gave Dru his first opportunity to investigate for himself. He and Suss were working on the dam, helping to build it higher against the expected seasonal flood. Elissa had warned him to be careful not to fall into the water. It was near the spot where her father had lost his life.

Suss was moving some stones when he stumbled and fell backward into the water. Dru heard the splash and the



boy's cry of horror. He turned to see the ripple of some underwater creature coming at great speed toward the floundering youth.

Slipping his *chiv*, his Gypsy knife, between his teeth, he plunged into the water and with a half-dozen strokes reached Suss. The boy was frantic with fear.

Rushing toward them was some kind of large water beast. Just as the Gypsy boy reached Suss, he gave a quick twist and faced the open jaws of the oncoming creature. With knife now in hand he flipped over and under its belly. Once, twice, three times he ripped at the white underside.

Coming up for air, he grabbed Suss by the neck and shoved him toward the dam. He helped him up and then held his shoulders while the native boy doubled over, coughing and choking, letting the water flow out of his mouth.

When he had recovered enough to sit up, he looked at Dru with wonder and new respect. He pointed at the water and started to speak. "You . . . ?"

Dru answered the question he supposed the boy was trying to ask. "Yes, I can swim. All my people learn to swim as soon as we can walk."

He paused and looked out again over the water. "Tell me, Suss, what kind of water animal was that?"

The native boy's face filled with terror. "Bad!" he said in a half whisper. "Kills. . . ."

When Dru tried to raise him to his feet, it was clear that the boy would need help. He was still shaking and weak.

"My father. . . ." Suss hesitated. "Will thank." Then he added, "Need help . . . home."

With Suss leaning on him, Dru and the boy made their way out of the settlement and into the dense forest.

The Gypsy boy had seen a few forests on Earth but none like this. It had an eerie feeling to it, as though he were

entering a magical fairyland. The trees were unlike any he had ever known—full of thick red leaves and hanging vines with crystallike berries. It was a surprise to Dru to see how Suss seemed to know which way to go without a trace of a path to guide him. By himself, he would have been lost in minutes in spite of his Romany training.

After about an hour they suddenly came to a large open glade. At one side was a stream, possibly the same one the colonists were trying to dam farther up. In the central area were about a hundred long, narrow buildings made of natural logs and untrimmed tree limbs. At the other edge of the space was an animal corral with several hundred cow-like animals.

"Come," Suss said, pointing at one of the huts. "My home."

A few minutes later Dru was listening blankly to what he supposed was Suss's description, in the sibilant native language, of what had happened. The boy's father and mother glanced from Suss to Dru, smiling.

Suss finally turned to the Gypsy boy. "Father thanks . . . mother thanks . . . feast tonight . . . you stay?"

Dru nodded. Here was the opportunity he had been hoping for to learn more about the natives. None of the colonists, Dr. Zeller had said, had even been able to visit the native village. And anyway, night was coming on.

A steady stream of natives came to pay their respects to Dru. They smiled thankfully at him as they filed slowly past him. One who had learned a few words of English said "thanks" several times.

A huge fire had been started in the center of the area. Already the flames were reaching almost half as high as the tops of the trees at the edge of the clearing. The whole community of natives was gathering, their faces happy and

bright in eager anticipation of the evening's festivities.

Half closing his eyes, Dru could almost imagine himself back with his Gypsy people. The laughter. The cries of the *chaves*, the children calling to each other. The feeling of excitement filling the air.

Night came quickly on Xylon. One minute there were traces of golden light in the sky and the next minute all was dark, as though a blanket had been thrown over the world.

Dru was given a place of honor between Suss and his father. Where before all had been noise and confusion, suddenly all was still.

Suss's father stood up, his hand on Dru's shoulder. He talked to the assembled natives in their language. When he finished, all were looking at Dru and smiling.

Then, off to one side, a stringed musical instrument started up a steady five-note beat, repeating the single phrase over and over. Then another instrument joined in. And another . . . until it was an insistent, almost overpowering attack on the senses.

Without changing pattern, the thrumming music gradually moved to a quicker tempo. And out from the shadows came a dozen young native girls and boys, led by Sis. She smiled at Dru as she moved past him.

The dance, obviously in his honor, became faster and faster. The dancers, graceful as young animals, used their strong legs and powerful tails to throw themselves in long, high, kangaroolike leaps that kept going higher and higher. Higher than any human could achieve. The dance had the furious intensity, almost wildness, of the Gypsy dances Dru remembered. Yet it was totally different.

Suss's father pressed a cup into Dru's hands. Without thinking he drank deep.

The liquid was fire in his throat. It was stronger than the strongest Romany drinks. And yet when Suss came to refill the cup, Dru held it out willingly.

Not since he had left the Gypsy life had he felt so gay, so happy. He struggled to focus his eyes on the dancers.

"Now," Suss whispered to him, "the feast!"

Dru watched as Suss's father came leading one of the animals he had seen earlier. Without comprehension, he looked as the beast was brought before him and a small slit made in its throat. A cup was held to catch the flowing blood. When the cup was full the wound was closed and the beast led away.

Suss's father presented the cup to Dru. Suss whispered, "Drink!"

Dru knew that it was all wrong. He knew he must not take the cup and drink its dark red contents. But his hands went out and he held the cup between them.

An inner voice kept telling him to cast the cup to the ground. But another voice told him he must drink. His hands shook with the conflict within him.

"Drink!" Suss said as he helped raise the cup to the Gypsy boy's lips.

And drink he did. The warm, sickeningly rich liquid slid down his throat and he almost gagged. He looked around at the natives, who were now cutting into the veins of more animals that had been brought forward. All were drinking eagerly, even joyously, of the warm liquid.

Dru tried to get control of his senses, but his head was in a whirl. Was this what it meant to be a vampire, to thirst after warm, rich blood? Kalia had warned him—if he didn't drive a spike into his father's heart and cut off his head, he would himself become a vampire.

A craziness seized him. Was he really turning into a

vampire? Was the curse finally taking effect? Was this truly a thirst for blood that was overwhelming his senses? His thoughts swirling, he turned desperately to Suss and asked, "Can you take me back to the settlement?"

"Now?"

"If you can in the dark? And if you are strong enough?"

"I can," Suss replied. "I'm . . . better now."

At the edge of the colonists' settlement, Suss left Dru to go the rest of the way alone.

The Gypsy boy, his head still spinning, looked over the village where all were sleeping. He thought to himself—he had tasted blood! His mind was filled with wild desires, wild fantasies. He was disgusted by this new and sudden thirst for blood. Nevertheless he could not deny it. It filled him so that he could think of nothing else.

It must be true—old Kalia's curse was on him. Across the great void of space, the long arm of Romany vengeance had caught up to him and now was taking its toll.

Against his will, against his very nature, he had become the vampire old Kalia had said he was fated to be. He now had a thirst for blood. There was no escape. . . .

Trembling with fear at what was happening to him, and yet unable to stop, he headed for the cottage where Elissa and her mother lived. All he could think of was Elissa's soft, white throat and the pure, young blood that pulsed there.

The thought of what he was about to do horrified him. Yet, slowly, step by step, he went noiselessly toward where the girl lived.

There were no locked doors on Xylon. He slipped in, his Gypsy cunning telling him how to avoid making even the slightest sound. With a last desperate effort to control

himself, he halted just inside the room where the blond girl lay sleeping on her bed. Then a new surge of thirst for blood overwhelmed him and he moved cautiously forward.

A single streak of light coming through the window from one of Xylon's four moons was an arrow across Elissa's bed, pointing to her exposed throat.

Could he really do it? Could he really sink his teeth into the soft flesh of the girl and suck her life's blood from her? This was the girl who had befriended him. No other person in the colony, except for Dr. Zeller, had been as good to him as Elissa.

He moved one foot forward and then the other toward the sleeping girl. So peacefully she slept. So fair. So lovely. And yet—so inviting to his blood lust.

Careful not to touch the bed, he leaned over the still figure. His lips curled back, exposing his sharp teeth. He lowered his face. Lower. . . . Lower. . . .

His teeth touched her throat. . . .

In that instant she awoke and screamed before he could stop her. He backed away, uncertain and confused as to what to do. Her screams shrilled through the night air, calling for help.

At the door of the cottage, he peered out. Already, lights were going on in neighboring cottages. Men were coming. He tried to dodge around the corner. A big, burly man seized him and held him tightly.

"I've got him," the man yelled.

In a few minutes, half the colony's people were surrounding the boy and his captor.

An angry mutter rippled through the crowd that was closing in around them.

Dr. Zeller came then, pushing his way among the settlers, as the mutter increased. Terrifying words rose out of

the general noise and confusion. "Vampire!" "Hang!" "Hang him now!"

Dr. Zeller pulled the frightened and confused boy toward him, holding him by the shoulders, facing the crowd. His words were calm. He would be responsible for the boy. Tomorrow, a trial. Now everyone back to their quarters. . . .

For the rest of the night Dru sat up with Dr. Zeller. At first the boy had nothing to say. The doctor warned him that unless he had some kind of defense or reason for what he had done, he had no chance.

Gradually, as the night hours passed, Dru told his story. He told of old Kalia's warning and how he had violated it and run away. He told of visiting the native village and drinking the native liquor. He described the feast and the bloodletting. He told of how he had fought with his conscience, but that some force within him had made him go to Elissa.

When morning came, the doctor led Dru to the central meeting area. All the colonists were there. From the expressions on their faces, Dru could see that, to them, he was guilty and deserved to die.

Dr. Zeller held up his hands for attention.

"I take it upon myself to defend young Alexandru, our Gypsy stowaway. He is guilty, and yet not guilty.

"First, let me say that he is not responsible for the four previous vampire attacks on our people in the colony. Those were done by the natives.

"From what Alexandru told me last night, they are drinkers of blood. And for a good reason. Their diet of fruits and berries and other native foods is grievously lacking in iron. Their systems crave it. So they drink the blood of animals they keep for that purpose, just as certain African tribes did until only a few decades ago.

“This, I assure you, is something that can be treated. I am certain I can correct their iron deficiency and end any further vampire attacks. The natives are not vampires in the legendary sense. They are just people suffering from lack of iron, trying to survive. I am taking out of our stores a supply of liquid ferrous sulfate to administer to them.”

He paused and put his hand on Dru’s head. “But here, I must be truthful, is possibly a true vampire!”

Dru looked up with shocked surprise at his doctor friend.

“Yes,” the doctor went on, “this young Gypsy boy is a vampire . . . in two ways. For one thing, he is a vampire because he thinks he is. The chief of his Gypsy tribe told him he would become one unless he performed a certain ritual. Which he didn’t do. Instead he ran away. And last night, under the influence of a native drink which probably included a strong drug, he hallucinated, and in his mind became a vampire. And acted like one.

“The other reason for his vampirism is a medical one. In testing Dru last night, I found he is suffering from a disease called Porphyria. There are several forms. His is one of the rare ones. He has inherited it. All I can say is that it is a disorder of porphyrin metabolism, a biochemical disease. The records show that it sometimes makes its victims crave the drinking of fresh blood. I have checked my reference books and find the disease can be cured.

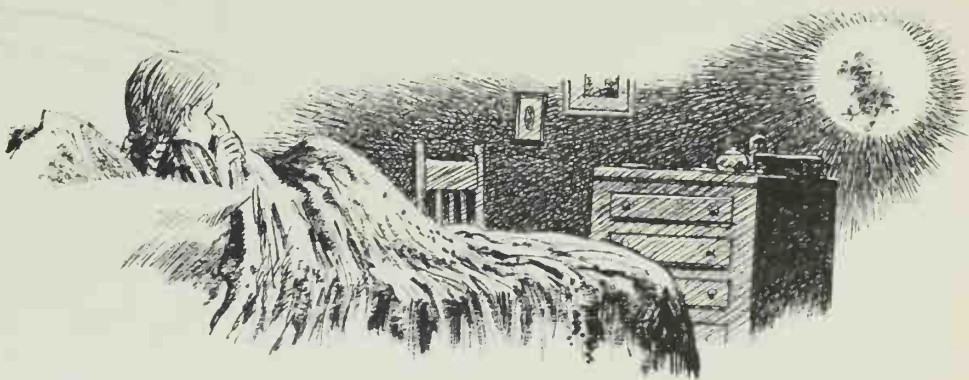
“So, friends, I appeal to you. I agree that Dru should not be allowed to go free until he is cured. But I promise you that I can effect a complete cure in less than eight months. In the meantime the boy will be in my care. I will assume full responsibility.”

There was mild grumbling from some of the colonists, but within a few minutes they were disbanding and going

back to their various tasks. Finally only Elissa was left.

She came up and took Dru's hand. She looked up at Dr. Zeller. "I can see him and talk to him, can't I?"

The doctor smiled and nodded. "That is the spirit of forgiveness that will make this colony a success. Yes, Elissa, he will need a friend in the months ahead."



the hole in jennifer's room

by BRIAN T. LoMEDICO

The first night Jennifer thought something was wrong, she didn't really *see* anything. She only heard the funny noises.

And of course, that wasn't so unusual because the house was always making strange noises. It creaked and groaned and shifted during those long hours of darkness when she was supposed to be sleeping. On this particular night, while she was lying in bed, trying to fall asleep, Jennifer heard the clicking sounds.

Clicking sounds.

Not creaks, or groans, or any other sound she had ever heard. It was more like the noise those little tin toys make when they are pushed with a thumb and an index finger—the ones that look like frogs or beetles and come in candy boxes.

But Jennifer didn't have one of those cheap toys.

Climbing out of bed, she groped around in the dark

until she found the night-light. Turning it on, she sneaked out of her room and down the hall to her parents' room. The door was closed, but she could see a sliver of light at the bottom of the door and hear the muffled voices of the television. . . . No clicking noises.

Her parents weren't making the noise. What could it be? She stood by the door a few seconds longer, just to make sure, and then she went back to her room and jumped into bed. This time she left the night-light on. But nothing could be seen except the usual pieces of furniture, her dolls, her bookshelf, and some clothes she had forgotten to hang up.

Thinking about the noises, she fell asleep.

The next day, she asked her mother about the clicking sounds.

"Oh, it's probably just your imagination, Jenny," her mother said. "Don't you worry about it."

Jennifer *didn't* worry about it . . . until the next night . . . when she heard the clicking sounds again.

The night-light cast a faint but welcome glow, lighting up the corners of the room. She sat up, her blanket clutched around her, expecting—what? Suddenly a strange, gleaming ball defined itself in the corner above her dresser. It was about as big as a basketball and it shone like a kerosine lamp. Jennifer felt the hair on the back of her neck rise. She wanted to scream out, but no sound would come from her throat. Her hands were shaking, her palms moist. Sinking back down in her bed, she pulled up the covers so that just her eyes peeked out.

The shining ball stayed perfectly still as something appeared inside of it. At first, the image was cloudy, like smoke swirling in a crystal ball. Slowly, it became much clearer until she could see the thing that was wriggling inside.

To Jennifer, the thing looked like the embryo of an unborn chick in its egg, like one she had seen at the museum. As she watched, it changed. Then, suddenly, there he was—a birdlike creature—actually passing through the side of the ball and into her room. She heard him plunk his clawed feet onto her dresser top. Then she heard the clicking sound again, a sound he made with his beak. The thing also had large eyes that bulged out of his head and moved about like beacons on a swivel.

Jennifer wasn't sure if the bird-thing had seen her or not, but she didn't want to just lie there and let him grab her. Quick as a cat, she leaped from the bed and raced for her closet door. The creature snapped its head up and peered in her direction. Reaching the closet, Jennifer opened the door and groped inside the darkened area until she touched upon her big brother's baseball bat.

Holding the weapon high above her head, she whirled and charged at the bird-thing on her dresser. She was ready to smash him, when he spoke. "Wait! Wait! Don't do it! Let me explain!"

Jennifer froze, thinking, "This little monster has just talked to me!"

The creature heaved his chest, sighing in relief. "Thank you very much," he said, again in perfect English. "Now, if you will just let me explain, I think we can both forget this whole thing."

"What are you talking about?" asked Jennifer, lowering the bat slowly to her side. "Who are you? And where did you come from? And what is *that* thing?" She pointed at the glowing ball behind the bird-creature's back.

"So many questions," he said. "I don't know where to start. Let me see. . . . Well, my name is Xander, and I come from the Sixth Dimensional Level, and that—"



"You come from *where*?" said Jennifer.

"The Sixth Dimensional Level. Oh, you don't understand that, do you? Well, let me see. . . . How would I explain this whole thing? Oh yes, look. This world you live in is called the Third Dimensional Level, and you have three basic directions—up, down, and across. Do you understand?"

Jennifer nodded.

"That's good. Now, the place I normally live in has not just three directions, but six! Hence the name, you see?"

"I . . . think so, but I'm not sure," said Jennifer, completely engrossed in the little creature's lecture. He sounded just like Mrs. Johannsen, her fourth-grade arithmetic teacher.

"And this thing behind me," said the creature, pointing to the glowing ball that still shimmered like a kerosine lamp, "is a hole that leads from my dimension, or world, into yours."

"A hole?" asked Jennifer. "It looks like a ball to me."

"Well, it's a dimensional hole," said Xander. "It just looks like a ball."

"Oh, I see," said Jennifer nodding slowly. She was getting to like this funny little thing. He didn't seem at all like a monster. He wasn't mean, or nasty, or even scary. He was standing there, kind of smiling—if a bird-beak could ever smile—when she asked him another question, "What are you doing here, sneaking into my room?"

"Well, well, I was waiting for you to ask me that," he said, the smile disappearing. "You see, in my world I'm an inventor, and for the last couple of years, I've been trying to invent a way to pass into the other dimensional levels. I have this machine I was playing with in the lab tonight, and it finally worked! So here I am!"

Jennifer wasn't impressed. "But you said you live in the Sixth Level, right?"

The bird-thing nodded.

"Well, how come you came all the way into the Third Level? What happened to the fourth and the fifth?"

"I was afraid you might ask me that too," he said, wringing his little hands together. "Say, how old are you anyway?"

"Me? I'm ten," she said. "Why'd you ask?"

"I was just wondering if everyone here is as sharp as you are."

"My mother says I'm 'precocious'—whatever that means," Jennifer added, laughing lightly.

The bird-creature laughed too. "Yes, I think your mother's right about that."

"Hey, wait a minute," said Jennifer. "You never answered my question. How come you came all the way into my world? What happened to the other two?"

"That's the problem," said the bird-thing, as he started pacing back and forth across the dresser top, looking like a windup toy. He clicked his beak nervously. "You see, I wasn't actually planning to come to your world. I wanted to go into the Seventh Level, but something must have been wrong with the controls, because I ended up here. Last night was the first time I landed here, but I just looked around then. Tonight I actually passed through the hole into your world."

Jennifer nodded. The whole thing seemed like a perfectly believable mistake. The only thing that was unbelievable was that the creature had appeared in the first place.

"This is kind of crazy," she said finally, voicing her own thoughts on the matter. "How do I know that you're not just a bad dream?"

"You don't really," replied Xander. "In fact, I'll let you in on a little secret. You're not supposed to be able to see me."

"I'm not, huh? Then how come I do?" Jennifer said, putting her hands on her hips.

"Oh, it's nothing, really. I didn't have the controls set properly, that's all. A minor adjustment, I assure you. Besides, even though you can see me, I'm sure that nobody else can."

"Ha! I'll bet they can!" said Jennifer.

"No, I don't think so," said Xander.

Jennifer laughed. "Okay, you watch. I'm going to call my parents. Then you'll see that you're wrong."

"Go ahead, see if I care," said Xander, putting his hands on his hips, mocking her.

Jennifer screamed. Long and loud and at the top of her lungs.

Down the hall, her parents' bedroom door opened. There was the sudden blare of the television and the clumping of footsteps in the carpeted hall. Her door opened and her father flicked on the light.

"Jennifer!" he said in surprise. "What's the matter with you? And what are you doing out of bed? It's after eleven o'clock!"

Jennifer stared at him for a split second, her mouth open. Turning, she pointed at Xander. "Look, Daddy. Don't you see him? Right there! Can't you see him?"

"See who, dear?" her mother said. "We don't see anybody."

"You don't?" cried Jennifer, looking from the dresser to her parents and back at the dresser. Xander was standing there making a funny face and sticking his fingers in his ears. "He's right there," she insisted.

"Who's right there, honey?" Jennifer's father glanced worriedly at her mother, who could only shrug her shoulders in perplexity.

"See, I told you so," said Xander, jumping easily from the dresser top to the floor.

"There! Listen!" screamed Jennifer. "He just talked to me. Can't you hear him? Can't you see him?"

Her parents came toward her. Xander walked casually past them, toward the hallway stairs. "Hey, you, where do you think you're going?" Jennifer yelled.

"Oh, I think I'll have a look around," called Xander, his voice trailing off as he disappeared down the stairs. "Who knows—I might grow to like it around here."

"But—but—"

Before she could say anything more, Jennifer's father scooped her up into his arms. "There, there, Jenny, nothing's in here. Take it easy, honey."

Jennifer wanted to explain everything to them. But it wouldn't do any good. They would never believe her. How could she tell them that there was a creature from another world walking around the house, and that he was invisible to them. Why, that sneaky little bird-thing could be spying on her parents and they would never know it! But Jennifer knew that even if she warned them, her parents would only think Xander was some product of her imagination.

So she didn't explain about Xander to them.

But she cried all night long.

Days passed, and Jennifer could keep still no longer. So she finally told her parents all about the bird-thing that had come into her room through the space-hole. She talked so much about it that her parents took her to see Dr. Courtney. Dr. Courtney talked to her parents, and he talked

to Jennifer and her parents together, and finally he talked to Jennifer alone. He asked if something was worrying her. But nothing was—just the space-hole, and the bird-thing. But nobody would believe her, not even nice Dr. Courtney.

And so, after that, Jennifer had to take some pills three times a day. The pills must have helped, because as the weeks rolled by, she sort of forgot about the space-hole that had appeared in her room and the creature who had popped out of it. At least, she didn't talk about it anymore, and after a while, everyone seemed to think she had finally forgotten about her "nightmare."

But she hadn't forgotten.

Sometimes, when she was sitting quietly, reading, or doing homework, she thought she saw something move—a fluttering motion of some kind just beyond her range of vision. But every time she turned quickly, to try to get a better look at it, nothing was there.

Other times, in the quiet of the night, when everyone was in bed, she heard—or at least she thought she heard—soft, distant, little clicking sounds.

"Xander," she thought to herself at those times. "Where are you? And why did you do this to me?"

And sometimes, in the deep, darkened corners of her mind, Jennifer heard a whispering voice, answering her as if from a great distance. It always said the same thing. "I'm right here, Jennifer. And remember, you did it all to yourself. . . . You should have hit me with that baseball bat."



the thing from ennis rock

by THOMAS F. MONTELEONE

It was past midnight when the earthquake struck. The earth vibrated and shook beneath the bunkhouse, and Greg awakened from a deep sleep to hear the ominous rumbling beneath the floorboards. Jumping out of bed and pulling on his jeans, he ran to the window to see the ranch hands hurrying toward the moonlit corral. The horses were spooked, acting wild, crashing into each other and the fence. As Greg watched, the ranch hands scaled the fence and dropped into the corral to try to calm them down.

Above the general melee, there came a single terrified whinny. Skipper! Greg rushed outside to help.

The earth beneath his feet groaned, creaked, and sometimes heaved as he raced to the barn. The door was already open, swinging on its hinges. Each time it crashed against the side of the barn, a terrified neighing came from within, to the rhythm of hooves beating against floor and stall.

The rumbling noises stilled just as Greg reached his horse. The earthquake had ended. He got hold of Skipper's halter and stroked the terrified animal's head. "Hey, boy! C'mon, now . . . take it easy . . . that's easy, now."

The horse's eyes were rolled back, his lips curled to reveal gleaming teeth. Greg hung on and continued to speak soothingly, and slowly the big animal calmed down. After a time Skipper stood quietly, an occasional quiver rippling his muscles. Greg relaxed.

Footsteps sounded, and the tall, dark silhouette of his father blocked the light in the doorway.

"You all right, son?" The man stepped forward and dropped a hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Oh, I'm okay, Dad. It's Skipper I was scared about."

His father nodded. "Everybody's okay, now. That quake was a rough one, though. I'll have to send some of the boys out tomorrow morning to check the fences for any damage."

Even though he was only eleven, Greg enjoyed trying to tackle a man's work. He jumped now at the chance to go out with some of his father's cowboys. "Hey, Dad! Can I—"

"We'll talk about it at breakfast, boy," said the father. "Right now, you get on back to bed."

The sun was only just beginning to tint the highest peaks of the Madison Mountain Range when Greg rode out with the men the next morning. They headed toward the southeast acreage, checking fences for breaks that might have been caused by the quake or by herds of skittish cattle. As they cleared a rolling meadow, Dusty, the ranch foreman, pointed toward a low ridge of cliffs. "Will you lookit there, now! Old Ennis Rock sure had one big tumble last night."

The ridge was still partly in shadow, and Greg squinted, trying to make out what Dusty was talking about. Then he saw it. An entire face of the cliff was missing. It was as though a giant had set his pickax into it and sliced off a big chunk. A mound of rubble at the foot of the cliff was all that remained.

The men rode near, to inspect the damage.

Three large holes had been opened in the face of Ennis Rock. Greg pointed to the biggest one. "Looks like a cave or something. I wonder what's in there." Visions of hidden treasure, of undiscovered gold, leaped before his eyes. "Hey, Dusty," he said, leaning back in his saddle, "can we go up and have a look?"

The cowboy trimmed his hat and smiled past a two-day-old beard. "Oh, I dunno about that. Your pa sent us out to do a job, not to go playin' around in no rocks."

Greg's enthusiasm wouldn't be put down. "Aw, c'mon, Dusty—it won't take long. Just one look, just for a little while. Please?"

Dusty looked around at the men. They were smiling, exchanging shrugs. A couple of them nodded. "Okay, kid," said Dusty. "But let's make it quick. We've got a lot of work ahead of us today."

Greg chose the largest of the three caves to inspect, figuring he could always come back later to see what was in the others. Then he and Dusty and a hand named Cal clambered upward over the unstable mound of rubble. The pile formed a gradual slope that led almost directly to a point below the gaping hole. With the help of a hefty boost from Dusty, Greg made it nearly up to the ledge. He grabbed hold of an upthrust rock and pulled himself, panting, onto the flat surface.

92 "I'm here," he yelled triumphantly, lying on his stomach

to catch his breath. After a moment he was in good enough shape to snare the rope Dusty tossed to him and to secure it to the biggest rock he could find. Dusty and Cal joined him on the ledge, and they stepped into the dimness of the great cave.

The sunlight crept ahead of them, lighting a cavern that had been locked in ageless darkness before the quake. The walls were cool and moist, unlike the dry, hot rock outside. The air was heavy, musky, with an odor not unlike rotting fruit or aging garbage. Greg picked up an oddly shaped bit of rock and turned it over in his hand. It was surprisingly light. With a shudder, he realized he was holding a piece of bone. He dropped it and looked around. The floor was littered with the bone chips.

Farther into the cavern, as far in among the lowering shadows as Greg and the men cared to go, Greg spotted a large, light-colored mound lying in a circle of stone. "Hey, look at this," he shouted, rushing to it. "This looks like an egg. What do you think, Dusty?"

It did look like an egg, but what an egg! It was nearly as big as a football, its surface mottled and stained with brown patches. Picking it up, Greg was amazed at how heavy it was, heavier than his book bag loaded with school-books.

"Wow," he said. "I bet this is a dinosaur egg. I bet it is."

Whenever Greg heard the word *monster*, he didn't think of vampires or Frankenstein creatures or anything tame. *Monster* to Greg meant towering creatures, as high as three-story houses and as long as boxcars. *Monster* meant rows of giant, glittering teeth, bulging turretlike eyes, massive columnar legs, rippling muscles beneath scaly skin.

He had read every book on dinosaurs in the Ennis Library. And more besides, because his family knew what to

get him for birthdays. Greg was an expert on dinosaurs.

Dusty and Cal helped him down from the ledge, gently, carefully, so as not to harm the ancient thing he carried. And he cradled it inside his jacket for the rest of the day as he followed the men on their inspection tour of the ranch.

After supper that evening, Greg sat at his desk in the bunkhouse, the egg on his blotter. Studying the thing by the light of his desk lamp, he wondered what embryonic creature lay still and unborn inside its leathery shell. Perhaps he would ask his father if they could take it to some of the scientists at one of the national parks, maybe even to the Dinosaur National Monument. Maybe he would get his picture in the paper. . . . Maybe he would even become famous for making the great dinosaur egg discovery. . . .

The fall weather had turned the nights into chilly, windy affairs, and Greg turned on his electric blanket as he got ready for bed. He shivered as he undressed and climbed into the already warm bed. He reached for the light switch, and as he did so, his glance swept across the egg. The cold egg. It had been cold for—who knew how long—tens of millions of years, maybe. And here he was with a nice, cozy electric blanket.

He got back out of bed. Carefully he wrapped the egg in the folds of the blanket, turned the dial to low heat, and placed the nestlike thing on the floor at the foot of his bed. Then he dug around at the back of the closet till he found an old-fashioned un-electric blanket, wrapped it around himself, and settled down for the night.

As he drifted off to sleep, he wondered if there was any chance of hatching the big egg. Even if it did hatch, though, it might only be some great big bird, like an eagle or something. What a disappointment that would be.

A week passed, and there was no activity inside the egg. Greg began to feel a little silly for hoping the egg could hatch, even though nobody knew what he'd been up to. He had kept his plans for the egg a secret.

More days passed. Another quake occurred, this one only a minor tremor and no cause for alarm. Slight activity was normal after a serious quake. Montana had always survived the few quakes that were ever called serious.

The night of the second quake, Greg finished his homework and then got down on the floor and studied the egg, his big experiment. The shell seemed a little harder than it had before. Was that good or bad? Maybe the heat was damaging it. Maybe it would just get brittle and fall apart, and then he wouldn't have anything to remind him of his great egg experiment. His hand touched the heat controls. Should he turn off the blanket? No, he decided. He would give it one more night, just one more. With that, he flipped off the light and went to sleep.

Strange sounds scratched their way into his slumber—crackling, snipping—alien sounds in the silence of his bedroom. Greg sat bolt upright in the darkness, and as he did so, a scuttling, scraping noise was added to the other sounds. Something was rustling about on the floor next to his bed. He remembered the time last summer when a big pack rat had somehow sneaked into his room, scaring him badly. His heart thumping, his breath caught in his throat, he flipped on the lamp.

A strange little thing was scraping awkwardly along the floor in a rocking, unsteady gait. About six inches long, the creature had the body of a lizard, a long tail, a pointy head, big eyes, and large, leathery batlike wings. It reacted to the burst of light by opening its long, pointed beak and emitting a shrill cry.

The back of Greg's neck crawled. He had seen things like this. Not flying around at the ranch. Not in trips into the mountains. Not even on trips to the zoo. No. He had seen things like this in the dinosaur books he carried home from the Ennis library. This was a flying reptile, a pteranodon! Nothing like it had been seen on earth for millions of years! It really had been a dinosaur egg after all!

He tried to touch the thing, but it cried out again and snapped at his fingers. It flapped its weak wings and tottered away from his outstretched hand. Quickly he gathered up his blanket and trapped it, bundling it into a soft, enveloping sack. Calling out, he woke some of the ranch hands. They came running to his room and stood, fascinated, as he unfolded the blanket. Gently holding the thing's wings so it couldn't escape, he explained about the strange, birdlike creature.

The men shook their heads in awe. One of them rushed out to tell Greg's father what had happened.

For the next week, Greg's life was a blur of excitement.

People from Ennis, a photographer from the *Gazette*, friends from school—everyone stopped by to see Greg's "living fossil," as the man from the *Gazette* called it. A man even called from the university, saying he wanted to come out and see the creature. Greg loved the attention, and he was discovering new things about the ancient lizard every day.

The little pteranodon preferred raw meat, especially hamburger, to all other kinds of food, although Greg was able to coax it into eating some fruit and lettuce. He never tired of watching his pet waddle toward him and pluck the food from his gloved hand. Occasionally, it attempted to fly. It climbed up his bedspread. Then, settling itself on the

edge, it flapped its leathery wings and jumped off. It didn't manage to glide though, as it might have if air currents were present as they would be outdoors. Greg winced when it thumped to the floor.

While he was at school, or at night, he kept the creature in a rabbit cage that had belonged to his sister Julie. The little captive paced incessantly, scraping its wings and claws against the mesh screen.

It had been almost three weeks from the day of his finding the egg when a disturbing thing happened.

Early one evening he sat at his desk, doing his math problems. As usual, the pteranodon was moving restlessly in the rabbit cage, scratching at the mesh, emitting an occasional squeak. Suddenly, the horses out in the corral broke into an uproar, neighing and squealing. Greg peered out into the darkness. Maybe a coyote or a small mountain cat had wandered onto the ranch. The men would soon tend to it.

Minutes passed. Then the darkness was sliced by an unearthly scream, followed by the rattling of wood beams and the muffled clatter of stampeding hoofs. The baby pteranodon went wild in its cage, flapping its wings, adding its own cries to the commotion.

Greg darted outside, heading toward the corral. Somewhere in the darkness, just outside his field of vision, a dark shape moved. But when he turned there was nothing to be seen.

Ahead, some of the men were clustered around the broken-down rails of the corral fence. All the horses had run off. Systematically, the men fanned out into the darkness, trying to round them up.

One horse still remained in the corral, and Dusty and the rest of the men were crowded around it, bending down,

shaking their heads in amazement and disgust.

Greg went near, but stopped short when he saw the animal. It lay on its side, eyes open but seeing nothing in death. Large pieces of flesh had been torn from its body and its once velvety coat was reduced to tatters. The earth beneath it was stained with blood.

Greg's stomach knotted, and he had to fight to keep from getting sick. "What happened!" was all he could manage to say.

"Dunno," said one of the men. "Malcolm was in the barn when he heard all the uproar. He saw the horses break the fence and get out, but he didn't see what did this."

"I seen a kodiak bear tear open a mountain cat like that once," said one of the men. "But there ain't no kodiak bears around here."

"And if it was a cat," said Malcolm, "he was an awful big one."

Heartsick, Greg wished his father was home to help straighten out the frightening incident. But his dad was in Billings closing up a cattle deal, and he wouldn't be back until the weekend.

"Okay, boys," said Dusty, "let's get this place cleared up. Move this thing out of here. And, kid, you get back inside. There's no knowing what's prowling around here. It ain't safe."

The men began to move purposefully. Reason was replacing fear. And Greg headed back to the bunkhouse to try to get some sleep.

Back in his room, he was greeted by the small flying creature pacing nervously in its cage, bleating out its strange cry, flapping its wings excitedly. Funny how animals—even safe ones in cages inside houses—sensed danger. He sat on the floor for a while, talking to the helpless little thing, try-

ing to soothe it. But it wouldn't be soothed, and after a while he went to bed.

Sleep did not come easily.

After school the next day, Greg saddled Skipper and headed out toward the eastern borders of the ranch, toward Ennis Rock.

More rock had crumbled off the face of the mountainous upthrust, and the cave openings were larger than before. He nudged Skipper forward among the rubble till he was at a point just below the largest cave entrance. Suddenly Skipper shied, dancing backward, snorting, bobbing his head nervously. Greg kept him under control, but there was no doubt that something was troubling the horse.

Looking down, he saw that here and there among the rocks were more of the animal bones he had seen in the cave. No wonder Skipper was scared. So was he! He looked back up at the face of Ennis Rock. There was some unknown danger here, an invisible and terrible presence. Pulling on the reins, he turned and rode quickly away from the place.

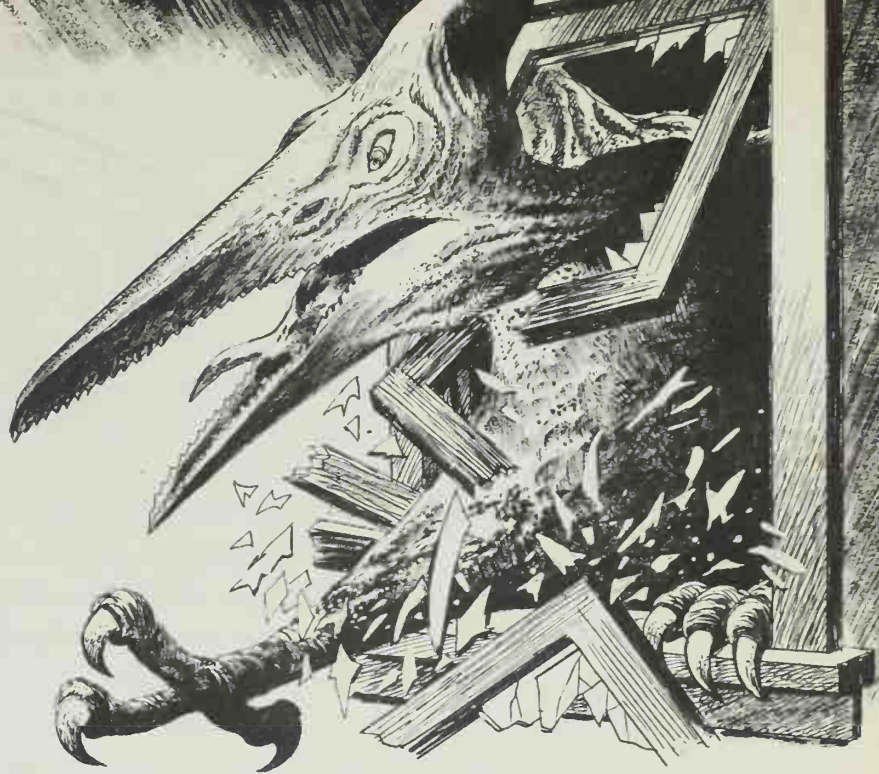
He had a difficult time doing his homework that night. He hadn't been very hungry at suppertime, either, and he felt the hollowness of his stomach as he sat stiffly at his desk. In the dim light of the desk lamp, he watched the little pteranodon contentedly gnawing on some liver. Where had it come from? It had been an egg, and that egg had to have come from somewhere. The thought was disturbing, and he gave up thinking about it. Finally he gave up on his homework, too, and closed his books. He got undressed and climbed into bed. At least he was glad of one thing—he had his warm electric blanket back. He snuggled happily down into it.

He was awakened by the little reptile screeching and



flapping around. He lay still for a minute, wondering what time it was. Then came the other sound, louder, somehow ominous—a rhythmic tapping, clicking, scraping. It was outside, coming nearer, growing louder, increasing in intensity. Greg forced himself to look toward the window. What he saw there, lit by moonlight, froze the breath in his chest, threatening to choke him.

Framed by the window was a large, yellow eye, shifting quickly, birdlike in a bony socket. The thing's head was



shaped like the tip of a spear which split into a large mouth that held rows of daggerlike teeth.

The baby pteranodon was shrieking loudly, and suddenly the room was filled with the night-wrenching bellows of the giant thing outside. One great wing, flapping and smacking against the bunkhouse, crashed against the window and glass rained into the room, a million diamondlike chips.

Greg leaped out of bed. Scrambling across the room on all fours, he fumbled with the latch on the door. Still he could not cry out. He turned to see a large claw reaching through the shattered window. The air was filled with insane screeches.

He fell through the door as the sound of crunching wood was added to the chaos. He turned and bumped into

Malcolm and Dusty, running toward him. "Look out!" he finally cried. "It's in there. It's in there."

Malcolm shouldered past him, lifting his shotgun, kicking open the door. He gasped at the sight of the giant pteranodon prying its way into the room, then squeezed the trigger of the gun. Both barrels erupted in a flash of light and sound.

The screaming of the grotesque reptile increased, and the flapping of its huge wings pulled it away from the bunkhouse, skyward. Greg and the men ran out into the night. The other hands were already there, pointing off into the sky, tracing the path of the thing.

"Like Lucifer hisself," said one man.

"I seen it, but I don't believe," said another.

The beast disappeared into the faint starlight near the horizon.

"Ennis Rock," cried Greg, still trying to catch his breath. "It's going to Ennis Rock."

Dusty put a steadying hand on the boy's shoulder. "How d'you know that, kid."

"'Cause that's where I found the egg, remember? That big one is the little one's mother!"

Some of the men rubbed their stubbled chins, others nodded in agreement. Greg continued. "We gotta go get her!"

"Now hold on there, kid," said Dusty. "We ain't goin' nowhere at this time-a night. In the mornin' me and some of the boys will head on out there and look around. We better all stay together tonight, though. Too dangerous to go out now."

Greg knew Dusty was right, and turned to go. He would have to sleep in the main house now, since his room in the bunkhouse was smashed up. But first he had to see

about the baby pteranodon. He ran back into the bunkhouse and into his room. Ignoring the debris, he bent over the cage.

The exhausted little creature was breathing in heavy, short gasps, its wings scraped and torn by its efforts to reach its mother. It made no effort to move as Greg lifted it out of its cage. One wing hung limply, several of the tiny straw-like bones broken. It was hard to imagine that the pitiful thing would one day grow into a horror like the one that had come crashing into his room.

He found gauze and tape and wrapped the wing, hoping the breaks would mend. Then he trudged up the road with Dusty to sleep out the rest of the strange night at the house.

His dreams were filled with images of the giant mother pteranodon scouring the Montana grazing lands, killing and clawing any unfortunate beast it saw on the ground below. Terror racked his sleep, and when he awoke in the morning, he was not rested.

By the time he got out to the corral, the sun was up over the Madison Range, and Dusty had assembled a posse of men. Greg just had to go with them. He was responsible, in a way, for what had happened. But he had to ride between two of the men who were told not to let him out of sight. And he was held back in the meadow that led up to Ennis Rock as Dusty and four of the men approached the cave opening.

Two of the men lit torches and hurled them upward into the mouth of the largest cave. In seconds, black smoke began to roll outward. Even from the meadow, Greg could hear the mother's cries of distress and anger as the smoke and fire invaded her lair.

Sitting stiffly in his saddle, he saw the great beast ap-

pear at the mouth of the cave, its body glistening in the morning sun, its long, pointed beak parted, screaming, its leathery wings flapping wildly. The men had raised their rifles as the thing emerged into daylight. As it launched itself into the air, they fired, the sound of the shots echoing off the face of Ennis Rock. Bullets ripped through the thin wings, drilled into the bony skull, and the tattered creature fell among the rocky rubble. It looked like a pile of broken twigs and oilcloth as it trembled and fluttered on the ground. Another volley of shells ripped into the body. There was a last flurry of wings, a weak cry, and the ancient reptile collapsed.

Greg joined the men, unable to take his eyes off the dead creature. The horror had ended almost as quickly as it had begun, and yet he knew that he had been changed by this experience. He also knew now that the baby pteranodon would have to be turned over to people at the college in Billings. He wouldn't be able to handle it as it grew to its full size.

Dusty pushed his hat back and pulled his sleeve across his forehead. "Sure am glad that's over with, ain't you?"

"Oh," said Greg, "Yeah. Sure." But he wasn't really sure.

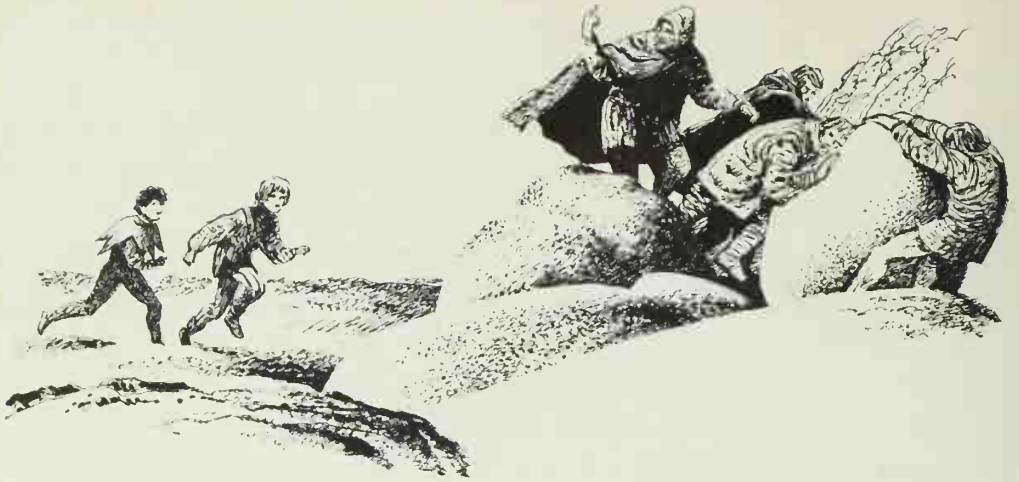
Back at the bunkhouse, he went to his room. The baby pteranodon lay, a hapless pile in a corner of the cage, its head lolling, giving out pathetic little squeals.

Greg looked at it for a long moment. He couldn't keep it. He would have to give it away. The scientists—as well-meaning as they were—would poke at it, and pry at it, and test it, and who knew what else they would do. It could never be free, as it was meant to be. It would live alone, for there was no other creature like it. And one day it would die alone. And it would suffer so much.

"No," Greg told himself, realizing how very fond he had grown of this peculiar creature. "No. I won't let that happen."

The pteranodon offered no resistance as Greg picked it up. A weak moan shuddered through its body. He hesitated momentarily. Then he took the skinny little neck in his hands, and twisted. Tears ran down his face.

Moments later his father entered the room. Greg couldn't say anything. Later, he would try to explain.



the bend of time

by WILLIAM DANTON

I had always dreamed of taking a trip to the planet Earth. When I was thirteen, the dream suddenly came true.

Earth had been sparsely inhabited for hundreds of years, its oceans clogged with industrial wastes, its air polluted and radioactive. But somehow men had survived. Through succeeding generations they developed a global reclamation project to make Earth fit for larger numbers. And after long centuries, the descendants of those who had migrated from Earth began a return to their cradle planet.

My family was among these early settlers. We moved into a quaint house built by an ancient American architect named Frank Lloyd Wright. It was full of old-planet charm. My father said that the house had been considered revolutionary in its time, a radical advance in architectural design.

But there were some strange things about the house.

We found the windows boarded up, though the architect had designed the house to admit as much light as possible.

And there was the study. Its walls were lined with elaborate computers. These had evidently been installed after the house was built. We had no idea what they had been used for, or who had used them.

We spent the first day on Earth getting the house in order. Dad and I removed the computers and took the boards down from the windows while Mom arranged and rearranged the furniture. Then it was time to explore our new home.

I was rummaging through the study when I noticed something wedged in a corner of the room. I picked it up and dusted it off. It was a faded snapshot of a boy about my age. He was blond with regular features, but the striking thing about him was his eyes—eyes that looked out at me with a strange, forsaken expression.

At the bottom of the photo I made out these words:

Subject: Keith Edwards. Age: Thirteen. Intelligence level: Superior. Date: August 15, 3220.

On the reverse side of the photo was printed: *Hold for further cerebrocortical inputs.*

I must have studied the photo a dozen times that day. I was drawn to it, fascinated, puzzled. It was a link with the Earth's past. But its meaning eluded and tantalized me.

The photo was my secret. I shared it with no one.

By evening I almost felt as if I knew Keith Edwards, though, of course, I knew practically nothing *about* him. In some odd way, he almost seemed a friend. It may have been because I was lonely, and Keith Edwards' eyes spoke of someone who knew about loneliness.

Whatever the reasons, the photo began to mean something important to me in a mysterious, personal way I could

This book is crazy

not define. I just let it go at that, without attempting to explain it. But somehow I knew that this boy from another time was my friend.

That first night on Earth I slept uneasily. There were times of half-wakefulness, when dreaming and waking, reality and unreality, all flowed together and blurred. I remember rising from my bed and going to the window. I swayed backward in shock. The window was completely boarded up. I tried repeatedly to pry off the boards, but my fingers lacked all strength.

I crossed the room in a sleepy mist. Something urged me to open the closet. It was filled with clothing, but not my own!

I dashed into the hallway. I ran to my parents' bedroom and threw open the door. The room was completely empty. The furniture was gone. The closets were bare. The windows were boarded up.

I banged on the boards with my fists. It was a futile gesture. I could never budge them without a crowbar. I was trapped.

A voice rang out. "Mom! Dad!" It was ripped from my throat, but I could hardly recognize it as my own. It was shrill and broken.

"Mom! Dad!" Over and over the syllables bounced against the walls and echoed through the silence.

I leaped into the hall and charged toward the stairs. My legs went limp and rubbery. I seemed to float down a stairway that had no end.

When I reached the landing, I stopped with a jolt. I had seen a shadow flit across the wall and disappear. For a few moments I stood frozen. Then I slowly followed the path of the vanished shadow.

I heard a door open on creaky hinges. I turned toward

the living room and saw a shadow steal inside.

I stopped, wavering. The door was partly ajar. I clenched my teeth and swung the door open.

Something rustled in front of me. The room was pitch-black. I groped for the light switch, snapped it on—and stood staring into the face of Keith Edwards.

Suddenly a hand gripped my shoulder from behind and shook me.

I heard my name called as through a long tunnel, “Roy! Roy!”

I could not see anyone behind me, but the shaking continued, until I found myself falling, falling—and landed in my bed.

My mother was standing over me.

I shook my head groggily. Gradually, the bedroom came into focus.

“You were having a nightmare,” said my mother. “You were calling out in your sleep.”

I looked about the room, the same room in which I had gone to sleep. Morning light poured through the windows. The boards were absent.

I asked myself whether my experience could really have been nothing but a nightmare. It had been more vivid than any dream I had ever had. Every detail stood out clearly, whereas most of my dreams vanish on waking.

But some dreams do seem very real, perhaps because they reveal deep hidden feelings. These are the dreams that linger in your mind. As for my brief encounter with Keith Edwards, it could only have been a dream. For, after all, there I was back in my bed again.

The rest of that day was spent decorating the house. Some more furniture arrived in the afternoon, early period pieces of the twentieth century that had been restored.

Later, in the evening, we made a start on a garden in the backyard. Dad said that vegetation had once flourished around our house. The architect's idea had been to blend the house with its surroundings, so that they formed a natural unit. I could imagine how beautiful it must have been when the house was first built.

By the time night rolled around, I was very tired and eager for sleep. I had been too busy that day to think of Keith Edwards, but as my head hit the pillow, I wondered if I would see him again in my dreams.

I rose from the bed with a start. A chill hung in the air. The temperature had dropped during the night. I went to close the window. The boards were in place again.

I tried to keep a tight grip on my nerves. I told myself I must be dreaming again. If I was dreaming, everything would soon be all right. I would just have to ride out this dream.

Then I heard a sound outside the room. The doorknob began to turn. I sprang into the closet and closed the door behind me.

I could make out footsteps. It sounded like only one person. Then, a minute later, I heard the door close, and there was silence.

I slid the closet door open and peeked out. As I expected, the room was empty. Nothing had been disturbed.

I couldn't remain there in the bedroom. I had to explore the house once again.

I crept softly into the hallway and down the stairs.

Suddenly I heard footsteps following close behind me. I turned sharply and came face-to-face with Keith Edwards. Before I could say a word, he spoke.

"Who are you?" he asked. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm Roy. Roy Ellis. I live here."

"That's not possible. You must have sneaked in somehow. I'm the only humanoid who lives here. You are a humanoid, aren't you?" He examined me all over. "I've never seen another humanoid."

"A humanoid?" I said. "I'm a human."

"But you were manufactured by the Ogolots, weren't you?"

"Ogolots? Who are they?"

"They are the all-wise, the all-powerful, the givers of life."

"Where are they?"

"Out there," he said, indicating the outside world.

"Have you ever seen them?"

"My tutor is an Ogot."

"Your tutor? Does he live here too?"

"In the Learning Center." He pointed to a room downstairs.

"You mean the room with all the computers?"

"Yes."

"So that's what it was, a learning center."

"What do you mean *was*?"

"I mean, that's what it was in the past."

He looked at me oddly.

"But, of course, you don't realize we're talking together in the past," I said lamely.

"How could it be the past if we are talking at present?" he asked, puzzled.

"That's what's so difficult to explain," I said. "I know you won't believe this, but I'm a boy from the future. I'm only dreaming that I'm talking to you. You aren't real. You lived here in the past, long before my family moved into the house."

He gave a loud snort. But there was a flicker of indecision in his eyes, as if he didn't know whether to laugh or show concern.

"I know it's hard to believe," I said, "but it's true. The year is really 4010. My family moved here from another planet. The windows of this house were all boarded up, as they are now. I found your picture in the study. It had a date on it, 3220. You lived here centuries before I did."

He remained silent, turning this statement over in his mind. It must have sounded remarkable to him.

"You're saying I'm just a product of your imagination," he finally replied. "And when you wake, I will disappear into thin air. Well, just for the sake of argument, how do you know that I am not dreaming and that your existence does not depend on *my* imagination? Taking it a step further, how do you know that our ability to communicate with each other doesn't depend on our both dreaming at the same time? Then, as soon as either one of us woke, the link between us would be broken."

He gave a laugh. The idea obviously amused him.

"We'll never get this settled," I said. "But before I have to leave, tell me something about yourself."

"What do you want to know?"

"How long have you lived here?"

"All my life."

"You have a family, don't you?"

At that, his eyes narrowed, as if he were staring into the distance.

"It is not possible for me to have a family," he said, "as I was created by the Ogolots. Only Ogolots have families, for they reproduce among themselves." He said this as if it was something he had been taught by rote.

"That's nonsense," I said. "Everyone has to have a

mother and father. You're as human as I am."

He looked uncertain. "At times I do seem to recall two large humanoids. They are very fuzzy in my mind. My tutor insists they never existed. Still, I seem to recall a struggle of some sort. I was very small. Two humanoids were calling my name, 'Keith! Keith!' They held out their arms to me. I reached for them. They were pulled away. There was a loud commotion, a clanking and grating sound. Then there was silence, and I was alone." He paused, his face drawn with the effort of recall. "My tutor says it never happened."

"The Ogolots must have captured your parents," I said. "And they've kept you a prisoner here all this time. But why?"

Just then there was a loud buzzer.

"It is a signal from the Learning Center," he said urgently. "I must go now. My tutor is calling me."

He began to inch away from me. His voice became more and more remote. "I . . . must . . . go," he repeated woodenly. He receded farther and farther, until he disappeared into the shadows.

The buzzing continued.

I ran after him. I saw him open the study door. I reached out, trying to grab him. Something came away in my hands. I was holding an object—it was my alarm clock. I pushed a switch on the clock and the buzzing ceased.

I was in my bed. And just as the morning before, light streamed through the windows and flooded the room. I was back in my own time again.

I wondered if I would be able to get back to Keith's century that night. It was hard to believe that he only existed in my dreams, for he was as real to me as any person I had ever known. If it was true, if he was a dream image,

then I might not see him for a week or a year or even ten years, depending on my dreams. And then it hit me, the sudden realization that I might *never* see him again!

But could he exist even while I was awake? Was it possible that time did not always go in one direction only? Could people exist simultaneously on two different planes of time? Then our meeting would depend on the accidental crossing of those two planes. Perhaps, in sleep, I didn't dream up Keith but merely left my own time level and crossed his. My head swam with these possibilities.

The worst of it was that I couldn't share these thoughts with anyone. Somehow I knew that were I to reveal them, the link between Keith and myself would be broken.

I didn't dream of Keith that night or the following night.

School was due to open in a week. Dad drove me over to register. The school was made up of separate soundproof cubicles, each with its own teaching machine. The machines were programmed for different subjects from which the student made a choice each day. The machine tabulated the student's progress on an Academic Achievement Graph. I was anxious to begin.

Though my thoughts were on school, I had not forgotten about Keith. I could find no answer to the mystery of his imprisonment by the Ogolots. Pieces were missing from the puzzle. The answers lay in Keith's time, not my own.

My next meeting with Keith came unexpectedly. I was helping my father put up a fence one afternoon. It was hard work, and the sun was sizzling.

I went inside for a break and I lay down on the living room couch and closed my eyes.

Suddenly I heard voices. They were coming from the next room.

I stood up. The living room was sunk in shadow. A quick glance at the windows confirmed my suspicion that they were boarded.

I went into the hall and listened at the study door. I made out Keith's voice and another, a voice that was deep, resonant, and mechanical in its regularity.

I stood there, undecided. Then I overcame my fear and slowly turned the doorknob. I opened the door a crack and peered through.

Keith was standing in front of a tall, massively built, metallic man, at least seven feet tall. So that was his tutor.

I suddenly understood what had been kept from Keith all these years. The Ogolots were robots. Keith had been taught that the Ogolots had created men. But the truth was just the opposite.

Keith's tutor was talking. *This was your last lesson. Tonight the Ogolots will come for you.*

"You mean they will take me away from here?"

Yes.

"But where to?"

To the Humanoid Experimental Center. You are ready to make your contribution to Ogot advancement.

"What do you mean?"

Your brain has achieved the prescribed neural growth factor. It will now be studied.

"Studied? How will it be studied?"

I cannot tell you more.

"But you must. I've always trusted you."

Do not make appeals to sentiment. Ogotots have no emotions.

I had stood there, hypnotized by this scene. But I suddenly found the courage to act. I flung the door open and burst into the room.



The Ogotot wheeled around in my direction.

I leaped across the room and tugged at Keith's arm.

The Ogotot moved toward us, his thick, metallic arms flailing the air in an awkward, groping motion. He snatched at us with steel, pincerlike fingers.

"Come on, Keith!" I screamed.

We ran out the door.

The Ogotot made a clicking, whirring sound as he trundled after us. But we were faster and bounded up the stairs.

"Keith, there must be a way out of here," I said.

"I don't know. It's all boarded up."

The Ogotot came whirring up the stairs.

"Let's use the back staircase," Keith said.

We ran to the back of the house and bounded down the stairs.

"Keith, are there any tools in the house?"

"There are some old tools in the basement," Keith answered.

"Let's go," I urged, as the whirring sound grew louder and louder.

We ran into the basement and locked the door after us. In a corner, we found a box of tools. I picked up an ax and began battering the single, boarded window.

Again and again I drove the ax into the boards with a wild fury. They splintered to shreds.

Behind us, the door suddenly gave way. The Ogotot stood framed in the doorway. The twin lenses that were his eyes swiveled and narrowed to a sharp, glittering point as they focused on us with an icy stare.

Desperately, Keith and I ripped the boards free. I sent the ax flying through the window, and we dove through the opening. Our arms and legs were scratched by the jagged

glass, but we came away free. And the Ogolot was still trapped in the basement.

We were standing in the backyard. With a wonderful sense of freedom, we gazed about the open countryside. The air felt fresh and bracing.

"Let's go!" I shouted.

Keith and I cut a path into the underbrush.

My fear was that the Ogolots would soon be combing the landscape to find us. I felt it best to stick to wooded areas where we would at least be partly concealed.

We charged through the woods, buffeted by brambles and lashed by low-hanging branches. Rocks bruised our feet. We limped and stumbled along, directed by blind instinct.

"Wait. Do you hear that?" said Keith.

The now-familiar whirring sound was bearing down upon us on all sides.

"He must have contacted the Ogolots," I said.

We quickened our pace.

Keith tripped and sprawled across the ground. I helped him up and supported him.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

"Yes, let's go on."

We set off again. If we kept due north, we would eventually reach the mountainside. Our only hope was to find shelter in a cave.

Suddenly, hands reached out and brought us to a jolting stop. We cried out but our shouts were instantly smothered.

Four men in ragged clothing had encircled us.

"Quiet!" they implored. "The Ogolots will hear us. Follow us. We'll hide you."

They trotted nimbly through the brush. Keith and I

struggled desperately to keep up with their rapid pace.

"Wait!" we cried.

"We must hurry," one of the men answered over his shoulder. His voice carried an urgency that gave vivid testimony to the danger that surrounded us.

We kept bearing north until we came to a clearing.

The men sank to their knees behind some bushes. Keith and I squatted down beside them. They gazed carefully from side to side.

"The sentries have been dispersed to the woods," said the man closest to us. "It's safe to proceed."

We stood up and made a dash across the clearing. A row of hills loomed before us.

We followed a straggling trail toward the hills. The trail wound in upon itself like a looping ribbon. Without landmarks, Keith and I were hopelessly confused, but the men scrambled up a hill with the surefooted ease of mountain goats.

We climbed higher and higher, over ledges and rugged shelves. The wind whipped about us and whistled along the pass.

Soon the woods stretched far below. Around its perimeter, we could just make out the Ogolots, massing like ants.

The trail continued winding like a corkscrew. Shadows chiseled black clefts into the sides of the hills. Clouds drifted overhead.

Finally, we came to rest upon a broad plateau. The men drew aside some boulders, revealing a narrow opening. It formed the entrance to a cave.

Keith and I followed the men inside.

We were immediately surrounded by a dozen men, women, and children. They clapped us on our backs and

shook our hands. We knew now that these people were our friends.

A tall, gray-haired man spoke. "Our quarters are not luxurious," he said quietly, "but you are welcome. You will be safe here."

Keith and I were full of questions. Who were these people? What were they doing here?

"I am Dr. Sloane. These others are some of the scattered remnants of the human race."

A woman with a kindly face broke in. "But the children must be hungry and tired. There is plenty of time for explanations later."

"I am afraid we cannot offer you much," said one of the men who had rescued us. "But what we have we will share with you. Most of the freely growing plants contain dangerous amounts of atomic radiation. Fortunately, Dr. Sloane is a botanist. With his help we have managed to grow uncontaminated fruits and vegetables in sheltered places like this cave. Here, help yourselves to these berries and tomatoes."

We dug into the food with as much relish as if a feast had been set before us.

When we had finished eating, Dr. Sloane related how the Ogolots, who had been created to serve men, had eventually become their rulers.

"It was our own warring that was responsible for it," he explained. "Following the global wars, the Earth became girdled with clouds of atomic fallout. Most of the human race succumbed. But hordes of Ogolots remained, unaffected by the radiation. This gave them their opportunity to gain control.

"However," he continued, "with the passage of time, the Ogolots, who were made of metal, began to rust and

decay. The scientists who had guided their manufacture and maintenance had all perished. The Ogolots were desperate. Unable to reproduce, their survival as a race depended on discovering how to manufacture themselves. For this they had to have human beings.

"Their main problem was learning how to create an electronic relay system that paralleled the functioning of the human nervous system. The human brain is the subtlest and most complicated of mechanisms. It has enabled men to make startling, inventive leaps throughout the ages. The Ogolots, in contrast, were programmed to process information. They lacked the intellectual flexibility to strike out into the unknown.

"In their desperation, the Ogolots began experimenting on the human survivors of the wars. For many years now they have kept children in isolation, grooming them for tests. Keith is one of these. Throughout his childhood he has been fed large quantities of factual information.

"The Ogolots hope that by studying the brains of humans at different stages of intellectual development they can discover how neural circuits grow and develop. They believe this will enable them to construct a model of the human brain. With such a model they may have the ability to construct new Ogolots.

"Those of us you see here have been engaged in raiding parties, attempting to sabotage their experiments. The men who found you in the woods were returning from just such a raid.

"All over the world there are small bands of men like us dedicated to destroying the research efforts of the Ogolots. We have kept them busy rebuilding their Humanoid Experimental Centers. And meanwhile, their time is rapidly running out. In a few years, they will all be reduced to piles

of coils, resistors, and useless metal parts. Then we, the survivors of the holocaust, can work to replenish the Earth and make it habitable again. It will take centuries and scores of generations, but we have nothing but time before us."

Dr. Sloane's eyes were alight with his vision of the future. He turned to Keith. "We are depending on young people like you, Keith, to be the pioneers of a new civilization."

A picture of Keith growing into manhood flashed before my eyes. I could envision him playing an important role in the future of Earth. He had intelligence, and the Ogolots had provided him with a fund of knowledge. As for me, I would have to return to my own time, where my own future lay. I had a growing conviction that this would be my last meeting with Keith.

Shadows were stretching across the cave. The people seated around me grew hazier and hazier. They seemed to be floating in a pool of darkness. They were growing more and more distant.

"Keith," I called suddenly, "I'll never forget you."

He seemed to understand. "Roy!" he cried.

He held out his hand to me. I tried to grab it. It melted into the darkness.

"Keith!" I called again. My voice had a hollow ring.

Keith was just a blur now. He was whirling away from me, breaking into atoms of light and dark, as I drifted through oceans of space and time, spanning the years to my own century.

And suddenly, the familiar surroundings of home sprang into focus. I had crossed back into my own more comfortable world.

Later that day I asked my father if he had ever heard

of Ogolots. He said they were a race of robots who had perished centuries before.

As for Keith, I have thought of him over the years but have never revisited him. Was he just a dream figure, an image projected upon the screen of sleep? Perhaps. Then again, perhaps not.

Roger Elwood, as a young reader, devoured every science fiction magazine, book, or short story available to him. It was no wonder, then, that Roger Elwood, as a mature reader, turned to writing tales of the impossible; he counts innumerable articles and short stories among his publishing credits. Almost inevitably, Roger Elwood the writer evolved into Roger Elwood the editor, gathering together outstanding collections of science fiction tales for eager adult followers of that art form. Our story now comes full circle. Remembering his boyhood enthusiasm for the other worldly, for the mysterious and unexplainable, Mr. Elwood turned his talents to gathering such tales for the enjoyment of young readers. He has here assembled his second collection of what he feels is "exceptionally good science fiction," with the hope that those readers will agree.

Barry N. Malzberg, who has written an introduction to this fascinating collection, is a long-time fan of sci-fi. He is also the author of dozens of science fiction short stories and several novels.

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