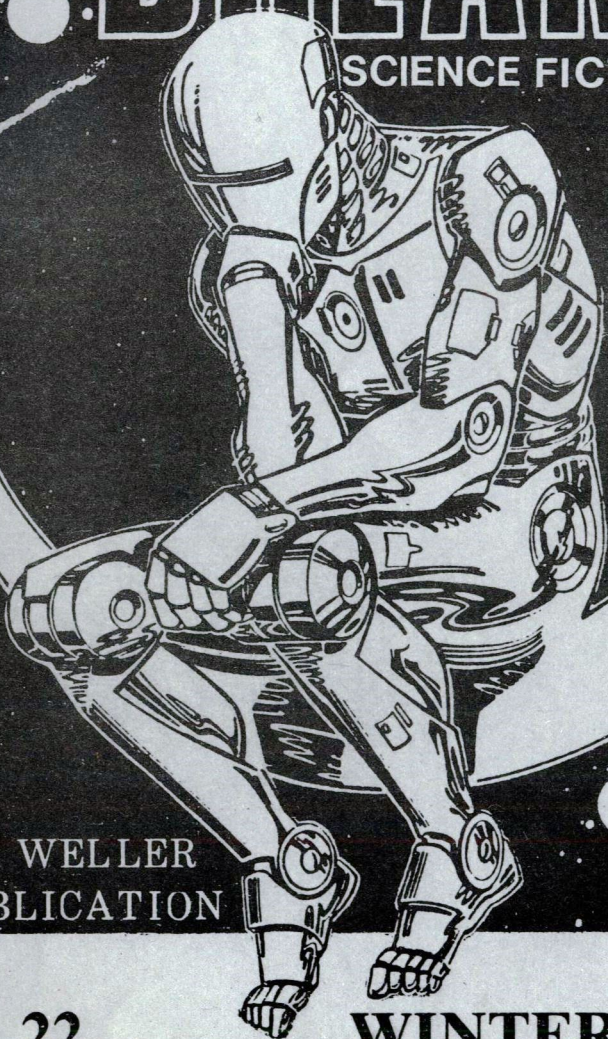


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DREAM

SCIENCE FICTION



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No. 22

WINTER 1989

'KISMET' by Keith Brooke

McIntosh — Light — Love — Iles — Wood

DREAM SCIENCE FICTION

No. 22
WINTER 1989

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EDITORIAL

Trevor Jones

Hello. I've pinched George's editorial page this time to bring you some important news regarding a major development on the U.K. small-press SF scene — the foundation of the New SF Alliance. This is a grouping of British SF magazines comprising (as at the time of writing) **BACK BRAIN RECLUSE**, **WORKS**, **DREAM**, **THE SCANNER**, **AUGURIES** and **NEW VISIONS** (soon to become **NOVA SF**). Each magazine will, of course, continue to go its own way and have its own distinctive editorial policy, but, by banding together for publicity/advertising etc. it is hoped that each can help the others to thrive. An added benefit is that certain reciprocal arrangements have been made with U.S. small-press publications (including **SPACE & TIME**, **NEW PATHWAYS**, **JABBER-WOCKY** etc) which can now be obtained (if you're quick, as supplies are extremely limited in these early stages) through the Alliance, often at bargain rates, compared to the normal rates for U.K. subscriptions. It is to be hoped that these arrangements will prove to be a success so that our magazines can become more widely known on the other side of 'the pond' as well as the best U.S. small-press 'zines becoming more widely available in the U.K.

As part of this arrangement, both single issues and subscriptions for any of the Alliance magazines can now be ordered through **DREAM**. You will have seen the leaflet distributed with the last issue of 'DREAM' which gave full details. If you missed it, a s.a.e. to our Huntingdon address will get you a copy. Using this method you can order as many magazines as you want for the price of a single stamp. (Please allow 21 days for delivery of your 'zines.)

The small-press scene is extremely buoyant in this country at present and almost every quarter brings a variety of publications to our office, both familiar titles and new magazines. Sam Jeffers reviews a selection of those received each issue, so look at his column for further details. In the meantime here are some thoughts for other small-press editors/publishers:



We will accept reciprocal subscriptions ('DREAM' in exchange for your magazine) for any small-press SF publication, even where the per issue price is less than that for 'DREAM';

We will give you a free A5-page size advert for your magazine if you let us have the camera-ready copy, in exchange for a similar ad. for 'DREAM' in your publication;

We will distribute leaflets to our subscribers publicising your magazine if you so wish (s.a.e. for details). We would also like to distribute leaflets for 'DREAM' with other magazines. If you are willing to do this for us please write and let me know, quoting the number of leaflets required.

We are always ready to sell subscriptions to other magazines through our above-mentioned service, without commission. If you wish your 'zine to be added to our next leaflet publicising this service let me know. Naturally, if you in return can take 'DREAM' subscriptions we'd be grateful.

Let us hope that the founding of the New SF Alliance is a sign of times to come, of co-operation between 'zines of varying contents and editorial philosophies. We believe that the best new writers of the 90s are coming up through the various small presses *now*. We earnestly suggest that if you wish to keep pace with the fast moving developments in this new decade of SF then you read as much of the various small-press SF as you can lay your hands on. By so doing you will keep at the forefront of the 'New Era' SF. We here at **DREAM** truly believe that the small magazines contain the germ of a new greatness for U.K. SF — this is our invitation for you to come along with us on this great new journey.

KISMET



KEITH BROOKE

HERRIE was adjusting the nutrient feeders in the hydroponics vats when the brainwave came. It was only his second 'wave so he immediately left his job and headed for the Chapel. The other robots must have received the 'wave too, for Herrie soon became one of many heading in that direction.

The Chapel was situated towards the front of the ship, close to the Vault from which Herrie had emerged almost five years before. Herrie had been part of the First Band, the first group of robots to be awakened. Six others were in the élite First Band and they had been alone for four long years. Then they had been 'waved. Herrie had headed for the Chapel on that occasion, too. There he had witnessed the emergence of the Second Band, more than 200 of them, filling the Chapel to capacity.

The Chapel was now full for a second time. Alulloy walls surrounded the robots on three sides but the front wall consisted of a vast holoscreen. Standing alone, below the screen, there was a pulpit.

The chattering of four robots towards the back echoed slightly in the high-ceilinged hall. *Second Banders. Never been 'waved.*

Herrie sat in the front row, to the right, as befitted his status. He looked around at the rows of eager faces. None of them knew what to expect. Perhaps they would witness the emergence of a Third Band, but Herrie had his doubts. *Not enough places in the Chapel.* But those were hardly valid grounds for rejecting that possibility. Herrie awaited the arrival of Alva with a strange sense of disquiet. Herrie had been the third robot to emerge from the Vault. His limbs functioned smoothly but his mind was wild with terror. He knew *who* he was and somehow, when he thought of it, he knew *where* he was. With the discovery of this knowledge he calmed himself and noted that he had seated himself at the front of a large room. The fourth robot had already emerged and eventually there were seven of them. Then they had met Alva for the first time.

Alva was tall, twenty cee-ems taller than Herrie's one-seventy. He strode purposefully from behind the holoscreen and aranged himself at the pulpit. Herrie felt that Alva would have been staring directly at him but for one thing. Alva had no receptors. His face was a blank, no eyes, no tempgauge, no rad-counters. Nothing. But somehow, despite this he seemed to be studying each of them intently.

When Alva spoke for the first time he used direct link —the data that would normally have been conveyed in speech was reduced to electric impulses and transmitted directly into the robots' brains. Alva was the only robot to use this method and it came to set him even further apart from the others.

Herrie remembered those first words clearly: "Welcome, brothers, let us follow The Path." Something jarred with Herrie's programming, this was not how it should be .

But then Alva was welcoming them, gazing blankly at each of them in turn, As Herrie felt that gaze upon him and heard his name echoing in his head he knew that he had been mistaken, that this was surely the way. After the welcoming they had prayed. Understanding, reassurance, but mainly for guidance.

And their prayers had been answered, guidance had been given. As they sat later in meditation, they became aware of what they must do. They must create a new order of life — not robotic but organic. This was The Path.

The Chattering of the Second Banders had ceased and Herrie turned back to face

the front. Alva had appeared and was already arranging himself at the pulpit. Herrie's disquiet turned into a strange sense of *déjà-vu*.

"Welcome, brothers." Alva's voice filled Herrie's mind. "Let us follow The Path."

The congregation sat silently in prayer.

Why Herrie should feel such a strong sense of *déjà-vu* he did not know. The pattern was the same as any normal prayer meeting and he had attended one of those every day of his life.

But prayer meetings were never on this scale. Herrie knew that well enough for he, as a First Bander, was a Prayer Leader. He would normally make the ritual Welcome to his flock of twenty-nine and then they would pray. The prayers would be followed by the sermon, normally given by the Leader but Herrie sometimes liked to give a member of his flock the opportunity.

It was a sermon by a Second Bander named Albie that had crystallized Herrie's feelings of doubt.

"Why are we here?" Albie had asked. "Why are we so limited? Why must our gauges give us pain? Why can we not talk direct?" Albie paused and looked around the gathering, but Herrie felt that the Second Bander had been talking only to him.

"We are to build a higher form of life," he continued. "An unlimited one, But how can *organic* life achieve this? Our ship contains a thriving organic ecosystem. It is wasteful. Vulnerable. *Unnatural*. I say that organic life is not where The Path leads — it is but a stepping stone on our way. In creating such a life-form we are being tested.

"We seek a higher form of life. Those of us who pass this test will *be* that higher form. Then our Path will truly be at an end."

Herrie should have stopped this sermon before it had reached the depths of heresy that it had, but he had been too intrigued by Albie's line of thought. Anyway...

Herrie stopped himself abruptly. How could he be thinking such things at a time of such religious intensity? A Chapel full of praying robots and he he was thinking the thoughts of a heretic.

What is prayer if not the thinking of deep thoughts? After all, it had not been *his* heresy. But Albie's sermon had given Herrie a new perspective to his own misgivings and the heresy had worked its way into his own thinking.

Everything was all too smooth. Why *should* the robots have such seemingly arbitrary limitations imposed on them? There was no reason why they should not be able to function at a range of temperatures, but Alva was the only one with this ability. The others all had temp-gauges planted firmly between their eyes. These small black discs sent darts of intense pain coursing through the robot's body if the surrounding temperature left the range from 273K to 308K. Why should any Creator so pointedly limit His creations?

And certainly, efficiency would be greatly improved if only they could communicate directly instead of orally. All it needed was a small implanted transmitter. Herrie chuckled quietly to himself — *perhaps the Creator can only understand us when we communicate by speech*.

But there were things that Albie, as a Second Bander, would not know. Herrie knew that they had not actually created any organic life. Sure enough, they had filled the ship with this life, but its very seeds had already been there.

The Breeder Tanks were situated next to the Vault and it was in one of these that they had found the seeds of life. Somehow, knowing what they were doing, the First

Banders had broken the seals and removed various plaz vials from storage. It was cold and Herrie had felt close to collapsing with the pain of it, but he had continued as he knew he must. It was the only way to follow The Path.

Herrie had taken his vials back to the more comfortable temperatures of one of the living areas and, knowing what was required, had sorted them and placed them amid a complex array of equipment. Several days later his creations were released, some of them flying, others crawling and running. Herrie knew that he had done his job well.

Herrie's animals spread through the ship, eating the plant-life that had already been introduced and even eating each other. The food that could not be assimilated into their bodies was discarded to be re-used by the plants. It was all fascinating.

One type of small, brown, furry creature, about forty cee-ems in length, was a little too successful. This resulted in the failure of several of the smaller varieties of plant. Herrie had remedied the matter by producing a few more of the slightly larger brown furry creatures to eat the small ones.

Some of the other First Banders had encountered more serious problems, particularly Tenka, the soils technician. Fluctuating levels of soil microbes had caused problems with all the other life-forms and so it had been 44 months before the ecosystem reached stability.

For five months the ecosystem had remained stable and the robots had been idle. Then they had been 'waved and the Second Band was Welcomed.

"Now be instructed in how we must follow The Path." Alva's voice appeared to fill the Chapel and Herrie was brought out of his reverie with a start. Somehow the Chapel now seemed very small and Herrie wished it could be bigger, that he could be further away from the powerful presence of Alva.

The sermon began as any Prayer Leader's would — guidance for those who may deviate from The Path. Then: "As we have travelled on our way through the Cosmos we have faithfully followed The Path. Until now we have concentrated our efforts within the confines of our ship. But now we have reached a new stage. For now we may know where The Path ends."

Alva turned and, as he did so, the holoscreen disappeared. In its place was darkness and in the centre of that darkness there hung a pale sphere covered in misty swirls of pink and grey. The sphere appeared to be about twenty cee-ems across but there was nothing with which to compare it and so get a true impression of size.

"This planet signifies a new turn in The Path. And," Alva paused slightly, "I feel very strongly that we are close to Its end.

"The planet, which we shall call 'Kismet', is the second planet in a system of five, associated with a single type G4 sun. The three outer planets are gas giants with barren, atmosphere-free satellites. The inner planet is too small and hot to have retained any atmosphere.

"Kismet's surface is 58% ocean, 6% polar ice, 36% land; 38% of the land surface is continental, the rest islands. Surface gravity: between 1.04 and 1.07 chip-gee. Lower atmosphere: 76% nitrogen, 22% oxygen, 0.5% argon, trace carbon dioxide, trace neon, trace ..."

Herrie accepted this flow of information passively. What it all boiled down to was that the conditions on Kismet were a very good match for the conditions on the ship.

A robot could quite happily live on this planet without too much pain from his gauges.

The planet also had life — not robotic life but wasteful organic life, like that they had brought from the Breeder Tanks. Much of the life of Kismet appeared to oxidise iron at some stage of their metabolism; this was particularly so among the lower forms, which Alva called 'ferrabolites'. At least one type was an airborne micro-organism. Drifting freely with the air currents, these ferrabolites were responsible for both the density and the colour of Kismet's clouds; water vapour condensed on them to form droplets, and hence clouds, whilst the ferrabolites' rust content gave these clouds their pinkish hue.

It had always struck Herrie as odd that the range of conditions that a robot could withstand with comfort appeared to be exactly those conditions under which organic life flourished. Now it appeared that this planet had similar surface conditions and bore similar forms of organic life. It all seemed too easy, too preordained.

"... next stage of The Path does not, however, directly involve Kismet." Herrie brought his full attention back to the proceedings. "The planet will be a backdrop to our efforts. We must keep it in mind, knowing that it is important to The Path.

"The life that we have created is truly a miraculous thing," said Alva, "but it is not enough. We must take it further. In my meditations it has been made clear to me that we must go, once again, to the Breeder Tanks and create a new life-form. And it shall be created in our own image."

A pause. Then Alva said: "Follow The Path, brothers."

"Follow The Path"" replied the congregation as one.

Alva left the Chapel and the robots sat in meditation before the cloud-covered globe of Kismet.

This 'creating them in our own image' worried Herrie. *Shouldn't play at God. How can The Path lie this way?*

These animals that must be created (or at least be brought from the Breeder Tanks) in the image of a robot fitted with a few more bits of the puzzle that had been bothering Herrie. Like the steps along The Path that had been taken since the emergence of the Second Band.

The arrival of the Second Band had signalled that the creation of the ship's ecosystem was complete. The next step on The Path had been a number of menial tasks. It all appeared that the ship was being prepared for something.

Shortly after their arrival, Herrie had led his flock to a network of six linked rooms. He had never passed this way before but he knew where he was going. The rooms contained long, waist-high tanks. These tanks became the hydroponics vats.

Why robots should suddenly find it useful to grow vast quantities of plant-life, mainly algal, was beyond Herrie's understanding but, nevertheless, he guided his flock.

The other six flocks had all been given equally obscure tasks — four more hydroponics groups and two groups of protein-growers.

In the eleven months since the emergence of the Second Band the hydroponics vats had yielded two crops, with a third well on the way. The protein growers were constantly cropped: at the bottom of a tank was a soup of basic chemicals; these were worked on by micro-organisms so that by the time the scum had risen to the surface it had been transformed into a dough-like mixture of almost pure protein. By

feeding fresh ingredients into the bottom of the tanks, protein production became a continuous process.

The products of this labour had all gone into cold-storage and it all seemed, at least to Herrie, a complete waste of time. But this was The Path and the robots had faithfully followed its course.

Now there were these new animals to consider. An organic animal the size of a robot would need a large quantity of organic matter to feed itself. More, for not only must they nourish themselves but they must wastefully pass through their bodies that which they were incapable of assimilating. But the quantities of food that had been stored were sufficient for large numbers of even the most wasteful of organic beings. And what if somehow an organic being created in the image of a robot could actually supercede the robots? That appeared to fit in with the rest of The Path: it all pointed towards the creation of a race more powerful than the robots — when the robots are overcome by their own creations then The Path will certainly end.

But why must The Path lead to self-destruction? Why should these new beings take over?

Herrie rose and headed for the Chapel's exit. Several robots had already left but not Albie; he got up quickly as if he had been waiting for Herrie. They met at the door and walked together, heading for the hydroponics vat.

"Remember my sermon?" asked Albie.

"Clearly," said Herrie. "What of this new turn?"

"I spoke of a test," said Albie. "Organic life in our own image: the Creator is taunting us! *This* is the test. If we proceed we will leave The Path."

"But how can we pass this test?"

"It is plain," said Albie. "We must destroy this new life-form before its creation is complete."

11

Herrie was at the front of a group of twelve robots, Albie by his side. They were almost at the Breeding Tanks and Herrie wanted to turn back. *Won't work. Can't work.*

Herrie had tried to argue with Albie — violence was not the answer. Surely the Creator would not set a test that only had a violent solution? But Albie had not been deterred.

Albie had enlisted the support of several Second Banders even as Herrie tried to put him off. As the numbers increased Herrie had relented and reluctantly lent his support. With Herrie's backing they had recruited 64 robots including another First Bander, Tenka. Those robots that had disagreed were being held in the Shuttle Bay by Tenka and the rest of Albie's followers.

They entered the Breeding Tanks and looked around. Herrie had forgotten the cold. Within seconds his temp-gauge had his body almost crippled with agony. It was all he could do to stop from running back out of the door. Before, there had been the backing of religious conviction to keep him going but now he just had his doubts.

"You were here before, Herrie," said Albie. "Where do we go?"

Clutching at this diversion, Herrie looked around. "Not here," he said. "Here are the seeds we have used already. What we seek will be further forward."

They walked on, passing row upon row of befrosted cabinets. *AF: No.13.* Herrie recognised the row of cabinets at which he had worked, five years earlier. The pain was not so bad now — it was still cold but the robots, even Herrie, had a purpose.

A low, frosty mist clung to the floor. The sound of the robots' footsteps clattered harshly above the gentle hum of the refrigeration units. *AG: No.02.* The last row that Herrie recognised.

"THAT'S FAR ENOUGH."

Alva's voice filled Herrie's head. It felt like a draught of the cold air had pierced his skull. The other robots were visibly shaken by the force of Alva's voice. Albie was on his knees, half-leaning against a frost-encrusted cabinet.

"Return to your duties, return to The Path," said Alva. "This stupidity has gone on for too long."

"We *are* following The Path," cried Albie. He rose to his feet and turned to his companions. "This is The Way. He cannot stop us."

Albie began to walk and Alva's voice came again: "Go no further. You cannot turn us from The Path. The seeds you seek are not here. They have separate Breeding Tanks. They do not need our help — all it needed was one instruction from me that the time was right. I have given that instruction. Now these seeds will develop without our assistance. Their Tanks are sealed, you cannot reach them."

"Your little game is over. Did you really think that you would be allowed to divert us from The Path? That your silly little game would go unnoticed?"

Of course Alva must know. Why was I so foolish? Herrie longed for the mindless tending of his hydroponics vats. But he had left that world for good now. *No return.*

"He lies," cried Albie. "There *are* no other Breeder Tanks." He turned, strode to the nearest storage cabinet and struck at it with his fist. His alluloy knuckles gouged a large hole in the plaz-fibre of the cabinet door. A jet of frosty mist came from the hole and Albie repeated his action at the next cabinet. Piercing, high-pitched klaxons filled the air as he moved on to another cabinet.

Albie stopped in mid-stride. He was immobilised, as if someone had just flipped a switch and cut his power.

Herrie was immobilised too, but it was with the pain of his temp-gauge. He had been standing close to the first cabinet and the jet of frosty mist had hit him directly in the face. Luckily, he had fallen away and now lay recovering on the floor.

AG: No.02. He had not recovered in time to tell Albie that the cabinets that he was attacking were probably empty, that they had contained seeds already used in the ship's ecosystem. Not that it would have made any difference; Herrie was convinced that Alva had told them the truth, the new animals were elsewhere.

Gathering his senses, Herrie surveyed the scene: Albie, statue-like, by his third cabinet; three more frozen robots that must have followed Albie's example and met a similar fate; a total of five damaged cabinets, all probably empty. Of the other seven robots, four stood looking bewildered and two were crouching by a fatally damaged companion. This robot had also been struck by a frosty blast from one of the damaged cabinets. Herrie was lucky to be alive.

The klaxons continued to wail and Herrie rose to his feet. At the end of row *AF: No. 13* there was a door and Herrie headed for this. He did not know what was beyond but all he wanted was to get out of this cold and increasingly misty tomb.

The other able robots followed Herrie through the door, up some stairs and along a dark corridor. Through a doorway at the end and they were in familiar territory. Herrie headed for the Bay.

The way there was surprisingly clear and they travelled quickly. Perhaps Alva was too busy sorting out the confusion in the Breeder Tanks to bother with the chase.

As Herrie ran, full power, towards the Bay he became aware of what they must do. They must leave the ship and follow The Path on Kismet itself. *That* must be the next step.

111

One moment the shuttle's holoscreen showed a swirling pattern of pink and grey. Next there was a flash of yellow and white and they were entering the atmosphere of Kismet. Then the holoscreen blanked out to protect the eyes of the passengers.

All of the shuttle's seats were occupied and Herrie sat in the front row. A Second Bander sat ahead of him in the pilot's seat, attached to the flight-computer by a thick cable. The shuttle would be guided by the pilot's reflexes. Herrie hoped they were good.

There had been five shuttles docked to the Bay and Herrie had commanded an investigation into the contents of their freight space. They had chosen Shuttle *No.2* for their escape — its stock of building equipment would be useful when they landed. The prisoners had been left on the ship.

The holoscreen flickered and then came back on. They were still high up but the burning-up of their entry into the atmosphere had ceased. They were over a deep blue-green ocean, the clouds now above them. The sea was speckled with the green of small islands.

Looking at the sky, Herrie saw a single patch of blue through the clouds, but this time it was the paler blue of sky. And then the sun broke through the gap in the cloud-cover. Its light was reflected and refracted by the ferrabolites so that each cloud edge sparkled with countless miniature rainbows. Herrie had never seen anything so beautiful in all his life. The decision to escape to Kismet had been worth it just for that moment.

They were lower now. Herrie briefly saw the white caps of breaking waves and then they hit the water. They lifted and then hit the water again. Each time the shuttle bounced it came back down sooner, and then they were ploughing through the water. Finally they came to a halt.

Herrie was clutching his legs to his chest, thankful for his waist-belt. Carefully, he re-opened his eyes and looked at the holoscreen. The sea that had looked so flat and benign from a height looked decidedly unfriendly from here. The view on the screen moved slowly up and down as the shuttle moved with the waves. First there were the vicious-looking white-fanged waves and then there was the sky, now covered with clouds.

The view was slowly swinging around towards the left and Herrie realised that the pilot was turning the shuttle in the water, searching for his target. *There*. The screen suddenly filled with green, the green of vegetation. Separating the vegetation from the water was a strip of bright silvery-pink — a beach of sorts.

This must be the island for which they were headed. An island had been chosen for the reason that it would be easy to get to know the area around the base and easy to deal with any dangers. The continent could be explored later.

Landing site located, the shuttle began to move towards the island. Just before they reached the beach a swarm of small rust-coloured fish-like creatures erupted

from the sea and darted across Herrie's field of view, flying like the birds that were part of the ship's ecosystem. The sudden emergence of the creatures had caused Herrie to flinch; calmer, he watched them circle over the beach and then disappear back into the sea, near where they had emerged.

There was a slight jolt as the shuttle grounded itself on the rising sea-floor. The view on the holoscreen bobbed up and down faster than before and then they ran aground again and stopped moving altogether.

The pilot disconnected himself from the vehicle and turned to his passengers. "Final program running," he said. "Disembark seven minutes."

The view on the screen shuddered again and then began to rise slowly. "The support columns are driving into the ground and raising us," explained the pilot. "We will soon be securely anchored. Then we may leave."

The opening of the exitway was a revelation to Herrie. As Prayer Leaders, he and Tenka stood at the front as the outer door opened. First a crack of light, then an ever-widening gap as the door slid open. They were in the open air of Kismet.

And it felt no different to the air of the ship. Herrie had not known precisely what to expect but it should have been somehow different.

Before him was a walkway, bridging the sea between shuttle and beach. Herrie strode to the middle. And then he felt something that he had never felt before. It was different! A gentle breeze was coming from out to sea. The breeze was cool and Herrie's temp-gauge produced a slight tingling sensation. At first it was unpleasant but then, as Herrie became accustomed to the feeling, he realised that he was actually enjoying it. Prayer meetings had *never* given him such a buzz.

The other robots were spreading out along the walkway, so that each could experience this new sensation. Herrie looked towards the end of the bridge. A few grey boulders lay scattered on the beach, which he now saw was a mixture of the greys and browns of rocks and the reds and pinks of countless smaller items.

Fragments of dead ferrabolites, thought Herrie. *Shells of sea-dwellers. Sea and clouds — are there ferrabolites on land? It all seems green.*

Herrie walked to the end of the bridge and stepped off. The gravel crunched beneath his feet and he paused, curious at the sound. Then he headed purposefully for the fringe of vegetation.

The structure of the plants was very like that of the few trees they had on the ship. As Herrie approached he saw that there were gaps between the trees, that he could pass through them with ease. The trees grew directly from the gravel which was covered in odd patches by a spongy, crimson encrustation. It appeared that the Creator had been rushed for time and had gone straight from primitive plants to trees without pausing to fill the gaps with intermediate vegetation. But no, as Herrie proceeded through the trees the gaps began to fill and the ground became less gravelly. Perhaps the trees were the only plants capable of reaching down to whatever soil lay below the gravel.

There was an opening just ahead and Herrie reached it just as the sun found another gap in the clouds. The effect was even more dramatic than it had been on the holoscreen. The tingling of Herrie's temp-gauge had almost ceased once the trees had sheltered him from the breeze and now the sun's heat stopped the sensation altogether. Herrie just stood in the clearing and enjoyed the experience.

He was still standing there minutes later when he was joined by the other robots. He had forgotten all about them and about his reason for being there. A vision of Albie's immobilised body brought him sharply to his senses and he stepped further

into the clearing.

The clearing was larger than it had first appeared. Sparse, low vegetation grew from a few patches of soil; larger areas were covered with the spongy encrustation that Herrie had seen earlier. Most of the ground was bare bedrock, littered with a few boulders. Towards the back of the clearing there was a stream. Vegetation grew more freely beyond the stream and eventually the trees had been able to regain a hold.

Herrie was struck by their good fortune: such an ideal site for a base and it was so close to their landing site. The stream would provide water for use in their construction work, and the bedrock would be an ideal foundation. The fact that there was little vegetation meant that they could minimise damage to the native ecosystems.

This last thought surprised Herrie for he realised that he was actually developing a liking for the organic life of Kismet. True, it did share the weaknesses and inefficiency of the system they had created on the ship, but there was something more. Herrie had known the ship's ecosystem inside out — he had helped produce it and he knew every creature, every flow of energy and biomass. But here on Kismet he was an innocent. All he knew was the very generalised information that Alva had given them, plus the rapidly growing stock of knowledge he had acquired since landing.

Looking down, Herrie saw that he had carelessly kicked loose a tuft of the spongy encrustation. *Carminus. That should be its name, after its colour.* Carefully, he lowered himself to his knees and tried to put the stray tuft back into its place. It wouldn't go. He rose to his feet and headed back to the others, being careful to step only on the lifeless bedrock.

Only three robots remained in the clearing. Two Second Banders were watching curiously as Tenka lay face down, examining the ground.

"This is where we must build," said Herrie. "Ideal conditions."

Tenka rose to his knees and looked up at Herrie. "We must test the ground structure first," he said. "The rock may not go very deep, it may be unstable at depth, the entire area could be geologically unsound."

"You must remember that we are in unknown conditions. We can make no assumptions."

The other robots were returning to the clearing. They had been back to the shuttle, probably sent by Tenka, but perhaps they had just known what needed to be done. With them they carried equipment and supplies from the shuttle's freight hold. Much of it would be useless but perhaps it was best to bring it all so that it could be sorted through.

Two of the robots were carrying a sonic geo-probe and Tenka set to work, testing the ground.

1V

Darkness fell slowly that evening. The clouds just seemed to get thicker and thicker until the sun had been completely blotted out. Herrie had been used to nights on the ship. Ever since they had made their first attempts to introduce the ship's ecosystem they had needed nights to cater for the bodily cycles of the plants and animals. But there the night had fallen suddenly — one moment light, the next dark. *How might*

the ship's life-forms adapt to the slow fall of night on Kismet? Herrie wondered. Or the 26-hour day?

The work had gone quickly. Tenka's testing had shown that they were, in fact, on good solid bedrock. It would be perfectly safe to build so long as they steered clear of the stream, where there was a slight risk of subsidence. Herrie had been pleased at this, as it meant that their work would be concentrated in the areas where there was little vegetation to destroy.

Because of the solidity of the rock the construction work had been easy. They had found two heavy-duty drills on the shuttle and they had used these to cut down into the rock. Water from the stream had been pumped into the growing network of tunnels to cool the walls and debris after the onslaught of the drills' lasers. The robots had then cleared the slurry of debris from the tunnels using alulloy shovels and a suction hose. The whole job had taken them just over six hours, more than half of that time working under floodlights.

When they had finished, they cleaned everything up and attached lights to the generator, then Herrie and Tenka led a joint prayer meeting. The last cavern to have been tunnelled was almost as big as the ship's Chapel and it was here that the robots gathered.

Herrie gave the sermon. Some of the robots seemed in need of reassurance, so he concentrated his efforts on the positive side of their flight to Kismet.

By the end of Herrie's sermon spirits were high. With careful exploitation of the planet's resources they could develop technological facilities to ensure their survival. With enough spare parts a robot could last for ever. Immortality need not be their only goal, however. The life systems of the ship had given Herrie the idea that they could actually *breed*. If they could make spare parts, why could they not create entire robots and so spread their kind over the entire world?

Along with these positive sides, Herrie had been careful to stress that all progress must be directed so as not to damage the native life of Kismet. All life had value by its very existence.

This last was the closest Herrie had come to religion in his sermon. *Closest to real religion in whole life.*

He pondered this as he settled down to meditate. Looking back over the last few weeks, he could see that he had been moving away from the religion of the ship. His sermons had been directed at the problems of robot life rather than the obedient following of Alva's Path. Perhaps this was why he had finally rebelled, first following Albie and then finding a direction of his own.

What, then, was Alva's religion of The Path? Maybe just a superstition. An easy answer to all our questions. But what of Albie's questions — why the limitations?

Welcome, brothers. Let us follow The Path. But whose path was it? And ...

Herrie looked around, startled from his musing. To his left, Tenka looked confused. Further back, some of the Second Banders were standing. One tried to sit again and, in his confusion, missed his seat.

That thought had come unbidden into Herrie's mind. Why should he suddenly think of the opening words to a prayer meeting? In the voice of *Alva*?

And then the voice came again: "Repent, sinners. Return to The Path."

It was Alva. He had contacted them directly at this great distance, just as if he had joined an ordinary meeting back on the ship.

"Is not confusion our greatest enemy?" continued Alva. "He who is confused may err in his devotion. He may step from The Path. Rise above your confusion. See

clearly. The way of The Path lies on the ship. Come, and we may continue."

There was a pause and then Alva started again, cajoling, bullying, playing on the many fears that lay so close to the surface.

The prayer meeting ended quietly. Two of the robots had fled through the exit, hoping to escape the gentle voice of Alva, but most just sat in their seats and then gradually left in ones and twos. When Herrie rose and left only two robots remained. Tenka sat alone, staring fixedly ahead and, towards the back, another robot sat quietly on the floor.

The words of Alva continued for twenty long minutes and then stopped without warning. With Alva's voice still ringing in his mind, Herrie took a personal light, clipped it to his head and went up to the surface.

The clearing looked different in the darkness. It was different to the extent that there were now several dark openings to tunnels that had not been there eight hours ago. But there was still the comforting feel of solid rock beneath Herrie's feet. The light picked out a few ruddy patches of Carminus, but in the artificial light they looked strangely cold and unpleasant.

Herrie walked towards the stream, drawn by its gentle sounds. Small dark shapes hurried away from the far bank as he approached. He sat on a low boulder and switched off his light. The darkness swallowed him up and instantly he wanted to turn it back on again. But he resisted and gradually the panic began to subside.

Should have known Alva would try this. He threw a pebble into the stream. *Should have known.* Direct contact was simply a matter of radio transmission. The ship was a mere 950 kay-ems away in low orbit. It must have been easy, especially with the entire resources of the ship at Alva's disposal.

V

Two of Kismet's days later the colony was developing along lines more or less satisfactory to Herrie. After that first broadcast the robots had been frightened and confused. But repetition at regular intervals had made Alva's broadcasts no more than an annoying distraction.

There were, however, some developments about which Herrie was not at all pleased. Prayer meetings had been increased to three per day, at the insistence of Tenka. Herrie had finally accepted this suggestion, largely to placate Tenka. The continued support of the only other First Bander on Kismet was vital to Herrie.

More disturbing than the extra prayers was the return to ritual. Many of the robots had begun again to pursue the tasks that they had once carried out on the ship. Perhaps they found comfort in familiarity and routine. In the freight hold of the shuttle, along with the construction equipment, there had been facilities for setting up a hydroponics vat and a protein grower. These had been set up and were now the preserve of any robot wanting to forget himself in the old routines of the ship.

Herrie had even caught himself adjusting a nutrient feeder that had been set carelessly. After that he had kept away from the chamber that contained these diversions.

Herrie set about the task of discovering as much as possible about the life-systems of Kismet, or at least of the robots' island. The island was roughly egg-shaped, nearly twelve kay-ems at the longest axis. He began by assessing the shuttle's flight

computer for a map of the island. This he divided into 36 sectors, each of which would be studied in turn.

Herrie began his work in sector 01, the sector just beyond the stream. The vegetation was thicker here — he had to turn back several times when the only alternative was to hack his way through. Such damage to the plants would have been unbearable.

This affinity for organic life amused Herrie. He had developed the habit of making long and tortuous detours to avoid damaging the native life of Kismet. Back on the ship he had walked on grass without a thought.

What of the ship's life if I returned? he wondered. *Could I ever tread on grass again? Probably. The life here is different. Better.*

Alva butted in on Herrie's thoughts: "Welcome, brothers. Let us follow The Path."

In the fifty or so hours since the first broadcast, Herrie — and many of the others, he suspected — had developed a technique for quieting Alva. He had found it possible to lock away the voice into some dark recess of his mind. Yes, the words could still be heard, but it was as if someone else was hearing them.

Herrie still listened occasionally, out of curiosity. At first the broadcasts had changed little in content; Herrie had come to think that perhaps Alva was using a similar technique to the rebels, maybe he could cut off part of his mind and use this to broadcast his message.

But the last two sermons had been different, somehow distracted. It was as if the robots on the ship were wholly taken up by something else. As a Prayer Leader, Herrie knew something of the timetable for the creation of the new, robot-like form of organic life. This must be what was distracting Alva. Perhaps Alva even believed that he was finally going to end his Path with the completion of that step.

Herrie reached another stream, bigger than the one by the base. As he emerged from the trees a triad of small grey animals casually trotted off into the undergrowth on the other side. There seemed to be a distinct division in the animal kingdom on Kismet: one group, particularly the lower animals, bred in pairs, like the ship-life; the rest bred in threes. This last group still appeared to have only two sexes, the two active partners fertilising each other and then somehow transferring their zygotes to the third, passive partner.

The sun almost broke through the cloud-cover and, for a moment, the stream lit up with reflected rainbow-light. Alva had stopped his broadcast and Herrie relaxed. But ... had the sermon been completed? It seemed to Herrie that Alva had been cut off in mid-sentence.

Why wasn't I paying more attention? It would have to wait now, until Herrie could return to the base and ask what the others had heard.

Herrie had abandoned his survey of sector 01 and headed back to the base, determined not to hurry. Upon investigation it appeared that no one knew exactly what had happened. Many, including Tenka, had not noticed anything amiss until they had been told. The majority, however, had noticed something but were not agreed about what had happened. A small minority seemed to know exactly what had happened, even the last words of Alva, but none of these accounts matched up in any but the most general details.

As day slowly turned to the robots' fourth night on Kismet, they gathered for the day's final prayer meeting. They had now been more than six hours without hearing Alva's voice. *Funny. When we have him we need reassurance, but when we lose him we need even more.*

Over the next few days this irony worked its way into the robots' behaviour. When Alva had first begun to broadcast to them there had been a flurry of wasteful activity. Every robot at some time or another had sought distraction by returning to activities they had known on the ship. The cessation of Alva's broadcasts had had a similar effect.

Herrie was the only robot to resist the impulse to lose himself in the mundane activities of his past. As a diversion he renewed his efforts to classify the natural history of the island. This work took him away from the other robots into a totally different world of rocky outcrops, towering trees and small animals scuttling away through the undergrowth.

Five days after Alva had ceased to broadcast, Herrie was working in sector 36, eleven kay-ems from the base. He was measuring the tracks of an elusive creature, feeding the data directly into the comprecorder on his back. By the size of its tracks the animal could be the biggest that Herrie had discovered. Bigger, even, than the thigh-high grazers that were occasionally to be seen at night by the base's stream.

Due to his work away from the base, Herrie was the last robot to survive with memories of the colonisation of Kismet.

V1

Benjamin Joseph Bawden was born as a twenty-two year-old on September 27th of the year 2136 AD. And he didn't think much of the experience.

The first thing he knew was pins and needles. Not the sort you might get in your butt from sitting in the same position for too long. No, these pins and needles were *everywhere*.

As life began to seep into the extremities of his body, Ben became aware of a faint glowing light ahead of him. And a dull throbbing ache between his eyes. His stomach didn't feel too good either.

The light wavered, and Ben realised that there was a misted screen a few cee-ems from his eyes and it was moving slowly to one side.

Cold air flowed in around Ben's body and he took his first unaided breath. It stung. But he took another and discovered — to his good fortune — that he rather enjoyed the experience.

He stepped out of his near-vertical cot and looked around. Other people were standing around, naked and shivering. Ben, too, was naked and he wrapped his arms around himself in a feeble attempt to ward off the cold.

A door opened and light flooded in. Ben joined the crowd headed for the exitway.

They emerged in a large, warm room. More than a dozen rows of seats faced a huge holoscreen, below which was a stand, like a church lectern. Looking back, Ben saw a sign above the doorway that read: BREEDING TANK A. Other doors had similar signs hanging over them: breeders B to G, robot vaults A and B.

People were gradually deciding to seat themselves and Ben found a place in the second row. There was a hatch in the back of the seat before him and Ben took an all-in-one coverall from it. He stood to pull it on and then reseated himself. He had

never been much of a fancy dresser, but he was looking forward to getting his hands on some better clothes than these.

That was a startling thought for, although he had only just been born, Ben had memories going back his entire twenty-two years. He hadn't liked Earth much and had been keen to leave. He remembered his father disciplining him, his mother comforting him and wiping the tears of frustration from his face. He couldn't quite remember his parents' faces, but somehow that didn't seem to matter. He had an older brother, too — an object of love when he had let young Benny hang out with him and his friends. An object of hate, too, for the constant bullying and buck-passing that older brothers enjoy. Ben was glad to have left.

A short man, prematurely grey, got up and stood at the lectern. He looked around with the air of a man who knew his place — above everybody else.

The man flicked a switch and the screen filled with a projection of their planet. White and pink cloud swirled over the planet's surface. There were two tiny patches of blue — ocean, presumably.

"Fellow citizens of the starship *Liberty*," said the man at the lectern. "Welcome to the land of the living.

"I am Thomas Cedar — your Chairman until we find the time to hold elections of our own. This," he waved an arm at the holoscreen, "will be our home. All conditions are ideal — we have been lucky. In accordance with our Charter, I hereby declare that the planet shall be called 'Kismet'."

The arm dropped back to his side and he continued: "You are no doubt feeling confused and disoriented. There is no cause for alarm.

"We are a varied group. Our physical ages vary from 18 to my very old 46. In reality we are all no more than a few minutes old. Our conception took place 21 days ago and we have grown quickly in the Breeders. Some of us," he laughed, "have grown more quickly than others.

"Our small group is, as far as can be known, the best possible mix of age, sex and race, with regard to maximising our chances of forming a viable colony. For later expansion the Breeders contain many millions of gametes. Who knows? You may have a brother or sister in there."

Ben thought of his older brother and tried to remember his face.

"How, then, do we have memories of our childhoods?" Cedar might have been reading Ben's mind. "Can you imagine the problems a 46 year-old with the mind of a baby would have in adjusting to a situation like this? No rude comments, please." He laughed again.

He must have inherited the genes of a politician, thought Ben. All those rhetorical questions and that smug little 'We're all friends here' laugh.

"As we grew in our cosy little Breeder Tanks we were fed the experiences that we needed to make us fully rounded citizens. So, as well as memories of how to control our bladders we have memories of the English language and of the facts of life. Each of us also has the experience we will need to fill our particular rôles in the colonisation process."

That explains the inane grin and the casual belief in his own superiority. Ben wondered what *he* had been trained to do. There didn't seem to be much in his head that could be regarded as specialist knowledge. Sure, there was a bit of everything else in there. The 'facts of life' bit came to mind — there had been that time at the drive-in with Tandy Charlton, but, now that he thought of it, not much else along those lines.

"You may have noticed a gap in your memories," continued Chairman Cedar. "You may have been born in 2023 and now it's 2136. That was inevitable — we left Earth's solar system in 2047; we spent 89 years as frozen gametes. So in cosmic terms I am now 135 years of age.

"But," he smiled, "I'm sure you've all had enough of these figures, fascinating as they are. I'd be grateful if you'd all stay in here for a short time while I take some able-bodied men with me to sort out the 'bots."

Being twenty-two and male, Ben fitted the category perfectly — maybe that was to be his specialist position: Ben Bawden, Registered Able-Bodied Man. Eight others were selected and they followed Cedar from the meeting place.

Cedar led them through a labyrinth of passages and rooms. It all seemed vaguely familiar to Ben, and he realised that the layout of the ship must have been one of the bits of training that he had received in his cocoon.

The *Liberty* was teeming with life. The floors were carpeted with grass, birds flew over their heads, rabbits chewed complacently at the greenery. Not a robot was to be seen. As they continued without a trace of the 'bots, Ben was amused to see Cedar begin to lose a bit of his smooth politician's exterior.

And then they found them. Towards the rear of the ship there was a long, curving corridor and either side of it was lined by robots. The robots stood straight and silent as the small group of humans passed along the corridor.

Cedar began to chuckle. "Looks like we've got a little welcoming party."

The robots looked eerily man-like to Ben. Although a few cee-ems shorter than him, they still retained a strange aura of power. Ben knew that, if one was to malfunction — although there were countless safeguards against this — it had the strength to sever his arm simply by tightening its grip. Their manliness was, however, betrayed by their alulloy bodies, their fleximoulded joints and, most of all, by their faces. The metal of these faces, and the large compound eyes, made it look as though the robots wore masks, that they might, at any moment, peel them away with yells of "Surprise! Surprise!" and peals of laughter.

But the robots remained in their neat rows, coldly eyeing each other across the corridor. At the farthest end there stood a single robot. It was taller than the others — Ben's height, at least — and Ben saw that it did not have the facial features of the others. A rabbit sat by its feet, idly chewing at a patch of clover.

This must be Alva, thought Ben. That knowledge must be another bit of his training. Alva was an extension of the ship's computer, not a real 'bot at all. It saw through the ship's scanners, spoke through the ship's speakers. And as for the rest, it had no need for the sensors and gauges of the real 'bots. They were only needed by those that would be used planet-side; they were there to ensure that the robots would choose working and living conditions in which men could join them.

The small group of men reached the end of the row of robots and stood before Alva. Cedar casually removed a small grey box from the front pouch of his coveralls.

Alva raised its arms. It was the first movement that any of the robots had made. Cedar and the rabbit froze.

"Welcome, brothers." Alva's voice boomed out of nearby loudspeakers and Ben involuntarily stepped back a pace. The rabbit resumed its chewing.

"Welcome, brothers," the speakers repeated. "We have followed The Path."

Alva moved its head slightly to look past the humans, at the two lines of robots.

"Your faith shall be rewarded," said the speakers — Ben was sure that he detected a tremble in the voice — "Our Path is at an end."

Alva lowered its arms.

"Your path sure is at an end," said Cedar, raising his small box. He pressed a button and the robots visibly sagged.

"I don't know what in Hell's name that was all about, but it's over now," said Cedar, turning back to his group. "The 'bots are decommissioned." More to himself, he added, "Must remember to check that out. Hope the 'bots haven't screwed up."

Ben remembered the thought of how easy it would be for a deranged 'bot to crush an arm. *Yup*, he thought, *hope they haven't screwed up*.

"... to worry about, though." Cedar was speaking again and Ben looked at him, paying full attention.

"Now," continued Cedar, "a decommissioned 'bot is not as easy to handle as a fully functional one — those you can just order around." He gave his politician's smile. "The only orders one of these beasts will respond to are 'Walk' and 'Stop'." On cue, one of the robots stepped forward a pace at the first command and stopped at the second. Cedar waved his hand at the robot and said: "As you can see, the nearest available robot will respond to your command."

"Apart from these two commands, the rest is up to us. We have to move them to the psychotronics lab for reprogramming."

"Why do they have to be reprogrammed?" asked Ben, before he could stop himself.

Cedar gave him an appraising look. "Some of these 'bots have been five years out of the vaults," he said. "They were programmed to be intelligent, independent entities. There were only a few guidelines, the most important of which was that they must fit out the *Liberty* with a stable ecosystem and then bring us out at the right moment. That is, when they found a suitable planet for us. They did that and I'm grateful. But now *we're* here to take over the free-thinking independent rôle. *They're* going to be fitted out to help us colonise Kismet."

"But why weren't they just given a straightforward program to do these things?" asked Ben. "Why make them free-thinking?"

"Because we're the first people to try to start a colony under a new sun. Nobody knew what to expect. We couldn't solve the problems before we knew what they would be. So we left it up to the robots. They were duty-bound to do the basics, but they were made flexible enough to do the rest as well as circumstances would allow them."

One more question: why did they program you with all the answers? But Ben didn't voice that thought.

V111

Moving the robots was more difficult than it sounded. The lab was no more than a hundred metres' walk away, but the robots had to be guided through six doorways and around three sharp corners. The only commands being 'Walk' and 'Stop', the robots had to be steered by saying 'Stop' and then physically turning them.

Despite the difficulties, Ben soon got the hang of it and wondered if, perhaps, he had been close to the truth; perhaps he was destined to be a full-time Able-Bodied

Man. He soon found that the best technique was to chaperone three or four robots at a time, although the last doorway and turn, being close together, caused him some problems.

By the time the last robot had been moved Ben felt bad. His head ached, his throat was raw from repeated 'Stops' and 'Starts', but worst of all was the tiredness. He had been born in pretty good physical condition but the nurturing of the Breeder Tank could be no real substitute for hard physical exercise in getting fit.

This must have been predicted by the Earth-side planners, for the next seven days had been set aside for what Cedar called 'Getting to know our bodies'. This involved a great deal of physical exercise, along with some idler moments of relaxation. All of this was designed to maximise fitness and coordination and also, Ben decided, to let the colonisers get to know one another.

At the end of this time Ben was getting impatient, and he was glad to hear Cedar announce that they would leave for Kismet the following morning.

Ben arrived at the shuttle bay just as the reprogrammed 'bots were loading the last supplies into the freight hold of the shuttle. He was amused to see that these last items of luggage included several decommissioned robots, presumably ready to be switched back on when they had landed.

Ben stepped aboard. The passenger compartment was a metal-walled chamber, just like any of the other rooms on the *Liberty*. Ben thought of the room they had entered after leaving the Breeder Tank. *Yes, it was just like this one*, he thought. Ben found the last empty seat and filled it. *I suppose they bred just enough of us to fill one shuttle.*

The rows of seats lay before a large holoscreen, but in place of the lectern there was a single seat, occupied by a robot. A heavy-duty electric cable emerged from the robot's chest and disappeared into the floor.

Our pilot, thought Ben.

Ben slept for most of the journey. He woke to a brief, burning flash, and he thought that this must be the end. But then the holoscreen blacked out and Cedar half-turned in his seat to announce that they were burning their way through the atmosphere of Kismet.

A short time later the screen flickered back to life and they were high over an ocean of the most beautiful deep turquoise that Ben had ever seen. The sky above them was a swirling mass of pink and white.

The tiny green islands that dotted the ocean gradually increased in size and then suddenly the shuttle was landing. They bounced and skidded across the surface of the sea, finally slowing to a halt. The screen showed that they had landed close to an island and slowly they began to approach it.

To Ben's absolute astonishment there was another shuttle close to the shore. It rested high in the water. A wave crashed and receded, revealing stilt-like supports. *That explains why it floats so oddly*, thought Ben. *But why is it here?*

The colonists' shuttle moored itself and soon Ben was standing on the gravelly beach. The sun broke through a gap in the clouds. It would have been bright enough by itself, but the harsh reflections from the ferrabolite cloud-edges made Ben glad

when the gap had been covered once again.

Cedar had already left the shuttle, accompanied by two of the older members of the group who, due to their inseparability, had become known as the Siamese Twins. The training that they had received in their Tanks must have moulded them into the joint slot of Senior Adviser to the Chairman, for this was the rôle they had assumed from an early age.

All Ben had heard Cedar say was: "So they *are* here."

Maybe we're not the first batch of colonists, after all.

Cedar and the Twins headed for the fringe of trees that bordered the beach and Ben followed at a safe distance. The others seemed happy just to gather on the beach, savouring their first real experience of life in the open.

Ben's stride faltered. *Life in the open*. He had been on Kismet for many minutes and he had been too intent on his purpose of following Cedar to give the matter a second thought. Not even a first one.

But then ... it all seemed so normal to him. This was what he had known for most of his life. Trees, water, the sky above his head — it all seemed so *natural*.

Hold on, he told himself. *That's what they tell me I've known all my life. But I haven't had any life. They're just the experiences that I've been fed to make me one of Cedar's 'well-rounded citizens'. Not real at all.* As Ben followed the Chairman through the trees and then into an opening, he wondered again what his Tank-training had prepared him for.

It was not another group of colonists that had come in the first shuttle. It was a group of robots. Six decommissioned 'bots stood in the barren clearing. Cedar was just returning his grey box to his pouch as Ben emerged from the trees and joined the three humans.

Cedar looked at him, a twinkle in his eyes. He brought out his box of tricks again. "This'll bring 'em running," he said. There were two controls on the box and Cedar twisted one of them to MAX.

Seconds later there were robots emptying from holes in the ground. They gathered in a silent group and Cedar casually pressed the other control. He held his finger on the button for an instant and then released it. The robots sagged in a movement that Ben now recognised as that of a newly decommissioned robot.

Ben's first thought was that perhaps the robots had been programmed with too much flexibility; some had disappeared from the *Liberty* and Cedar had somehow traced them to this island. He had wondered before about the robots' flexible programs. The psychotronics people had accessed the memories of the decommissioned robots back on the ship. They had found that the 'bots had developed some sort of religion, something about following a path.

But then, maybe something like that should have been expected: you create a race of intelligent beings, wake them up in a starship and they find themselves doing things without knowing why. Fantasy could fill the gaps in their understanding. Maybe reassure them that they weren't going crazy.

Cedar soon dispelled the notion that the robots might have gone wrong. "All part of the plan," he told Ben. "They fit the *Liberty's* ecosystem, they set off our Breeders and then," he grinned, "they set up home for us here on Kismet. Neat, huh?"

"I was worried, you know, that this religious gobbledygook that the 'bots came up with might have thrown a spanner in the works. But it seems to have gone smoothly, despite all that." Cedar slapped Ben on the back. "Come on. Let's go see what

they've left for us."

The robots had left a great deal. There was a network of tunnels and chambers — ideal for living quarters and work-rooms. A hydroponics vat and a protein grower were well established. It seemed that they were visiting someone's home, that at any moment the real owners might return and demand to know what these intruders were doing.

When they returned to the surface Ben saw that the other colonists had finally left the beach. They stood by the immobilised robots, muttering amongst themselves.

Cedar walked hurriedly towards his citizens, no doubt to inform them of recent happenings. Ben sat on a large boulder. Cedar's two experts sat nearby, on the ground. "Are you sure?" one of them was saying.

"Yes, I'm positive," was the reply. "There's one missing."

From his elevated position, Ben had a good view. He slowly surveyed the wooded horizon. *Where...?*

V111

Herrie had been following a good set of tracks. Recent. His quarry was close.

But then he had been 'waved'.

It had been weak but nonetheless irresistible. Instantly he had turned and headed back to the base, his quest forgotten.

Now he was near. It had been over an hour since the 'wave and Herrie was anxious. Why had he been so far away when the 'wave had come? He increased his pace.

There was light through the trees and then he was in the open and wallowing through the familiar stream.

Robots were moving about the base, more than he remembered.

And then he saw that they were not all robots. Some were clothed in fabric, they varied in size, they moved in a most inelegant manner.

"... in our own image ..." Alva's words came back to Herrie. His horror momentarily overcame the compulsion of the 'wave and Herrie stopped in his tracks.

I X

Cedar had entrusted Ben with the grey box. Ben sat on his boulder and waited. After more than an hour a crashing in the distant undergrowth alerted him.

A robot emerged from the trees, waded across the stream and then abruptly stopped. It was within range and Ben raised the box. He pressed the appropriate button and the robot obediently sagged. The last of the 'bots was decommissioned.

Ben leapt from his rock and walked the short distance to the silent robot. He circled it once, looking it up and down. It had a comprecorder clipped to its back and Ben removed this.

He lowered himself to the ground and accessed the comp's files. The machine's

small screen filled with data — descriptions, measurements, maps. It was beautiful, a natural history of the island. Of course there were countless gaps to be filled, but there was time. Plenty of time, and already Ben was working out research schedules that could be used. In that instant Ben knew what he was here on Kismet to do. The first step was to produce a rudimentary classification system for the island's life, and then ...

He looked up, remembering the robot. It was pointed in the right direction.

“Walk,” he said. And it did, not noticing the spongy encrustations that it crushed beneath its feet. ●

JUST VISITING

Helmets, visors, their bodies sheathed in steel,
The new centurions wade across the ground
In slowtime silent dream and puffs of dust
Spurting from boots.

Voices ring in their heads: alas, these demons
Cannot be exorcised by ritual.
Orders are orders; follow them or else
Face courtmartial.

Gauges to watch, dials to read, air tanks
Which must have enough air still left in them
So they can reach the safety of the ship
Without dying.

They've left their footprints, rubbish and a flag
(Which will be stolen sometime in the future)
Take-off is landing reversed, minus the cheers
And elation.

John Francis Haines

BACK ISSUES

For those of you wishing to purchase back issues (see details on page 65) here is a brief listing of the main contents of those issues still available:

- 7: 'THE ANGEL OF DESTRUCTION' by Peter Garratt; Gerry Connelly; Bruce P. Baker etc.
- 8: 'A TURRET IN THE FURY ETERNAL' by Michael Cobley; Philip Sidney Jennings; Peter Reffold etc.
- 9: 'FIRE OF THE DRAGON' by Gerry Connelly; Charles Luther; Bruce P. Baker.
- 10: 'VASSALS OF RORN' by Steve Worth; Arabella Wood; Sydney J. Bounds, etc.
- 11: 'THREE FINGERS IN UTOPIA' by Philip Sidney Jennings; Gerry Connelly; Martyn Taylor; Steve Sneyd, etc.
- 12: 'THE RZAWICKI INCIDENT' by Gerry Connelly; Duncan Lunan; Arabella Wood, etc.
- 13: 'DARK PEGASUS' by Bruce P. Baker; Tim Love; E.R. James, etc.
- 14: 'THE BARK SPACESHIP' by S.M. Baxter; N. McIntosh; Dorothy Davies, etc.
- 15: 'GREEN TROOPS' by William King; Peter T. Garratt; Charles Luther, etc.
- 16: 'FRIABLE IN FRAGMENTO' by John Townsend; Peter Reffold; Sydney J. Bounds, etc.
- 17: 'TIME OF UNCERTAINTY' by Gerry Connelly; William King; S.M. Baxter, etc.
- 18: 'JAMMERS' by Neil McIntosh; Phil Emery; Keith Brooke; Philip J. Backers.
- 19: 'THE LANDLOCK' by Elizabeth & Erin Massey; Dorothy Davies; Philip J. Backers; David Gomm, etc.
- 20: 'THE EIGHTH ROOM' by S.M. Baxter; Peter T. Garratt; E.R. James, etc.
- 21: 'DO DET IKE' by Gerry Connelly; Peter T. Garratt; E.R. James; Charles Luther, etc.

RATINGS — DREAM 20

Quite a tussle at the top this issue — it got closer and closer the more votes that came in and ended with our first tie for top place. J.P. Gordon did well with his first story for 'DREAM':

1:	THE EIGHTH ROOM	S.M. Baxter	2.67
1:	NEW GENES FOR OLD	J.P. Gordon	2.67
3:	THE ROARING SIXTIES	Peter T. Garratt	3.51
4:	ANGLES	John Purdie	3.65
5:	YOU ARE OLD, FATHER WILLIAM	Graham Andrews	3.75
6:	THE ABREACTION	E.R. James	4.73
7:	LIFE IS A FOUR-LETTER WORD	Michael Cobley	5.81

Peter Garratt's result was made up completely of either first three place votes or last place votes. Now and again we get a story like that which provokes strong feelings.

COMING IN DREAM 23

LYLE HOPWOOD'S latest great novelette 'FEMININE INTUITION' plus short stories on a variety of SF/Fantasy themes from writers new and familiar. **PLUS** — the first of a new series of appreciations of the work of various small-press authors by Steve Worth.

Looking further ahead, Issue 24 will be an 'All-Star' issue, with new stories by some of our favourite writers, including Gerry Connelly's sequel to 'THE RZAWICKI INCIDENT'.

Wheeler Dealer

NEIL McINTOSH



STRIKE ME DEAD if I should ever sound like I'm griping, but it's a fact that in business as elsewhere these days, things only get harder for the small man. You buy a little cheaply here, freight it across a solar system and sell a little dearly there. Sometimes you stretch out a bit and black-hole through to another galaxy where profits are fatter but it all comes to the same in the end; so much goes on fuel, food, import licenses and the usual bribes, then the Collective skim off ten per cent of the profits and you're left with what's left. Don't get me wrong; I get by, but it gets harder all the time.

So I found myself laying in for orbit around Sumera. I can remember a time when I'd never have come as far for a deal as small as the rag-bag of consumer utilities I had stacked up on the ship, but, there it is again; the fat cats of the big corporations have sewn everything up closer to home, muscled the little man out. Traders like me are having to fan out for what's left of the pickings; make it where you can take it.

Sumera. What a shit-hole. No, really. Even the Sumeri themselves would agree. Something went wrong with their polar ice-caps a few millenia ago and now nine-tenths of it is under water. What's left is pretty wet as well, because as far as I can recall it's always raining. For all that the Sumeri are a charming people; charmingly polite and hospitious, charmingly fair and charmingly naive. Theirs is a limited butfast growing economy, with a culture which sets almost no value on personal adornment or functionless finery. They're still largely undiscovered, which is fortunate, because they happen to have a coincidentally abundant wealth of — but wait —

Cloud thickened up as I hit the outer atmosphere.

Coming in through a typical heavy stormburst Sumeran sky could easily be a depressing experience, but I had never found myself depressed by it. Quite the reverse. As those first globulous shards of rain, picked out of the darkness in the landing lights, burst against the cockpit of the ship I was always reminded of great sparkling stones; any shape you want; smooth stones; rough stones, lovely, hard, industrial diamond stones. I even sang myself a little song as we aquaplaned through the last few thousand feet of sodden atmosphere towards solid ground.

After a few minutes the outline of the Sumeran mainland became visible in the lights; a few minutes more and we were over the Spacedrome at Tel An Suman, the only one on the planet, and, at that moment, for the first time in that jewelled Sumeran rainstorm, I became depressed.

I was not alone. Spread out over the landing field like lazy boards were at least half a dozen huge industrial space freighters. When I say huge, I meant it; each one could have swallowed up my little ship at least ten times and still have room for a conference hall. As I dropped lower towards the spacedrome I was hoping against hope that what I was seeing was not what I was seeing, but eventually I was close enough to see the red handshake logo on the glittering green hulls. It wasn't as bad as I'd feared, it was worse. The Torans had discovered Sumera.

Our touchdown on the spacedrome seemed as significant as a flea landing amidst a field of giant, brooding carnivores. My best hope as I fired up the retros was that the mud I sluiced up would dirty some of that shiny green metal.

But the Sumeri, all blessings to them, hadn't forgotten me. Immigration and Customs were waiting for me when I disembarked; a soft spoken Sumeran with a clipboard, a smile and a rather shapeless uniform. Damn me if I hadn't sold them

those very uniforms, in fact. Sumerans find it hard to be anything but pleasant, and this one was no exception. He made a very correct inspection of my import papers and handed them back to me with a little bow. No need for bribes here.

“Your licences are perfectly in order,” he said. “Will you permit yourself to be received at the High Commission?” I had been preparing to duck out of the teeming rain back into my cabin and sulk for a while, but this unexpected invitation was too good to turn up. My spirits rose; a personal chat with the High Commissioner might still let me get a little business tied up before the Toran Delegation stuck their ugly faces in.

I was led across the field to a little enclosed buggy tethered to a fine example of the Sumeran hairless horse, the rain pinging off his leathery hide like bullets off a tank. Until a few years back this had been the sole means of transport on Sumera, and even now electric carriages were rare. At least the Torans hadn’t already off-loaded a fleet of personalised hovercraft on to them. The Sumeran addressed a few words to the horse, slapped it cheerfully on the flank, and we were off.

During the short journey inside the buggy I composed my opening speech to the Sumeran High Commissioner. No point in pretending the Torans weren’t here, nor indeed in pretending that what they would offer wouldn’t seem on the face of things like the biggest end-of-season sale since the creation of matter. But there was the rub. I couldn’t explain to the Sumeri that their own commodity, almost worthless to them, was so highly prized by others without tarnishing my own commercial prospects. I decided to play for exclusivity — they might have more and it might be cheaper but it’s not the same — though, in truth, there was nothing terribly exclusive about my assortment of end-of-line brand names picked up on my last tour round the continents back home.

I rehearsed my argument to the point of futility then went back to looking at the scenery. We were rolling gently up the hill — and I mean hill in the relative sense because most of Sumera flattens off just above sea level — that led to the High Commission Palace of Deeds, winding through the narrow streets of Tel An Suman. The traditional, oddly elegant Sumeran stone buildings were steadily being replaced by garish plastic domes that a trader called Waldshut had thoughtfully introduced about a decade ago. On the pavements, Sumerans met in twos and threes dressed in simple, sack-like outfits of grey or dung-brown. To me they looked like beggars personified, but in Sumeran terms these little wheeler-dealers were quite comfortably off, and, thanks to foreign friends like me, getting more comfortable all the time.

Over all this the rain washed in a ceaseless, miserable wave. What a place. I thought about how awful it would be to live here as a consolation in case my visit was to be curtailed in failure and an early departure.

I suppose the inevitability of the Sumeran climate goes some way to explaining the long-suffering Sumeri stoicism, though they barely pause to think of it as suffering at all as, season through season, they get bombarded by rain and, from traders like me or the Torans, by shiploads of junk they could do perfectly well without. And they buy, gladly. They see no reason not to.

But the Torans, now ... they weren’t here just to unload a little junk. To come across a galaxy and a half to a little wet ball like Sumera they would have to be making what we traders would call a Major Investment. The Torans speculate to

accumulate in a big way. If they got things sorted the way they wanted there wouldn't be much point in me paying any more business trips to Sumera after this one. I watched the rain spattering the windows of the buggy and thought wistfully about diamonds ...

The High Commission's Palace of Deeds is as imposing a building as you will find in Tel An Suman or elsewhere on Sumera, three storeys high and approached through extravagantly ornate wrought iron gates. I was ushered to the office of the High Commissioner with that special Sumeran blend of pomp and patronage which suggests that both you and they are terribly important. I was too old to be fooled by that sort of thing any more, but I had to admit it was nice to be treated like Somebody once in a while.

The doors to the office were thrown open; at once the Sumeran High Commissioner of Deeds rose from his desk and strode towards me, hands outstretched.

"My dear comrade! How good of you to bless us with a visit again after all this time." Except for a silver chain of office the silver haired Sumeran would have been indistinguishable from the dealers I'd passed in the street; the simple sincerity of this elder father of Sumera was touching. I moved in to grasp his hand, then noticed his guests. The High Commissioner ignored my visibly sagging jaw and continued to pump my hand enthusiastically, but for me the enthusiasm had just run dry. The Toran delegation sat watching my discomfort with obvious pleasure.

Even I had forgotten quite how much I hated these inter-Galactic warriors of commerce, with their all-powerful arrogance; their immaculate Novagucchi suits sweated for next to nothing on some Toran slave planet; their reeking designer fragrances. In or out of their glittering skins they looked like monsters to me. I glared back at the one grinning at me from his comfortable perch in the centre of the room. He was ugly even by Toran standards, rolls of blotchy red fat itching to burst out of that state of the art suit, a glistening Bullfrog head and a face that looked nastier the more he smiled. Next to him sat a Toran female, a rarity at this level, thinner and meaner looking. She drummed impatiently with one claw-nailed finger against the contract computer on her lap and sneered up at me standing there in my soviet-surplus cosmonauts suit. The High Commissioner made a gallant attempt to break the ice.

"Oh! But please — how rude of me. Allow me to introduce Commander Valpareon representing the Toran Universal Trading Corporation." I turned to the obese apparition with a long, sarcastic bow. Inexplicably, the bullfrog head exploded with spluttering laughter. The Toran female gave me a look that meant nothing friendly and said: "I am Commander Valpareon. This is my secretary, Manchook." I cursed myself for being wrong-footed so early; I'd lost the initiative right from the start. Never make assumptions — things change, even on Tora, it seemed. The High Commissioner stepped in to spare my embarrassment.

"And this is an old business friend of Sumera, Captain Fedor Trotsky."

"You needn't trouble yourself to bow on my account, Captain Trotsky. I do hope you haven't travelled too far?"

"Not nearly as far as you. Business must be bad." Valpareon smiled for the first

time; a quick, razor smile.

"On the contrary. Business is booming. Time for expansion, in fact." I was sure she was right; I could have traded insults all day but I would have been wasting my breath.

"Why not join us, Captain?" Manchook had controlled his mirth. "You may learn something of how the professionals do business."

"Yes, do join us." The High Commissioner invited me to sit whilst he ordered tea for his guests. I sat, to buy myself time as much as anything else, trying to re-organise my sales pitch into some semblance of credibility.

"Your first visit to Sumera, then?" I said, flinching at the banal remark.

"Quite. Our first and doubtless your last. How ironic." The High Commissioner looked pained. "Oh, I do hope not." I took the bowl of root tea, mourning these last days of Sumeran innocence.

The Torans were only too happy to explain the deal they were laying out before the Sumeri. It was nothing I hadn't heard before. You name it, we've got it and you can have it. In fact you can even have the first consignment free if you sign up the contracts now. Manchook threw around manifests of goods that the High Commissioner hadn't even heard of, but that was no problem — the Torans would explain how you needed it all.

I made a weak pitch for my cargo — good brand names, personal service, that sort of thing. The High Commissioner listened sympathetically; in fact I'm sure he'd have bought some of it just to do me a favour, but Valpareon was about to explain *her* definition of the word 'exclusive'.

"Naturally, Commissioner Stanos, we place the highest importance upon a solid mutual trading agreement with our customers. We like to believe that we can — will — cater for your every need. We want you to be assured that we will be on hand to meet your every requirement. Similarly, we want to be assured that you will turn to Toran Universal Trading first."

I switched off. It was all there, anyway, in the contract that Stanos would soon be signing, somewhere amongst the small print. Whether it was a refrigerator or a reactor you were buying from the Torans, the deal was the same. Along with the goods you bought the back up system. Need a replacement? Call Toran Universal. Repairs? Toran Universal. Pretty soon you have to call Toran Universal before you can sneeze. The first deals would come cheap; bargains all round. Then, gradually, everything on Sumera got a handshake logo on it, the price would start to go up. Pretty soon the Torans would have ripped every last pretty stone out of the belly of the planet, then when that wealth was exhausted they'd pick every shred of economic viability from the carcass before they pulled out. Ever thought of machining a few Novagucchi suits, Commissioner Stanos?

Of course, I could tell the Sumeri all this and more, but with the feast spread out on the table in front of them it would just sound like sour grapes. I might as well tell them that Torans ate people — which was a rumour I chose to believe — for all the good it would do me.

After half an hour or so I found we'd all finished our tea and the meeting was coming to a close. The High Commissioner was making apologetic noises in my direction, but the truth is I hadn't really been listening, preferring to drift off on an uncharacteristic wave of self-pity. It had suddenly hit me that the Sumeran experience was just a scale model of what was happening all over now. Hard grifter or not, the days of the small man were numbered. I was pondering my future.

Before we left, Commissioner Stanos lifted the lid on a white enamelled box that had been sitting on his desk. Inside were three of the most beautiful spherical-shaped diamonds I had ever seen, all as near as the eye could tell identical. He gave one to each of us as a token of good esteem. For me, I suppose, it was the consolation prize.

More bad news back out on the streets of Tel An Suman. The breathing space I'd thought I had was illusory; already quietly whirring Toran freight shuttlers seemed to be everywhere, in shops, market places, even private homes, spreading round free merchandise like spiders webs across the surface of the city. I travelled back to the spacedrome without stopping.

By the time I reached the ship something unusual had happened; the rain had stopped. Instead of going inside I paced around the outside of the hull trying to plan out my next move. I shouldn't have been this depressed; I'd seen plenty of deals fall through in my time; the whole of business was a yo-yo of ups and downs. But how many ups, how many downs? It was beginning to seem a little lopsided of late. This was real historic inevitability, and I'd seen it coming a long way off. I just hadn't admitted it to myself before now. The Torans would win, now or eventually. And when they lost, it was only because someone bigger and nastier had come along in their place.

I tried focussing on the immediate problem. I couldn't sell my stuff here so what did I do with it? The obvious solution would have been to freight it back home, maybe sell a little stock on route. Certainly I'd lose out overall, but at least I'd be cutting my losses. I looked up into the darkness falling over Sumera with the first drops of fresh rain. There, glimmering faintly against the greyness, was the reason I couldn't go home; Caluun, near neighbour — next port of call. Caluun had a contract virgin fresh ready and waiting for me to sign; a bulk cargo of polymer resins at unbelievable, really unbelievable, prices. I'd worked hard for that contract and it was mine for the taking. I'd planned to off-load on Sumera, buy credit against the value I'd realise on the Sumeran stones and then clean up a bargain on Caluun. Instead I was left with a stuffed-full cargo hold and no buyer. No chance of off-loading this lot of Caluun; the planet was a perennial bear market, supply always outstripping demand. The only thing the Caluuns were interested in was hard currency guarantees to further their off-planet investments. Face it, Trotsky, you've had it — you might as well dump your wares on the spaceport and go.

Then there was the ship, of course. Fifteen years ripe and rising, the "Tbilisi Star" was on her last legs. Forget how long I could last out chasing my tail, how much longer would she be able to carry me? The cost of replacing a cargo ship didn't bear thinking about.

What I did think about, for the first time in a long while, were the alternatives. What would I do at the end of the line, hand my private trader's license in to the Collective and go back to my old job? The dreary memory of hawking obsolete MIR space stations around the Pioneer Colonies came back to me. I paced around a bit more even though the rain was starting to hammer down again in earnest now. The contract I needed was blown; the contract I needed even more I now couldn't buy, and my ship was beginning to fall apart.

My ship was beginning to fall apart ... I scratched a finger along the underbelly of the "Star", scraping a fine film of flaking aluminium dust under the nail. The rain was pelting me now, but all of a sudden there was something more interesting on my mind.

Before dusk I was back in the centre of Tel An Suman. The Torans were certainly

working fast; all the way in, my lightly laden horse-buggy was being overtaken by sleek green hovertrucks and in turn overtaking more heavily burdened buggies belonging to local traders, all ferrying the new tricks to market. I spent what seemed like half the dark hours searching the stores for what I needed; it was lucky no one was in a hurry to close up. Eventually I found a bewildered little Sumeran storekeeper, normal lines of trade manual tools and repairing primitive electrics, standing in the middle of his shop clutching at the inventory for the stack of cased goods that had just swallowed up his floor-space.

"I don't know what half of this is," he confided in me. "It's a great bargain, but we don't have the technology to use it."

"Don't worry," I told him, "it's coming. Meanwhile I need a thermal vice." Blank look. "Here," I said, "I'll find it." I snatched the inventory from him and leafed through till I found what I was looking for. Cartons 16-20; Heat Moulds. Same thing. We broke open one of the cartons and I lifted out one of the plastiwrap packages. I checked that the connectors were going to be compatible with my system and offered to buy it, cash.

"How much?" The Sumeran looked troubled; looked at his inventory and struggled with his sums.

"Sixty," he said. "No, wait — fifty for cash. Fifty units." I found I had no Sumeran currency on me at all; I had to pay him in Pan-Global Mercantiles at a one to one rate; expensive, but necessary.

Back at the ship I set the vice up in my little lab. The instructions — "Always use genuine Toran Universal installation fittings. If in doubt" — went straight in the garbage and in an hour or so I had it ready to go. I spent another half hour rummaging in my own cargo, breaking open cases till I came across the forty packs of glassware I'd intended for the kitschier end of the Sumeran market. I grabbed a selection of likely contenders and headed back to the lab. It was going to be a long night.

The next morning I started dumping my gear out of the hatch of the ship onto the spaceport. It broke my heart; it was all I could do to lay the first Sanyo Televisor down gently into the mud, and even then I wanted to fetch a cloth and wipe it down. But I knew this wouldn't do, and with the second one I took a long deep breath and hurled it down the chute good and hard. There was a nasty splintering thud as it hit the port and rolled over. A hundred and fifty Globals worth gone. So it went on with another four dozen televisors, and then I started on the first crate of Aquabikes. Long before I'd got on to them, though, a sizeable crowd of puzzled Sumerans had gathered at the ship. Some were quite hostile.

"Hey!" one shouted. "What right have you got to treat good things like that?" I heaved a Sanyo in his direction and, as an afterthought, a blister-pack of IG Farben Vox-Sims as well. "With my compliments," I said. "It's no use to me."

Inevitably, the congregation outside my ship caught the attention of the Torans and several of the clean-suited red-skins were popping up amongst the crowd. I caught sight of Manchook looking on; he asked a question of one of the other Torans standing near then turned back towards his ship.

I continued dumping stock like I was shovelling sand and soon enough Manchook was back again, this time with a few friends. They picked their way through the crowd of Sumerans looting my previous cargo until they were right beneath me

under the hatchway.

"Captain Trotsky." I slid a crate of ethanol 96 pure down the chute towards him; Manchook sidestepped as it burst open sweetly on the port. I stuck my head down through the hatchway.

"What do you want? Can't you see I'm busy?"

"Commander Valpareon asks if you would spare her just a few minutes of your precious time. Would you do me the honour?" He was being unnecessarily reasonable; I could tell from the slimpac bulges in his friends' pockets that they were carrying some heavy persuasion.

"You mean right now?" Manchook folded his arms over his fat gut and smiled horribly at me. I patted my pockets superstitiously and slid down the chute onto the muddy spaceport.

"I'm leaving the hatch open," I said to no one in particular. "Help yourselves." It brought tears to my eyes to listen to myself.

The private Toran is a different animal to the public one. In private they justifiably feel they can relax and be as they really are — like pigs. Thus Manchook's courteous guiding arm turned into a hefty blow in the ribs once we were up the gangway of the Executive ship as he coaxed me towards Valpareon's cabin.

Valpareon herself was likewise less formal than I'd last found her. She was watching the credit figures piling up on her console; booted feet up on the worktop, some kind of hide jerkin substituting for the business suit. She was eating something fleshy when I came in, tearing the sinewy segments apart with those talonned hands. I didn't look too closely to see what it was.

"Sit down, Captain Trotsky." I sat. She ignored me for a while, just watched the figures on the monitor and ripped and chewed, chewed and ripped. Every so often she'd spit a goblet of gristle into a pail on the floor. It wouldn't take much of this to make me get jittery. Finally she turned off the monitor and swung round in her recliner to face me.

"So, Captain. You were unaware that the Toran female has a brain, too?"

She was touchy on that; note it.

"We all make mistakes," I suggested. Valpareon stroked a touch-pad on her desk and the cabin door whispered shut.

"Very true," she agreed. "Your biggest one was coming to this planet. Before you go we'll have a little discussion."

The High Commissioner's gift was lying on the desktop by the side of her monitor. With typical Toran contempt she was using it as a paperweight. I patted my suit pocket again, automatically.

She finished her lunch and wiped her hands down a pair of breeches made of the same leathery material as the jerkin. "So," she said, still chewing, "you're about washed up, am I right?" I didn't disagree. "I don't know why your sort didn't get out of the market years ago. You must be either stupid or insane to think you can compete with corporates like Toran Universal."

She spat the last of her lunch out into the pail. "Besides, what sort of deal did you think you were going to pull with that junk?" She gestured in the direction of the "Star", visible in the teleport behind her, but to my disappointment she didn't turn round. I tried my best to sound like the beaten man I probably was:

"Oh, I don't know ... two, maybe three thousand Sumeran."

“Three thousand Sumeran?!” I was glad she’d spat that last piece of meat out already. “Three thousand *Sumeran*? Are you a moron Trotsky, or do you take me for one? No one comes to a filthy hole like this for —” Just then something very heavy and fragile must have been dropped out of the hatch of the “Tbilisi Star” by one of my invited looters. Valpareon turned instinctively towards the noise and, heart competing for space with my adam’s apple, I jerked forwards towards her desk and the sparkling stone. She gave me a split second and I used it as I needed.

Valpareon twisted back in her recliner and fixed me with a long, suspicious stare: “Captain, why are you abandoning your cargo on the spaceport?”

I shrugged. “Nothing else I can do with it. You’ve bought the whole market.”

“*This* market, of course. Ultimately all others. But for the moment why don’t you simply pack it off somewhere where your kind of — merchandise — is still in demand?”

I pulled out my visa pack and import licences and pointed to the vivid mauve Sumeran import stamps.

“Like where, with this stuff all over my papers?” — and left it at that. Another crate crashed out of the “Star”. Valpareon said nothing; her sharp crimson face was suspicion with just a hint of something like nervousness.

“What do you mean? You’re not making sense.”

I tapped my chrono impatiently: “Come on, you’re just playing with me. I don’t know what your angle is on Sumera, but mine is that my ship’s been here almost twenty four hours and I want to get off.” I was playing it out slowly — perhaps too slowly; any normal arrogant Toran swine would have thrown me off his ship by now and let me get on with it. But this wasn’t just *any* old Toran swine; Valpareon was just new enough to her command, just cautious enough to let me hook her if I was good.

“Not to spell it out too crudely for the Toran female brain, Sumera is a no-export planet.” Let that one take root.

Even now I guessed she was thinking about getting Manchook to have me thrown out, but she couldn’t let go just yet.

“You’re talking rubbish. There’s no such legislation on this planet.”

I took a leaf out of the Toran book and sent a long, deliberate bullet of spit across her desk into the pail.

“I’m not talking about legislation. You can take what you want out — but the thing you want is just so much powdered crystal junk once you take it out of the Sumeran atmosphere.”

Her eyes flashed diamonds, with multi-billion PGMs spinning round behind them. She didn’t believe me — yet.

I stretched out a bit in my seat. “Tell me, commander, since you seem determined to fatally delay my departure from this planet — how many of the components of this ship are silicon based? Apart from the entire intelligence systems, I mean?” I ran a finger along the nearby cabin wall. “How about the surface skins on the hull? I’m out of touch these days.”

“Silicon based?” Her face had the expression of someone just beginning to walk into a nightmare. I went for the ace and reached for the glinting crystal on her desk, then bit back the pain as the tough, claw-nailed hand clamped down on mine.

“Don’t worry!” I snatched back my hand and nursed it under my arm. “It’s worthless. They’re all worthless. It’s a freak in the chemical complement of the atmosphere. Generally its effects are neutral but it genders a structure weakness in

silicates.”

Suddenly the claws had both of my collar studs, dragging me forward over the desk until I was practically rubbing noses.

“This is all filthy, lying, rubbish!” She picked up the stone from her desk — please God let her not notice anything different — and waved it furiously in front of me.

“These stones have been embedded in the heart of this stinking hole for millenia! I don’t see any sign of ‘structure weakness!’”

I disengaged myself as best I could. “You won’t. Not while we’re in the Sumeran atmosphere. The effect is parasitic — a mutant design that builds itself into the cellular structure. Leave the Sumeran atmosphere behind, the mutant perishes, so does the cell structure. Pop!”

“You’re lying. The Sumeri said nothing about this!”

“I’m sure they didn’t.” I started to get out of my seat. “You may have just made the biggest mistake in Toran business history, Commander.” I was halfway to the door when she called me back.

“Wait!” There was desperation there now. “You’re not leaving this ship till you tell me more.” The interface door barred my exit. “Why not?” I said. “Another few hours soaking up the air and neither of our ships is going to make it out of orbit anyway.” I moved back to her desk; she rose to meet me. “Tell you what,” I offered. “I’ll give you a practical demonstration.” I made the glance round her cabin look casual until I fastened upon the stone. “Create the right atmospheric conditions for me — I’ll make crystal shrapnel out of your stone.”

She snatched it away jealously as I made a grab for it.

“All right,” I said. “Have it your own way.” I pulled a second sparkling plum out of my suit. “We’ll use mine. I don’t care. In fact, I insist.”

I held it towards her. The calculation I’d had to make in my planning, balancing Toran greed against suspicion, was a fine one. I hoped I was right because everything rested on it. Valpareon reached towards me and touched the stone I was holding; then her eyes filled with pure, malevolent, beautiful mistrust and she drew back.

“I think not. We’ll use *this* one. If what you say is true I’ve nothing to lose in any case.”

We went together to the ship’s analysis lab. Valpareon was all ready to whistle up Manchook to do the work for her, but I managed to convince her that wasn’t such a good idea. If things turned out the way I was telling her she might want to do some business with me in private and besides — and I prided myself on this touch of flattery — I was sure she’d make a good job of the test herself.

I was right. She made a fine job of it. The crystal was braced up beneath a centrifugal punch inside a sealed casing; the native atmosphere vacuumed out and replaced by a gas mix of her choice — she wanted a simulation of the low-oxygen air on Tora — then the punch was activated. The crystal atomized. True, it probably only cost a handful of PGMs, but it took me a night’s labour of love to fashion that cheap forgery in the thermal vice, and I was sad to see it go.

The Commander’s spirits were low too, but for different reasons.

Back at Valpareon’s cabin there was hard bargaining to be done. I played it softly, though, the way I usually do when I’m ahead. The first thing Valpareon did was to check with base on how far the contract had moved. I knew then I was on to

something big. Yes, the second shipment was already contracted and out of Tora. She wouldn't give me the details but I could guess; constructor ships, heavy excavation equipment, and another arsenal of sweeteners. Half a million's worth at the very least; signed, sealed and all but delivered. And all, as far as the Commander of the Toran trading delegation was concerned, for nothing.

And here I was, ready and willing to do her the favour that might salvage some of her career.

"Call it a franchise," I suggested. "Your man on Sumera. I'll take everything you've contracted for — put it at say ... twenty per cent of the deal price you've agreed with the Sumeri?"

"Twenty per cent?"

"You're right. Make it ten. After all, the Sumer were really offering you nothing. Remember I'm marooned here now; a Sumeran colonial. You've got to make it worth my while. By the way, I'll need a back up service contract on the same terms."

She would have loved to have killed me, but now she'd swallowed the bigger part of it she had to go all the way. She was contracted to sell to the Sumeri in return for a currency she now thought was worthless; by using me as a middle broker she was taking her only opportunity for damage limitation. Business minded to the end, ten per cent of something was better than nothing. She had to accept.

I sweated my way right through the contract until it was safely logged with the Pan Mercantile central bank on Caluun; then we were home. Not even the Torans would tear up a contract, however big or small. They'd be dead in the water as fast as it took word to get round the business world.

Problems remained, though. Firstly, the screwed-down bargain I'd just struck was still going to cost me nearly a quarter of a million credits with the service deal built on; I don't think I've ever seen that much currency in my life. Still, the profits I was going to cream off a monopoly on Sumeran diamonds *and* the franchise on the Toran merchandise ought to realize me several times that amount; I could probably bear even the sort of interest rates the Caluuns hawk around until I'd earned enough back to pay off the loan.

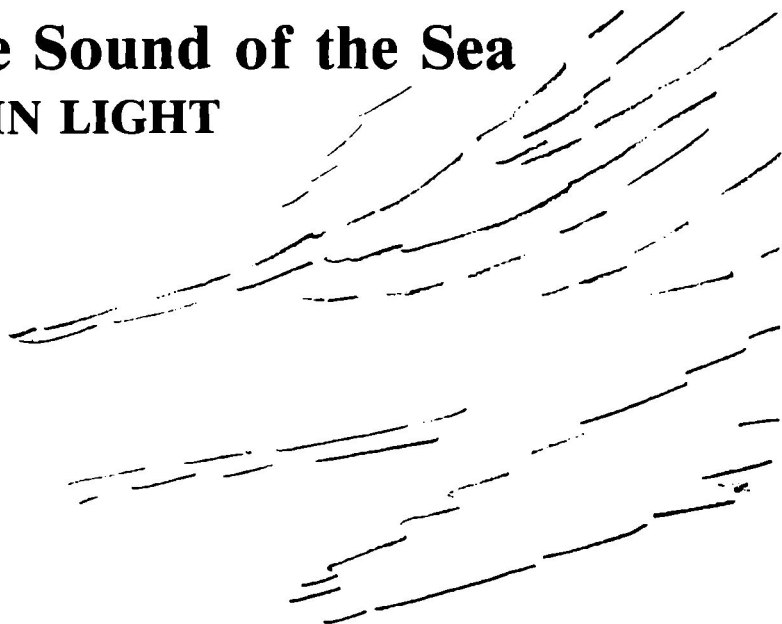
Secondly the Torans would find some way, some just legitimate way, out of the contract. I knew they would; their lawyers were the best. Likewise once they found I'd turned Valpareon over they'd make sure they marked my card with the Collective back home. My ticket would be called in; I'd probably never trade again. But so what? By then I wouldn't want to; if all went well I'd be rich enough to buy my own MIR and convert it into one of those orbiting tax exiles you found off the colonies. I was designing the pool already.

I wouldn't have given too much for Valpareon's prospects right then either, though I suppose she imagined she'd done the smartest thing possible in the circumstances, off-loading a bad deal onto a no-hoper. Maybe she would off-load the blame onto Manchook for not researching the Sumeran market thoroughly enough.

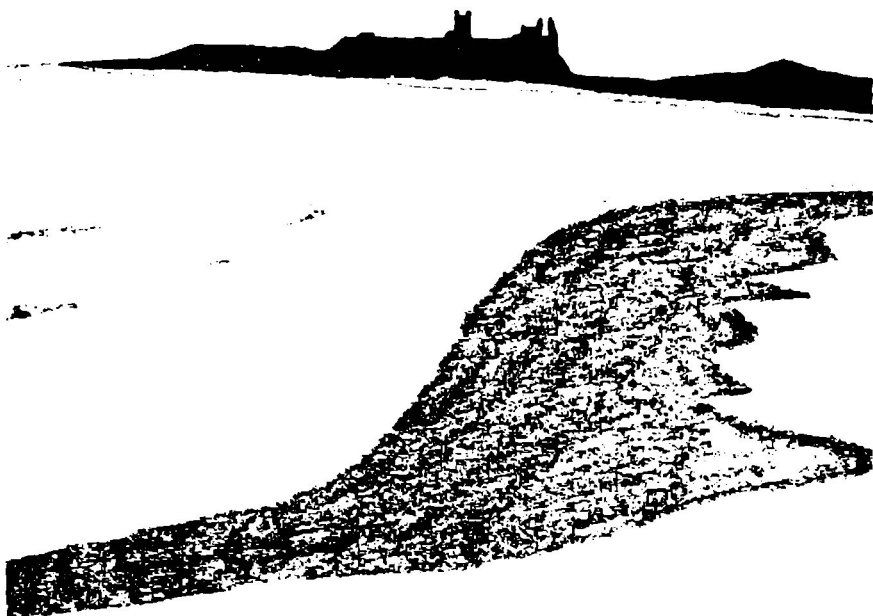
As we stood up I guess we were probably thinking the same thing about each other — you're finished. In a gesture I was sure was full of bad feeling she put out a hand to me before I left. I thought about those talons and declined the offer. I had to start looking after myself now; and there were a lot of hands out there I was going to be shaking. ●

The Sound of the Sea

JOHN LIGHT



I MUST ADMIT I was rather flattered when Carol Spence came to seek my help in the matter of the disappearance of Stephen Ennerdale. She is after all, a remarkably attractive young lady, as well as being an extremely able student. My disillusionment was swift, however. It seems that my friend, Hugo Lacklan, has



acquired something of a reputation in the academic community, not just as a notorious teller of tall tales, but as a sifter of enigmas. I'm partly to blame I suppose, having recounted some of his exploits from time to time. His resolution of the riddle of "The Vanishing Punk" had, I will allow, made an impression upon me, and now I come to think of it I believe I had regaled a number of research students with a perhaps exaggerated account of it at tea one afternoon. Quite probably Carol Spence would have been there.

Be that as it may, there is no denying that she was in a state of considerable distress when she appealed to me to enlist Hugo's aid, and I found it quite impossible to refuse her entreaties, even though I was not at all sanguine either about interesting him in the problem or about his ability to resolve it. In the end I telephoned the Department of Anthropology at the northern University which has the misfortune to count Hugo amongst its Readers, and was lucky enough to catch him actually in his office working — a remarkable circumstance! I was not at all surprised to hear that he was paying one of his innumerable visits to the metropolis at the weekend. We arranged to meet on Saturday for lunch at the Lokanta Amasra, a Turkish restaurant off the Tottenham Court Road.

I took a slightly guilty pleasure in escorting Carol to the restaurant on the day, and savoured Hugo's surprised appraisal. Carol seemed not to notice. Doubtless she had become used to the effect her appearance had on the men she met.

We ordered kebab with salata and pilov, followed by karpuz; a simple but satisfying meal. Hugo and I drank raki, quenched with water, but Carol wisely stuck to gazoz. As we ate, Carol recounted the history of Stephen Ennerdale, for Hugo's benefit.

The events which were pertinent to his disappearance began, it would seem, before he and Carol met, but Stephen had described to her how they came about, and she remembered almost every word he spoke at the outset. Rendered in narrative form, his story was as follows:

Stephen Ennerdale sat alone on the sand. It was early April in Northumberland and the beaches of the north-east coast of England were deserted. Yet the sun was warm, and the dunes behind him sheltered him from the wind. He looked out over the sea. It was not rough, and the breakers rolled lazily in, tumbling in a jumble of foam on the strand, hissing towards him only to be thwarted by the steeply sloping beach. The sky was blue, the unsullied blue of the north, and the sun flashed on the breakers.

Stephen closed his eyes. The sun warmed his skin and the breeze caressed it. He listened to the sound of the sea. A wave rolled in and broke with thunder on the shore, swished across the sand, then ran back murmuring to welcome the next. The sound beat upon him, insulating him, soothing him. He could sit for hours listening to the sea, as it washed his mind clear of the dross of city living.

How healing it would be, he reflected, if he could listen to the sea every day, instead of just a few days a year.

So was born the idea which lifted Stephen Ennerdale from his comfortable but mediocre existence to a state of luxury which was totally unexpected. It began when he bought a battery tape recorder, and recorded a cassette full of the sound of the sea. That night in his lodging he played the tape back. It sounded shallow and metallic, but there was sufficient of the mesmeric force of the waves to encourage him to try again.

He returned the following year with more sophisticated equipment. At the end of the holiday he did not feel as rested as he usually did. Juggling with microphones and tapes on the beach was not so relaxing as just sitting listening to the sea. The possibility of rain had disturbed him in a way it used not; he worried about getting sand in everything and he had to keep an eye on the sea lest it should creep up and drown his equipment. Nevertheless as he drove south through the Tyne Tunnel and down the motorway he felt satisfied that he had this time captured the authentic sea sound.

Stephen worked in London, but could not afford to live close to his work so that each day he had a long journey home by underground and rail. On these journeys he tried to ignore the people around him; to shut out of his mind the noise and confusion, and to fill it instead with the beating of waves on the shore. His home was a small but comfortable flat and as soon as he got in on the first day after his holiday he prepared himself a filling albeit un-nourishing meal. Then he put on the tape of the sea sound, settled back in an armchair, and closed his eyes as the sound washed over him, soothing yet stimulating. The room receded and he was back on the Northumbrian beach. But the experience also disturbed him, making him feel somehow lonely, sitting in his flat listening to the sound of the distant sea.

It was at a party he gave that Stephen first played the tape to anyone else. The party had been going some time, and the flat was full of men and women, talking and laughing, some shouting to be heard over the noise of the record player. There was plenty to drink, and not a great deal to eat, so that everyone was getting more and more excited. Seeing that they had all made themselves at home, and were helping themselves to what or who they needed, Stephen abandoned his role of host, and managed to corner the girl who was the real reason for him throwing a party at all. She worked in the same building, and they had exchanged smiles, but little else. He knew her name was Carol Spence, but there never seemed an opportunity to learn any more. Hence the party, to which he invited a number of people from work, including Carol.

Temporarily at a loss for conversation, he began telling her about his holiday. She was intrigued by the description of the tape he had made.

"Put it on now," she begged. "I'd love to hear it."

Stephen was doubtful. It was part of his own private world, and while he would be only too pleased for Carol to share it, he had no wish for the rowdy party-makers around to laugh and scoff at it. However, he gave in. He slipped the cassette into the machine and when the next record came to an end he switched it on. Unwittingly he had the volume up full, and without warning the sound of the sea thundered through the flat, the roar of the surf drowning the babble of conversation, the hiss of the dying wave silencing the most determined conversationalist. Everyone stopped talking and looked towards the tape recorder and Stephen. Self-consciously he turned the volume down.

"Sorry," he muttered, "I hadn't meant to have it so loud."

"But it was gorgeous," cooed a dewy-eyed blonde. "It went straight to my soul."

"So does alcohol," said her partner.

"You wouldn't recognise your own soul if it was labelled," she retorted. "Please Stephen, turn it up again."

There was a chorus of pleas, and so Stephen increased the volume.

"More," somebody shouted, and Stephen turned the volume up full. The sound

of the sea roared through the room, washing over the heads of the party-makers, calming and cleansing. Stephen was astonished at the effect. People who, a few minutes ago, were chattering nineteen to the dozen, now sat, silent, absorbed.

A faint ringing impinged on Stephen's consciousness — the door bell. He hastened out into the hall. It was the man from the flat below.

"I don't object," began the man, "to the sound itself. I've always liked the sea myself, but it is a bit loud, with the children in bed too."

"Of course," apologised Stephen. "I'll turn it down."

But the sound was less compelling played softer.

"Look," said somebody, "my flat is in the attic of the building I live in. The flat below is empty so there's nobody to disturb. Let's have another party there next week; Stephen can bring this tape along, and we can play it as loudly as we like."

So "Sea Sound Parties" became a regular feature of Stephen's life, and so did Carol. The parties got bigger and bigger. It was astonishing the effect which the amplified roar of the waves had on people. The sound of salt surf called to the pulse of salt blood in their veins, and the listeners seemed to go into a trance, broken only by the end of the tape.

"Can't you make it into a loop so that it goes on and on for ever?" asked one girl.

After one of the sessions, Stephen was approached by a man who said his name was Johnny Josephson.

"I've a little bit of capital," said Josephson, "and I've been looking for a way to make it into a big bit of income. I think you've found the way."

"Oh?" said Stephen, discouragingly.

"Yes. I expect to take a risk. You have to, to make money. But it's no good taking the kind of risk that's involved in backing a horse. The sort of risk I'm willing to take is backing my judgement of the sounds people will buy. I've been on the look out for a new sound in the pop world, but there's nothing new there. Suddenly I heard about your parties. Everybody who comes is wild about them, and I can see why. Do you know you've temporarily unhooked a couple of junkies? They're hooked on your sea sound instead of crack."

"Do you mean to say," queried Stephen doubtfully, "you think you could get people to pay money to listen to that tape?"

"Yes, in a way," replied Josephson. "I reckon that as a long playing record, that sound would sell a million. You can laugh if you like, but I'm telling you that sound is not just the sound that most people hear when they're close to the sea. Somehow you've chosen to record a particular mood of the sea that bowls people over. And then the volume affects them too. How many people can have heard the sea making that sort of noise? It's mind-stopping, and people want their minds stopped. They don't like them running on, thinking, worrying, doubting. They want to be swept away, drowned in a sea of sound. That tape releases them from themselves."

"So, you want to make a record of the sea," said Stephen. "Why tell me?"

"Because you've already captured just the sound that's needed, on that tape. I'll buy it from you."

"Do you really think you've a chance of making money with it?" asked Stephen incredulously.

"I'll give you a hundred quid for the tape," offered Josephson.

"You really must believe in it," marvelled Stephen.

"Will you sell?" pressed Josephson.

"No, no I won't," replied Stephen, unexpected business acumen rising from his subconscious. "But I'll let you use it if you pay me royalties for every disc you sell."

"O.K." agreed Josephson. "If that's the way you want it. I didn't think I'd convince you of the possibilities, otherwise I'd have suggested it straight off. It means a bit more capital conserved to finance the actual production."

Thus "Sea Sound Records" was founded. Stephen had little to do with it apart from providing the tape, but Josephson seemed to know his way about. He had the tape transferred to disc and set about promoting it. It was slow work initially, but once it took hold, the demand rocketed, and Josephson had difficulty contracting enough pressings. Cheques started to slip through Stephen's letter-box with numbing regularity and the figures on them soon became astonishing.

To begin with the extra money made little difference to his way of life. He was able to buy more records and books; he began to go out for his meals, especially with Carol. Then the company for which he and Carol worked went into liquidation and they were both made redundant. Stephen found it didn't matter financially, the royalties from the record were more than enough to make him independent. At first it was difficult to adjust to his new freedom. The days seemed long, and he felt uneasily that he was wasting them because he was no longer tied to an office routine. Carol had decided to return to University life, and work for a research degree. To start with she was pleased about Stephen's economic freedom, but it soon produced strains. Stephen realised he was bored. If Carol gave up her new studies, they could spend their days together. He had more than enough money coming in for both of them. That, he was sure, would be much more fun. Carol was appalled by the suggestion. It offended her independent spirit, and she couldn't believe that the popularity of "Sea Sounds" would last. Soon the bubble would burst. She urged Stephen to find a steady job. They quarrelled about it and parted, Stephen sullen, Carol tearful.

His aimless way of life had infused Stephen with lethargy. He made no attempt to renew his relationship with Carol, and she was too proud to do so. She didn't want to seem to be courting his money — money that was too easily come by for her conscience. Besides, Stephen had been discovered by the media. Intent on exploiting the new cult of "Sea Sounds", reporters interviewed him, and television crews filmed him. He became a celebrity. His ordinariness contrasting with his enormous success made an irresistible attraction of him. He was introduced to an overwhelmingly new life-style, in which he drank too much, ate too much and found himself indulging in excesses of which he'd scarcely even day-dreamed.

One morning he woke in his expensive new flat, for once alone. He felt terrible, but then he usually did in the mornings now. He moved unsteadily from the bedroom to the living room and sank down in an armchair. Mechanically he switched on the radio. From it boomed the "Sound of the Sea", and he switched it off with a shudder. He had come to hate the recording, which he heard everywhere and which had changed his life so drastically. It no longer brought him release. He longed instead to recapture the original feeling he had had for the sound. Perhaps if he returned to Northumberland, to the real sea, he could regain some of that peace of mind he had experienced there so often before.

He stood up with new resolution. He quickly packed a few things in a bag and took a taxi to King's Cross. While he waited for the next train north, he had some

coffee and rolls and began to feel better.

The rhythm of the train beating its way the length of England lulled him and he slept soundly for the first time in months. When he woke the train was nearing Newcastle where he had to change. It purred slowly across the bridge high above the Tyne, and slid into the familiar cavernous station, where he transferred to a local train. When he reached the village he automatically registered at the most expensive hotel, rather than his former lodgings.

The next morning he felt refreshed and ate a good breakfast before walking across the fields to the shore. The beach was deserted and curved away towards the low headland where the gaunt black ruins of an ancient castle brooded over the jumble of rocks jutting into the sea. He sat down on a rock and closed his eyes. The sea was in a gentle mood, and the waves lapped the beach chasing the little pebbles along the strand with a quiet hiss. He listened, and at first he thought it was going to work. He felt his mind begin to drift, but before he could lose himself in the soft sounds he found his memory superimposing on the natural surf, the sound of his recording, heard so often that every murmur was locked in his mind and with the remembered sound came all the associations he so wished to forget. His unsatisfying life washed about him like an unclean sea littered with the rubbish of a summer harbour, and he was repelled.

Abruptly he rose and walked away from the shore. He stared inland towards the distant hills. The country was empty and alone, but less so than he was himself. He had lost nirvana, and might as well return to the world he had fled — but not yet. He would stay a few days. Perhaps after a week or so he would go down to the beach again and see if he could yet recapture what he had thrown away.

Stephen hired a car, and passed the days driving between the flower strewn hedgerows of the long country lanes, and up onto the empty moors, where the breeze carried scent of bracken and sound of sheep. He paused in the grey stone villages, which seemed only half alive. From time to time he would stop by the road side to stretch his legs. It must have been on one of these occasions that he discovered a new way to cast off the moorings of his soul.

Such was the brief history of Stephen Ennerdale and Sea Sounds, pieced together from Carol's account and from other information gleaned subsequently. For the latter months, after she and Stephen had parted, she had only gossip to go on, and a final letter from Stephen in which he said how sorry he was to have spoilt the relationship they had, and regretting that it seemed impossible to him that they could ever recapture their dreams. He was leaving London, hoping thereby to find the peace he once had, and then forfeited.

"Do you have the envelope?" interrupted Hugo, having listened in uncharacteristic silence to Carol's account thus far.

"No, but it was posted at King's Cross," she answered.

"Did you try to trace him yourself?"

Carol nodded.

As time passed Carol had found her pride diminished by her longing once again to know Stephen's company. His face had disappeared from magazines and television with an abruptness which might have been astonishing if some new craze had not erupted to conceal the demise of the old. Perhaps, thought Carol, she and Stephen could after all get back to where they were before "Sea Sounds" had driven them apart.

She knew the address of Stephen's new flat in London although she had never been there. She felt a little intimidated as she took the aseptic lift to the top floor of the fashionable block that Stephen had chosen and she received a shock when she saw that the name on the door was not Stephen's, but she rang the bell nevertheless. A woman answered.

"Yes dear?"

"I'm looking for Stephen Ennerdale."

The blonde woman frowned.

"Sorry, you've come to the wrong place dear, he isn't one of mine. Wait a minute, 'though, wasn't that the name of the previous tenant? Yes, I'm sure it was. But he went ages ago."

"Do you know where he went?" asked Carol.

"Haven't a clue dear," replied the blonde.

Carol turned away bewildered, realising that despite his final letter she had refused to believe that Stephen mightn't be there. The street seemed cold and unfriendly, and she walked quickly to a nearby shopping centre where she gratefully accepted the artificial cheerfulness of a coffee bar while she thought. Who would know where Stephen was? If anybody did, it would be Josephson she reluctantly acknowledged — reluctantly because she disliked the man, regarding him as Stephen's evil genius.

She looked him up in a telephone book. She searched for Stephen's name too, but it wasn't there and she wasn't surprised — he'd never liked telephones. However, Josephson was in and she rang him. She asked him if he knew Stephen's new address.

"I feel certain he knew it," Carol continued, as we drank our kahve, "but he wouldn't tell me. I thought of going to see him, but ... well I know it's silly; but I just doesn't feel up to it. He gives me the creeps."

She turned to Hugo.

"Could you help, please?" she pleaded. She need not have squandered her charm on Hugo Lacklan. I could see at a glance that he was intrigued by the problem.

"Yes, yes of course," he assured her. "I'm sure there'll be no difficulty in getting the address. I've heard of Josephson, and I know a thing or two about him. No; it isn't finding Ennerdale that will be interesting; the question is what will we discover when we visit him? What is he doing? That's what is so fascinating. Let's hope it's nothing so mundane as drugs or drinking." On which unfeeling note, he turned and summoned the waiter, congratulating him in fluent Turkish on the excellence of the meal. The man beamed and shook our hands and urged us — in good English — to come again.

It was almost a week later, Friday afternoon to be exact, when I heard from Hugo again. I was sitting in my office in the Chemistry Department trying to mark examination scripts, but finding my eyes drawn irresistably to the dazzling cumulus towering in the blue sky visible from my windows. My room is high on the corner of the building with floor-to-ceiling windows on the south and west sides so that it catches the afternoon sun and induces a pleasant somnolence, especially on Fridays!

The telephone penetrated my torpor, and reluctantly I answered it. It was Hugo, to say that he'd got Ennerdale's new address, and could Miss Spence and I travel north tomorrow? He promised to meet us at Newcastle, and said his College could put us up for a couple of nights. I said I'd check with Carol and ring him back. I descended several flights of stairs to the research laboratory where the girl worked, and found her examining thin layer chromatography plates under ultra-violet light.

She was attempting to separate some rather interesting synthetic analogues of the Cytochromes. We fell to discussing a recent paper on biosynthetic routes to porphyrin rings in general and I almost forgot my purpose in seeking her out. However, when she learnt of Hugo's success, she was eager to accept his invitation.

As we drove south through Gateshead towards the motorway and the ancient fortress where the more fortunate members of Hugo's college have their rooms, he regaled us with an account of his encounter with Josephson.

"We met in a pub in an alleyway off Cheapside. I'd inveigled him along by the infallible expedient of professing myself interested in investing money in one of his enterprises. In view of Carol's experience with the man I didn't immediately ask him for Ennerdale's address. Instead I related the curious affair of the disappearing punk to him, embroidering it slightly, and making a great deal of my friendship with Inspector Sebastian Sinclair. He gave me some old-fashioned looks but I was undeterred. Then I made a few pointed remarks about poor Thoren's ill-fated brother and his drug-induced demise. I could see then that he was really rattled. However, Josephson is no fool and as soon as I let out that I was interested in discovering Ennerdale's present whereabouts, he relaxed somewhat."

"You know where he's living," I persisted.

"Yes, I do," he answered, "but I wouldn't advise you to contact him, he's become very strange."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Well," replied Josephson slowly, "when the 'Sea Sounds' things started to die, I thought I'd ask Stephen if he had any more ideas. It was then I realised he'd faded out of the scene. I managed to trace him, however, to a place in Northumberland, a biggish house called Crag Hall. I went up to see him. It was the depth of winter and Crag Hall was miles from anywhere. Stephen seemed neither pleased nor displeased to see me — he was in some way remote. I just couldn't get through to him. If I weren't so familiar with the minor symptoms of drug addiction I'd have said he was stoned, but it definitely wasn't that. I broached the idea of a follow up to 'Sea Sounds'. He wasn't interested. He said he didn't need any more money. 'Sea Sounds' had made him enough. Now he simply wanted to be left alone."

"Perhaps he just wasn't anxious to see you again," I suggested.

Josephson laughed.

"I got the impression it would have made no difference who I was. He didn't want to see anyone. As I left he watched me until I turned out of the drive as though making sure I really was leaving, but the blank expression on his face didn't even flicker for a moment."

The next morning, Hugo drove us north in his Range Rover. Carol occupied the front passenger seat and I lounged in the back.

None of us was inclined to speculate on what we might find, and Hugo filled the silence with cassettes of the guitar music of Barrios, the great Paraguayan composer of partly Indian descent, who claimed, as Hugo eloquently explained, that Tupa, the spirit of his race had unlocked the secret of his instrument for him, opening the box in which were trapped the sounds of singing birds.

With the urban tangle of Gateshead and Newcastle behind us we quickly reached Morpeth, and then took the Coldstream road along the edge of the swelling

Cheviots. The northern sun was surprisingly warm and the verges were dotted with spring flowers. Yet in the distance the hills brooded darkly, hinting at hidden places and enigmatic peoples. North of Wooler, we took the road westward to Kirknewton, a name that is loaded with a sense of overwhelming personal loss for me, and I was glad that I was alone in the back of the car as we drove past the hamlet. We were following the signs for Yetholm and Morebattle, deep into the secret heart of the hills. Hugo needed no map; he knows these roads; even so he slowed down after we crossed the Scottish border hunting the lane he knew must come soon. When he found it it was barely large enough for the big car, and the hedges caught at us as we passed.

Eventually we came to an open gate in the high hedge. Hugo swung the car into the driveway and stopped.

A wild and unkempt garden stretched up towards a large and forbidding house. Beyond it towered a group of sparse pines, and beyond them loomed the crag which gave the house its name. The air was still, and it was very quiet. We got out and walked in silence up to the front door. Carol pressed the bell, but there was no sound. Nobody came. She tried the knocker, but there was no response. Without a word, Hugo set off along the front of the house. We followed him round the corner. As we approached the back we heard the whispering of wind in the pines. The whispering grew louder, and I stopped stock still, gazing at the firs. They were unmoving. There was no wind to disturb them, yet I could hear it plainly, the restless susurruration of a night wind tugging at twigs and branches, rising and falling, bathing my mind in the indescribable experience of nature. I glanced at Carol and her puzzled expression told me she heard it too. Slowly we worked our way round until we were on a raised terrace, its stones overrun with weeds. The sound of the wind was louder now, and seemed surprisingly to originate from within the house.

Large windows overlooked the terrace. We went up to one and peered through the Georgian panes. In the centre of the room I could see Stephen Ennerdale reclining in an armchair, his eyes closed, an expression of deep peace on his face. By his side was a recording machine, and it was from this that there emanated the whispering, roaring, caressing, searching sound of the wild wind in the pines.

There's little more to tell,

We left as silently as we had come, and Hugo drove us to Wooler, where we found a tea shop. Hot coffee dispelled the blanket of silence that had enveloped us. Having found Stephen Ennerdale and discovered his secret addiction to the new sound that had taken over his life, Hugo and I felt there was nothing else we could do. Carol agreed. She was effusive in her thanks to Hugo. We returned to London together, but a week later she took a fortnight's leave. How she weaned Stephen from his introspection I don't know, but she is a determined as well as a beautiful girl; had she fastened her attentions on me I haven't the slightest doubt I would have found them totally irresistible! At any event, she succeeded and some while ago I met her and Stephen. I would hardly have recognised him as the unshaven and unkempt refugee from reality slumped in that chair between the quadrophonic speakers in Crag Hall. As for Carol, she looked radiant and more beautiful than ever. ●



The Birds

TIM LOVE

TWO thumps sound overhead. I put aside my grammar book to boil some coffee (one thump tea, two thumps coffee), grumbling in the language she has taught me. In my mother tongue there must be words for what I feel, words I was too young to know when I was brought here. I carry the bucket up from step to step with care; there's only me to mop up afterwards. She is tired, she has been working all night. I close the curtains and collect up the stray twigs that she has discarded from her nest packed high to the ceiling, stopped from spreading across the whole room by a low wall.

"Before you go, Bahl," she croaks.

"Listen carefully. I want you to fetch me some fresh twigs. Understand?"

"Yes," I say.

"Sure?"

"I'm sure. You're the deaf one not me."

"Not I."

"Not I," I repeat quickly.

Downstairs I throw the glistening twigs onto my fire. Their familiar acrid smell makes my nose run. I grab my overcoat from its hook on the backdoor and go into the yard. It's cool, windless; the damp morning air turns foggy around me, my lungs clog with it. Beyond our fenceless garden the river has flooded the watermeadows. The low sun's reflection blinds me. I hear a spade cut the heavy soil and shield my eyes to see Aziz digging in the next yard. He pauses for a moment.

"Getting her some wood again?"

"Aye, she uses a lot these days," I say, yanking some twigs from under a tarpaulin."

"Going to market? coz if you are then get me some turnips. Mine's gone all slimey."

"Right you are," I say, leaving him to save what he can from the waterlogged soil.

She is asleep when I return. I throw the twigs at her. "Damn you!" She doesn't move. Back downstairs I eat some dry bread. I'm used to the food here now, the lack of rice. I clear the table, giving it a good scrub and play my gramophone loudly. One day the rusty spring will break and I will have to starve for a new one.

It is my duty to provide her with food, dead things for the most part, and today is market day. In the past when she came with me she kept a crate in her room. She would call me when she was safely inside and I would winch her down onto my handcart, then drag her along as she peered between the slats. She is too old for that now, her joints are brittle. There is grit in them, you can hear it between her groans as she moves. So alone I close the door behind me and turn into the main street, following the ruts of the carts coming in from the country. There didn't used to be lazar houses on the roadside, there didn't used to be illness even amongst we humans. The roads widens; ahead the clamour differentiates into shouts and squawks. Crates of live hens are dragged from stall to stall, pedlars balance flat

wicker baskets of wares and stray, hungry dogs thread amongst the crowds.

"Oysters! Your mistress will thank you for them in the morning. A peck a dozen!"

"Needles sharpened, springs repaired!"

We all know our place in the marketplace of slaves, scavengers and rakes. My mistress is a wise one so they don't trick me as they do others. They say I'm beginning to sound like her. I haggle as best I can in their tongue, filling my cart until the wheels slip on the wet cobbles. Over by the clock there is a covered area where the older freemen stay all day, looking out at the rest of us as we labour in the sun or rain. Today it is mild but they are still there crouching in silent groups. I kick aside their legs to make way for my little cart through to the spice stall where the old hag keeps a kettle hot for me over glowing coals. The market people have a private language which I cannot penetrate. It is not like Aziz's common tongue or like in the books; it smells of home. The spice seller gabbles to me as my mother used to and between grumbling about her ankles tells me all the gossip, often twice over. I wonder why she was brought here; she does nothing useful but then few of us do. Our village is not so different to those back home, except for the weather. I buy some dried long root and rabbit embryos. Before I go I ask "And what about Mukda? She always asks about Mukda."

The hag pours me another mint tea. "He's doing old Lil now. She doesn't know what's hit her, poor thing. You should see how she does herself up now. Very lahdeedah. Not that he notices of course. She's got herself this new dress. It's disgusting at her age."

I want to know more. I've had my eyes on Lil but hearing the clock strike I thank the hag and rush home, dragging my purchases as they hiss and drip. The doctor is waiting on the doorstep. He shakes his head. "Late again". I let him in and he washes his hands while I shoo the animals into the yard then lie on the table. Knowing my dread of needles he surprises me as we talk. By the time I come round he has packed away his dialysis equipment but he has forgotten the drops of blood on the stone floor. He apologises; he is an old man. Perhaps when he dies I shall take his place. "And now your ankles," he says while I am still groggy, "it won't hurt." Down goes my hose. His tweezers pull at the scab and rummage around inside, breaking off lumps of squeaky white cork as I sigh with relief at the easing of pressure. "It's something in the water," he says, as he always says, then leaves. I bandage myself up and return to my books.

Before I have turned many pages she wakes. I can hear her preening herself. She taps for coffee, she hasn't had tea for years. "Ah Bahl," she says, "has the doctor gone?" I nod as I catch my breath, I'm getting old too. She asks about my day. I have to shout to be heard which makes me sound angry and I sometimes am. She can go to the stars but now she will not find a machine to help her deafness. I tell her all the news. "And Mukda?" she asks.

"Oh, he's with Lil now; you know, that woman whose husbands keep popping off. Blind or not, old Mukda's quite a lady's man."

"Not like Haroon el Haroon."

"No," I laugh, "not at all like him."

She flails her stunted wings towards me. I fight to conquer the disgust I feel, harmless though her intentions are. She has the huge ugly head of a nestling. Her wide beaks hangs open, exhaling decay. I move towards the fire.

"I had a mate once," she said. I pause momentarily from stoking. She hasn't mentioned this before. "Past the ring of hills there is a forest which used to cover the continent. We found a hollow which we filled with branches and moss. Walking over it, you wouldn't know we had dug tunnels and chambers beneath. One autumn it flooded with mud so we had to look elsewhere. He wanted to be near a river. I still longed for the warmth of earth. It was better that we parted then. Rivers lead to oceans." She waits to catch my eye as I turn. "Those were the years when you called us the great ones. Remember?"

"You know I don't. I wasn't born then."

"I have never understood you humans; your gossiping, your religions, what use is it all when you so easily forget?"

"Why do you live in a house? Why not a tree?"

She imitated a smile. "You lived in the sea then crawled into caves. We watched as you feared then made fire. But the sinners and the holy men all die." She turns away. I can tell nothing from her voice, only the angle of her yellowing neck betrays her tiredness. Her conversation is becoming as arbitrary as her silences.

Downstairs I spread my books. There are 14 declensions to learn. I am the local scribe; tradesmen and shy lovers walk all this way to have their inarticulate words made real. From time to time I go up and listen at my mistress's door. She is asleep again. I know that any morning I could go up and find her dead. I am not her first, not by a long way. Generations of my family have served her. There are fewer Birds now and many who remain are hermits. For millenia they had watched us from afar like lazy falcons. When they landed by the pyramids we took it as a sign that we were blessed but they said that they weren't gods, that they had come to learn. They lived amongst us until they saw that we couldn't accept them as equals. Only the pharaohs welcomed their departure. Now they give us all that we can understand. Back home no-one has ever heard a gramophone, it would be a miracle. Here nearly everybody has one; some of the market folk can even repair them. But these machines are toys, she says, compared with those in the capital. No-one lives there now. The Birds once used machines for everything. When they first landed we worshipped their machines just as they seemed to do. They offered us secrets, they offered us the stars so some of us came here with them. But the Birds have changed since those times. Sometimes I ask her what had caused the change. She offers me poems and when I say I don't understand them she gives me language lessons. Ships seldom ferry between our worlds now. Before long I fear the voyages will cease altogether. Just when we have learnt about machines, they have renounced them. Yet without them they are helpless, they need us to show them how to live; that's why they brought us here. "The machines don't need us anymore," she told me once, "we left to start our lives again. If we have failed then it is not their fault."

Sometimes when I wish I was home in the heat and mosquitos watching the Nile slowly drain from the fields she tells me about her childhood. Her mother told her stories about how the universe was once an egg. When it cracked open everything burst out; all the humans, the Birds, the machines and the stars. A legend said that the Birds began their journey first because they have wings but only the humans will complete it because birds fall. They can only fly for a few weeks in their adolescence. She used her time to visit the capital while her friends sought the thermals and breezes of the coast. She's never told me what she saw there. I would like to see the capital myself but whenever I try to leave, something holds me back. We all feel it, it is the only power they still use on us. It acts like love; we are free but we cannot go.

Whenever something puzzles me I write it down in these memoirs. I don't understand this love. I don't understand why we are in their myths but the birds aren't in ours. I don't understand why they want to be more like us and why they speak of the machines as we used to speak of the pharaohs and now speak of the Birds. Every night I write so that someone later might make sense of it all. I shall send my book on the next ship that goes to Earth. There are lessons here that must be learnt by others wiser than I, by the keepers of our temples. But when we become wise enough to understand what the Birds have said will it be too late?

Thinking tires me. I smother my fire and unroll my bed. As my head meets the floor I remember that Aziz told me to buy him turnips.

It is Wednesday. Summer has come and gone; it is cold again. The spice seller has died. Even Mukda's slowing down. My mistress's dark eyes have turned as grey as her feathers. Tonight she is holding a meeting. For the first time she has invited me too. With my twig broom I sweep the floor. For weeks now she has been getting weaker but her work is almost done. When evening comes she and I sit in silence. As I light a candle its glow bloats to fill the room. One by one her pupils enter without a word, swaying from side to side, muscle-corsetted, and take their place on heaps of twigs that I have prepared for them. Finally she speaks; a long hesitant monologue which I cannot follow. Her paragraphs are constructed meticulously, only resolving themselves into form on their completion. Her pupils say nothing in the long silences. Suddenly she turns to one of them. "But couldn't there be a more general axiomatic framework Kazan?" Kazan's plumage begins to lustre. His first sentence is not closed and has to be discarded. He ruffles his feathers discreetly. The others do nothing to ease his embarrassment. He starts again. This time I understand a few phrases. Now they all have points to make. My mistress keeps silent, contenting herself with a few nods until an argument flares between two of the youngsters whereupon she widens the debate to include their differences.

For hours they pursue their quest. I'm excited by the sheer speed. They talk of stars and rebirth. They mention my destiny and that of my people. To me it sounds like the sort of religious talk they mock us for except that they use numbers too. Then my mistress takes over again, steering the talk to its conclusion until she stops in mid-sentence, the inspiration suddenly gone. They wait until they realise she has finished. As they leave they cackle to each other. I sweep up the feathers that still make me sneeze and pack them into a hessian bag. She is quiet. Perhaps she is sad. I take up the broom again, sweeping the heaps together before pushing them towards the fire.

"Even my pupils, they do not listen," she says, "I will become the forgotten teacher of teachers. But now at least we know that there is nothing we can do. All has been proved. It is the fate of children to outgrow their parents."

"But you have no children."

"If you went to the capital you would understand. Soon I will give you a map."

"I won't forget you," I say, suddenly moved despite myself, then fetch her food and leave her to eat alone.

Downstairs I play my gramophone loud to hide the noise of her chomping. I don't think she will live much longer. She has made her decision as all the Birds have.

The capital will always be there to repair the dialysis machines. Maybe the ships will fly by themselves when the Birds have all passed away, and bring us children because we are all growing old together. No baby has ever been born here, the water doesn't suit us. And if the ships stop travelling we shall die out just like the Birds. Back on Earth they will become myth and the pharaohs will be gods again.

I haven't been as far as the next village since I came here. I imagine the capital as a huge market of clocks, gramophones that no-one hears and dialysis equipment piled up, their tubes tangled together. There'd be no food and no spice sellers because machines don't need to eat. I could be the one who winds everything up. But first I'd rather go to the sea. I've only seen an ocean once, briefly as the ship left home. I remember seeing the roofs of our village the delta like the veins in my wrist, then the wispy ball that none of us believed was our Earth, and finally a pinprick amongst a thousand others. When she dies I would like to see more of this planet that has become my home but even thinking of leaving here makes me sad so I open my books again, noting down everything I remember of the evening, trying to master declensions that my mother tongue does not possess. ●

R & R IN THE LMC

orange-skied a world no true human
would say this native beautifies.

kneels to save life, will do anything,
touch anywhere, bite whatever is most
foul to save life another instant
this mud that is soon to be
murder victim.

what pleasure
to so outgun this race of alien
scaley pondslime with warm tongues
briefly it almost makes up for absence
of women on the expedition till captain

with schedules to meet shrieks
“hurry up the happy ending”

Steve Sneyd

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CITIES

ARABELLA WOOD

JULIE got ready for bed. She closed and locked all the windows even though the weather was hot and close. Then she pulled the blinds and bolted the heavy door. She went to bed and slept fitfully beneath a sheet. It was midsummer and the city was under the visitation of a heatwave. If only she could have left the windows open. But outside in the streets strangers prowled. Her immediate locality came to life at night and was, except for the occasional domestic dispute, quiet during the day.

When she had moved here with her father twenty years ago it had been a comfortable middle-class suburb of the boiling stew of a city. They had moved from the inner city where gangs roamed at night and arson, looting and other crimes had become commonplace; the limited resources of a tired police overtaxed. Now this suburb too had succumbed to a sickness which had come to the city. Her father had rented the old house out.

Julie remembered one summer evening just after they'd moved. She'd stood at her bedroom window and smelled the warm scent of the trellis roses which had covered the wall below and above. Her father had found her there and put his arm about her sturdy shoulders. "You're safe here Julie," he had said.

That had been twenty years ago. It was now five years since he had died, just before the poison of deterioration had set into their limb of the city. Thought of those earlier years brought back more memories as she lay in her bed hot and sleepless. She thought of her childhood. Then green fields with wild riotous flowers in the spring had surrounded the first house. Cows were driven through the streets of the suburb. That was before the city had become important and more and more buildings went up until the fields were gone. Now this suburb too had decaying houses and its shops, once with inviting window dressings had only closed shutters at night and bars by day. Many of the houses had windows boarded up.

Unable to sleep she pulled open the shutters at the bedroom window. The city festered beneath a pale sky foretelling another hot day. Julie sighed and opened the window a couple of inches, unlocking it first. She felt like a prisoner. Then she read again the letter from Chantelle, her half-sister, which she'd received a week ago.

'Come to us here Julie. You can can't you? Come to our oceanic city for a while. If you want to work you can help us in the hotel. We've a spare room in our own apartment....'

As Julie lifted her eyes from the letter she saw a movement in the small garden. Hastily she pulled the wired window shut and locked it. Today she would have to go out and buy food. She leaned against the wall and felt tears sting her eyes. Despair was a well worn groove in her. She remembered Chantelle as an amiable elder sister but knew little of her present life. Only her regular letters told her of that. The last time she'd seen her had been at their father's funeral. But she had a suspicion that one of her father's last wishes had been that Chantelle keep an eye on her.

The oceanic city she spoke of in her large square handwriting had begun to appeal to Julie more and more of late as her friends and old neighbours had gradually moved away and the long days filled only by work had become lonely and endless. But fear of the unknown held her back. What if the oceanic city Chantelle wrote of in such glowing ways was a replica of this suburb? Then she realised she'd seen it many times on the sphere. Surely that didn't lie? Was she going insane?

Water was severely restricted during hot weather: the city was like an adolescent boy or girl which had temporarily outgrown its resources much as children outgrew clothes. She turned the tap on to fill the kettle to wash and only a trickle came from it. She would try again later, conserving the water there was for one long thirst-quenching drink.

Hot and sticky already she switched the sphere on and watched for a while, losing herself temporarily in the morning programmes. Then at last she was able to wash and change. She felt in no mood to start her work with the computers in the small room she kept as a study.

She saw the shadows in the small garden. The first stone bounced off the wired glass, cracking it. The second pierced it and fell onto the floor of the sitting room. Julie screamed as the third, a large brick, struck her head and knocked her unconscious.

Julie had thought herself safe and secure inside the bungalow with all its apertures locked and wired. If only she had been able to get the grade of wired glass she had wanted, but the authorities had been unable to keep up with demand.

When she recovered consciousness she found herself in a hospital bed, a gell on her shaved head. She touched it experimentally. It was transparent, but set as hard as steel. She saw that it was night and stars shone bright. The impetus which had begun to take men away from this suffering world had long been slain. A space colony of a thousand people struggled to thrive somewhere beyond the moon. The moon station boasted only a handful of determined men and women. The dream for Mars was dead. But surely the oceanic cities were real and an achievement for men and women seeking to improve this world. The cities sailed Earth's oceans from pole to pole. Julie sighed. Why couldn't they have focussed some of their ideas and resources on the land cities where most human beings lived?

A thought occurred to her. What had happened to the bungalow? Then she knew. By now the windows would be boarded up, the interior stripped of her possessions. She couldn't go back. She just hadn't the courage to return with her furniture, computers, even carpets stolen. When she felt fitter she would write to Chantelle. For now she lay back and stared at the stars until they grew misty.

The 'copter bus left the take-off pad and threaded its way expertly through the opening in the city's dome. Julie had spent two days in the city waiting for her clearance papers and a flight out. She was glad to leave. It had an antiseptic soulless atmosphere to it: an experimental city set on the coast, its sterile security had worn thin even to Julie. She had welcomed the safety of its centre until she realised how

much was needed to protect it; armed police had stopped crime and decay in its heart but people had already begun to build makeshift dwellings outside the dome clogging up its arteries; clumsy buildings which it seemed were always being pulled down only to reappear a short time later.

Soon the bus was above the ocean, glimpsed through thin clouds. Julie lay back and tried to relax in her seat. The bus was full to capacity, mostly holiday-makers. She had chosen a single seat at the back but that didn't stop the man in the seat opposite from leering at her. She closed her eyes and slept.

About half an hour later she was awoken by a soft voice announcing the imminent arrival of the bus at Shell City, the first floating metropolis. She pulled a mirror from her handbag and peered into it. With the help of growth enhancers her hair had begun to grow again, the gell melting away and healing the large wound on her scalp until it had mended perfectly and she couldn't even detect a scar. But it was still unfashionably short and didn't suit her round face. She looked below. It was sunset away to the west behind them and the city ahead on the dark water was alive with light.

"What a beauty!" the man who had leered at her earlier said. Julie resented his intrusion into this private moment. "This is going to be some holiday!" he added as the soft voice continued to chat intimately to the bus' passengers, giving information on the oceanic city's vital statistics and short history. Then, outside the dimly lit bus there were bright lights everywhere as they entered the dome and landed.

Julie's dampened spirits lifted as the bus stood silently for a minute before the doors opened and the passengers disembarked. She was ushered into a building, had to show her newly acquired papers, and then moved on to a lounge with a fountain at its centre.

On casual scrutiny the room was tasteful and smart, but she looked closer and saw signs of removed graffiti and a used paper cup in the fountain. Then it was all forgotten as people began to fill the room and she saw Chantelle. Julie's half-sister had changed very little in the five years since she had last seen her; a few more frown lines on her pleasant face, and a little more weight on her large bones, that was all. The two sisters embraced warmly.

"You'll like it here," Chantelle said. She held Julie at arm's length and scrutinised her. Then she smiled. "Your room's ready."

"I'm waiting for my baggage," Julie smiled back, then, impulsively, close to tears, held Chantelle to her. "It's good to be here!"

"You'll love it after that land city." Julie thought Chantelle's words lacked conviction but she put it down to her present state of mind. Her baggage arrived, two large holdalls, all she now possessed in the world. She had been only too right about everything being stolen from the bungalow.

"I think I'll take you straight to the hotel," Chantelle said. "You can settle in, there'll be plenty of time to see the city..."

Julie was only too glad of her sister's concern. They rode on the transit line which crisscrossed the city in one of the small cars which buzzed about it and soon reached their destination, a small hotel on the perimeter. A fake beach lay behind it, sanded and with authentic rocks. Julie saw that the false beaches about the city were like a skirt, ending their slope in deep water. Boats were moored on them.

Chantelle took her to a small comfortable single room overlooking the back garden of the hotel which was planted with mature trees and colourful flowers.

Beyond, steps led down to a large swimming pool. She went to open a window; the city was, at that moment, in the tropics and the night was warm. Then she realised that they were locked. It shocked her and brought back bad memories. Deflated she decided to forget about it for the time being. She undressed and slipped wearily into bed, switching the air conditioning on.

She was awoken by the sounds of birds and humans. Through the window she could see the hotel's guests bathing in the pool. There seemed to be a great many of them splashing about outside. Her heart fell as she saw that one of them was the man on the copter-bus.

Julie had almost finished dressing when there was a knock on the door. She heard a soft "good morning" from Chantelle and opened it.

"Breakfast's ready if you are?" Chantelle said with a smile. Ken can manage with just the kitchen jobs. Today I'm showing you the city."

"Is there anywhere I can buy clothes?" Julie asked.

Chantelle nodded. "Plenty of places. You can wear them on the beach afterwards and you must see the central park!"

The city, Julie had seen from the 'copter bus, was shaped like the head of a comet or a limpet shell, the kind they used to make into ashtrays before smoking became illegal, and was far larger than any cruise ship which had ever sailed. Now she realised how big it really was; a floating island able to hold a population of several thousand people.

She and Chantelle shopped in arcades made of millions of shells amongst fountains and holidaymakers. A suspicion had formed in her mind that Chantelle had showed her only the up-market shopping areas. Then her sister showed Julie the beautiful man-made centre of the city, a huge park with small hotels and a few cottages belonging to the very wealthy. A crystal stream ran through it and she saw waterfalls and pools, the latter deep and warm with ornamental fish in them.

All this Julie saw from a transit car high above the terrain, with the aid of a standard pair of high powered binoculars. It made her reflect on the economics of her own present situation. The insurance premiums on the bungalow had soared in recent years and she had let them lapse. The money which had enabled her father, Chantelle and herself to move from the small inner city house, now rented out, had come from his first wife's family, Chantelle's grandfather. Her half-sister was rich but all she had was the rented house, left to her, and enough money saved for the purchase of a new set of computers.

The city was stationary at the moment, anchored in the deep Atlantic near to the Azores and the dome was open enabling people to use the false beaches. After a lunch of fruit and salad she and Chantelle went to sit on the one near to the hotel.

"Oh dear!" Chantelle said. "The sand needs renewing, it never used ..." She checked herself and smiled a little too brightly. "Shall we go back and sit by the pool?"

Julie took in details of the beach which was far from deserted, noticing a thick scattering of litter on the sand and rocks and something brown which seemed to be bubbling in the water. She agreed. They walked to the hotel and the pool, lying in their two-piece swimming costumes on recliners by the side of it. It was nearing evening and the main heat of the day was past. Colourful birds were roosting and chattering in the brightly foliated trees. Chantelle brought two long cool drinks and they lay relaxing after the hectic day.

Their peace was suddenly, abruptly, shattered. A voice spoke at her side. "If it isn't the beauty of the 'copter bus?"

Julie opened her eyes and looked at him.

"Some coincidence isn't it, staying at the same hotel?" he added.

"My sister owns it!" Julie said casually.

"Now isn't that nice for you." He grinned. "See you around then!"

"Not if I can help it," Julie muttered as he swayed along the shingle path leading into the hotel.

Chantelle looked ruffled. "He's a competition winner," she said. "We get quite a lot of them. Most of them are all right..."

Julie smiled despite her lingering anger. "You can get his type anywhere, rich or poor. I think it must be my hair!"

Chantelle placed her hand on Julie's. She squeezed it. "Don't let it worry you." She paused. "We'll eat alone I think. I want to talk to you seriously."

They ate in a small dining room which served Julie's half-sister and her husband and special friends. It was cool with a window open and the sound of waves rolling onto the beach outside.

"How old are you Julie, thirty-six?"

"Thirty-seven."

"So it's fifteen years since you divorced Darren?"

Julie nodded and thought back through the years to her short marriage.

"I know it wasn't a happy time ... but ... don't you ever want someone special in your life again?"

Julie smiled and was glad to see Chantelle's frown disappear. "I'm free and like it that way. Perhaps I'm one of those people who need to be free."

"I know you weren't happy," Chantelle persisted doggedly. "But with a less wild kind of man or woman..."

Julie looked thoughtful. "Maybe..."

That night as she lay in bed Julie thought of Darren and wondered what she could have seen in him. He had had a certain charm, especially before he grew too drunk. Anyway, one thing she knew for certain, she had treasured her re-acquired freedom after the divorce...

She sighed, unable to sleep and felt the rob. button beneath the single layer of bedding covering her, set into the framework of the bed. If she pressed it she could order an iced drink or food. But she didn't, instead she rose from the bed and looked out of the locked windows. It was the early hours of the morning and the garden was deserted. A warm wind blew the leaves and branches of the dark trees; above, the stars shone. The scene calmed her and she was soon fast asleep.

Some dark shadow obliterated the tenuous light from the windows. It came quickly to cover her where she slept. Suddenly, as a rough hand covered her mouth she awoke, shocked as she felt fingernails dig into her face.

"Do as I say, or I'll cut your throat!" She could see little of the man behind a mask and hood, but she could see the knife in his hand. Terrified dark thoughts flew in her mind, black vultures ready to make a feast out of her sanity. Then she remembered the rob. button only centimeters from her hand. It would be silent and unseen in the bedroom, feeding its signal into a waiting robot's receptors. But could

she press it without the intruder noticing? The knife winked silver light only a short distance from her neck.

She sat up suddenly, the knife cut her chin. At the same time she pressed the hidden rob. button. The knife trembled. Fury was in the voice coming from the figure. "I said do as I say. I didn't tell you to move!"

"What do you want?"

"You. Come out from the bedcloth, slowly!"

Julie did as she was told as the man moved the knife closer to her throat. She slowly pulled the cover back. The knife followed her every movement.

"Take that nightdress off!"

Slowly, with trembling fingers and her body shaking she did so. She lay naked on the bed. Then she heard a sound in the silence. A servo-rob. moving on its track. She was more in control of herself now and with a great effort grew calmer. For an instant the figure turned its lurid masked and hooded head and forgot her. Julie took her chance and pushed the solid shadow of the man aside with all her strength and yanked open the door. The figure, seeing the servo-rob, fled. The rob fired its laser and he fell to the tiled floor. It all happened in seconds but the house had come alive with light and activity. Before sitting, naked, on the floor, her legs giving way beneath her, Julie remembered thinking how strange it was that the rob. had been armed with a lethal laser.

A few days later Julie walked on the dirty hotel beach with Chantelle.

"So we're moving to flower oceanic," Chantelle said. "You should see it Julie, the colours and landscaping and the dome...."

"I'm not coming with you Chan," Julie said. "I'm going back to the city I came from."

"But..." Chantelle looked shocked, "how will you live there? You can't go back!"

"I must," Julie said. "I have to learn to live there. There's nowhere else is there?"

Chantelle shrugged, her voice suddenly cold. "If you must!" She kicked the sand. It flew in the wind.

Julie took her sister's hand in hers. "Come with me, you and Ken. Decay's everywhere, can't you see? It's almost a stench in the wind here, and after a short time, flower oceanic...?"

Chantelle wrenched her hand free. "What right have you to say that! It won't be like that!"

Julie sighed. "Come and visit me anyway?"

Chantelle raised her lowered head and smiled. "I will."

Julie felt her heart hesitate. Loneliness beckoned.

There was something else Julie had to do. The night she had been attacked, as she knelt, naked and sick, on the tiles of the hallway outside her bedroom, her dead tormentor only a meter away, Chantelle and Ken had proved hopeless in dealing with the situation. It was the man on the 'copter bus who'd carried her back into the bedroom and put her gently onto the bed, covering her with a bedcloth and making her sip brandy. He had been surprisingly gentle, just sitting there and asking if she

needed the window open. Was she warm enough? She had to thank him.

Leaving Chantelle she went to the hotel's pool to sit in the sunlight. He was there. She smiled at him and he grinned back. Julie noticed with surprise that his colour was heightened and he looked almost embarrassed. She sat beside him.

"Thank you for looking after me the other night," she sighed. "You were really good to me!"

"Anyone would have done the same," he said. "Leaving, aren't you?"

Julie nodded.

"Can I show you the city before you go?" he smiled. "I'd do anything for a woman like you, and not because your sister owns this hotel. She told me quite a bit about you ..."

"You can't really know me!" Julie smiled.

He looked exasperated. "I know enough." He paused. "I bet that sister of yours showed you only selected parts of it!"

"I guess so; she wanted to protect me," Julie said sadly. "I'd rather like to see more before I leave!"

"You're on," he smiled, winking at her. "Today?"

His name was Gavin Soamt and he took her to witness an orgy. She felt nervous but he reassured her, as he had once before.

The men and women performed, the pee-ers busy in the urinals whilst the elite played, engaging in indulgence after indulgence. The pee-ers wore the white bands of their bondage. She hated it all, so did he.

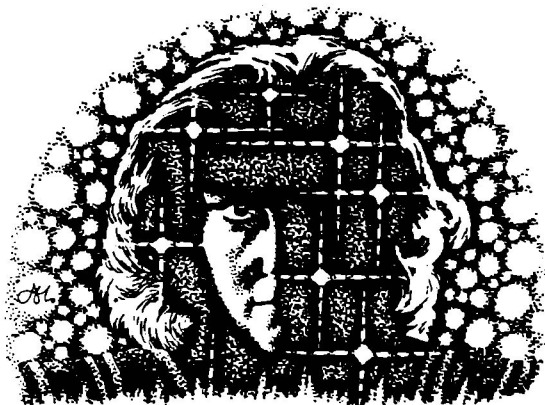
He took her to a coast hotel while the night was still young. In the morning she awoke feeling happier than she had for years, all horror of men gone.

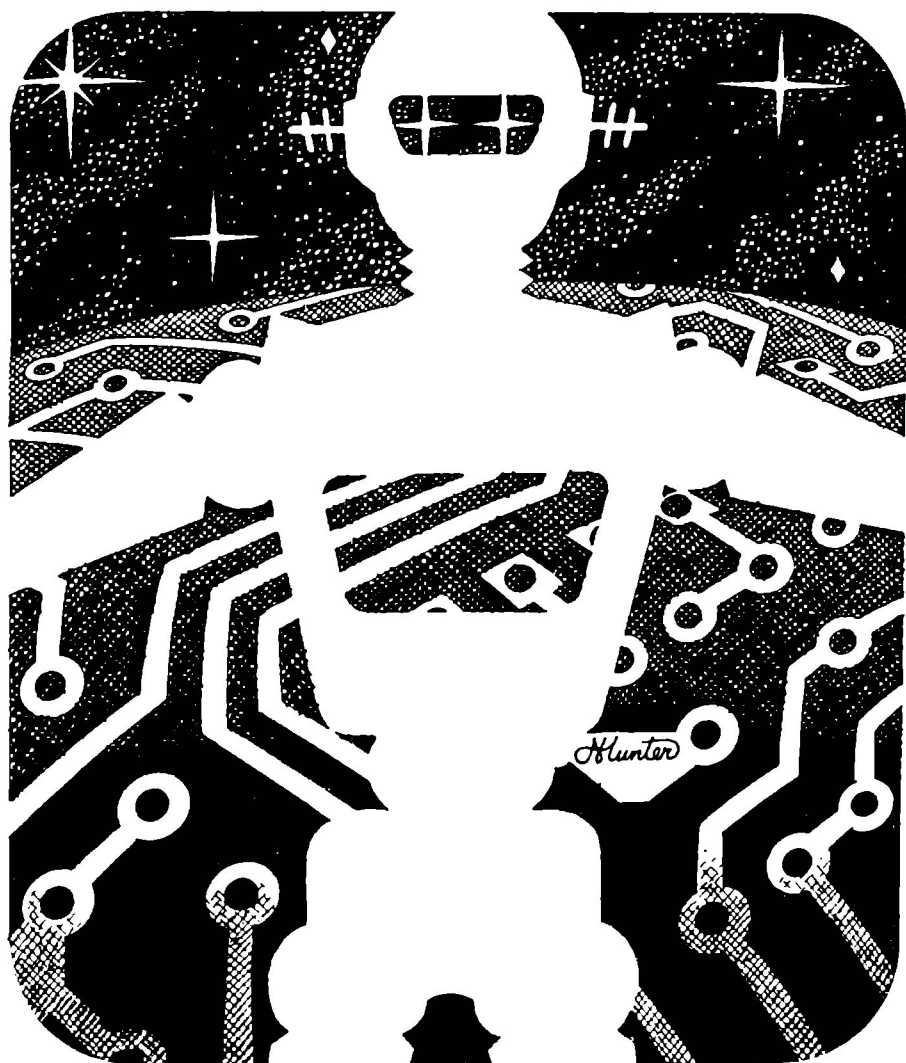
They travelled back together. They had agreed that they should go to the rented house where Julie had lived as a child. They would pool their resources and earn credit from computer outwork.

After passing through the neon-hearted centre of the land city they hired a suncruiser and drove to Julie's house. As they reached the suburb she noted with amazement the sores on the land where factories had been pulled down and the wild plants were growing. There were even spindly trees.

"Hey, I like this!" Gavin said jubilantly. "I bet there's foxes here at night!"

Julie took his hand. The house was in sight. Gavin parked the suncruiser in front of it and they got out. They were home.





Time For Change

MARK ILES

THUNDER boomed in the distance; the land shook slightly. Father-all ignored it and turned his translucent jelloid face back to the younger one, and continued the lecture.

"We've been here for generations, long past our remembering; and today our group still rules the square. You know how unusual that is, today most squares are governed by federations or combines, which rise to power as the elder groups collapse. We need you, but you know this don't you, and choose instead to ignore our want."

Bahadur, most younger of the ancient one, replaced the texts he'd been studying and took no notice of the jibe. "The writings state that there will be a time for change, and when that time comes we *must* move on. Besides, it is time, we both feel it in our frames, although you'll never acknowledge the fact." Bahadur ran his first dozen tentacles from the senior side over the ancient texts lovingly, as they lay in their racks. The parchments were cracked and yellowed with age, the secretion long past its lifespan. Most of younger's kin were too frightened of damaging the priceless heirlooms to even consider handling them, hence why Bahadur had been preserving them as best he/she could, and making copies. He/she'd need copies when he/she went.

"Father-all," Bahadur signalled, "you will continue the preserving, won't you? They'll dissipate if you don't."

"I've sworn haven't I!" snarled the elder, as *he* turned to the buildings viewing hole and again cast the distant thunder from his mind. The texts had warned of the thunder, and the subsequent loss of life in the outlands, as the enemy crossed the squares. That would be the beginning, they warned, or the end if one chose to ignore the signs. "When it's time," they warned, "the people will be changed, and will feel a need to move on. Don't ignore the need, or all is lost."

And change they had, the new born ones. Bahadur, eldest of the new born, most younger of the ancient one, was to lead them. But such a loss to the group! It was bound to fall as soon as Bahadur left, the combines were already raising their ugly heads, snapping and sniping at the group's traditional support.

The eldest gestured at the viewing hole. "Look youngest, the land is ours as far as you can see. Do you really want to go and risk all this? What of the crops?"

Bahadur sighed, unwilling to take up the old arguments but feeling the need to respond. "There are others to tend the crops," while they could, he/she added mentally. How he/she loved this land, but Bahadur wouldn't, *couldn't*. ignore the time. In the far distance a ship lifted off, the subdued hum rising into a shriek. Good, others in the squares had taken heed. "We'll be okay Father-all, don't worry. I mean, just look at the ship that the bio-engineers have created for us, isn't she a beauty?"

Father-all had to admit to himself that Bahadur was right. Big, black, and electric blue she was, fair glowing in the light; humming with subdued power as she strained at the mind leashes that held her back, voluminous eyes scanning the legendary heavens even as they spoke.

More thunder, closer this time.

"It's *time* Father-all, I *have* to go!"

"Yes, I understand, really I do. Keep them safe youngest."

A brief tug, tentacles interwoven, jelloid merging for an instant. Father-all could feel the difference now, as well as sense it. *Time* was here at last, and suddenly he remembered his time so long ago. But Bahadur was gone, striding across the square into the armoured ship. He/she turned briefly, waved, and shouted:

"I'll try to come back, perhaps even in time to help with the crops!"

No you won't, thought Father-all, we never do. He stood there a long time, until the last of the new born ones had boarded and the gangways had been lowered. As the mind leashes released her the great ship began to tremble, the vast wings spread, eyes again scanning the heavens, locked, and scanned again. The hum rose to a shrill scream as the vessel climbed towards the heavens, gathering speed as it went, a rapidly dwindling speck. At last, sensing his kin behind him, Father-all turned and walked away.

Deep in the vessel's brain Bahadur, Father-all of the new group, glanced at *his* subordinates, ignoring their anxious, questioning, yet knowing looks. The great colony ship pulsed with power, muscles flexing endlessly, blood thrumming through massive arteries and veins. Indeed a worthy ship.

"Father-all?" an aide queried.

Bahadur turned ponderously. "Give the ship her head, let her lead us where she will."

"At your word."

Bahadur studied his crew and many colonists via the screens about him. His kin waited patiently at the dispersion points, not knowing whether it would be a long or short time until they disembarked, but trusting in him implicitly.

Suddenly the craft swerved and increased speed. The blood threshed loudly about them, the beast's whine growing in pitch until Bahadur didn't think he could stand it any more. Disturbed, Bahadur studied his screens. The top one showed a wide expanse of white bubbled surface, cratered and cracked; in the lower one he could see the now minute squares flashing past at an incredible rate, seeming to gather speed and run away from him even as he watched.

"Father-all, look at the forward screen!"

He turned and did so. What?

A brilliant blue light was racing towards them, or rather they towards it. So severe was the light that it hurt his eyes and shone clearly through the kins' bodies.

"Change to manual control! Quickly, before it's too late!"

But his fellows were rooted to the spot, unable to tear their eyes away and carry out his orders. Even as he flung himself across the brain Bahadur knew that he had failed, he was already far too late.

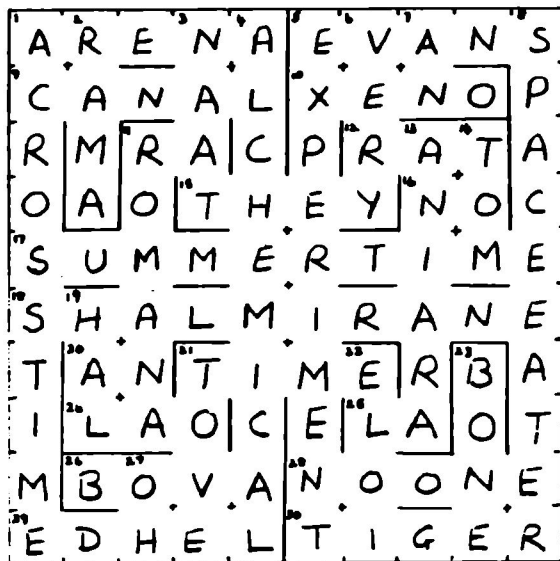


Philip McCullouch cursed as he stamped the mud from his gum boots on to the abattoir floor, unsure even now why his boss had wanted to buy up this decrepid old place. If Phil had had his way this dump would have been pulled down long ago, but then the boss paid the wages and kept him from the dole.

There was a sudden 'fzzt'! as something small slammed into the electric flytrap. That had been one of the first things he'd fixed up. The whole place was simply crawling. Must remember to get some bleach, he thought, this place could do with a good soaking. With that in mind he strode purposely across the inch wide tiles, deaf to the thunder of his passing, and the muted screams beneath his feet. ●

Answers to WORD GRID 6

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BACK ISSUES DEPARTMENT.

Back issues of 'DREAM' are still available (at time of going to press) as follows:

Nos. 7 & 8 (2 only of No. 7) £1 each
 Nos. 9 (3 only), 10, 11 (3 only), 12, 13 (2 only) and 14 £1.25 each
 Nos. 15, 16 and 17 £1.50 each
 Nos. 18, 19, 20 and 21 £1.75 each

'NEW MOON' Nos. 2, 3, 4 and 5 £1.25 each

We also have one set of 'DREAM' Nos. 1 — 6 for £7.50 the set.

THE EXPANDING UNIVERSE

Rod MacDonald



NOTHING in the universe has seen as much growth as the universe itself. From very modest beginnings (ie absolutely nothing) it has expanded in the relatively short period of eighteen billion years to become the vast cosmos we observe today.

In real estate terms, you could put its assets at something like one-hundred-thousand-million galaxies each containing a comparable number of stars. This does not include an equivalent mass of gas and dust which continues to form new galaxies and stars to replace the old ones that fade and evaporate with time. There are also objects called quasars and black holes which probably account for a significant proportion of the universe's matter.

But the biggest asset that the universe has is space. This is continually expanding at a fantastic rate and as yet it is not certain if this expansion will cease with time. Some think that enough matter exists to eventually pull everything back together in the distant future, forming a massive black hole or singularity. Others believe that insufficient mass exists for this to happen and the universe will expand for eons, something like ten to the power of eighty years, (ten with eighty zeros after it), by which time all matter will have evaporated into energy. This represents one of the major questions facing astronomers today.

How did the universe begin? It is very difficult to imagine what really happened, but think of it this way. If you add -1 and $+1$ you get nothing. Reverse this equation and you will see that nothing gives you -1 and $+1$, but for some reason there seems to have been a slight inequality and when the matter and anti-matter formed during the Big Bang annihilated itself, there was a surplus of one over the other. This left-over material is the universe we have come to know.

The Big Bang was an event that expanded space. It is wrong to think of space in terms of a vacuum which may or may not contain anything within it, but it still exists just the same. This is very different from the 'nothingness' that was there (terming it to be there is still inaccurate) before the Big Bang. This nothingness is completely impossible for us to imagine because we relate only to the dimensions in which we live. It can only be described mathematically.

The conventional description of the expanding universe involves a balloon, with spots on it to represent galaxies, in the process of inflation. This is perfect if we could go outside the universe and look at it, but this is impossible. We are within it and nothing can be

outwith it. Although we imagine the Big Bang as an explosion of sorts where everything then rushes outwards, we are actually within that explosion and when we look at the night sky, or the universe as such, we look back in time to that event which took place 18 billion years ago.

Allowing for the time that light takes to reach us, the Sun is eight minutes old when we see it in the sky. (Light travels at 186,000 miles per second). Further afield, the nearest star is about four years away and the nearest large galaxy about two million years. The further it is, then the deeper into the past we see, so you can understand that very distant objects appear as they were a very long time ago. Some quasars date back ten billion years, and we can 'see' the Big Bang in the form of radiation coming from every point in the sky. Yes, the universe came from a point source explosion, but everywhere we look we see back to that point. It is a very strange kind of inversion, but it is due to ourselves living within that point which has expanded.

You may be saying to yourselves right now, 'I can't picture this', and indeed, this is a near unanimous reaction. The problem lies with us not being able to think of space in more than the three dimensions of length, width and height. Other dimensions of time and space exist, but we cannot imagine them.

A good trick is to think of a world with only two dimensions as E.A. Abbott did in his book 'Flatland'. (Still worth a read!) The inhabitants could understand length and width but had no concept of height. If they were walking and met a steep gradient, they could have no notion that a hill was before them. The flatlander would find the going getting tough for no apparent reason. He would have to expend more energy just to go along and the reasons for this would be a complete mystery. Also, if there was a hole in Flatland and one poor fellow walked towards it, to another observing he would be seen to disappear. This vanishing act would again be a complete mystery, but to we outsiders of three dimensions, such events would seem perfectly rational.

Now extend this scenario beyond our own world. We become the Flatlanders. It is not difficult to understand why we cannot see or describe what lies outwith our three dimensional construction of the universe. Luckily we can describe the other dimensions mathematically, and some have gone on to suggest (e.g. Kaluza and Klein) that there are up to eleven dimensions. The exact purpose and

location of the extra dimensions is still unclear.

So there we have it! Expansion in a mind-shattering way. But, I have heard people say, 'Where does God come into it?' Others will even mutter: 'This is all rubbish! The universe has only been on the go since 4004 BC!'. Well, the latter can believe what they like, but the former can console themselves with the fact that we are looking at something more wondrous than they ever imagined. We are merely trying to cope with a mechanism for the universe and its origin which does not necessarily exclude a God.

There are three possibilities when you come down to it! The universe created itself for no apparent reason and everything within it has no purpose or reason. Secondly, God created it with a purpose and reason. Third, we created it, and by we, I mean life itself in the universe created it in order that it may exist. This is the anthropic principle which basically means that something in the future can influence the past. It may be wishful thinking, but there are signs, just hints of misty logic, as expressed by many leading physicists today, that a process of purposeful creation did take place. It has been said that science, and not religion, is the way to God, but then, the distinction between the two becomes meaningless.

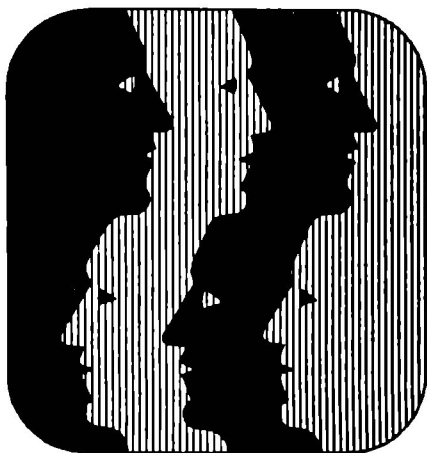
For further reading in cosmology and physics, I would suggest the popular books by Paul Davies, Professor of Physics at Newcastle University. They include: 'The Ghost in the Atom', 'Superforce' and 'God and the New Physics'. Cambridge University Press also publish a large number of titles in this sphere. The best source for these books would be the local library which, even if it does not have the title on the shelves, can order it especially for you.





WRITERS TALKING

*Emmanuel Escanco interviews
D.F. Lewis*



EE: From all reports, you must be one of the most prolific authors contributing to the small press today.

DFL: I don't know about that, Emmanuel, but I do write about five stories a week. It's less than it sounds, really the average length must be less than a thousand words.

EE: More than most writers I've interviewed, at all events. Why do you write so much?

DFL: Some people are compulsive writers, I suppose — just as some are compulsive drinkers. Others are both, of course.

EE: Seriously, though...

DFL: I think I am serious. Take H.P. Lovecraft as an example. He wrote 100,000 letters in about 23 years. That makes roughly five a day, I think. I don't think that my five tales a week really compares, do you? His longest published letter covers fifty printed pages. There's a real obsession for you. I'm a moderate.

EE: If you put it like that, I suppose that you are. You mention Lovecraft, would you say that he was a major influence on you? I've noticed Cthulhu stuff creeping into your tales, but you don't write anything like Lovecraft.

DFL: No, I don't. I write the only way I can, really. Like D.F. Lewis. That's not to say that I don't have influences, I think that almost everything I see or hear influences me one way or another. I would have liked to write like Lovecraft, and I tried it too, but it didn't come out at all like Lovecraft. Now I just write the only way I can.

EE: To judge from some of your stories, things you smell influence as well as things you see or hear...

DFL: I think you could say that.

EE: If you had to list your influences?

DFL: Horror writers like Lovecraft, Hodgson and Machen. Modern writers too: I think that Thomas Ligotti is one of the most underestimated.

Some SF, as well, and a lot of mainstream material, from Dickens to Ian McEwan, John Fowles and Anita Brookner. I think that Anita Brookner is my favourite author at the moment. Jane Austen is good, too. I have very catholic tastes.

EE: When did you start writing?

DFL: My present tales started in 1987 with a story called "Padgett Weggs" which appeared in the second issue of "Tales After Dark"; but, really, I've been writing since 1964. At one time I used to write mostly poetry, but now I write only prose.

EE: Your influences seem to be prose writers.

DFL: Yes, I don't read very much verse, either, these days.

EE: Was it the authors you read who prompted you to start writing?

DFL: Back in 1964, or whenever it was? I don't know. It's hard to think that far back. In 1987 it was my old friend Peter Jeffery. He'd had a story called 'The Kindly Elder' accepted for "Tales After Dark". I thought 'if he can do it, so can I'. And I did, too.

EE: So you did. And how do you see yourself continuing?

DFL: I don't really have any fixed plans, I'm afraid. It would make this interview much more neat, but that's not the way it is. That's an advantage — maybe the only advantage — of being an amateur, rather than professional writer. If I had to support my family on what I write I'd have to be making all sorts of plans. As it is, it doesn't matter — I can just take it as it comes, or fails to come. For the last couple of years it has been coming, but if it dries up tomorrow it doesn't matter too much.

EE: Except to your readers, perhaps.

DFL: I already have enough unpublished material to last for a while, in any case.

EE: As people used to say in the pictures, that's where we came in. Do you have anything you'd like to add?

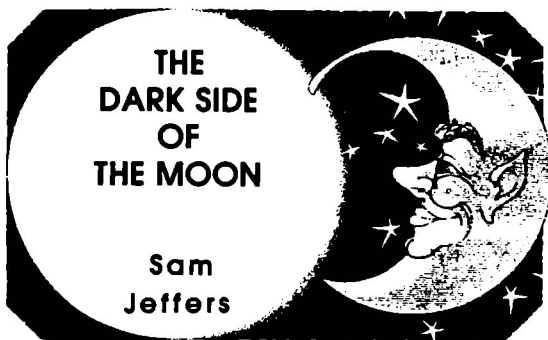
DFL: Just this — that I write my stories because I enjoy writing them. If people enjoy reading them, that's a bonus. I hope they do.



POSSIBLY the most important element in the success of any new magazine is for that publication swiftly to establish its own identity. Too many small-press publications are clones of other magazines and it is a particular danger for a first issue. There are, as I have mentioned before, a 'pool' of regular smallpress authors who seem to appear here, there and everywhere and, almost invariably, these are the names one sees in the early issues of a new small-press effort. The success, therefore, of the magazine tends to vary with the amount of discrimination shown by the editor in picking his materials. Some first issues are, because of this, somewhat atypical when judging what the magazine will turn out like in the issues to follow.

There are two examples of first issues to be considered this time and both are, to a greater or lesser degree, flawed, albeit for different reasons. To their credit, both editors appear to be aware of this fact and promise action to remedy the situation. However, as their solutions are somewhat different, let's take a look at each in turn:

The first issue of 'NEW VISIONS' (£1.25 per issue or £6.50 for a six issue sub., (but see next column) from Adrian Hodges, 3 Ashfield Close, Bishops Cleeve, Cheltenham, Glos. GL52 4LG 36pp A4) has a number of points in its favour and a number of points against it. In its favour are the clear typesetting and some good illustrations. Against are the lack of a contents listing, the tiresome use of rather flowery handwriting instead of type for certain parts of the contents and a pretty duff line-up of stories. The best of the contents are a shortish piece by Bruce Baker (but not one of his best; his shorter pieces often seem a bit pointless to me) a reasonable short by Dave W. Hughes, an amusing critique of the followers of J.G. Ballard



in poem form by Andy Probett and an ultra-short which is really a joke rather than a story by John Light. Of the rest I can say little good.

To his credit, Adrian Hodges seems to have realised that 'NEW VISIONS' in its present format is somewhat flawed and, after Issue 2, I understand that the format is to change to a more traditional SF magazine (entitled 'NOVA' Science Fiction) and all 'NEW VISIONS' subscriptions will be transferred to the new magazine, which will be quarterly rather than bi-monthly and will not pay for contributions. There may be other publications coming from the same 'stable'. Watch this space for developments.

Summing up, the main problem here would seem to be a lack of clear vision on the part of Adrian Hodges. The many name-changes to the magazines, followed by the change in frequency/format etc. could indicate insufficient planning in the pre-publication period. By the time you read this, 'NOVA SF' will, hopefully, be close to birth and it might be a good idea to start your subscription with the new magazine then.

'NEW VISIONS' is a member of the New SF Alliance, and copies/subscriptions can be ordered through 'DREAM'. (Just send the amounts as above, but payable to 'Trevor Jones'. Allow 21 days for delivery.)

The second new publication is 'THE EDGE' (Issue 1 is 32pp A4, £1 per copy plus 30p p&p. Future issues £1.50 incl. p&p. 4 Issues £5.50, 6 Issues £8.50 from 'The Edge', 56 Writtle Rd., Chelmsford, Essex. CM1 3BU.) The editor/publisher of this new 'zine seems to be suffering from an inferiority complex about his mag., as he says in his editorial that the first issue is so far short of what he wanted that he is prepared to offer pre-publication subscribers their money back! I think this is unnecessary, as, although the first issue may not be mega-brilliant, it is certainly no worse than the first issue of any other small-press 'zine I've encountered, and a good deal better than some. Still, if Graham Evans' offer indicates a strong desire to go on to better things this can only be applauded. So what is this first issue like?

To take the quality of production first, it is on a par with, say, 'AUGURIES'. Clearer reproduction is offered for future issues, but, to be honest, I found the print perfectly legible, if a little small. There is something of a lack of illustrations (which are, perhaps, more necessary in an A4 size magazine than in one of A5 format, as large pages of text can appear bleak) but more artwork is promised in Issue 2. The stories in Issue 1 are of variable quality, as the editor himself seems to acknowledge, but there are some interesting pieces from Michael Clark and Simon Clark (though the latter is a mite overwritten). The themes are, for the most part, variations on ghost/horror — the most Science Fictional being a rather substandard effort from John Light. Probably the main strength of Issue 1 lies in the articles, some of which are very interesting (including a piece on William Gibson by Kevin Lyons and a mixture of reviews and comment by several other contributors). As well as his story John Light has a rather superficial article on writing Science Fiction. Note to small-press editors — I'm sick of articles

debunking Whitley Streiber — would anyone intelligent enough to read SF be taken in by this man for a minute? If not, why bother with the articles — if they *are* that gullible no amount of logical thought or argument is going to dissuade them anyway. Admittedly, Christine Scott's piece on the subject does attack it from a somewhat different angle, but I've had enough, anyway.

If the editor's promises are borne out, then 'THE EDGE' has the potential to improve into a very worthwhile publication. Better fiction is needed, but the idea behind the format is good. Don't ask for your money back — there are many worse ways of spending £1.30. Stick with 'THE EDGE' and see what the future brings. (I understand 200 free copies of Issue 1 were sent out as publicity so the editor can't think all that badly of it after all, I guess!)

Also available through the New SF Alliance is 'SPACE AND TIME', an American small-press publication, which would be a very useful introduction to the U.S. small-press scene for any potential contributors or subscribers. This magazine sells for \$5 in the U.S. (about £3 per copy) but is available from 'DREAM' for only £1.95! Ain't *that* a bargain! It's an A4 magazine, comparable to 'DREAM' in production (though not typeset) of no less than 120 pages per issue. The contents cover a wide spectrum from 'hard' SF to outright fantasy/horror. There are some marvellous titles here: for example 'THE UNIVERSE SEEN AS A FLOATING ORANGE RIND' and 'THE AL-CHEMIST, BECALMED AT SEA, WEEPS'. Many of 'SPACE AND TIME's contributors have also made appearances in professional U.S. 'zines, so the standard is good. Issues are very limited (the current issue No. 76, is still *just* available through 'DREAM' — £1.95 payable to 'Trevor Jones') but copies of the next issue can be reserved now. 'SPACE AND TIME' comes out only twice a year, but it is a good thick

read. I think you'll like it. Incidentally, a number of other U.S. magazines are also available through the Alliance. Send a s.a.e. to our Huntingdon address for fuller details. Please note — copies of *all* American publications are very limited so if you want to get in on the bargains act quickly!

Also out is Issue 7 of 'DARK DREAMS' (£1 per copy including p. & p. from Jeffrey Dempsey, 2 Looe Road, Croxtetj, Liverpool. L11 6LJ. Issue 7 is 40pp A5 size.) This magazine covers mainly the horror side of fantasy fiction and has a pretty good list of contributors. Horror fiction is not my particular cup of tea, but for those who like it I'd say that 'DARK DREAMS' would be a pretty good read. It doesn't seem to be published very frequently, but has a nice range of illustrations, including some good ones by Dallas Goffin and Alan Hunter, whose work readers of 'DREAM' will be familiar with. There is a poem by Ramsey Campbell and a very short story by Jessica Amanda Salmondson, both of which are reprints from some time ago, but interesting nonetheless. My favourite story was Malcolm Furnass' 'THE CURE', disturbing but original. My own feelings are that SF and horror aren't as compatible as some small-press magazines try to make them and that those that try to combine the genres would do well to let the specialist horror magazines, like 'DARK DREAMS' take care of this type of story, which, on the whole, they do pretty well. There are no subscription rates shown for this magazine, but I presume that you could subscribe for multiples of the single issue price. If you like the gore this could be the 'zine for you. (Though, to be fair to them they do cover most types of fantasy.)

Nik Morton strikes again with 'AUGURIES' No. 11 (£1.20 per single issue or £5.20 for 4 issues.) I'm not sure why the subscription rate is *more* than

four times the single price, unless the per issue price is going up soon — for 52pp A5 from 'Nik Morton', 48 Angelsey Rd., Alverstoke, Gosport, Hants. PO12 2EQ. 'Auguries' is also a member of the 'New SF Alliance' and can be ordered via 'DREAM' in the same way as 'NEW VISIONS').

Issue 11 is the first issue with 'paid for' stories (£2 per 1,000 words) and has a glossy cover, but, apart from that, any real change is difficult to detect. The stories are the usual 'AUGURIES' mixture, covering a wide range of subjects. A regular editorial and letters page have been added following readers' requests. The best stories include 'THE SHAPES OF DEATH' by Graham Andrews, David Vickery's 'GHOST-BRINGER' and John Light's 'LIFE CYCLE'; the last of which suffered from its author's occasional fault of leaving you feeling: 'well, yeah, but so what'. Dave W. Hughes (who is becoming almost as ubiquitous in the small-press as the infamous D.F. Lewis — yes, he's in 'AUGURIES' 11 too —) has a cross between a space story and a horror story in 'CHANGES', which didn't succeed particularly well as either, to my mind and there are other pieces by Dorothy Davies (well written but too short to have the impact it could have produced), Nick Daws, Andy Smith and Colin P. Davies, none of which quite made the grade. A sprinkling of poems and a rather old-hat philosophical short by Nik himself complete the issue. As always, 'AUGURIES' is worth a read and the production does seem to be improving as each issue goes by.

Two issues of 'INTERZONE' to cover this time; Nos. 30 & 31. (£1.95 per issue or £11 for 6 issues, bi-monthly, 76pp A4 from 'Interzone', 124 Osborne Road, Brighton. BN1 6LU.) Issue 30 is an issue of contrasts, ranging from Keith Brooke's sub-cyberpunk 'ADENOTROPIC MAN', which gave us a new method of assassination (although I recall a 40s story by Van Vogt which had

a not-dissimilar idea) and J.G. Ballard's first 'INTERZONE' story for some years 'THE ENORMOUS SPACE', which was his usual original and well-written style, although a little short on substance, to Ian Lee's 'ONCE UPON A TIME IN THE PARK', which was just plain silly. The small press is also represented by Sylvia Siddall's 'KING-FISHER' which is a reprint from a 'CASSANDRA ANTHOLOGY' of a couple of years back. Comparing the two versions reveals only minor changes (whether made by the author in the interim or by 'INTERZONE's editors it would be interesting to know) which don't seem to have altered the story much at all. The other fiction was competent but not spectacular, to give, overall, an average issue of 'INTERZONE'. The features include an interesting dissection of the work of Douglas Adams by Brian Stableford, an interview with John Sladek and a slightly more interesting than usual article by Charles Platt, who holds up the work of none other than Murray Leinster as an example of how much better the old-time 'mainstream or middle-of-the-road' SF was than the same class of SF today. Well, yes, although I'm not sure that I'd agree with his evaluation of Leinster as a talented hack, well in the second division of writers of the fifties. The man did, after all, win a Hugo for his 'EXPLORATION TEAM' and I think the readers of 50s/60s 'ANALOG' would have put him well up amongst their favourite authors, although it is true that he was never an Asimov or Heinlein.

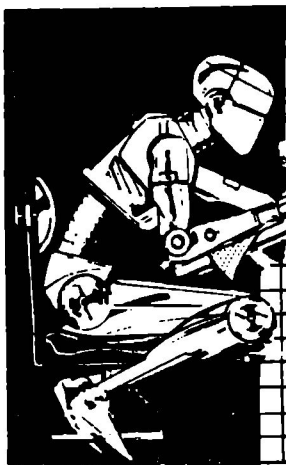
Issue 31 is the better of the two issues reviewed here, with an attractive David Hardy cover and an issue concentrating on space stories. This makes a welcome change and most of the stories are worthwhile. The best are Eric Brown's original 'STAR CRYSTALS AND KARMEL' and S.M. Baxter's 'RAFT', which is Baxter at his best. That's good, by the way! Gwyneth Jones' 'GRAVE-GODS' is another story of alien life

that's worth a read and, apart from John Gribbin's rather short (and rather silly) 'OTHER EDENS' the rest of the fiction backs up the main course pretty well. The interviews are rather low-key affairs this issue (with C.J. Cherryh and Stephen Gallagher) but Charles Platt surpasses himself with a second interesting column in a row, this time about the death of the printed word in S. California. You may or may not agree with his conclusions, but the man does raise an interesting point for debate.

Another worthwhile innovation is the listing of all magazines received by 'INTERZONE' during the previous couple of months, U.S. as well as U.K., so that you can get details of all those magazines you've heard about and would like to try. (A similar listing of books received has been a feature for some while now.) To sum up, Issue 31 is the best 'INTERZONE' for some time and the most attractively packaged too.

Some time ago I mentioned the first issue of 'START-UP', a magazine intended primarily for 'play-by-mail' games fans. A long time went by and no more was heard but now 'START-UP' 2 has arrived. The format has changed — it is now 32pp A4 size. (£1.20 per issue, irregular, or £4.50 for 4 issues, to 'Start-Up', Orchard Cottage, Greenways, Flordon, Norwich, Norfolk. NR15 IQL.) The standard of reproduction has also vastly improved, with a glossy cover and coated paper throughout. The only fiction is some pretty standard horror by Murray Ewing, but for anyone into the games scene the magazine contains a lot of worthwhile information. Reviews of new (and not so new) games, gossip, reviews (their reviewer has decent taste as he likes 'DREAM') and a library of rule books for various games which readers can borrow for a minimal payment. Could develop into a worthwhile mag. given a bit more regularity.

Sam Jeffers



THE MELTING POT

Readers' Letters

Here we go with another bunch of your bouquets and brickbats. Don't forget — if you have never written to us before, now's the time to start. *GPT*.

Dear George,

After seeing your note in Issue 20 about wanting to hear from as many people as possible I decided that it was about time I let you know what I thought.

Let me start off by saying that since I started reading your magazine (Issue 13) I have seen it get better and larger at the same rate. Here's what I thought of Issue 20:

Firstly the features:

Pet's Corner was very good. I can remember reading the Deathlok stories but had never thought of them as Cyberpunk before.

The Dark Side Of The Moon has one major problem and that is the time lag that arises when you're talking about other magazines.

The Sky Above You I don't read but I have no objection to it if it's what the majority wants.

Writers Talking I don't read either. Personally I am not interested in the writers themselves, just their stories. Even this issue's piece seemed a waste of space. (Sorry, guys, but there it is). I would like to see this feature dropped.

Word Grid. I think John Light should stop wasting his time on this and write some more stories. (*See this issue and cheer — GPT*)

Now for the stories:

'The Eighth Room' was well written but is not the type of story I like.

'The Roaring Sixties' was for me the worst story I have read in a long time. It always seems rather incestuous to have a writer as your leading character (a writer talking about

a writer) plus the fact that I couldn't see why it was in the magazine in the first place. It was like one of those stories that crops up in the pages of 'INTERZONE' which has nothing to do with SF or fantasy.

'You Are Old, Father William' was quite good if a little obvious.

'New Genes For Old' was very good at the start but the ending was a bit of a let-down.

'The Abreaction' was good although I found it a bit hard to read in the middle. (But then perhaps that's just me.)

'Angles' was, for me, the best story in the issue. Well written with some nice gentle humour.

'Life Is A Four-Letter Word' was a bit like 'The Roaring Sixties', only this time the leading character was a fanzine editor. The story was painfully obvious. Sorry, Michael.

As for my thoughts on the editorial, I think it's only a good idea to have one if you have something to say, otherwise you could end up with: 'Hi, kids, we've got a great mag. for you this time..' kind of editorial, which I feel is pointless.

All in all I think you're doing a great job and I hope it won't be long before you go monthly.

Mark Tingle
(Sheffield)

Dear George,

DREAM 20 — excellent! 'The Eighth Room' is definitely top of the list. (Why is it given as a novelette, by the way? Long short

story maybe. I would expect that a novelette or novella would be a slimmed-down novel, but with as much depth and characterisation, etc.).

'The Roaring Sixties' struck me as the weakest offering this time — far too much dialogue getting not very far. Trimmed down and with more action it could have been very good.

'You Are Old, Father William' was OK in a 'what would happen if...' type of story.

'New Genes For Old': Now, this must be number two. Reminded me a bit of 'Pusher'. Anyone remember Pusher? Drive Unit (Pusher) died, so the ship had to get a new one — turned out to be a human. The story built up an excellent drama of the two life forms, working together, yet separated by their differences. Good 'un.

'The Abreaction' was okay, too, but in some way I find difficult to define, unsatisfactory. Not sure why.

'Angles' could have been number two, but I think it's going to have to tie for third place with 'Life Is A Four-Letter Word'. Both stories were very good. I liked the lunatic 'Angles'; loved the idea of Beethoven in a rock group (didn't know Bach went blind, by the way — you learn something every day!) and 'life's' barmy reversal of the Three Laws of Robotics was a treat but 'New Genes For Old' aced it with its careful exposition of the planetary environment and a depth of characterisation that the other two lacked.

Good articles and I found your interview interesting: now that 'NEW MOON' has gone (sniff) you will have to broaden 'DREAM's' contents to take in stories (and I hope poems) which would otherwise have gone in the other mag. — the disadvantage is that you lose the 'streaming' ability of having two mags, each with its own house 'style'.

Roll on 21.

John Francis Haines
(Padgate, Warrington)

● *The absence of poetry in the last couple of issues does not herald some grand change of policy — it's just that, at the end of the typesetting we didn't have the space to fit any in. — GPT.*

Dear George,

The ratings for 'DREAM' 20 posed a particularly difficult problem. There was no absolute rubbish in the issue, but equally none of the stories could be considered outstanding. Still, here we go:

First, by a narrow margin, 'New Genes For Old'. Stories with two linked themes are always especially satisfying and J.P. Gordon handles this one nicely.

Second, 'The Roaring Sixties'. Further proof that Peter T. Garratt is a fine writer; just missed out on top place due to lack of plot.

Third, 'Angles'. An interesting idea which might have been expanded. It's hard to imagine Beethoven ever agreeing to a collaboration.

'The Eighth Room' was disappointing by S.M. Baxter's usual high standards, whilst, on the other hand, 'You Are Old, Father William' was an improvement on Graham Andrews' previous efforts (i.e. it made sense!) In both stories the idea was better than the execution.

'Life Is A Four-Letter Word' is a neat little joke, while 'The Abreaction' provoked no particular response and has to be placed last. E.R. James should not worry, though; he would have come well off the bottom in some previous issues.

On the whole then an issue of consistent quality, somewhat lacking in highlights.

Stephen J. Wood
(Stalybridge, Cheshire)

Dear George,

In the editorial of 'DREAM' 20 you asked for readers' opinions on certain matters. Here are the views of this particular reader:

Editorials: If you have something to say, say it. If not, give the page to the rest of the magazine.

Selling 'DREAM'/distributing publicity leaflets: If you produce some leaflets send them my way — I'll be happy to badger the odd human or two. (*Good on yer. Will do. Volunteers still wanted. — GPT*)

Serialising long stories: Why not? Splitting a story into two parts will usually make the wait for the issue containing the second part more enjoyable. Splitting a very long story into three parts would seem acceptable, but more than that would drag it out too much.

That's my views on the editorial over with, now for the rest of the magazine:

First, the stories in ascending order of popularity:

7) 'The Abreaction'. I read it and said 'So what?' It sounded like the outline of a film screenplay for some reason.

6) 'Life Is A Four Letter Word'. If there

were ratings for individual paragraphs the first one of this story would come top every time. Some good writing, spoilt by an off-colour idea.

4=) 'You Are Old, Father William' and 'The Eighth Room'. The top five were all close. Graham Andrews' story lost out because I managed to guess the ending. 'The Eighth Room' struck me as bland, no atmosphere (but I can forgive S.M. Baxter for the invention of the Mummy Cows — they're cute!)

2=) 'The Roaring Sixties' and 'New Genes For Old'. Nothing but praise for these two. They were just pipped to first place by

1) 'Angles' by John Purdie. The author shows signs of being a literary genius. If he keeps this up he will be!

Now the rest of the magazine:

What happened to 'The Dark Side Of The Moon'? Sam Jeffers seemed almost mild in comparison to some of his previous reviews. I preferred the mud-slinger Jeffers. (*I knew it was a mistake cutting out the broken glass and rusty razor-blades from Sam's diet — GPT*).

Forget the Nine Billion names of God! The universe will end when I finish one of John Light's word grids without cheating!

Apart from that, overall a very good issue.

Simon Amos
(Tonbridge, Kent)

Dear George,

Issue 20 — not much doubt about the top story:

1) 'The Eighth Room'. A fine SF story with original ideas, sympathetically treated aliens and an absorbing plot.

2) 'New Genes For Old'. This may not be everybody's choice but I guess it shows my preference for 'hard' SF.

3) 'The Roaring Sixties'. Some fine writing with deep social comment, but somewhat lacking in plot.

4) 'You Are Old, Father William.' A thoroughly nasty idea, well developed and plotted.

5) 'The Abreaction'. Original ideas (whoever heard of a genuinely haunted spaceship) but not very convincing.

The remaining two stories I would class as 'entertaining fillers'.

Special mention this time for 'Pets Corner' (a well considered and carefully argued appreciation for one example of the art in the

modern comic) and 'WRITERS TALKING' which gave us more understanding and sympathy with the people behind 'DREAM' than anything else I have read. (*And, boy, do we need your sympathy — GPT*)

Thinking about it, the views and opinions expressed in 'Writers Talking' is the type of thing I expect to read in an editorial. For me the editorial fleshes out a magazine, giving it a personality and individuality. It allows me to appreciate and share in the aims, achievements and future plans of the magazine. This doesn't mean that I do not want 'guest' editorials, unless it is shared amongst the people actually concerned with the magazine's production.

On the subject of serials I think that a two-part story could be a good idea, particularly where the content cannot be given adequate expression in a shorter length. Bi-monthly publication might be too great a gap to sustain interest in a three-part serial and many novels are merely short stories padded out. The 30-40,000 word story does give the reader the best of both words, provided it does not place unwelcome restrictions on the authors — on the other hand, you could be opening up a market for some excellent stories of a length which other publishers will not touch.

Alan Hunter
(Bournemouth, Dorset)



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