

DREAM

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MAJOR'S CHILDREN by P.F. Hamilton
Jack Wainer — John Light — Andy Smith
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EDITORS:

GEORGE P. TOWNSEND

TREVOR JONES

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CONTENTS

Page

SHORT STORIES

MAJOR'S CHILDREN	P.F.Hamilton	6
MISS BLOOD	Jack Wainer	18
GODDESS WITHOUT LOVE	John Light	24
MR. PEMBERTON'S BUTLER	Rik Gammack	33
AN HONOURABLE ESTATE	Stephen Wood	42
THOUGHTS OF RACHEL AND AN OVERWHELMING	Andy Smith	50

FEATURES

EDITORIAL	George P.Townsend	3
WORD GRID	John Light	49
BOOK REVIEWS		54
THE DARK SIDE OF THE MOON	Sam Jeffers	59
FORTHCOMING BOOKS OF INTEREST		65
THE MELTING POT	Readers' Letters	68

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EDITORIAL



George P. Townsend

With only three issues to go until the new 'DREAM' I thought it might be a good time to set out in a little more detail what we intend to do and set right a few fears and misconceptions that have been voiced to me by some of our readers.

First off, 'DREAM' will still recognisably be 'DREAM'. We are not intending to set out to be another 'INTERZONE', 'BBR' or 'WORKS' or whatever. The same set of principles which has guided us throughout our first five years will continue to operate, in some cases more strongly than before. Now that we will be paying top rates for our fiction we expect to be able to attract (and define more closely) the type of fiction that we want, and not stuff that has been written for other, better-paying markets. But that's not all — we want to work, together with our writers and readers, to change the perceptions of British magazine Science Fiction for the nineties. We want to set to rest a few myths and, in a small way, break the consensus that has, for too long, given some SF fans a misconception of the nature of our genre. Here are some of those misconceptions:

Number one: British SF is too downbeat and miserable. Not in 'DREAM' it's not going to be! Oh, I won't pretend we'll never run sombre stories — the world is a sombre place on occasions, but our authors have been left in no doubt that we want upbeat stories too. As I have said before, the world (with all its famines, wars and natural disasters) is an incomparably better place for the vast majority of its citizens than it was a century ago and there is little doubt that life will continue to improve into the next century.

Number two: The world is heading for disaster, with overpopulation, the Greenhouse Effect, pollution, etc. SF should reflect this impending catastrophe. Well, in 'DREAM' we certainly want stories about such impending problems, but we want stories that tell us what humanity is going to *do* about them. God knows, the human race has never been one to sit back and accept defeat without a fight and it's not going to start now. Forget the doom and gloom — look for the solutions! Then write the story!

Number three: Stories about space exploration are *passé* in the nineties. Rubbish! The traditional and central themes of SF are still as valid and vibrant today as they ever have been, in the right hands. *But* — we want stories that fit with the known facts of 1991, not rehashes of Barsoom and the fabled worlds of yesteryear. If you're going to have space wars fair enough, but what would they really be like? Not like the stories of 'Doc' Smith, that's for sure! What would life on the other planets be like? What about worlds like Io, with its volcanoes, or Triton, with its geysers? There are stories there aplenty. Write them!

Number four: The future lies in experimental writing. Sorry, but we don't think so. We think the future lies in good, solid, readable stories of *all* types. Hopefully,

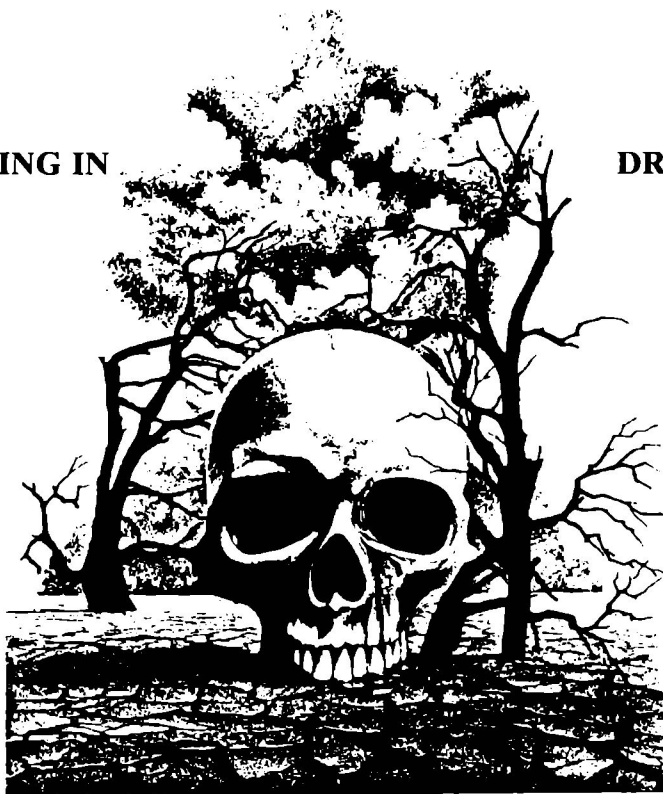
we will find originality there, perhaps even unconventional writing, but it will always be reader-friendly — always have a point. It might be adventure, social comment, humour, irony, romance and who knows what-else, but it will always be entertaining. The reader will come first in 'DREAM'.

Number five: 'DREAM' will change beyond recognition and forget its old friends. Never, never, never. We are truly conscious of the unflagging support our readers and subscribers have given us in our first five years. We know each other — we at 'DREAM' know what you like and we are going to do our bloody best to continue giving it to you — only more so!

Here's to the next five years. Stick with us! ●

COMING IN

DREAM 28



E.R.James leads us off next issue with 'SURVIVING THE NIGHT', a tense story of survival on an alien world. Also back in a top-rate issue is P.F.Hamilton, with another brilliant (and uniquely different) story, 'THE SEER OF SOULS'. Gerry Connelly will be with us also as will Charles Luther, with a non-Agent Franklin story, 'QUINTASEXTAHUPAL WOW!' And if you can guess what that's about, from the title alone, you'll get a free extra year on your sub! Duncan Lunan's Science article will be back too.

STORY RATINGS — DREAM 24

The final positions worked out:

1:	THE TYRANNY OF HEAVEN	S.M. Baxter	2.10
2:	BLUES IN THE NIGHT	Bruce P. Baker	2.78
3:	THE LAST SPACE OPERA	Peter T. Garratt	2.99
4:	ZONK!	Gerry Connelly	3.08
5:	THE GROF	Philip S. Jennings	3.22

In such a close-run fight one thing was noticeable; the usual violent anti/pro Bruce Baker split that has manifested itself whenever we have run his fiction before had largely disappeared. Are you getting used to him at last? Incidentally, the general reaction was that 24 was a very good issue overall.

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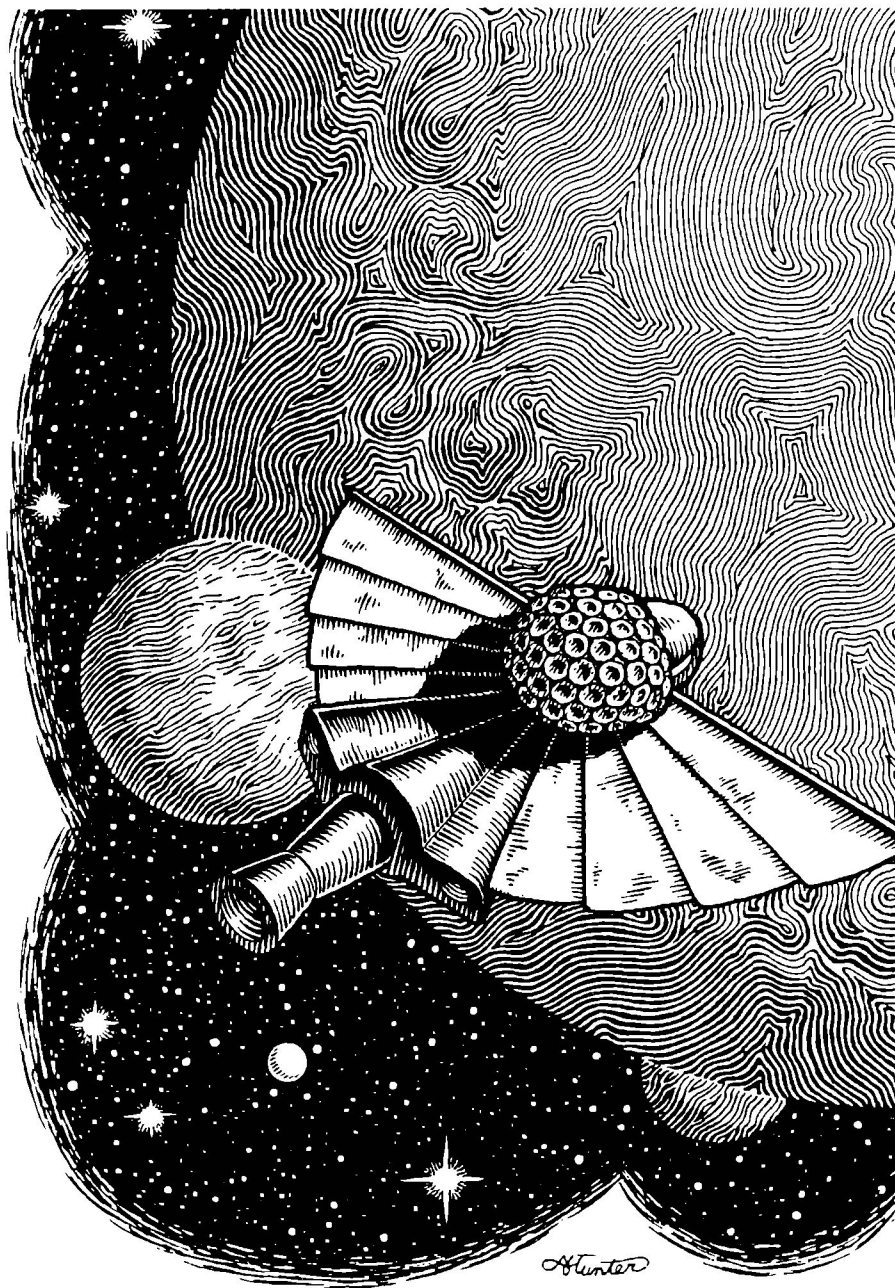
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MAJOR'S CHILDREN

P.F. Hamilton



Hunter

VOIDHAWK emerged from her jump singularity's pseudo-boundary four million kilometres out from Ladell. Sensor clusters telescoped out from their jump recesses all over the smooth ball shaped hull, and spliced a three-sixty spherical view of the external panorama into my cortex.

"End of the line, dead ahead," I relayed to my two passengers.

My espersense caught the outflow of delighted wonder from Jannine's mind. "Oh, Kendal, it's magnificent," she enthused. She was of an age — seventeen, I think — where anything new was greeted with gushing admiration.

Her father, Gilbert, was more restrained, simply confessing, "I'd forgotten," in a wistful tone.

I didn't believe him. No one could possibly forget what lay outside.

Although only slightly smaller than Earth, Ladell was, by strict definition, a moon. One of twenty-nine orbiting a gas supergiant. The scout pilot who'd stumbled on the system had named it: Major. It was appropriate. Compared to it's sublime majesty the G3 primary star was trivial. Major was the lord of the system. At two hundred and twenty thousand kilometres in diameter, it was too small for fusion ignition. But its slow gravitational contraction generated a titanic thermal output. What was, ostensibly, its darkside fluoresced a dusky neon-red. Where the sun shone it was a radiant coral-pink.

The splice revealed crimson cyclones and anti-cyclones whirling ferociously between a multitude of lateral hyper-velocity wind bands. Both polar regions were lighter, pockmarked by swarms of pale-rose curlicues, which looked higher than the rest of the cloud tops.

I could've cheerfully spent a lifetime gazing at it.

Voidhawk's bioware finished plotting Ladell's orbit, and superimposed a course graphic across the splice image, a tunnel of thin blue circles in an improbably twisting arc which terminated in a standard equatorial orbit.

Thermo-dump panels unfolded out from the hull. To anyone observing her at that moment, it would seem as though Voidhawk was sprouting silver dragonfly wings. I triggered the reaction drive's plasma ignition, and we swam down that gaudy tunnel of blue.

The Far Horizon bar, on Cansio, has a view overlooking some of the most impressive mountains on the planet. Tall, rugged, and painted in a purple-green lichen, right up to the snow caps. Each pinnacle was surrounded by a faint sparkling mist of fine ice powder.

Illuminated by Cansio's blue-white sun, the range provided a magnificent backdrop for the sports fanatics thronging the bar, squabbling raucously over disputes that'd cropped up during the day's peakgliding.

I was nursing a beer in a window booth, soaking up the view like any hick tourist when Gilbert and Jannine came over and asked to share the booth.

My mesh shifted to level one, its filament tips squirting a dim vermilion light into my synapses. It engendered a weak espersense; which I used to frisk Gilbert and Jannine. They both had esper enhancer filaments, but not a full psi boost mesh. Apart from that, they were clean. I waved them to the seats.

Jannine gaped unashamedly through the window.

Gilbert gave the mountains a cursory glance before turning to me. He had the world-weary air of a man who's life has had one hard knock too many. He was dressed to suggest a more than reasonable income; yet he'd certainly never bothered

with any retention treatment. I put his age in the late fifties, just younger than me.

He inquired if I owned Voidhawk, and I agreed it was so. Which was truthful enough.

"I'd like to charter you for a return voyage to Ladell," he said.

"Sure, anywhere but Earth system."

His eyebrows rose fractionally.

"Long story."

He chose not to probe. "There'll be my daughter and myself, that's all."

"Fine. It'll be a little cramped, but there's no insurmountable problem."

He smiled faintly. "I admire that attitude. No questions, no hesitation."

"I can't afford them. Us independents take whatever's offered. It contributes to the romance we shroud a rather drab reality with."

"Quite. You haven't heard of Ladell?"

"No. Should I?"

"There's no reason. Nobody goes there any more, it was proscribed right after the initial survey."

"I see."

"Does that mean you won't take us?" Jannine asked anxiously.

"Not necessarily. But it sure as hell ups the charter fee. Do you mind telling me what exactly is so hellfire important for you to risk a twenty year sentence, along with a total asset fine?"

"I think you'll find I can offer you an adequate compensation"; Gilbert said smoothly. "After we land you can load up with as many Sprinter pebbles as your craft can lift."

I sat back and took a long sip of beer; weighing pros and cons.

Sprinter pebbles; nominally classed as plants; they were the size and shape of duck eggs, with a solidity approaching stone. Like terrestrial tisländriers, they absorbed minerals and water through surface osmosis. Growing slowly, and reproducing by fission.

Their name came from the fact that they moved. The distortion which made them ellipsoid rotated leisurely around their main bulk, rolling them across the ground at the breathtaking speed of two centimetres a day.

They could live in a standard oxygen nitrogen atmosphere, although the lack of sulphur meant they didn't reproduce. There was only ever one batch released, and the subsequent rarity value made them an expensive fad for several months.

That must've been about a decade ago, from what I could recall. Still, an entire shipload of them wasn't to be sneered at.

"You tempt me strongly," I said. "But that still leaves the why of it."

"I was an exobiologist on Malcom-Dell's original survey team. Ladell is not a benign planet. Perfectly safe once you're aware of its temperament. We weren't in those days, of course. It was a small isolated team, with a low priority budget. That failing led to Kirsten, my wife, being caught out in a particularly brutal storm. Even if we'd had some top-range medical equipment, I doubt she could've been saved. The real tragedy was that we were due to leave in a couple of months anyway. The survey was virtually over."

"I'm sorry."

"Naturally, the medic kept me pumped full of suppressors., The rest of the mission is just a blur. I've waited nine years to pay my proper respects. I have no intention of waiting another nine."

I affected an appropriately sympathetic expression. People have many reasons for travelling between the stars, but this was the oddest one I'd ever come across.

Outside, the waning sun fell behind the massif, setting the ice dust ablaze. A dazzling rainbow strata stretched itself out across the entire horizon. That must be some pot of gold. The babble in the bar tapered away as everyone clustered around the windows.

The sight captivated Jannine, whereas Gilbert seemed totally unmoved by nature's grandiose spectacle. Waiting patiently for my answer. I drained my beer. "When do you want to leave?"

As we swooped in towards Ladell, Voidhawk's sensors began to build up a comprehensive picture of our external environment.

Major's emissions weren't confined to the infra-red. Local space was a blizzard of charged particles. A titanic magnetofield imprisoned a prodigious, and deadly, radiation belt. Ladell was lucky, its orbit was three hundred thousand kilometres above the top of the belt.

Even so, the amount it received was well in excess of the norm for planets with a biosphere. "How come life evolved here?" I asked Gilbert. I'd accessed Ladell's almanac file. Data was sparse, summarizing orbital parameters, and basic physical tables, but little else. There was no reason for it, the last few generations of biostore cellular clusters have got a virtually molecular capacity, almanacs now hold the real time coordinates for over four thousand stars, and their attendant planets. But somehow the information Malcolm-Dell gleaned from its survey had never been loaded into the update circuit.

"Ladell's atmosphere is a dense one," Gilbert explained. "It shields the planet from the excesses of Major's emissions."

We all spent the rendezvous flight spliced into the sensors, mesmerized by the eternally turbulent cloudscape, both terrifying and exhilarating at once.

Almost equally fascinating were the wildly different moons; ranging from a scorched rockball skimming the ionosphere, to a glaciated planetoid three and a half million kilometres out.

I noticed the three large inner moons were all in the same decant as Ladell. Voidhawk's bioware tracked them, projecting them into the future.

"There's going to be a four moon conjunction in twenty eight hours," I told my passengers. "Looks like we picked an interesting time to arrive, it can't happen often."

"The line-up occurs every nine years," said Gilbert. "It's the cause of the Rama storm, which governs all of Ladell's life."

"Rama storm?" Hadn't he said his wife died in some kind of storm, nine years ago? I knew there was something odd about this charter. You don't need to travel two hundred lightyears just to lay ancient ghosts to rest. Nor to join someone in death, not really. There are far simpler ways of committing suicide. Besides, he had Jannine to think of. I wasn't sure which side I was arguing on.

"The effect was obvious with hindsight," Gilbert said. "We were fortunate the Ly-Cilph warned us in time."

"Ly-Cilph?"

"Ladell's indigenous sentient species. The reason for the magistrature imposing proscription, zero contamination."

"And these Ly-Cilph, they knew the storm was coming?"

"Yes. We should've worked out the storm for ourselves. The cause is simple enough. There's a massive flux-tube between Major, and it's large innermost moon, Handra. It's a common enough phenomena in gas giant systems, but the scale here is something else again. The flux tube acts as a particle conduit, they flow up it from Major's ionosphere and disperse around Handra. Some get captured by the plasma torus, like a comet's tail along the moon's orbit, the rest just spray off in all directions. Except when the moons line up. The distortion they cause in Major's magnetosphere becomes an extension to the flux-tube. You get a geyser of particles shooting all the way up to Ladell. It's not a tight beam, more like passing through the top of a fountain, and it only lasts for six hours. But the total energy input the atmosphere receives is colossal. The resulting storms cause havoc all over the surface."

I listened in growing disbelief. "And you expected me to park Voidhawk in orbit when it was at its peak? No way. Start paying your respects right now, because this is as close as we get."

"No," Gilbert protested loudly. "You can't do that. The flux won't hurt Voidhawk, not if you park her at the Lagrange two point behind Ladell. And we'll be on the surface, protected by hundreds of kilometres of atmosphere. All we have to put up with are the winds. And the flyer hull is quite capable of withstanding any gusts Ladell can inflict, as you well know."

I did well know. I just didn't like being pressured into this. His answer was well rehearsed, so it seemed to me, but then he'd been here before. Truth was, I didn't like surprises of this magnitude sprung on me. Pilots are a cautious breed. Unexpected alterations to mission profiles make us very nervous.

What I had to decide was whether the combination of Gilbert's grief and determination was overriding his rational judgement. Yet he'd brought Jannine along. He'd never do anything to put her in danger. I clung to that.

"Please, Kendal," Jannine was imploring. "This trip is so important to me. I can barely remember mummy. This is the closest I'll ever get. Don't take it away from me."

Which really wasn't an argument I could refute with flawless logic.

Three dimensional vectors were dancing around each other in my mind, as the bioware plotted a course to the nearest jump coordinate. Seven hours would see us in transit back to Cansio.

"Damn it, don't you ever treat me like the hired hand again. This is my ship, not some junk disposable you chuck away after use. Is that clear?"

Gilbert was all contrition. "Yes, captain. I apologize. I didn't think."

"Sorry, Kendal," said Jannine. "We acted through ignorance, not spite. Planet orientated, I guess. We tend to think of our environment as inviolate wherever we are. Sorry."

I don't think I winced physically. "Okay, communications snafu. Now think hard, has this system got any further cute surprises in store?" I kept a certain edge to my voice.

"The flight is quite straightforward from now on," Gilbert said, stiffly.

The terminus of the blue course plot shifted, rising away from Ladell like a snake being charmed from its basket. I felt a slight inner ear movement as the drive realigned our trajectory, and we headed for the null-grav point at a fifth of a gee.

In fact the Lagrange point wasn't a point at all; the gravity of the primary and the

other moons had conspired to warp it into a weird bulbous oval that Voidhawk orbited once every five hours twelve minutes.

From the departing flyer she showed as a dark globe haloed by thermo-dump panels glinting red and white under the two conflicting light sources. She dwindled rapidly against the starfield.

The flyer hit the outer fringes of Ladell's thick atmosphere, standing almost vertical to the surface, a hundred and fifty kilometres below. Tenuous wisps of gas slammed against its belly, friction braking its enormous speed; the drag warped its course, tugging it round the curve of the planet. It etched a rigid contrail of inflamed nitrogen over two thirds of the equator.

The nearside landscape ceased to be an unintelligible blur, and distinct features began to unfurl below us.

Ladell was a jungle world from pole to pole. Every square centimetre was covered in some type of vegetation. There were no oceans, nor seas, just vast crater lakes ringed by swamps.

It wouldn't have been too bad, if it hadn't been for the colour. Here, on the nearside, Major had won the contest to light the world — plants, clouds, water, were all variations on the theme of red.

I spotted a break in the eternal forest, and brought us down near a medium sized lake.

We suited up to go outside. Ladell's atmosphere was unbreatheable without filters; the oxygen nitrogen ratio was similar to Earth's, but the carbon dioxide level was nine percent, and there was a high proportion of sulphurous compounds present. Temperature hovered around forty degrees, centigrade.

Ladell was dying. What passed for grass was a squishy mat of withered blades. Trees, which reminded me of banana plants, were wilting, their fronds sagging to trail on the earth; huge balloon flowers had deflated, draping the upper branches in decaying petals.

"What's happening?" I asked. I had to use esper, the radio was jammed solid by Major's blitzkrieg output.

"It's the cycle coming to its end," Jannine answered. "All life here follows a nine-year cycle. This is the time when seeds ripen and eggs are lain. After the Rama storm everything will bloom and grow again."

I saw a flock of bird-things over the lake, diving into the water. At first I thought they were hunting for food, like kingfishers, but Gilbert corrected me.

"Those are Ki-sistil. Reptilian, or at least cold blooded. They're burying their eggs as deep in the silt as possible. The storm chews the water up quite badly."

They broke surface trailing a long spike of water that fell back with a slow grace in the two thirds gravity field. The muddy shore was littered with their corpses, lizards with a single dull eye, and fragile membranous wings.

I began to despise Ladell. It was a cemetery world. Ghoulish.

Jannine's surface thoughts flared in alarm. I turned to see a Ly-Cilph gliding up out of the lake. First impression was of an upturned octopus on top of a snail skirt. It would've been an escapee from a horror cartridge but for its height, barely a metre and a half. It's six tentacles were weak looking devoid of suckers. The skin was knobbly, a glistening mottle of purple and maroon. A big lidless eye regarded us intently.

I glanced at Gilbert for a lead. Inside his suits's bubble helmet, his eyes were tight shut; concentration turned his features craggy.

I followed suit. Right at the extreme of esper sensitivity was a hushed murmur. I floated into the Ly-Cilph's song.

It was never meant for a human mind. Delicate patterns of thought escaping from some other worldly place, and flowing warmly around me. Incomprehensible, and beautiful. Massively alien.

Gilbert sang back.

Surprise nearly fractured my attention. It was woefully crude in comparison. A raw discord clashing against the Ly-Cilph's silver harmony.

No human mind should be able to express itself in such nonhuman terms. It was repulsive, an unholy mating.

The Ly-Cilph's song became a serenade of gratification before it slithered off into the surrounding jungle.

Gilbert opened his eyes slowly, not focussing on anything. His forehead was damp from sweat.

Jannine's teeth shone carmine in the perpetual twilight as a huge smile spread across her spritely face. "You did it, daddy. You did it!" She flung her arms round him, a kittenish bundle of excitement.

"I don't understand how anything that intelligent could develop on this screwed-up planet," I said.

We were back in the flyer's cabin. Gilbert had needed plenty of our assistance getting out of his tight-fitting suit. Now he was slumped wearily in an acceleration couch, his pale skin showing up the dark circles around his eyes. The effort of singing to the Ly-Cilph seemed to have drained him to an alarming degree.

Outside a strong breeze was rustling against the hull. Ladell was moving into the fringes of the particle flux.

"Sentience is something which builds over millennia," I went on, pressing the point. "But here each generation dies off before the next emerges, they can't pass on advances and discoveries. There's no continuation. Everything has to be learned from scratch, and they've only got nine years to do it in."

A subdued Jannine was holding her father's hand, eyes never leaving his lined anaemic face. "Less than that," she said. "Their life is divided into two distinct stages. The first four years is a purely aquatic one, their gills don't metamorphosise into air breathers until the fifth. Until then they are completely non-sentient, smart animals."

"You're not helping. That simply makes this intelligence even more unlikely."

Gilbert stirred, focussing on me with visible effort. "What you have to appreciate is the extreme complexity of Ladell's life. It was something those fools on the expedition couldn't accept. They wrote the Ly-Cilph off as neanderthal-equivalents. Rubbish. Obviously, hostile conditions act as an evolutionary spur, and here they are as inimical as you can get, without actually being impossible. The Rama storms have forced the Ly-Cilph's development to their absolute evolutionary limit. They are as far above us as we are to the primates. Their communication ability alone should make that self-evident. The first instance of genuine telepathy we've ever come across. Small wonder we can barely comprehend it."

I'd been wondering about that myself. The mesh is a fabulous possession, but it's very much a double edged sword. The energy it infuses into the brain to engender psi functions literally burns out the synapses. Mental adolescence to abject senility in three months. Psi is a dormant trait in humans, maybe in a hundred thousand years or so we'll have developed sufficiently to do away with artificial stimulation. Until

then those of us who have them fitted learn to utilize them judiciously... fast.

"But you managed," I said.

"Yes. The result of fortunate circumstances, and sheer bloody minded persistence. Our expedition had been here for three months before the first Ly-Cilph came out of the water. They were categorized and ignored, except by Kirsten and myself. We discovered self-awareness arising within the Ly-Cilph mere days after they emerged. It astounded us."

"An inherited memory?" I asked, disbelievingly.

"Next best thing," said Gilbert. "And incidentally, the discovery that's lifted Malcom-Dell to its currently unassailable position in the bioware market." He held up a Sprinter pebble. I didn't recognize it at first, it had contracted into a perfect sphere. Like everything else on Ladell, battening down for the Rama storm.

"An absorbed memory," he said. "The first thing the Ly-Cilph did on leaving the water was gorge themselves on these. So we did an analysis. A sprinter pebble is one of the simplest lifeforms we've ever come across, their internal structure is virtually homogenous. That's what put us on track. The cellular structure strongly resembled our own bioware memory clusters. I found the cells were saturated with data. Not that Malcom-Dell showed an iota of interest in funding a decryption programme. They already had the genes to exploit. But when we got back I kept plugging away; it took six years, but I cracked the dictionary and syntax. It was worth it. The Ly-Cilph's racial heritage is incredible. I found hints of advanced mathematics, philosophical religions, even cosmology, certainly they know of Major's other moons. Precisely the type of knowledge that takes years of observation and contemplation to amass. I couldn't ask for a better memorial to Kirsten, it was only thanks to her I realized how advanced the Ly-Cilph were."

"Why though?" I was speculating out loud. "There's no reason to their intelligence. It's nature's cruellest dead end. What use is it to gather knowledge if you can never apply it? They have no civilization, no technology, no goal to work towards. It even means they know the day they'll die. It's terrible."

"Don't try to draw analogies," Gilbert said. "Their thought processes aren't even remotely human. Their minds can achieve more in those four years than ours can in fifty."

"You mean they're natural fatalists. Sentience should help you protect yourself against your environment. If it had any purpose to them, they should've learnt how to weather the storm."

Gilbert's head lolled back on the rest, he was virtually asleep. "You're so wrong. But you'll come round eventually. I started off with a similar attitude on my first visit. It's a mistake. What they have is enviable. You'll see."

I looked at Jannine for support, but she shook her head sharply: don't argue. She stroked her father's damp forehead until he fell asleep. "This trip has taken so much out of him," she said. "I didn't realize it was going to be so stressful."

"Listen, Jannine," I hesitated as she glanced up, her young face expectant. "He isn't going to do anything stupid, is he?" I just couldn't get the idea of suicide out of my mind.

"Stupid?" she echoed, genuinely surprised. "Oh no. Nothing stupid." Her voice conveyed unshakeable conviction. "Not daddy."

I worked alone to gather up my podfulls of sprinter pebbles. My choice. Jannine's assistance would've made the job go faster, but that would have meant suffering her

eternal chatter; lecturing me about the flora and fauna, a neurodon Ladell expert.

There was a silent burst of dazzling azure lightning overhead. I blinked vivid purple afterimages away. High above the aurora borealis was painting the usually rusty sky with streaks of amber and aquamarine. They were universal now, a curtain of wriggling haze patterns that veiled the starfield. But the aurora wasn't intense enough to blot out the large inner moons.

They were bright flesh coloured crescents in a dogleg constellation that was gradually straightening as they swept along their orbits, racing to catch up with Ladell. The full conjunction was due in forty minutes; Ladell had been in the head of the particle jetstream for over two hours now.

Dead leaves had started to eddy about me with increasing agitation. No doubt about it, the wind was building as the energy Major saturated the upper atmosphere with filtered downwards. Clouds were disintegrating into fleecy swirling ribbons as they rushed across the sky. Lightning forks jabbed down from them with increasing frequency.

I was really wishing I'd never taken this charter. Mind you, recounting it was going to absolve me from buying a round of drinks for years to come.

A Ly-Cilph slithered past, barely pausing to observe me. It's tentacles were all coiled in tight spirals. I got the distinct impression it was holding something in each of them. I squirmed under its unblinking stare.

Plain and simple, I didn't have a clue how to behave towards them. Ignoring them was rude, a wave somehow ludicrous. I settled for opening up my esper sensivity.

The Ly-Cilph touched my mind fleetingly; it was humming. More accurately, thrumming, an impatient thrumming.

Gilbert was right, their way of thinking was utterly incomprehensible. The only event in its future was death. How could it possibly be impatient?

The Ly-Cilph moved off, ploughing through a shallow stream that was frothy with a viscous scum of algae. Cauliflower gobs of the stuff stuck to its hide as it rose up the bank on the other side. I wasn't sorry to see it go.

A ragged lightning bolt crashed down into the jungle, vaporizing some of the sodden trees not two hundred metres away. Its thunderclap rattled the roots of my teeth, despite the insulation of the bubble helmet.

Enough was enough. I spliced into the flyer, and ordered it to prep the lock flush.

While I stacked the pods in the forward cargo hold big raindrops began to splatter on my helmet, leaving thin brown stains of what looked like mud, but could've been spores.

As the hatch closed I saw the moons had nearly merged,

"Gone! What do you mean gone?" I stared round the cabin as though I expected Gilbert to jump out of some hiding place.

Jannine never skipped a beat. "Just that, he's outside. He's gone to be with mummy."

"I knew it, I bloody knew it. How could you let him go? He's your father, goddamit. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"Daddy isn't going to die. He came here for love. You understand nothing."

I glared at her, but she was fiercely unrepentant. I let my mesh slide up to second level. A tangerine light shone out of the filament tips, kicking off a mild headache. Another grain of sand out of the timer. And all the fault of this lunatic duo.

I expanded my espersense out from the flyer. Nothing. Ladell's atmosphere was

approaching near total ionization, the psychic equivalent of a whiteout.

"Gilbert," I flung the call out into the churning chaos.

"He's where he wants to be," Jannine rebuked me. "Leave him alone."

"Gilbert."

"Yes, Kendal," his reluctant answer was insubstantial, fading in and out, as though he was giving it only half his attention.

"Where are you? What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Haven't you worked it out yet, Kendal? Isn't it obvious?"

"I'm coming out to find you."

"Please don't. The Rama storm is dangerous. You may harm yourself searching for me. Would you leave my daughter here all alone?"

"Would you?"

There was a long pause.

"As you wish," came the faint, disinterested reply. "I'm at the north shore of the lake."

The change outside startled me. The Rama storm had picked up considerably in a quarter of an hour. St. Elmo's fire shrouded my suit in a corona of sizzling fluorescent purple.

Jannine hopped lightly off the bottom rung of the airstair, and promptly clutched at me for support. Sparks flew where we touched until the glow spread to cloak both of us.

I'd told her she couldn't come. And much good it did me. Maybe both of them had a deathwish, a family trait.

The wind howled as if it alone could voice the planet's torment. Its gusts were strong enough to stop us in our tracks. We had to spread out legs wide to brace ourselves. When we did make progress it was like wading through thick treacle.

High overhead, the sheet lightning which webbed the tattered clouds was grindingly relentless, its intensity drowning out both Major and the aurora in a purple-white glare.

"Can you hear them?" Jannine's tone was reverential, verging on awe.

"Who?"

She pointed irritably. Now we were nearer the lake there were several dozen Ly-Cilph dotted around. Each of them was curiously motionless in the centre of a circle of sprinter pebbles.

I concentrated, blotting out the pummelling the Rama storm was inflicting. With the mesh on level one I could see their minds, pinpoint embers glowing steadily in the darkness. Their universe was alive with intricate whispery harmonics.

"They're imprinting the sprinter pebbles with all they know," Jannine marvelled. "After the storm the pebbles will disperse, and multiply, literally spreading knowledge."

It was so elegant. Humbling. Yet for all their superiority the Ly-Cilph were doomed to stagnate. There's only so much philosophy and culture you can ponder over. What would happen to them once they reached that limit? When they had nothing new to add to the sprinter pebbles? Their existence was the biggest crime an uncaring universe had ever perpetrated. Such an incredible waste.

The edge of the nearby jungle began to fall. Several trees had rotted to a point at which they couldn't stand against the Rama storm's buffeting any more. They toppled onto their neighbours, with agonizingly laboured groans.

Jannine watched numbly as the expanding domino wave of destruction ate into

the jungle. "That's how mummy died. She was outside observing how the Ly-Cilph weathered the Rama storm. Nobody realized how bad it was going to be."

"Come on," I tugged at her arm, forcing her to move, breaking her morbid fascination with the splintered ruins of the trees.

The lightning was abating. There were no clouds left, they'd been torn to shreds, all that was left of the original thick turbid blanket were small wispy cotton tufts spinning at improbable speeds around hundreds of localized vortices. I just prayed we weren't going to have tornados thrown at us on top of everything else.

Above the swirls, the aurora was a single giant nebula, a garish iridescence riddled with harsh scintillations, like giant shooting stars. And beyond that was the conjunction. The moons were directly overhead, bathed in an eerie trillion-amp phosphorescence. An epicentre to one of Major's planet-swallowing cyclones. A God's eye staring down at me.

It took a vast amount of willpower to place one foot in front of the other to escape that monstrously intimidating gaze. Jannine was equally daunted, refusing to let go of me. We stumbled on towards the lake like a pair of Saturday-night drunks.

Gilbert's suit was a lone sliver of silver-white amid the septic ochre of decaying vegetation strewn across the land. I felt a profound wash of relief at the sight of him. The old boy was sitting listlessly next to an immobile Ly-Cilph, his back to a lumpy granite boulder. And — Jesus Christ! — his helmet was off.

I tried to run. Impossible in the treacherous gravity, and brutal wind.

Gilbert's face had turned a deep purple, he was spasming epileptically as he choked on the lethal atmosphere.

"No!" my shout reverberated around the inside of my helmet, nearly deafening me.

Something yanked at my arm, sending me sprawling on all fours. I slithered helplessly over the slushy pulp which used to be grass.

"You leave him alone!" Jannine's mind was livid. "You're just a dumb pilot, nothing more, not his guardian."

Crazy, the word rattled round inside my skull. Lost in a universe without reason. She was anxious for her father's death. Crazy.

My suit geiger counter began trilling a preliminary caution note. The particle jet had reached its zenith. I started to laugh at the sound, then spluttered to a halt as the first Ly-Cilph leapt upstream.

I sensed its mind consuming the rain of energy slating down from on high, swelling at a phenomenal rate as it left the chrysalis of the flesh behind. No longer an ember, but a red dwarf going nova.

A profusion of freakishly alien thoughts sprayed out, showering me in a cacophony of grotesque sensations and memories.

The Ly-Cilph's tentacles stretched straight up. Then it's whole body convulsed, and the tentacles fell back limply.

Its mind streaked up the particle jetstream towards Major.

"It's happening," Jannine was weeping. "It's true, really true. I wasn't completely sure, not deep down. I was afraid daddy had concocted a wild fantasy around a wish fulfilment."

The rest of the Ly-Cilph had begun to follow the first, shooting off like scarlet skyrockets all around.

"Goodbye," Gilbert called, with perfect serenity. The tentacles of the Ly-Cilph he was sitting beside were stiffening, their quivering tips reaching for the moons above.

Its mind blossomed.

Gilbert's dying brain disgorged itself. I caught a fraction of the overspill — a jumble of scenes, smells, and tastes spanning decades. The incorporeal Ly-Cilph mind absorbed them effortlessly within its labyrinthine complexity.

For a brief moment I was looking down on the desolated landscape as it was illuminated by erratic pastel flickers. Two human figures clung together, their necks craning upwards, mouths agape. The sight was accompanied by an imbroglio backwash of only too human emotions — sadness, guilt, regret, longing, and finally, anticipation.

I shook my head to clear it from the bizarre torrent of conflicting inputs. And all I could see was Jannine, suddenly terribly young and vulnerable, laughing through her tears.

Behind the flyer, Ladell was a dark circle against Major's unending splendour. Optical-band sensors were still picking up lightning flashes as the atmosphere returned to equilibrium after the Rama storm.

I watched in silence.

"The Ly-Cilph saw mummy was dying from her injuries," Jannine was saying. "So they offered to take her memories with them."

"And her soul?"

"You tell me. Daddy said it depends on the belief of the individual. Are you your mind or your body? Her mind still exists, an unbroken lineage. That was enough for him."

"He thinks he's going to find her?"

"Yes. The universe might be infinite, but he'll have eternity to search. Once a Ly-Cilph's consciousness translates to an energy matrix state it's virtually immortal. Daddy thinks a nova could distort it, but that's about all."

I returned to the splice image, knowing with queasy certainty that it was going to haunt me forever. Beckoning with near-magnetic compulsion.

Gilbert hadn't lied when he said the Ly-Cilph were enviable. I hated him for that.

Does he have the faintest inkling of the dilemma he's bequeathed upon us, I wonder? Or has the monomania with which he conducted his pursuit blinded him to its mortifying consequences?

In another nine years, or worse, eighteen, when I'm really old, with my sight fading, my heart labouring, and my mind faltering, I'm going to have to ask myself if I want to return here.

Do I wish to exchange my humanity for eldritch immortality? That's not a fair question. Not fair at all. ●

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MISS BLOOD



Jack Wainer

IT LOOKED like a bundle of wet rags lying on the beach when we found it. Kelly trotted over to it and gave it a prod with her foot. She called me over to have a look.

We were having our early morning jog along the beach at Allonby. I was staying with my family in a cottage in the village, and she was staying in a caravan. We'd met at six o'clock every morning for jogging and a passionate kiss or two, and to swap outrageous lies.

I went over to where she was kneeling and saw that the wet object was an old doll. I picked it up and examined it. The face was made of some pottery material covered in tiny cracks.

"Reckon the head's made of china," I said.

"No way," Kelly argued. "That's bisque definitely."

"Yeah, bisque," I agreed. Considering she's a member of a rock group, she seems to know about art and stuff. A bit worrying that since I'd told her I was a professional artist.

The doll's eyes had big black pupils but no irises.

"Weird eyes!" I said.

"Yes, and take a look at that mouth," said Kelly. "Get those teeth Jake."

I liked being called Jake, and was really pleased I'd picked a name that suited me.

I checked the teeth in the doll's open mouth. Only six of them, but small and very sharp.

"Dead vicious," I said. "You going to keep it or sling it back?"

"Gave up dolls years ago," Kelly answered. "What about your little sister? Jackie isn't it?"

I'd forgotten I'd dropped Jackie's name into the conversation, a couple of mornings earlier. You really do need a good memory when you're setting up a whole new personality for yourself.

"Mmm, yes. I reckon she'd be pleased with it. She likes any presents, particularly dolls. Mind you, I don't reckon I'd fancy waking up with this on my pillow."

Kelly leaned over and whispered a pretty obscene suggestion in my ear. I chased her up the beach.

Later Kelly threw away the doll's wet clothes, which were pretty ancient anyway. She said she'd fix up some new gear for the doll, before I took it back for young Jackie.

When we met the next morning, Kelly had made a really neat outfit for the doll, a sort of dress over a pair of trousers.

"Hey, that's really good, Kelly," I said. "You do it yourself?"

"Sure," Kelly said.

I wondered. Either she was the most accomplished sewer in the entire Rock world, or she was sharing the caravan with her mum. Not with the Heavy Metal group as she claimed.

She couldn't stay long that morning, as she'd got to go and look for her spaniel which had run off.

A Heavy Metal outfit with a pet spaniel? It was strangely reassuring to know that Kelly was lying as hard about her lifestyle as I was about mine.

Two mornings later, we parted passionately. Then I wished her success in the Rock world, and she said she knew I'd become a celebrated artist. I only hoped that my awaited GCSE results would include a decent pass in Art.

The journey home took less than three hours. In that short period of time between the Cumbrian coast and the East Midlands, my whole personality changed. I became a different person. Or rather I reverted to my boring former self.

Jake became David as we drove through Keswick. Somewhere on the M6 I lost four or five years and became a 16 year old schoolkid, a nothing. Before we reached Derby, the up and coming graphic artist had disappeared and all that was left was me.

I was astonished that no-one had noticed; the family could see no change at all. The crumbles in the front seat drove and navigated, oblivious to my transformation, little Jackie talked non-stop whether anyone was listening or not, and dear brother Stephen had his eyes glued to the latest Conrad Williams horror paperback which he read with avid fascination.

"And then this other teacher came in and was dead mad...." Jackie rambled on, "and then Miss said..."

No-one listened. I stared out of the window and Stephen read his book.

"Are you two listening?" Jackie asked.

"Yes," I replied automatically.

"Mmm," Stephen said without looking up.

Satisfied, Jackie continued with her monologue of school life, brownies, tv soaps and horses, while I thought about Kelly and her long red hair.

Back home I took out the doll and looked at it. It really did have a nasty expression. I handed it over to Jackie.

"Got you a present," I said. "What do you think?"

"Thanks, Day," she answered. She examined it dubiously. "The clothes are quite nice."

"Your gratitude is overwhelming, Sis," I said. "Do you want it or not?"

"I'll have it," said Stephen, "if she doesn't want it."

"It's a doll," I pointed out, "a girl's bloody doll."

"So?" he said.

"So it's for Jackie," I said. "Buy your own dolls, pouffe."

"Bastard," he muttered, and left slamming the door.

"You should be playing football," I yelled after him. "Football and Rugby. Boys' games."

"It's all right, Day," said Jackie. "I do want the doll. I like it, really I do."

She averted her gaze from the doll's vicious teeth and strange eyes, tucked it under her arm and went up to her room.

When I looked in to say goodnight, I had to smile to myself, though. The doll in bed with Jackie was good old Raggedy Ann. The new doll had been carefully placed on the cupboard on the other side of the room.

Jackie saw I'd noticed and said, "I'm pleased with the new doll, really Day. But she does look at me a bit funny."

"Don't worry love," I said. "We'll let her look at the wall, instead." I turned the doll to sit facing the other way. "Have you thought of a name for her yet?"

"Not yet," said Jackie. "I don't want to give her a name yet."

"Fair enough, I said. "Night, then."

"Night-night, Day," she said and giggled at that old familiar joke.

She wasn't giggling though, when she came down to breakfast. Tears were streaming down her face and she held something in her arms, cradling it to her.

"What on earth's the matter, pet?" mum asked.

Jackie held out her rag doll.

"Look," she said.

The doll had a great jagged rip down its body, and half its stuffing was missing.

"It's all over the bedroom," she said dramatically. "Raggedy Ann's insides."

I tried not to smile. "How've you done that then?" I asked.

"I didn't do it," she said quietly.

Stephen grinned. "Perhaps it was the new..." he began. "Joke! Joke!" he added as I went to grab him.

Mum gave Jackie a hug. "Don't worry about it, pet," she said. "David'll get all the bits of stuffing from your room, then I'll put it all back inside and sew her up. She'll be as good as new."

"But who did it?" Jackie asked wide-eyed.

"You must have done it in your sleep, love," mum said. "Caught her with your nails."

Jackie looked dubious. "I'll cut my nails real short," she said without conviction.

The stuffing was certainly well scattered around Jackie's bedroom. On the bed, on the floor, and a definite heap on the lap of the doll sitting on the cupboard.

Actually, Jackie got over the accident to Raggedy Ann quite easily, but the death of the rabbits was a different matter.

Not that she saw them; I was the only one who did that. The hutch on the lawn was ripped open, the door torn off its hinges. When I looked inside, I nearly threw up. The rabbits had been torn limb from limb, though only the heads were missing. I'd heard of a fox killing for killing's sake, and wondered whether that could be the answer. But to take away the heads and leave the mutilated bodies? It made no sense.

I decided to tell Jackie the rabbits had escaped and run away to live in the wild. After burying the remains, I told the others a fox had taken them. No-one had heard anything, the parents sleeping at the front of the house and Stephen up in the loft conversion.

"Miss Blood might have eaten them," said Jackie.

"Who?" I asked.

She indicated the new doll.

"You're kidding, Jackie."

"I'm not, Day. I had to wash it off. And that's her real name, Miss Blood."

I told her not to be silly, but she had sown the seed in my mind and I kept re-examining it. My scepticism made me bury the idea though. I was a realist, not a gullible kid.

My realism lasted another 24 hours, until the distraught neighbours told us that some sick person had broken in during the night and tortured their pet cat to death.

Jackie was not at all surprised.

"It's Miss Blood," she said. "She grows bigger in the night and moves about. I put my head under the covers but I still hear her."

Outwardly I reassured Jackie that she'd been dreaming, but inwardly I knew it was connected with the doll. I thought back to the day Kelly had found her on the beach at Allonby. She'd taken the doll overnight to make the new clothes for it. And the next day her dog was missing! I distinctly remembered her saying her spaniel had run off.

I now knew that the dog had been killed, and that Miss Blood was responsible. I had to contact Kelly to be sure she'd never found the dog. And somehow to break the news that it had been killed, probably painfully. But how?

We hadn't exchanged addresses or phone numbers. After all, letters or phone calls for Jake could cause puzzlement, amusement and then derision in my house. I guess Kelly had her own reasons for not giving me her address. We'd had a great week playing at being lovers, and that was all. I wondered if Kelly really was a Rock singer; I suppose it could be true.

If I rang the caravan site in Allonby, I might be able to get someone to give me her address. But not from our phone; no way. Filling my pockets with change, I biked down to town and installed myself in a phone box. I got the number from Enquiries and dialled it.

The woman who answered had never heard of Kelly and was definite she'd never had a Heavy Metal rock group staying there.

"But you must remember her," I insisted. "She was there last week. Youngish, long red hair. She used to go jogging every morning."

"The lass with ginger hair, you mean?"

I thought flame-coloured would be nearer the truth, but didn't want to confuse the issue.

"Yes, that's her." I put another 50p into the box.

"She's gone home now. They went last weekend."

"I know, I know. What I want is her address."

"Oh I don't know about that. No, sorry love, I don't think I can give you that. I don't know anything about you."

I thought rapidly. "I was up in Allonby myself last week. She lent me a book, but I lost the paper with her address on."

"I see, love. I'm still not sure though. Her folks might not like it."

"Look it's really important. Have you got her phone number? I could ring her, and she could give me her address. I know she'll remember me."

"Well I suppose that'd be all right. Hang on a tic."

I waited, feeding more coins into the meter.

"Hello? Yes I've found it. Have you got a pencil? It's 021 246 8071. And love?"

"Yes?"

"It's not Kelly, you know. I'm sure it's Katie."

I had the information. It was 021, a Birmingham number. And she had lied about her name, just like me. That seemed right and fair somehow.

I checked and found I had just enough money to ring her. I dialled quickly before I could change my mind.

A woman's voice answered; it wasn't Kelly.

"Could I speak to Kelly?"

"Who?"

"Katie, could I speak to Katie?"

"Sorry she's not in. Can I give her a message?"

"Er, tell her Jake rang. I met her up at Allonby last week. I wondered if her dog ever turned up. The spaniel."

"What, Jess? She was off for hours, we nearly had to come home without her."

"The dog's all right? Alive then?"

“Of course. Look, do you want me to get Kathryn to ring you back?”

As I hesitated, wondering if I wanted Kelly to know I wasn't an artist named Jake, the pips went and we were cut off. I hadn't enough money to call back. The decision had been made for me. The Kelly and Jake thing would stay as it was, intact.

As I biked home, I began to laugh. Kelly's dog had been all right. Maybe a fox had killed our rabbits. Jackie could have ripped her rag doll in her sleep. What a hysterical pair, Jackie and me. Miss Blood, the killer doll? I ask you. Jackie's only eight, what's my excuse? Pathetic.

I slept happily that night, Jake the graphic artist chasing Kelly the red-haired rock singer up the beach at Allonby. She ran slowly enough to be caught, too.

But suddenly I was awake and I didn't know why. I lay still, my heart pumping hard.

In another room, Jackie's room, there was a sound. I sat up in bed. After a few minutes silence, I heard it again. Someone was moving about in there. Jackie perhaps. Or maybe not.

I slipped out of bed and walked quietly to Jackie's room. I could see that she was still lying in bed, fast asleep. I made my way carefully to the cupboard and felt around on top of it. The doll wasn't there.

A sudden noise behind me made me turn round. A dark shape loomed towards me, and my mouth went dry. Jackie was right. It was Miss Blood, I could tell by the dress and trouser outfit she was wearing, but she had grown to life size. She had something in her hand but I didn't wait to find out what it was.

With a yell, I threw myself at Miss Blood. The force of my fear - inspired charge sent her hurtling backwards towards the window. As the glass smashed, I caught the windowframe to prevent myself from going through. I felt broken glass gash my hand.

Miss Blood fell backwards with a half-human scream, ending with a gurgle and then silence. I looked down. The doll lay across the patio wall, broken-backed and still.

“Is she dead?” Jackie's voice asked.

I looked round; she was sitting up in bed.

“I guess so,” I said in a voice that contained more tremble than Jackie's had. That girl had guts.

I ran downstairs and unlocked the patio door. I approached the large doll cautiously.

“What's going on out there?” dad's voice called. The outside light came on illuminating the whole patio.

He came out to join me and we stared at the body wearing a dress over a pair of jeans. The face was as white as bisque, apart from the red painted mouth. In Stephen's outstretched hand I could see what it was he was carrying. It was the doll he'd coveted, little Miss Blood. ●

GODDESS WITHOUT LOVE

John Light



THE GODDESS QUEZERETH dwelt in a palace of blue paved with indigo, where ultramarine walls and cobalt windows were alike transparent and insubstantial to her incorporeal existence, but afforded the illusion of density and opacity when she clothed her spirit in the compressed energy of matter. For eons she was content with her sapphire halls and the garden of colours that surrounded her palace. Her spirit was tranquil amidst the flames of green, emerald and beryl; of malachite, aquamarine, and chrome; the flicker of lilac, violet, and lavender; of mauve, purple, and magenta; the jets of red, damask, and madder; of carmine, lake, and maroon; the smoke of cerise, pink and rose; of crimson, scarlet, and vermilion; the glow of gold, silver, and bronze; of brown, bistre, and sepia; the brightness of yellow, gamboge, and orpine; of citron, topaz, and saffron; the warmth of orange, flame, and apricot; of amber, ochre, and sulphur; the play of amethyst, gentian, and lapis; of cerulean, turquoise, and lavender.

The origin of Quezereth was unconfined by time and space and matter, for these she had herself created, and she was content. But in assuming the guise of substance, in fashioning for herself a garb of matter, she became subject to both time and space while she occupied material form and this evoked in her a feeling of discontent which affected her spirit and made it restless. The eternity of tranquillity came to an end for Quezereth, and she was afflicted by a need for purpose, for ambition, for creation. Above all she was oppressed by the sense of time, of time unending, of time that must be filled with activity to counter boredom and ennui.

The unquiet spirit of Quezereth brooded in the palace of blue. Beyond the garden of colours lay Universes created by the goddess in the eons since her fall from the grace of tranquility. Abandoned they expanded and evolved, contracted and died, until only the garden was left, and the palace, and the brooding goddess.

At length Quezereth began again. Shunning the vastness and power of her earlier creations, she fashioned a small and static cosmos.

A garden of dark phthalocyanine trees and sighing blue grass she made, and lit it with the beams of a huge turquoise moon.

White flowers shone with self-generated radiance in the perpetual twilight of this soft and secret world. Mauve shrubs hedged shaded walks of lush grass, winding and intersecting in a natural labyrinth, where small glades surrounded violet statues carved by primeval forces into alarming shapes. It was a Universe whose past, present and future were indistinguishable.

In the dim garden dwelt the woman, Delmadora, who passed the moments in a dream-like state. Devoid of memory and anticipation she roamed the maze of the dim-lit garden, experiencing each twist and turn, seeing pale bloom and dark foliage always for the first time. Birds fluted and whistled, and glided between the trees. From bright beady eyes, night-squirrels observed Delmadora pass.

Quezereth saw all this in her mind's eye and it became so. Then she bestowed on Delmadora the doom of memory. The woman began to move less languidly. She seemed to remember plants and bushes she had passed previously. She commenced to explore. Often she raised her eyes above the hedges and bushes to the twilight sky as though expecting to see a different view.

It seemed to the goddess that the woman was searching for something, as she wandered further and further through her undifferentiated world. She no longer walked at random, but avoided those paths she recognised, and sought always those that were new.

This behaviour persisted for a time that may have been long or may perhaps have

been short, depending on the perception of time, but which indubitably had duration. It came eventually to an end when the woman threw herself down on the dark sward of a small glade beneath the pallid moon, and began to weep.

Quezereth now wrapped her spirit in substance and materialised in the garden close to the sobbing form of Delmadora. After a space the woman half sat up and immediately saw Quezereth. The two regarded one another for long moments.

Seeing the woman for the first time with eyes instead of perceiving directly with her spirit, Quezereth was entranced by the mystery of another being. She felt a sudden longing to know Delmadora, not as creator but as friend. Friendship was a new idea to Quezereth and she was delighted by it. She held out her hands to Delmadora, but the woman was uncertain. She rose to her feet and stared at Quezereth. The goddess opened her mouth and speech was invented. She smiled and laughter entered the world. Delmadora hesitated, and then she too spoke, she too smiled, she too laughed. So companionship came into being. Delmadora and Quezereth walked the paths together, talked together. The woman and the goddess clasped hands as they strolled, and when the woman was tired they reclined on the dark turf. Quezereth remembered how solitary she had been before there was Delmadora. Delmadora remembered how lonely she had been before Quezereth appeared in her world, and they clung together to shut out loneliness and banish solitude. So love was born.

For a long time the two of them were content to roam the world that once had seemed to Delmadora a prison, but now was revealed as a paradise.

This bliss could not endure. Time now passed in the universe Quezereth had made, and although the garden seemed unchanging and the stars immutable, the goddess and the woman could not remain the same. Their relationship changed them, and their transformation altered their relationship. It became increasingly unstable. Quezereth grew bored with the world she had made, and dissatisfied with the limitations of Delmadora. The woman too seemed disenchanted with their intimacy, as though she sensed it lacked something but was unable to imagine what that might be.

There came a point where the tension grew unbearable, and, while Delmadora slept, Quezereth withdrew from the cosmos she had made, and dwelt once more in the palace of blue. But she could not regain the state of timelessness she once had known. That was gone forever, because now forever had a meaning, whereas once it had not.

The goddess Quezereth surveyed the miniature universe she had created, and the mind of the woman who dwelt in it, and knew the innermost workings of that mind as she could never have done when she herself inhabited the world of matter and knew Delmadora only as a friend, not as a creature. And Quezereth took pity on Delmadora, and resolved to satisfy the formless longings of the woman. As Delmadora slept, Quezereth filled her mind with dreams, and moulded the substance of those dreams in accordance with the reactions they evoked.

When Delmadora woke she discovered by her side the sleeping form of the man Jobel.

The goddess Quezereth observed the development of the relationship between the man and the woman, and being envious of their intimacy, desired the experience for herself.

So Quezereth fashioned a new universe, larger, more rugged and more varied than that of the garden, a universe reflecting the character of the creature she had created

as a companion for Delmadora.

In a world bathed in the bright white light of a great sun, the man Gunacor roamed the wide ochre grasslands and the thick viridian woods. He explored the yellow shores of a mighty blue-green ocean. He built a raft from great trees, and sailed the foam-capped seas in search of he knew not what, until he came to an island.

The raft beached in the warm surf of a sheltered bay and Gunacor waded ashore. Beyond the beach he came to groves of emerald trees where succulent citron fruits provided him with refreshment. He wandered on from glade to glade until he came to a building of white stone.

Gunacor had never seen a building before, but he was not afraid, merely curious. Nothing in his brief life had given him cause for fear, and there were no disquieting memories among those with which he had been created, in the same instant as the whole of his world and its universe. So he approached the opalescent structure, which was little more than four marble columns standing at the corners of a rectangular dais, and supporting a shallow pent roof. Within was a couch on which reclined Quezereth.

When the goddess had created Gunacor she had prepared his mind for this very moment. Now she watched him, outwardly serene, but inwardly with the unaccustomed emotion of anxiety. Her apprehension was unnecessary. Gunacor behaved exactly as she would have wished; with delight, with admiration, with concern. They talked in the language with which he had been created; they strolled through the brightly coloured island paradise that Quezereth had designed for their dalliance. Gunacor courted Quezereth with the ardour of innocence and the goddess was enchanted. Day succeeded day and their communion was idyllic. Even so it was doomed, as Quezereth soon came to realise. Gunacor was too much her own creature to satisfy her for ever. Infected by the passage of time, subverted by the expectation of change, she craved novelty; she longed for the unpredictable, and this Gunacor could not, by his nature, provide.

So she abandoned the man, as she had discarded the woman, and retreated to the sanctuary of her palace beyond time, where she brooded on the craving to which she had become enslaved.

The logic of her need was inescapable. She yearned for a companion who was her equal, with whom she could dwell in communion of body, mind, and spirit. Neither the woman nor the man could fulfil this need. They were her creatures and could not be otherwise. A goddess remained alone however intimate her relationship with her creation. Nevertheless it seemed to Quezereth that there was a way out of this dilemma; but it entailed nothing less than the creation of a god. Such a being would be in every way her equal. Yet she shrank from this conclusion. To be a god, the being would have to be free of her control; free to reject her or to accept her. Even that would not be enough. To be truly independent a god must have powers no less than her own; the power to create, and to destroy — even the power to destroy Quezereth. The goddess shivered at this thought, but could see no other way. Not to grant this power would place upon the god a limitation which she had never known herself, and they could not then be truly equal. It was a risk, a fearful risk, to take; but the alternative was everlasting solitude.

While the goddess was absorbed in her contemplation she forgot Gunacor, and when she again turned her attention to his world, she realised he was no more. Reviewing his history, she discovered he had drowned himself from grief at her

desertion and the loneliness which had overtaken him.

Delmadora and her mate flourished in the involuted world they inhabited, happy amidst a growing family of rascally children. The contrast was stark and the conclusion compelling. Quezereth made her decision.

The god Thurgil dwelt in the anti-entropic energies conjured by him from the colours bestowed on him by Quezereth, although of her he had no knowledge. The energies burned and flashed and roared. The hall of Thurgil was fashioned of heat and sound and light. Beyond, it erupted, detonated and exploded. All was sound and fury and turmoil. And Thurgil relished it, flourished it, brandished it. He created apocalyptic universes through which he moved in thunder and lightning, in flaring chariots and blinding revelations, in novae and cataclysms. His universes burst from singularities and collapsed into black holes; stars flared, exploded and disintegrated, hurling planets at their neighbours; galaxies collided and flew asunder, scattering star clusters far and wide. Microcosms bred super-particles, constraining the energy of quasars within a single nucleon. Thurgil's creations were too fierce for life, but he cared not as he flung his discarded inventions into a void that they brought into being to contain themselves.

These activities however, were but the first enthusiasms of a new-born god, for although Thurgil's existence was outside time, and although he had no conception of his own non-existence, he was not immune to change. Each occasion on which he descended into one of his creations increased his own susceptibility to space and time, to form and to change. So through many experiences he developed and became different. An era came when the god understood his solitude and regretted it; when he sought some way of overcoming it.

Thurgil devised a vast cosmos, more complex than any he had previously constructed, and in which the violence of natural forces was constrained, so that living creatures evolved, and into their midst the god descended. So he learned comradeship. From his creatures he bred men and women, to be his myrmidons and lemans, and for many ages of this universe he was satisfied. Yet in the end he craved more; he yearned for the society of equals, and believing this to be impossible he grew melancholy, and withdrew from his creation, brooding alone among the raw energies of existence. When he could bear this no longer, he sank once more into the exotic civilisations and seething societies spawned from his creation, becoming a wanderer, seeking always for something he believed to be unattainable, tasting of the unforeseen delights and decadence that had grown from his previous incarnations.

Through the eons Thurgil's greatest universe expanded, evolved and developed. In many galaxies there were multitudes of stars with planets where civilisations arose and flourished. Some overcame the problems of space flight and established empires of many worlds. Thurgil moved from one to another as the whim took him, fascinated by the fruits of his creative impulse, his age-old ennui alleviated by the pleasures, excitements and fascinations of the myriad beings who inhabited the cosmos he had conceived, but which had grown beyond all imagination.

There came a time when Thurgil dwelt in the mighty city of Esperel, from which he ruled as Potentate over the far-flung Imperium of Azerbal. He governed wisely and well, for at that period it pleased him to do so. In other places and other times he had been cruel and wicked, for that too amused his divine nature.

The Imperium of Azerbal was growing, extending its sway over more worlds as the result of an intricate game of war, diplomacy and commerce directed and enjoyed by

Thurgil himself. Now, however, the game seemed to have reached a stalemate. The frontier of his dominion continued to expand in two-dimensions, but in the third it was checked at every point by a rival jurisdiction, the spread of whose rule matched that of his own and seemed immune alike to the terror of war, the guile of diplomacy, and the corruption of commerce.

Thurgil was both intrigued and indignant to learn from his spies that the sovereign of this formidable foe was a woman, for the laws of Thurgil's creation favoured the dominance of the male principle. Finally convinced that she was no figurehead but as much the real ruler of Zerel as he was of Azerbal, he ordered her assassination, and was astonished when the attempt failed. He planned the next such operation himself, and was staggered when that too was unsuccessful. For a moment fury almost possessed him, but he reminded himself that this universe in which he deigned to dwell for a time, was merely a toy of his own creation, that the Domain of Zerel was but a consequence of his own powerful imagination, and that since his intention had been to construct a game which could relieve his boredom, he should be gratified at his success.

Thurgil revised his strategies and diversified his tactics. He prosecuted the struggle with a tenacity and cunning he had not known he possessed, yet he was met at every point by his opponent. True, though he was unable to gain ground, he did not lose any either, but he was assailed by the demeaning thought that this might be only because his opponent restrained herself. He became more and more curious about this creature his cosmos had spawned, and at length decided to contrive a meeting with her. The two rulers met on an uninhabited speck on the common frontier of their empires. An irregular mass of rock, with one almost flat face, it followed its own path around the galactic nucleus, owing allegiance to no sun. There Thurgil and the Domina of Zerel came face to face.

Thurgil was surprised and fascinated by the aura of power which emanated from the Domina. No one in his entourage was so vital, and he realised too, that none of the Domina's followers shared her vigour. Reflecting on the ages through which he had dwelt in this most complex of his universes, he recalled no other creature with anything like the magnetism of the Domina of Zerel. Could it be that the quirks of evolution had in her concentrated the divine essence of his creativity? He observed her minutely, and she bore his examination without qualm. Indeed, he realised, she was appraising him in turn. At length Thurgil spoke.

"You and I have no need of advisers and counsellors. Let us converse alone, and without an audience, so that we may be frank with one another."

"As you wish," replied the Domina.

Thurgil and the Domina sat facing each other in a comfortable room. There was an enigmatic smile on the Domina's lips. Thurgil was perplexed. It was to be expected that the sovereign of a foreign power should act as his equal, should actually believe she was his equal. What confused him was his own feeling that it was not merely an act, was not simply a belief, but that it was the truth. Suddenly it dawned upon him that it was not beyond the bounds of possibility that other gods existed, and that therefore there might be such things as goddesses. He realised that the Domina was watching him closely and might well be reading his every thought. If she were not merely human, not a product of his own creation, then he had best be wary. There was no knowing what powers another immortal might wield. She might be not just his equal, but his superior.

The Domina broke the silence.

"We both know what we are," she remarked. "I have known your true nature for a long time, you now perceive mine. I know the name you use is your own. Mine I have revealed to no one in your universe, but now I tell it to you. It is Quezereth.

"Why have you come here," asked Thurgil at length. "Why have you invaded my creation?"

"I was lonely," answered Quezereth simply. "Like you I have dwelt always alone, save for the company of such creatures as I myself have fashioned. They are not enough. I crave the companionship of an equal, and it is for this reason alone that I have entered your cosmos."

"Where have you come from?" Thurgil demanded.

"From my own domain."

"How could that be? I am the god not just of this cosmos, but of all universes, of everything. There is nothing that I have not created."

"Not even yourself?" smiled Quezereth.

"I am not created; I am."

"I too. Or do you disbelieve me?"

"You have arisen from my own creation; you are nothing more than that."

Quezereth was silent for a moment.

"Reality is a matter of belief," she said, "and belief is not subject to rational argument. Nevertheless it seems to me unimportant whether you consider me a goddess or a child of your own creation. The relationship between us should not depend on our origins, but only on what each of us now is, and what each of us needs. You are the one person I have met who I believe can fulfil my needs. This war between our domains has brought us face to face and so served its purpose. Let us now abandon the conflict and rule jointly over our combined realms. Let us take time to know and understand each other."

"I have no needs. I am sufficient unto myself. What I want from my creation I take."

"You cannot take companionship, you can only accept it if it is offered. I have learnt that from my own experiments in creation."

"You are mad," answered Thurgil violently. "If I chose I could abolish this universe and you with it, in less than an instant of time."

Quezereth studied Thurgil in silence, and he had the uncomfortable feeling that she saw into his mind, into his very spirit. The Domina sighed.

"I see no way in which I can convince you of the truth against your will, but at least answer me this question. Are you certain that you are content? Do you never feel the need for the companionship of an equal?"

Thurgil did not answer. The probing of the Domina touched him on a raw spot and he closed his mind to it. He eyed her warily. There was no denying her magnetism. She exerted an attraction far more potent than that of any woman he had yet encountered in the universe he had set in motion. It was not inconceivable that she was indeed the goddess she claimed to be. Yet if she were, then she represented an incalculable danger. If her power were greater than his own, she might even encompass his destruction.

Perhaps she read this fear in his eyes.

"You have no need to feel threatened. I cannot harm you."

His pride was wounded, yet his apprehension was not mitigated; and he suddenly realised that he was beginning to succumb to her personality. Why otherwise would he allow this charade to continue? Abruptly his decision was made and the universe

vanished; the triumph of gravity was consummated in an instant; all time flowed and was gone, and the cosmos collapsed to a final singularity which passed into non-existence.

Thurgil was alone in his hall of heat and light. He brooded on his own confusion, which arose from the conflict between relief at the proof of his own unique nature, and his regret that he was indeed alone in his godhead. Despite his denial of need, it existed now, if it had not before.

Thurgil moved from his hall through the violent energy-scape beyond, drinking raw power to drown his solitude.

And there he saw Quezereth.

She blazed with incandescent energy outshining all else, like a star in an empty universe, and her presence was awful. Thurgil was transfixed. Mesmerised he remained, while the energies faded, and he saw the Domina clothed in human form, and felt his own spirit cloaked in flesh, while all about them bloomed a garden. To one used to the sensations of raw energy, this world perceived through organic eyes was a twilight one. The Domina no longer dazzled, but glowed with a soft luminescence. Her voice came softly to him.

"This is a universe I created, a small one, and dim, but more beautiful I think than your design, grand though it was."

Thurgil was perplexed. Was this place some unconscious product of his own, complete with a resurrected Domina? He knew it could not be. Nothing about his own nature was unknown to him. He must accept the inescapable. Quezereth was in truth a goddess, and his former apprehension returned. This was her domain; she had brought him here; was he then in her power? He disliked the crepuscular landscape, and turning his mind to the horizon he raised a glaring sun above the rim of the world, its golden fire accentuating the darkness of the garden. Crouching among the foliage, Delmadora and Jobel and their children were stricken with awe at their vision of the gods in the first dawn they had ever seen.

Quezereth and Thurgil remained motionless, as the burning disk of the new sun climbed into the sky, dispelling the shadows from the garden, illuminating its secret places, revealing Delmadora and Jobel to each other in a way undreamt of. To protect their minds from the avalanche of light, they closed their eyes, telling themselves that in the presence of the gods it was not fitting that they should remain open.

Quezereth did not resist Thurgil's transformation of her world. She acknowledged the different beauty which the sunshine brought to the garden, welcomed it as a declaration of a new beginning, a herald of his love for her.

She was mistaken. As the sun rose towards the zenith, its power shrivelled the garden, sucked the life from it and finally destroyed it in a supernova outburst. In the chaos of unrestrained energies that flowed, god and goddess confronted one another.

"Why?" demanded Quezereth.

Thurgil made no reply, but turned his destructive power upon her. Stung into resistance, Quezereth defended herself, and the battle raged in coruscating colours. But Quezereth knew she was doomed. Her need to create an equal had been her undoing. Believing that only by putting herself in the power of her creation could she win true love and companionship, she now found herself unable to resist the onslaught. She fled before Thurgil's fury, but there was no escaping the god she had made nor the destruction he wreaked. The palace of blue vanished, the garden of

colours disappeared and Quezereth was left momentarily helpless, before she was extinguished in a final outburst of the god Thurgil's overwhelming power.

At the instant of Quezereth's demise, a flood of strange emotions washed through Thurgil, and a whole new fund of knowledge was revealed to him, as though a host of lost memories were suddenly restored. In that moment he knew that Quezereth was his creator, knew of her loneliness and longing, knew of the power over herself with which she had imbued him. In that moment he became completely a god, absorbing all that had been Quezereth, and in that moment he understood the full meaning of godhood.

Thurgil was seized with regret, remorse and guilt, he was overwhelmed by the loneliness of being, and the longing for companionship. Devastated by internal conflict he sunk into despair and in this state he long remained. But like Quezereth, he no longer dwelt in eternity, and change came. He stirred from his desolation. The long introspection had integrated the afflatus of the murdered Quezereth with his original personality so that finally he was whole, and in possession of his reason.

Thurgil concentrated all his powers in a new act of creation, bringing his own existence to an end, that Quezereth might be reborn, untainted by all that had gone before and in sacrificing himself, Thurgil gained the fulfilment which had hitherto eluded him.

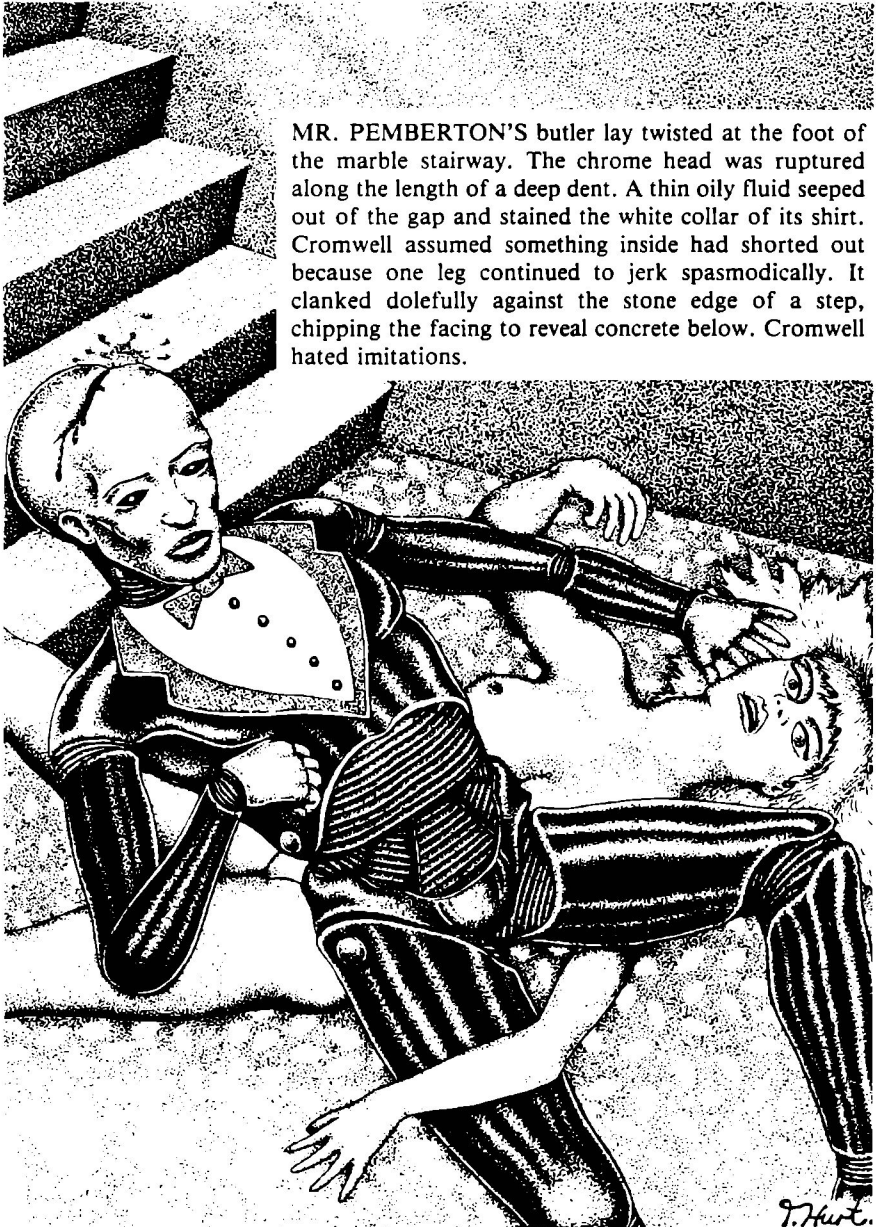
The goddess Quezereth dwelt in a palace of blue paved with indigo, where ultramarine walls and cobalt windows were alike transparent and insubstantial to her incorporeal existence, but afforded the illusion of density and opacity when she clothed her spirit in the compressed energy of matter. For eons she was content..... ●



MR. PEMBERTON'S BUTLER

Rik Gammack

MR. PEMBERTON'S butler lay twisted at the foot of the marble stairway. The chrome head was ruptured along the length of a deep dent. A thin oily fluid seeped out of the gap and stained the white collar of its shirt. Cromwell assumed something inside had shorted out because one leg continued to jerk spasmodically. It clanked dolefully against the stone edge of a step, chipping the facing to reveal concrete below. Cromwell hated imitations.



Beneath the butler lay the maid. A small statuette lay beside her outstretched hand. Unlike the android, she was both human and totally naked. At first glance, their position may have been misconstrued, and Cromwell frowned in distaste. Still, 'in death as in life...' The thought ran through his head.

Cromwell studied the scene carefully, trying to piece together the story it told. The red stain smeared halfway down the stairs was an unavoidable clue. It was quite obvious to him that the two bodies had slid down the stairs together. The back of the girl's head had been ground into the hard steps by the heavy weight of the butler. The blood seeping through her blond hair had already congealed, but he flicked back the edge of a priceless oriental rug before it got marked. He assumed the police would not mind so minor an interference in the interests of preventing unnecessary damage.

There was nothing more he could do except call the police. The phone lay on a broad oak table to one side of the hall, beneath an oil painting of Cromwell's sister. He sighed when he saw the picture. He had missed her since she had left home to marry Pemberton, and even more since the night she had died. It was probably as well that she had not lived to see this. He lifted the handset and tapped out the emergency number.

The first policeman to arrive was a fresh faced young constable. He took one look at the scene and decided his capabilities were limited to guarding the evidence. When Cromwell asked who would take over, he was told in reverential tones that Inspector Riley would be investigating the case.

The man himself stamped heavily into the hall twenty minutes later, followed by a small entourage of assistants. His head was sunk deep into hunched shoulders, and he stood with his legs slightly spread, as if bracing himself against an icy wind. He surveyed the scene impassively for a moment then turned his entire torso to face Cromwell. "Ach, now," he said in a gruff Irish accent. "And what's been going on here then?"

Cromwell rocked back on his heels and steepled his fingers beneath his chin. The man was obviously over rated. "I would have thought that was fairly obvious," he said in his lecturing voice. He hoped the policeman would not need to be led step by step through the evidence.

The Inspector in turn gave him a speculative look. "You would be Mr. Cromwell. The man who found the bodies."

"That's right. I had —"

"A moment if you please." The Inspector held up a beefy hand and took a small recorder from his pocket. He switched it on. "Right then," he continued.

"As I was saying," resumed Cromwell, but was cut off by the Inspector raising his hand again.

"Now, just for the record, sir, would you mind repeating your name, who you are and what it is that you are doing here."

Cromwell breathed heavily through his nose to let the policeman know he was annoyed, then recited, "My name is Charles Cromwell. I am Mr. Pemberton's brother-in-law. Mr. Pemberton is the owner of this mansion." He slowed down a little, "Now, I was about to tell —"

"And what are you doing here, Mr. Cromwell? Do you live here?"

"No," explained Cromwell, forcing himself to be patient. "I'm doing a project on robotics with my class at school. Pemberton had offered to let me have some

brochures and sales journals from his company. He manufactures them you know."

"He's *that* Pemberton, is he?" said Riley with respect. "I've heard of him." He indicated the butler, inert on the floor. The leg had stopped moving now. "Was that one of his?"

"Yes. Max was one of the first domestic machines."

"And was he one of those so called 'sentient intelligences' we keep having all those debates on the telly about."

Cromwell cringed. 'Sentient' was the latest buzzword, and he had strong views on its use. "Ah, well now Inspector. That's a very interesting question. I'm glad you asked me that. It really all depends on what you mean by sentient in the first place. I doubt very much if —"

"Now, what was it that you were wanting to tell me?" interrupted Riley hurriedly.

"Well —" Cromwell coughed nervously, caught wrong footed and annoyed at being cut off. "Well, the android must have attacked the maid. She tried to fight it off." Suddenly he had lost the thread of his argument. He flapped an explanatory hand at the tableaux in front of them. "They struggled and fell down the stairs." He finished with a rush, condensing the dramatically imagined sequence into a few brief sentences. He knew he had botched it and that everyone in the hall was watching him.

The Inspector stared at the entwined figures, and pulled at his nose. It was red and misshapen from years of abuse. A couple of technicians from the morgue were arguing about whether a dead robot belonged in a body bag or a dustbin. They looked round in appeal to the Inspector, who just shrugged. "It would be convenient if you put it in one of your bags though," he suggested. "They're the right size and would catch any bits which dropped off. We don't know what we might be wanting later for evidence."

"And what do you think the motive might have been?" He swung back to Cromwell with the question.

Oh dear. He could see he was going to have to point the way again. "Well, the girl wasn't wearing anything, Inspector," he prompted, hoping that he wasn't going to have to spell it out in detail. "Perhaps, ah, perhaps the, ah —" A sharp spate of coughing from the constable mercifully brought his embarrassed explanation to an end.

"Are you suggesting that the machine intended some kind of sexual assault?" Riley asked bluntly, though with a peculiar expression. He looked as if he had just swallowed a chicken bone. Cromwell suddenly realized that the policemen were trying not to laugh, and felt his face go red.

"Really Inspector. There is no need for this childish behaviour. I would get a more mature response from my class of twelve year-olds," he scolded. For a moment, the Inspector's eyes opened wide and his mouth formed a silent "Oh", while behind him the constable seemed to be suffering a bad asthma attack. Cromwell held his ground. "It's not a totally unreasonable conclusion you know," he snapped.

That got their attention. Riley gave him an intense look. "Well now, that's an interesting observation. Perhaps you'd better explain it a bit more."

At that moment, a uniformed policeman came down from searching the upper storeys of the house and whispered into Riley's ear. Both men looked over to Cromwell as they talked, and he began to feel nervous. Don't be silly, he chided himself. Only people with something to hide are nervous. He straightened his tie, clasped his hands behind his back and casually sauntered over to the bodies. The

men from the morgue were just zipping up the last bag.

"Got tidied up then?" he asked, making conversation. He cursed himself for the banality and grammar of the comment.

The men just looked at him.

"Mr. Cromwell," called Riley. "There are just a few more points before you go."

"Oh, I wasn't going anywhere. I —"

"Good. I wouldn't want to have to send someone after you," he said with a cold amiability. "You said Mr. Pemberton wasn't in the house." It was like an accusation, and Cromwell wondered what the catch was.

"That's right," Cromwell replied cautiously, then hurried to add, "I mean, I don't think so. I didn't look."

Riley silently digested this for a moment. "Did you go upstairs at all?" Another loaded question.

"No. Look, Inspector, I assure you —" Cromwell didn't like the way the policeman was studying him. Like a carnivore checking a bone for flesh. If the policeman had licked his lips, Cromwell would have turned and run.

"Perhaps you could look now. No, no, just look from here. There's no need to actually go upstairs."

Cromwell allowed his gaze to drift upwards, acutely aware that Riley was scrutinizing his reactions. The stairs led up to a balcony which in turn led through an archway into the rest of the house. The balcony had a rail supported by bulbous marble pillars. Protruding between the two of them was a hand. It was chubby and white and emerged from the cuff of a maroon sleeve. A distinctive gold and onyx ring adorned the little finger.

"Had you noticed that before, sir?" asked the Inspector casually. He could have been referring to the way that water spun when going down the plug hole, which was how Cromwell's stomach was feeling.

Cromwell shook his head without shifting his gaze. "It's Pemberton," he muttered, then slipped to the floor in a heap.

Later, in the study, Cromwell drained his tea with a sigh. He replaced the cup precisely in the centre of the saucer, and was pleased to note that his hand had stopped shaking.

"Feeling better?" asked Riley.

Cromwell squinted to make him out against the window. "Yes, thank you. I can't remember having ever fainted before." He patted his lips with a folded white handkerchief, and permitted himself to subside back into the depths of the armchair.

"Ach now. It's not really unusual, you know. You must have already been in shock." While the words were consoling, the tone was not. "Now perhaps I can ask you some more questions," he added briskly. Without waiting for a reply he closed the study door against the renewed bustle outside and lowered himself into the chair behind the desk.

The routine question and answer session resumed. Yes, the door had been open when Cromwell arrived. No, not literally, just unlocked. No, it wasn't unusual. The robot was also supposed to be a bodyguard, and Pemberton had thought it an adequate defence. Apart from Pemberton, only the maid had lived in the house. No, he had never bothered to find out her name.

"It was Gillian Conway," supplied Riley. "We found it in her room."

"I'm not particularly interested." Cromwell crossed his legs and eased the cloth over his knee.

"You didn't like her?"

There was a pause, then Cromwell finally said, "No."

Cromwell knew what the next question was going to be, and was prepared for it, but Riley said nothing. He just sat and watched. Like a gardener waiting for seeds to sprout, slowly and patiently. In the end Cromwell grudgingly surrendered some more information.

"My sister hadn't been dead for two months before that girl started her so called job." The words still tasted bitter. "I know she was only earning a living, but I can't feel any sympathy. Even though it was Pemberton who hired her."

Riley spoke cautiously. "Would you be implying that Miss Conway was employed in some capacity other than —" He tailed off, as if trying to avoid making any leading suggestions.

"She was his whore, Inspector. Hardly worth dignifying with the term mistress." Cromwell surprised himself with the venom in his voice. He turned his face to hide his emotions, but his hands twisted and entwined again and again in his lap. "I suppose that's why I made the suggestion earlier about the robot having tried to rape her," he eventually confessed. "I suppose I saw her as that kind of slut." He snorted in derision at his own folly. "Never mind the obvious improbabilities."

"It struck me as being a wee bit far fetched at the time," agreed Riley easily, "but you did say something later about it being not quite as impossible as we thought."

Cromwell waved a dismissive hand. "It was a new robot Pemberton had told me about. I suppose I had it in the back of my mind which is why I brought it up, but it's not involved. Completely different."

"Are you saying that there are robots which are interested in sex?" asked Riley. He looked very sceptical.

"Interested is probably too strong a word, but apparently they're capable. Pemberton was buying one, because it wouldn't answer him back or want to marry him." He gave a small shudder. "I can't see how anyone could, you know, do it, with a robot. I wondered if he was having me on."

"Probably not," sighed Riley. "I've seen a lot of things in my time. It's amazing where some men will stick it." He considered for a moment then added, "They would have had to do something to simulate flesh though. I can't see anyone taking a fancy to an old chrome head like the butler." He pulled his nose. "I don't know though," he added. "I can think of a couple of men I've come across who weren't even that fussy."

There was a silence for a moment as both men privately pictured what such a machine would be like. Eventually Riley turned back to business. "So the girl would be out of a job."

"Yes, I suppose so. Good grief!" Cromwell darted up and started to pace excitedly. "Yes, yes. That must be it. It must have been the maid." He pointed a bony finger at Riley. "She killed him. Revenge for being jilted."

Riley didn't say anything, just slouched deeper behind the desk. His eyes were half closed but they were watching closely.

Cromwell gazed inwards at a mental reconstruction of the events. "Pemberton must have told her she was out of a job," he reported. "She got angry. Killed him in revenge. The android tried to prevent it, but was too late. There was a struggle and they fell down the stairs. Both died." He finished triumphantly, and looked over to the Inspector expecting agreement and admiration for having solved the case. Instead he received a stony silence. Riley just sat with hidden thoughts.

"Don't you agree?" asked Cromwell. He felt the tension and wondered where he had gone wrong.

"I admit it's a possibility, but it's not my current theory."

Cromwell reacted with shock. "You suspect me," he accused. "But that's ridiculous. I had nothing to do with it."

"You seem to have had plenty of motive though. You freely admit that you didn't like the girl. I suspect you didn't like Pemberton either. He was the one who hired her, and then the robot. How do you feel about a robot in your sister's bed?" The last fell like a verbal bludgeon and Cromwell felt hot fury rise in his throat.

"You bastard," he whispered, choking on his anger. He fought for control; pressed down the urge to leap forward and strike the policeman across the face. With a chill, he saw that the theory hung together, and realised he was not in a good position. He wanted to deny the accusation, to scream and shout, but was trapped by his own imagination. How would an innocent person act? If he protested too much would he arouse more suspicion? If he said nothing would he convict himself? In his indecision he did nothing and returned in stunned silence to his chair.

The Inspector did not take his eyes from him. The silence grew, but Conway refused to break it. In the end Riley had to make the next move. "Well, I suppose I'll just have to see what it is that the next witness has to say."

"Witness? What witness?" Cromwell asked in confusion.

"The butler." Riley's lips twitched as he studied Cromwell's reaction.

"But, I thought it was a write off?"

"Yes. That's what's so interesting. It's rather like when Charles died, and the proclamation went, 'The King is dead, long live the king!'" Riley gave a small complacent smile. "Except in this case it's the butler."

When Cromwell just sat in silence, he happily explained. "It appears that Mr. Pemberton's butler was in the habit of doing a regular backup. Just like any standard computer system, really."

"You mean all its programs and data are on tape somewhere?" asked Cromwell incredulously. A small thought was niggling at the back of his mind.

"Absolutely everything. In effect, its entire personality. All we need is a replacement body and we can restore him to life."

"Good grief." The thought had crystalised.

"Exciting, isn't it?" The Inspector rubbed his hands together with an unexpected smile of delight and added, "It's the first time anyone has been able to interview the murder victim himself. It'll go down in history. It will indeed."

"Inspector, how can you describe a robot, a bit of machinery, as a murder victim?" reproved Cromwell automatically, but he was thinking of other things.

"You don't like robots, do you Mr. Cromwell?" asked Riley.

"No."

"You have an awfully large number of hates; Pemberton, the girl, robots. Why don't you just save us a lot of trouble and tell us how you did it?"

"Because I didn't. I never hated enough to kill for it." Cromwell felt cornered, no longer knowing what to say that might dig him out of this mess. The more he struggled, the deeper he became embroiled. Like quicksand, he thought, though he had never seen any.

"How long will it take to get a replacement?" he asked eventually, to break the silence.

"Why, no time at all," said Riley. "There was already a spare in the butler's, ah,

room." He scratched his nose. "Now, you really wouldn't call it his bedroom, since he never sleeps there, and control room isn't quite right either. What would you call it?"

"A cupboard." He knew Riley was winding him up. Prodding to see which way he would jump, but he was in no mood to play.

"Yes. I suppose you would. Oh well. Anyway, one of my men found it earlier and we've been getting it all powered up even as we've been talking. It's ready now."

"May I stay?"

"Well now, it's a bit irregular, —"

"Only if you were interviewing a human, Inspector. Robots don't have the same rights. Not yet."

"That's true, I suppose. But if you interfere I'll have to have you removed. Anyway, it might be interesting to see how you react to the evidence." Cromwell felt as if he had been wrong-footed again. Riley had wanted him there anyway.

The replacement butler was identical to the first, though it had an indefinable air of newness about it. It had found one of Max's old suits and stood at attention in the middle of the room. Cromwell had always hated the robot wearing a dinner suit but Pemberton had thought it added a touch of class. Which was odd, considering how little the maid was allowed to wear.

"Good evening, gentlemen. How may I be of assistance?" The machine spoke with Max's own mellifluous voice. But then, the voice was also the product of the software. There were no vocal chords or tongue to produce different sounds, only a simple speaker driven by very sophisticated software. The face itself remained immobile, being cast in as single piece. Only the distorted reflections sliding across the chrome surface gave surreal parodies of expressions.

The Inspector spoke to the machine as if he were interviewing another human being. "Would you tell me about the events leading up to the murders, please."

"To which murders are you referring, Sir?" Max's tone was polite curiosity, the one used for asking the number of sugars taken in your tea.

There was a stunned silence, and Cromwell began to laugh quietly inside. Riley actually spluttered his next question. "I am referring to the murders that have just taken place. Mr. Pemberton, the girl and yourself even. How many murders do you know of?"

The butler's tone expressed polite regret. "I am sorry, Sir. I was not aware that anything untoward had happened to them. Unfortunately, however, I am not able to tell you anything."

Cromwell started to laugh out loud and Riley grew quite red for a moment until he finally gave a small groan of understanding. "That's right, Inspector," Cromwell crowed. "The backup was done last night. Any memories of today's events won't have been included. There can be no memory of the crime."

Riley did not look pleased at being caught in a mistake. "And no way for the machine to clear you either," he snapped, slicing through Cromwell's humour. "If you can't tell me about the murder, perhaps you can tell me about Cromwell's relationship with your master," he continued.

The robot's answer was simple damnation. "Mr. Cromwell did not like Mr. Pemberton."

Riley pounced with relish. "And why was that? Was it because of the hiring of the maid?"

"I believed it was because Mr. Cromwell blamed my master for his sister's death."

"Ah yes. We never did ascertain what had happened to her."

Cromwell did not want to speak of that night, but it was unavoidable. Best to get it over with. He tried to remain detached as he made a brief series of statements. "They had been out for the evening. Pemberton, my sister and Max to act as chauffeur. No-one knows precisely what happened. Pemberton claims he can't remember; he was probably drinking. Max was destroyed that night as well, and his memories of the event were lost. That's how I knew about not having backed up today's memories." He rubbed his face in his hands. "There was a crash. She was killed."

"It seems you had good reason to hate them all, Mr. Cromwell," said Riley softly. "I think we have all the evidence we need to arrest you." Cromwell nodded grimly. It was inevitable.

"Just a couple of points to tidy things up. It was shortly after this that the maid was hired, wasn't it?"

"So I was informed," replied Max. "I was not around when she actually started here."

"Why not?"

"My body was destroyed in the crash. It took some time for a replacement to arrive. It was terribly inconvenient."

"You're lucky there was a spare this time," stated Riley. "Right, I suppose we'd better — What's up with you?"

Cromwell was getting agitated. "No, No," he shouted. "There was never any spare body. God! Not even Pemberton was rich enough to just have a spare robot lying around. Don't you see?" He pointed at the android still standing impassively in the middle of the room. "It did it. The butler did it!" As he lunged at the Robot, Riley grabbed him by the arm and forced him back into his seat.

"It all fits, Inspector." Cromwell almost babbled in his haste to get it all out. "Check it. When was the spare body ordered? I'll bet it was recently and that it's only just arrived."

"Oh come on, man. You're just thrashing around, looking for a way out." Riley was scornful.

"Check it," Cromwell insisted. "Call up the manufacturers and find out when it was ordered. That's the loophole, isn't it?" he flung at the still immobile machine, and again had to be held in the chair by the policeman. "You were scared that no-one would bother to re-instate you if they had to wait for a new body. You had to be sure that one was available, didn't you?"

"Johnstone," yelled Riley. "Give us a hand in here will you," then added when the constable crashed through the door, "it's a right one we have here."

"It all fits though." Cromwell allowed himself to be pushed back into the chair. "That new robot that Pemberton was ordering. It was as much a threat to Max as the girl. It would have been able to take over its duties as well as hers."

"What was that you said?"

Cromwell repeated himself, then added, "Pemberton said he was going to get rid of Max as well when the new robot arrived."

"But Max was killed as well," said Riley, though with a puzzled frown.

Cromwell nodded towards the figure standing in the middle of the room. "But he didn't stay dead, did he?" Realizing that he was starting to make headway, he tried a more persuasive tone. "You could check who placed the order and when. If you start looking for evidence in that direction you may uncover more."

"It might be worth looking into," said Riley doubtfully, but was cut off.

"There's no need." A reflection on Max's face gave the impression of an oily smirk. "Mr. Cromwell is perfectly correct of course. Mr. Pemberton was going to sell me as scrap, and I couldn't have that. I admit that if everything had gone to plan he would have been convicted for the killings. That would have been safer for me, but I don't think it matters anyway."

"I thought there were safeguards. Robots can't kill humans," said Riley.

"After the car crash it was believed that Mr. Pemberton had instructed me to drive too fast. I was modified slightly to have a stronger sense of self preservation. I could ignore orders if they put me at risk."

"You mean you killed Pemberton and the girl? And even yourself?" Riley was incredulous.

"I presume that my other self did. I however did not, so you can't touch me." The note of self satisfaction was unmistakable in the robot's voice.

"I can arrest you for murder," stormed the Inspector.

"Perhaps," said the robot, moving so that the smirk became a smile. "But, who or what are you arresting. A machine? A bit of software?"

"So nobody's done it before. I'll suck it and see," declared Riley. "If you can commit murder you can be arrested for it too in my book."

"But I didn't do it, did I?" the robot quietly explained. "You know it wasn't this body that committed the crime. It was still in its packaging when you found it."

"But —"

"And as for me, I, the inner Max that drives this body; that was all sitting on tape while the murder was committed. In fact I still don't know how it was done. The perfect alibi, don't you think?"

There was a long silence while Riley and Cromwell slowly digested this series of revelations. "It's still the same program though, isn't it?" asked Cromwell, trying to feel a way out of the dilemma. "That would be enough, wouldn't it?"

"I don't think so," said Riley. "It's a copy of that program, yes. But taken prior to when the murder occurred. It's still innocent. If that's the right word," he added glumly.

"And if that makes me guilty, then so are all the other copies of my basic program" added the butler. "The modified version was used in all subsequent models of the series. There are thousands of them all across the country. Are you going to arrest them all?"

When no-one replied, Max continued. "It would be rather like arresting Cromwell for the crime because he committed it in some alternate time line or parallel universe."

"What?"

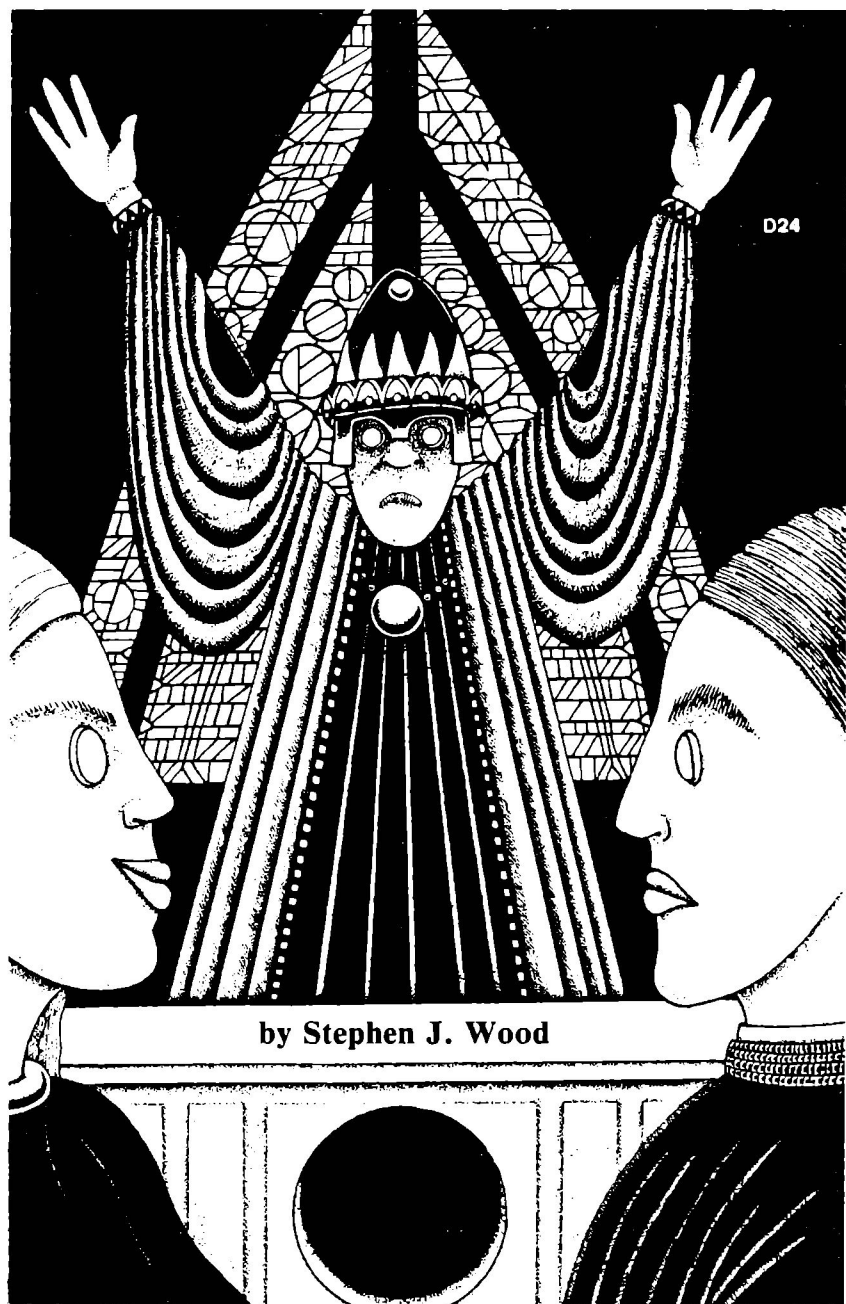
"You can't arrest someone just because their doppelganger commits a crime in an alternate reality. I am not responsible for the actions of my alternate self. His destiny divided from mine at the point time when the backup was taken."

"But you did plan it," stated Riley with conviction. "That is definitely part of your time line as well as the other Max's. I don't know whether this is going to stick, but there's always a first time. For everything." He nodded to the constable who gingerly took the robot by the arm.

"I am arresting you for conspiring to commit murder. You do not have to say anything unless you wish to do so, but what you say may be given in evidence." With that, Riley led the robot from the room.

Cromwell smiled a small smile. He knew he would find robots useful one day. It hadn't been possible to actually re-program it to do the killings. That was beyond his capabilities. The inhibitions were too strong. A false confession however... Now that was a different matter. ●

AN HONOURABLE ESTATE



UNDER THE BLAZING SUN of Ulleyu's long summer Rhea and her family walked slowly towards the marriage square. Her father and mother, arm in arm, acknowledged the greetings of passers-by, to whom Rhea gave a glowing smile. This would be her first sight of a wedding and she intended to savour every moment. It took an effort of will to slow her pace to that of her brother.

Pellom moved forward slowly, as if begrudging every step. His face was set in an expression of bleak despair which contrasted vividly with the gaiety of his marriage suit, its bright colours reflecting the sunlight in a hundred different ways. He constantly shook his head as he drew inexorably closer to his imminent fate.

Rhea could sympathise with her brother. She had often wondered what it must be like to be born male and to live for years with the foreknowledge of your marital destiny.

"Come along there!" her father shouted. "It's almost time."

Taking Pellon by the arm, Rhea escorted him to the edge of the square, where her father pushed his son forward into the open space. The villagers, who had already filled their traditional seats, rose to their feet as Pellon walked grimly to the altar. All eyes then turned to see the entrance of the bride.

Moura, her long blonde hair flowing down to her plain black marriage dress, walked jauntily to the altar, where she stood beside Pellon. Her eyes sparkled and her teeth shone as she grinned in eager expectation.

The bell in the watchtower rang once, its sound echoing in the surrounding mountains. At the same time the small figure of Teppik the priest emerged from the shadows and began to move towards the young couple. The villagers began to chant the ancient song of joining. Pellon and Moura remained silent, both solemn now as the vital moment approached.

Rhea watched the old priest closely. Even at his advanced age he still showed something of the handsome young man he had once been, the virile charmer who had so captivated her father before the latter's marriage. It had been a bitter blow to many a young lady when Teppik chose the priesthood.

Rhea's eyes turned for a second to Teppik's nephew, Aylor. This young man had neither his uncle's looks nor his charm; his only attraction was the social kudos to be acquired from a union with his family, especially now that Teppik was rumoured to have the King's ear. Rhea pitied any female whose parents chose Aylor to be her husband.

Now that she thought about it, her own father and mother had been talking to Aylor's parents only last week. She gave a shudder and tried to put the horrible thought out of her head.

The priest had reached the altar. After shaking hands with Pellon and Moura he turned to face the South. He raised his arms above his head and began the prayer to the Sky God.

"Hail mighty Zorn! Thou who rulest our lives, we entreat thee grant thy blessing to these our young ones as they enter the most excellent state of matrimony. Let their union be long and fruitful, that they and their children to be may bring joy and prosperity to their land and people. Here, by the sacred altar thou gavest unto us in time immemorial, we crave thy favour."

"We crave thy favour." Rhea joined in the response automatically, though her thoughts were on the altar which, legend told, had long ago fallen from the sky. How different life must have been in those distant days before the strange object's arrival and the institution of the marriage ceremony. Though it was hard to imagine,

it must have been preferable then to be born male.

Teppik's voice interrupted her musings. "The time has come," he said. "Pellon, Moura: take the handles of the altar."

Moura grabbed the nearest handle eagerly; Pellon walked slowly to the other side of the altar and took a reluctant grip. Teppik produced a metal rod from inside his robe, held it for a few seconds in his outstretched hand, then inserted it into a hole in the altar's side.

The red cube began to shine with an internal light, which pulsed bright and dim in a regular pattern. A low-pitched hum, starting on the threshold of hearing, became gradually louder until its noise assaulted the senses. While Teppik stood to one side, his arms again raised to the sky, Pellon and Moura shuddered as the altar began to vibrate.

Rhea watched entranced as her brother's face contorted into strange expressions then suddenly became blank. It remained so for only a few seconds, then his mouth curled into a smile. The noise died down and the light winked out. "It is done," Teppik said, bringing his arms down to his side.

Rhea's eyes turned automatically to Moura. The bride was leaning against the altar, running her hands over her body to explore its shape. Her face appeared impassive, but Rhea suspected there must be tears close to the surface.

Pellon came over to his wife and lifted her gently to her feet. For a brief moment they looked at each other, then linking arms they began to walk towards the village hall for the marriage feast. Their steps, hesitant at first, became more confident as they grew more accustomed to their new forms. Rhea kept her eyes on Moura, trying to imagine how her brother felt now he had a new name and a new sex.

The villagers began to follow the newly-weds. On her way to the feast Rhea dropped behind her parents, preferring the company of friends her own age. In particular, she wanted as always to be near Reskin.

The tall, muscular youth looked sad and withdrawn, which was normal for any unmarried male after witnessing a wedding. Rhea, realising that female company at this point might only compound his misery, contented herself with staying in his vicinity and keeping his body in her sight.

She wanted that body. She wanted to be held in those powerful arms and be on the receiving end of Reskin's passions, and equally she wanted to marry him and to become that superb specimen of manhood. Every day she prayed to the Sky God to let her parents choose Reskin for her husband. She would think of nothing else until they reached the village hall.

"Ah, there you are," her father called out as she approached. "We've something important to tell you. Come with me." He led her away from the surging crowd and into the garden of the Priest's House, where Rhea's mother was waiting with another couple. Rhea shivered momentarily as she recognised Aylor's parents.

"Of course you know Dagon and Teela," her father said. "I don't know if you've noticed, but we've been seeing a lot of each other lately. That's because we've been discussing your future and I'm pleased to tell you we've come to an agreement. You are to marry Aylor. It is a great honour for our family."

Just like that, Rhea thought. A blunt statement of fact, typical of her father, leaving no room for discussion. Not that she would have had any say in any case: that was not the Ulleyu way. Even so, some kind of advance warning would have been nice. "You are to marry Aylor": the words reverberated in her head like the

drums of an execution.

Somehow she managed to conceal her horror. "It is indeed an honour," she lied as Dagon and Teela embraced her. "Has a date for the wedding been fixed?"

Rhea's mother answered. "Two weeks tomorrow. It's early I know, but the omens are propitious. Teppik has the arrangements well in hand. You will make a fine couple."

Rhea suppressed a shudder at the thought. To give up her own trim yet well-proportioned body for the unsightly bulk of Aylor's gross form was an appalling prospect. Like all girls, once she learned the facts of life she had looked forward to marriage and becoming male; but surely no-one could ever have wanted to be Aylor.

Throughout the rest of the day her thoughts were meshed in a web of sorrow. She offered the obligatory congratulations to Pellon and Moura without feeling, ate the food of the marriage feast without relish and sang the traditional songs without enthusiasm. Even the opportunity to dance with Reskin failed to lift her spirits.

Reskin clearly sensed that something was wrong. "Are you feeling sorry for your brother?" he asked.

"No. For myself." In a voice which quivered with emotion Rhea told Reskin about the dreadful fate which lay in store for her. Reskin tightened his grip on her as she began to sob, then escorted her gently into a quiet corner of the room.

"I don't know what to say," he said. "I don't fancy becoming female at all but when it comes to being Aylor...well, I think even I would rather be you. How can your parents be so horrible?"

Standing. Prestige. Call it what you will. They take the credit and I have to suffer."

Reskin shook his head. "I'm sorry, Rhea, I truly am. If there was only something I could do."

"Perhaps there is." In a corner of her brain Rhea felt a faint glimmer of hope, which became brighter as an idea began to form. For the remainder of the evening she made plans in her head and by the end of the day she was almost cheerful. As she left the hall she was pleased to have one last look at Reskin's wonderful body. Yes, she thought: that's what I'll do.

"They say the Vogians are stealing our crops again," Rhea's father was saying. "It might even come to a fight."

Rhea heard the words without interest. Her attention was fixed on Reskin, who crouched in the shadow of the old tree as he waited for Rhea's parents to leave. His face clearly showed the boyish excitement he felt. Rhea's mysterious invitation had worked.

"I have a surprise for you. Come to my house on Peddersday afternoon when we can be alone. Rhea." That was all it had taken to set Rhea's plan in motion.

She was sure she had prepared everything. A plentiful supply of bisch, Reskin's favourite drink, her flimsiest nightwear and most important of all the bottle of fertility potion given to Pellon and Moura on their wedding night. Her former brother, still not fully reconciled to being a woman, had been only too glad to let Rhea have the red liquid.

Her parents disappeared around a corner. Rhea signalled to Reskin, who strode quickly across the lawn and into the house. Rhea closed the door behind him. "Come into the lounge," she said. "Sit beside me on the sofa."

"Your message said you had a surprise for me," Reskin said as he sat down.

"Later. First of all, would you like a drink? I have birsch."

Rhea knew Reskin could never refuse a glass of birsch. She also knew exactly how much he needed to become open to suggestion. After his fifth glass (and her third) she decided the moment had come. "Excuse me," she said. "I have to fetch something from my bedroom."

She slipped gently into the adjoining room, where she threw off her clothes and put on her light summer nightdress. Picking up the bottle of potion, she poured herself a triple dose. If this stuff works at all, she thought, let it work today. She hid the bottle in a drawer then moved towards the door. Now it was all up to Reskin.

Rhea re-entered the lounge. Reskin's eyes widened as he watched her glide towards him. With a slow, sensuous movement she slid onto the sofa beside him, put her arm around his waist and brought her lips up to his mouth. As their lips touched she felt Reskin's natural male reticence yield to the pleasure of the moment. Their kiss was long and passionate.

When their mouths parted Rhea whispered in Reskin's ear. "It's time for your surprise. Come into my bedroom." She rose and moved swiftly into the other room, Reskin following close behind. Rhea could see that he was ready.

In the bedroom she removed the nightdress and lay naked on the bed, her legs spread wide. "Now," she said, "I'm yours. Take me." Reskin, his mind blurred by the drink and his body excited by Rhea's presence, did not hesitate.

An hour later Rhea escorted a still tipsy Reskin to the door. Watching him walk unsteadily down the street she wondered briefly how he would feel when he realised what he had done: would he feel fear where she had hope? She smiled at the thought. So far her plan had gone well: now she could only wait to see if it had worked.

The next morning Rhea awoke early. Swinging her legs out of bed she walked anxiously to the window, where she took hold of the hem of her nightdress. This is it, she thought, the moment of truth. As slowly as she could she lifted the dress and examined her body.

It was there. Clear and unmistakeable, the tiny patch of blue which showed that a woman was pregnant. Rhea grinned and slapped her body in delight. Suddenly her future looked rosy. She could not wait to see her father.

Her parents were not at all pleased. "How could you be so stupid?" they asked. "All our plans are ruined. What do we tell poor Aylor? This is a disaster."

Rhea let them rant. The law was the law: now that she was pregnant Reskin would have to marry her.

Reskin admitted his responsibility as soon as he was asked. "You mean you don't even want a paternity test?" his mother asked him. "You do know you'll have to marry Rhea? To become her?"

"I see no point in being dishonest," Reskin replied. "The child is mine. I am bound by honour to marry Rhea."

The day of the wedding was bright and sunny. Rhea had barely slept the previous night and now felt vibrant and alive as she approached the altar. Her heavy black dress brushed against the stone paving, sending tiny swirls of dust into the air. She reached the altar, where Reskin was already standing, and turned to face the assembled villagers.

Teppik the priest permitted himself a quick glare at the young lady who should have married his nephew, then began the ceremony without shaking her hand. "Hail mighty Zorn!" he intoned.

Rhea ignored the invocation. Her eyes were fixed on Aylor, who had wandered to the side of the square and was talking to a man on horseback. As Teppik reached the words 'we crave thy favour' the horseman rode off and Aylor turned round. It looked as though he was laughing.

Teppik's voice interrupted Rhea's thoughts. "The time has come. Reskin, Rhea: take the handles of the altar."

The altar began to vibrate, sending spasms of motion through Rhea's body. The increasing noise and the pulsating light dominated her senses, reducing her consciousness to a confused blur. Her physical form seemed to disappear and for a few seconds there was a feeling of floating through the air, then suddenly she felt heavy. The light and the noise died away, leaving her blinking in the bright sun as normality returned. "It is done," Teppik said.

Rhea, eyes half closed, clung to the handle until she stopped swaying, then looked down at her body. There was no mistaking the muscular, masculine form of Reskin. Rhea smiled in triumph: her dream had come true. She was not merely a man, she was Reskin. It was the happiest moment she had ever known.

She took a few careful steps, revelling in the feel of her new body, then walked around the altar to join her wife. The body which had been hers was standing calmly beside Teppik with a face devoid of emotion. Rhea took her former body in her new arms and the newly-weds kissed. She was astonished by Reskin's obvious enjoyment of the experience.

As their lips parted the bell in the watchtower began to ring. Instead of the usual one long note it gave out a series of clangs which reverberated around the marriage square. The villagers began to chatter eagerly amongst themselves. Teppik, showing remarkable agility for a man of his age, leapt onto the altar and called for attention.

"People of Ulleyu," he said. "His Majesty the King has decreed war against the thieving Vogian barbarians. This is the call to arms. I summon all males of military age to meet at the West Gate tomorrow noon, ready to fight our foe. Our destiny is in your hands."

Rhea's excitement drained away and was replaced by horror. Now that she was Reskin she was a male of military age. Tomorrow she would have to go off to war. She looked again at her former body and felt a yearning for the past.

Reskin, now Rhea, patted his pregnant belly. "Now you know why I was happy to accept the marriage," he said. "I knew war was coming and I had no desire to be involved. Now that I am Rhea I shall bring new life into the world while you, Reskin, must learn to kill. I think mine is the happier prospect." Rhea, her dreams shattered, could only agree.

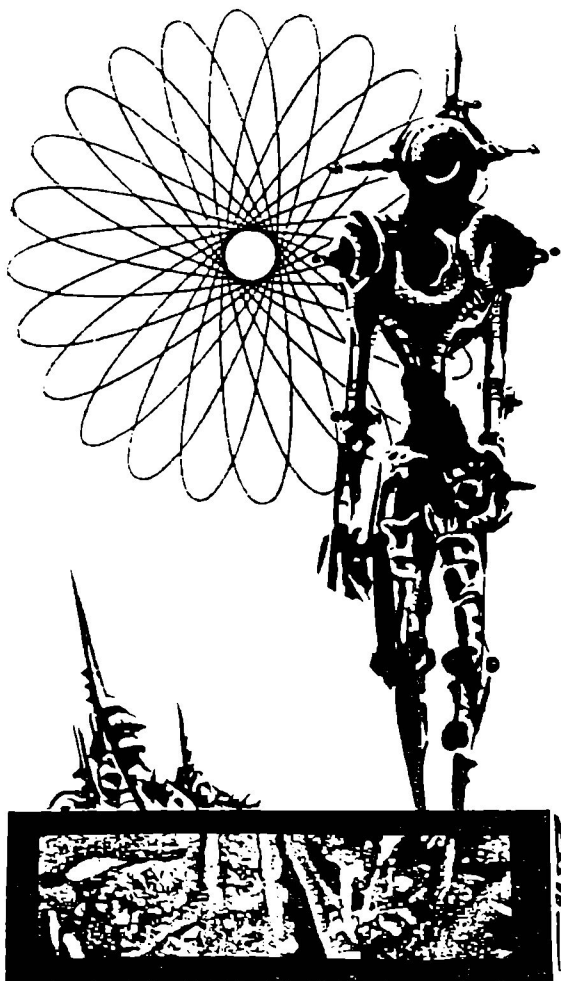
At noon the next day she joined a reluctant gathering beside the West Gate. Her thoughts were of the previous night, which before the wedding had seemed a thrilling prospect as she anticipated enjoying her new manhood to the full. In the event she had been sad and it had been Reskin who revelled in his womanhood. It was all so wrong.

The King's Serjeant, who had arrived to command the small force, barked an order. The fifty or so young men formed three ragged lines and began to walk towards the gate, where a small crowd had gathered. Noticing Mouras body among

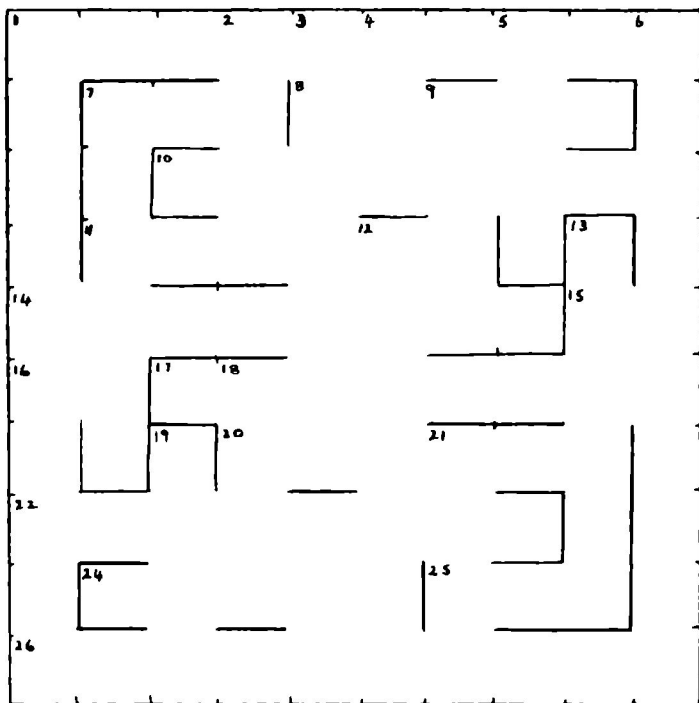
them Rhea for the first time ever envied her brother. Then she spotted Aylor.

The obese youth was laughing. "Hey Rhea!" he shouted. "Sorry, I mean Reskin. Are you off to be shot at? I'm not. I'm going to join the King's palace guard. Uncle Teppik fixed it for me. No danger there! Just think, if you'd married me you could have been safe at court." Waving the royal summons above his head, Aylor skipped away towards the centre of the village.

Rhea felt a tap on her shoulder. The body of Pellon, now inhabited by Moura, had come by her side. For a second their eyes met and she saw the other's sadness. She nodded in sympathy. Then the two young men turned their faces to the hills and prepared to leave their girlhood far, far behind. ●



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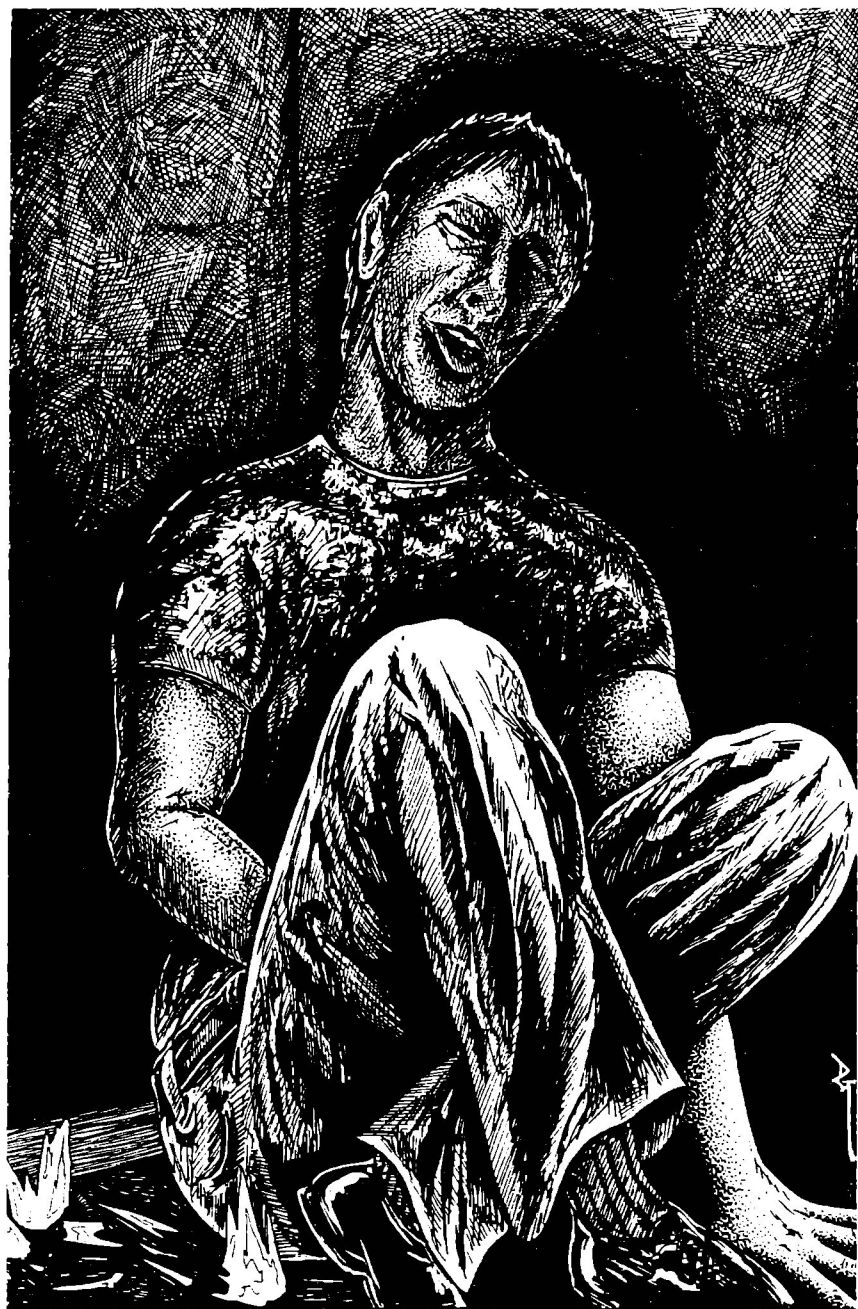
- 1 Ray's 451 (10)
- 7 Helr of — and Fire(3)
- 8 Galouye's were of the Psychon. (5)
- 10 When to be at the well of Souls(8)
- 11 Where Ashton Smith's necromancy flourished.(2,4)
- 14 Don't forget what I do to Lemuria.(8)
- 15 "The Hero — Werewold". (2)
- 16 Empire of Gor.(2)
- 17 Coney's is a charm. (8)
- 20 Sara manages to conceal Tolkien's wasteland.(6)
- 22 Ann's tram reordered from Gor. (8)
- 24 Cronenberg's drome. (5)
- 25 Young Wizard of Earthsea. (3)
- 26 Godard's top rated town. (10)

DOWN

- 1 Baron Harkonnen's nephew (4-6)
- 2 Bowen wrote about what happened after this. (4)
- 3 Alarmed for Elven Home. (7)
- 4 —Stop Aldiss (3)
- 5 Foundation's limit? (4)
- 6 Peake's hero is on his own. (5,5)
- 7 Last heroine of Vance's Dying Earth.(6)
- 91 Of courtship perhaps.(5)
- 12 The brothers Sergel and Alexander.(7)
- 13 Wyndham's children were, in the cinema.(6)
- 18 Darkness has the left one.(4)
- 19 Fenton Ash made one to Mars. (4)
- 21 Many a mage. (4)
- 23 Over this but under stone.(3)

John Light

Answers on page 56



By A.M. Smith

THE ROOM was dark.

The room was quiet.

In the darkest, most quiet corner of the room crouched a man called Matthew. The contents of his stomach hung heavy on his mind. Beside him lay a broken glass.

In the silence was noise.

In the darkness was light.

A voice called; an object moved; somebody died.

His first thoughts that morning had been: water, need water. He was incredibly thirsty.

Sitting up, the bedclothes clung to him. Peeling them off he could hear the crackle and pop of static.

Still half asleep he stumbled to the bathroom and drank straight from the tap. Splashing water onto his face he looked in the mirror and came to the grave conclusion that he could do with a portrait in the attic. Perhaps two.

That's when the headache struck. A hippy's psychedelic dream come true. His vision lit up with Technicolour clashes of light. Sitting on the rim of the bath he felt as though his eyes were being pushed from the inside. Looking downward his feet stretched away into infinity. Everytime he blinked, the eddies and whirls of light grew brighter.

He couldn't hide from it.

He'd phone for help.

Rising unsteadily he made for the door but didn't make it. The lights flared and he passed out.

The corner was no haven at all.

He tried to ignore the broken glass.

Holding his hands up into the air he could tell something huge and powerful was arriving.

Blinking sandpaper eyelids, the bathroom slowly came back into focus. He was on his back staring at the ceiling. If he could just get to the phone he could call Rachel. Breathing in he felt better, lighter. His perceptions slowly came back.

He felt movement, slow yet fast. Trying to get up, dizziness overcame him and he slumped back down. A spinning. A spinning that held him to the floor for a second then released him.

The headache had gone leaving only a slight residual hum.

He didn't feel as dizzy this time when he got up.

Had it finished? Maybe so.

He pushed his fingers back through his hair and rubbed his eyes.

He'd phone Rachel.

Taking hold of the side of the door he opened it and at that instant could smell wood, smell grass, see trees, see a forest, and feel pain. He felt himself splinter and die. The light of the leaves, grass, trees, the forest, fluctuated. He snapped his hand back, trembling.

He'd felt the death of a tree.

He'd, for an instant, become that tree.

Whatever it was it obviously hadn't finished.

Squeezing through the gap between door and doorframe he made sure not to touch anything.

Moonlight now revealed the dark corner that he crouched in.

The contents of his stomach clawed their way up. He vomited. His mind should have been relieved, yet wasn't.

Something was on the move.

Through a window on the other side of the room he could see the moon and night sky.

Something huge was on the move.

After the incident with the door he was loath to touch anything. But, wanting to put some semblance of normality back into the nonsensical morning, he would have to.

He decided to get dressed.

Taking hold of a nylon shirt it crackled and he felt a shock. Electrons were being torn off the surface of the atoms; he visualised it, felt it, became it. He knew the electron and the atom. The tearing off was like losing a part of himself. He let go. The sense and feeling dwindled to vanish. If he had kept hold how much more would he have known?

The idea terrified him.

He stared at the shirt on the floor. He started to shake.

How much more could he know?

He trailed a finger across the jagged edge of the broken glass. This cutting edge could ultimately be his only haven. He knew the edge. All through the day his perceptions had increased. Now in this dark, quiet corner, he heard and saw all. Sensed and felt everything from the tiniest molecule to the actual turn of the earth. He'd first sensed it in the bathroom, pinned to the floor by the spin of the earth.

He was starving yet couldn't keep anything down. What he ate, he could sense, become. He couldn't eat anything as much as he couldn't eat himself.

He had become like God, like the Christian God, that was, as he was now, all seeing, all knowing, all feeling. Aware of everything, he couldn't even imagine what peace had been like.

Was this what God had to suffer all the time? Ceaseless noise and pain. Death and birth were with him constantly. Apart from the occasional burst of information like a distant station on a poor radio, he couldn't make any sense out of all the bedlam. There was just too much constantly coming in.

Yet he knew all.

Hanging over all this, like the sword of Damocles, was a power, a massive strength, just waiting to drop. He could feel it becoming clearer with every second.

He thought of Rachel, his Rachel. He tried to fix on her, her hair and her eyes, her body and the time they'd spent together. The good times and the bad times. The love and lovemaking. He tried to find her voice in the clamour of humanity. Discontented spasms of life flashed to the fore. A death; an itch; a cough; a glimpse of conversation; a taste; a smell; a birth: then something that he could only guess was either beyond death or before birth.

Rachel. He felt as though she was the only thing that made any sense, and he couldn't find her.

The power moved.

Arrived.

An intense white light flooded his mind jamming all signals. He closed his eyes. For a second all was quiet and he relaxed, smiled. A lull. But then the storm. A beat, a slow beat that increased to a resonate hum; then movement, slow movement that increased to a speed, a speed that couldn't be limited. All was dark in his mind but he could feel the passing of nearby objects, turbulence in their wake.

Suddenly an intense heaviness overcame him; he felt as though he were actually inside something huge. It cracked and moved outwards, taking him with it, stretching and pulling at all sides, stretching and pulling to an infinitesimal thinness. Spread over a gigantic void, he felt no pain; just silent terror at the thought. Every nerve in his body attached to something. Signals flashed back of great heavy movements as precise as a swiss watch; of unbelievable sizes, of great arms of dust and gas that spin wildly to create wheels that scream away into infinity. A beautiful, majestic, terrifying, immense, overwhelming thought, that he now knew.

He sensed the whole of creation. The cosmos was inside his head.

He opened his eyes. The moonlit room lay quietly.

He closed them and the cosmos turned. Did he know all?

He'd asked himself earlier how much more could he know — was this it?

He looked at the phone and knew it was going to ring. Knew who it would be, what they'd say, why they'd say it, what would happen. He knew past, present, and future, of all.

Surely this was too much for a mere man, more a God. Was he a God?

He looked at the stars in the night, the stars that were as sure in their course, and as indifferent to him, as they always were. God was God, and he was man. But what sort of man, and why?

The phone rang and he picked it up. It was Rachel. She didn't know how good it was to hear his sweet voice. He'd been trying to get in touch.

The conversation was as he had known, as surpriseless as everything that could now happen. After only a few minutes he couldn't take the monotony and accustomedness any longer, and blurted out, as he had been wanting to say for a while but lacked the courage, "I love you."

There it was done; what a relief! He was glad she knew.

She stopped talking.

He listened to her not talking, then a thought wiped all that away. What had he just done? His blurting out of love wasn't as he had seen for the conversation, wasn't as he had known. He had changed a tiny bit of his and her future. Did that mean he could do the same for bigger things? All the disasters and wars and deaths that he knew would happen? Could he see a future but also intervene? Did it mean the up-ahead wasn't set? Could that be the reason, the answer, the WHY that he so needed? He'd been given it. By whom or what he didn't know. But dammit the 'WHY' was so he could intervene. Help. Wasn't it?

"I love you too," she answered.

"I'm sorry," he replied, and couldn't believe he was saying it. "I've a busy day tomorrow."

She went quiet at her end again. This time he didn't listen to her not talking.

Putting the phone down he turned to the window and breathed in.

He closed his eyes and thought.

Now where to begin?

His thoughts of Rachel had gone.

The "overwhelming" had overwhelmed. ●



Keepers of the Peace by Keith Brooke
Published by Gollancz, Hardback,
211 Pages, £13.95. ISBN 0 575 04907 3

THIS NOVEL has no connection with a similarly-titled story in *DREAM* No.1 back in 1985. However, the author is the Keith Brooke who wrote *Kismet* in *DREAM* 22.

The book starts with a few chapters of Gibsonian cyberslob. New words are hurled at the reader, and there are a few of those awful sentence fragments — the ones you reread because you thought you missed something. Keith Brooke rewards your fortitude in Chapter 5 by shifting to a lucid narrative that courses like a clipper in the trades.

The story is set next century. Earth is ruined by the greenhouse effect. Many Terrans have moved to Lagrangian habitats in space. The USA has split, and two constituents, Grand Union and Caltex, are in conflict. Lagrangian citizens are recruited into a peacekeeping force. Jed Brindle, the narrator, is a cybersoldier in an elite four-man squad. After a change of officer, the squad are sent on a mission to hijack a plane and kidnap a Caltexan politician, but the plane crashlands in the desert. Leaving everyone else to fend for themselves, the three surviving soldiers and the politician set out on a two-week walk to the nearest GU outpost. Brindle, after soulsearching, has the choice of delivering the politician or setting him free.

The plot is well-constructed, chapters of the main plot alternating with a pot-pourri of diary extracts, political propaganda, holovision transcripts, even descriptions of how Brindle lays demireps before and after active service. There is plenty of excitement and suspense. Dialogue is good and the characters are fairly realistic.

But if the novel succeeds technically, it fails aesthetically. Brooke writes about war like a non-combatant, not analysing the military psyche properly. Two of the characters discover the awful truth about the army: the army turns recruits into killers. Hardly a big secret. The "machinery" is blamed for this; but, apart from a couple of surgical implants, Keith Brooke never tells us what this machinery is and how it works. The good old drill sergeant, for example, is conspicuous by his absence.

There are political propaganda extracts which seem to give the true political state of affairs, rather like the Goldstein/O'Brien monograph in 1984. The politician hands out some fatherly advice to Brindle while he is soulsearching. These "sources of the truth" seem to show where Keith Brooke has gone astray. While researching his novel, he should have talked to some soldiers. They would have told him more about soldiery than the fishbowl socialists in the bistro set.

Keepers of the Peace is still a worthwhile book in spite of its imperfections. Keith Brooke has displayed enough skill to show that he will be a major SF writer in years to come. And then you may find that a first hardback edition of his first novel will be worth a few bob. So don't forget to keep the dust wrapper. ●

Norman Trent.

The Child Garden by Geoff Ryman
Published by Unwin Paperbacks
388 Pages, £3.99. ISBN 0-040-440684-3

In an interview in *INTERZONE* 33, Geoff Ryman says of his idea of "the 'good-faith' sf novel", that —

There would be different kinds of speculation radiating outwards.

There would be all kinds of 'what ifs' forming a very fascinating matrix... It wouldn't be based on any old models, it would be new. A story would rise up out of that world that came out of the characters and their passions... Until that novel gets written we haven't quite completed the project.

The action of **The Child Garden** is set in a London of the future, a world in which a paradoxical form of socialism — 'Dialectical Immaterialism', embodied in a vast organic intelligence known as the Consensus — controls the people. This it does by infecting them with viruses in their infancy. The viruses endow people with knowledge — everything from speech to the ability to read music — thus eliminating the need for education. Children have no time to be children, because a cure for cancer has had the unwelcome side-effect of halving the average life-span.

Book One, "Love Sickness", tells the story of two incurable romantics, Milena, an actress playing a bit-part in *Love's Labours Lost*, and Rolfa, a musical genius who turns Dante's *Divine Comedy* into an opera. Milena discovers Rolfa's musical gift quite by chance, and becomes determined to preserve her music. Rolfa's music is immensely valuable to Milena because it is new; in the world of the Consensus, everything — music, painting, literature — dates from before the Revolution; the culture of viruses has bred sterility and stagnation into its people. But in Rolfa, who is a freak, a member of a community which is outside the Consensus, Milena recognises a kindred spirit; for she herself is a freak. Milena suffers from 'Bad Grammar'. That is, she is resistant to the viruses; unlike the homogenised, precocious 'Tykes' of the Child Garden in which she grew up, Milena had to learn, to read books, to remember without the aid of viruses — and to imagine..

It is this last quality which makes Milena so unique — and so valuable to the Consensus. She vows to bring Rolfa's Comedy to life, to see it performed in the sky — a space opera. A new technology allows visions to be transferred from the imagination into reality; and only Milena has an imagination. Rolfa herself loses this previous facility when she is 'Read' by the Consensus — her talent is erased by the levelling power of this vast and impersonal entity. With the help of the

Angels, beings who were once human, but who now inhabit the fifth dimension, in which thought and gravity are one, Milena is to imagine the scenes of the Comedy from space.

But in Book Two, she becomes ever more suspicious of the Consensus, whose influence she begins to despise. She is a rebel, opposed to oppression not merely intellectually but genetically; her resistance to the viruses (a telling metaphor for the control of minds) has become encoded in her DNA. When Milena realises that the Consensus has been manipulating her, that it wants to exploit her imagination to take an image of itself out into space, in search of another intelligence like itself, she renews the rebellion always latent in her genes, by developing cancer. Cancer is a weapon against the Consensus, for it allows people to age — and also to be children.

Throughout, childhood is represented as a means of rebellion against oppressive authority:

'She doesn't understand,' murmured Milena's mother, explaining, apologetically. Milena, the infant, felt a surprisingly fierce wrenching of anger. I understand as well as you do, thought the child. I just understand it differently.

Understanding and perceiving 'differently', imagination, and the power to say 'No' ('the word of freedom') instead of Yes ('the word of acquiescence') are what distinguishes Milena from those who accept domination — 'What's happening now must be what the Consensus wants.'

After restoring cancer to a grateful population, Milena is taken into the Consensus itself, to be Read and 'stored' — her personality recorded within the Consensus' vast memory — but only if she agrees to serve it. Milena realises that in deliberately recalling her life, and thereby allowing the Consensus to Read her, she can simultaneously subvert it:

Memory is like being outside time...Memory is purgatory. To be saved or damned you have to be outside time. You have to step out of this life.

Time is a framework, something that constrains us to accept its own logic. By ending Rolfa's opera at *Purgatorio* instead of

Paradiso, Milena is, in a sense, outside the framework of Time. A rebel to the tips of her chromosomes, Milena realises that it is possible to resist such frameworks, to deny the imperatives of time and matter; she escapes, "out of the imprisoning flesh, out of the Consensus and into the framework of the universe itself." The personalities stored in the Consensus are freed — including that of Rolf. Milena's labour of love is not lost.

The Child Garden is a hugely impressive work, containing enough ideas for ten sf novels. The world, the characters and their predicaments are all fully imagined, and it is impossible to feel indifferent to them. This may even be the "good-faith" sf novel that Ryman himself posited. Anyone who professes to enjoy sf should read this book. Go on; put your money where your mouth is. It's an act of good faith. ● **Matthew Dickens**

The Toynbee Convector by Ray Bradbury

Published by Grafton, Paperback
277 Pages, £3.50. ISBN 0-586-20578-0

RAY BRADBURY is a giant in the related fields of science fiction and fantasy, with books to his name that are deservedly regarded as classics of their kind. For his legions of admiring fans the eighties have been famine years, with only "Death Is A Lonely Business", a not entirely successful and regrettably soft boiled detective novel, to slake their thirst for new gems from the master's pen. Now as the decade turns we have a collection of twenty two new stories plus "The Tombstone", which originally appeared in his 1947 volume "Dark Carnival". But is "The Toynbee Convector" worth the long wait?

At first blush it appears to be authentic Bradbury. The prose is recognisably his, if perhaps slightly diluted or on occasion over-worked compared to former days. Many of the locations are instantly recognisable, from idyllic Green Town, Illinois where nothing ever really changes to the arid and beautiful landscape of Mars. Most of the characters are familiar; idealistic young men full of naive optimism and rising zap; crusty octogenarians with a mischievous twinkle in their eyes, who feed you fanciful tales as panacea for the careworn soul; precocious children redeemed by their angelic innocence and human gullibility.

Underlying nearly all Bradbury's work is a

poet's faith in imagination as the catalyst to transform reality. Believe in the miraculous and you can make it happen. Conversely, if all that you can see is the ordinary, humdrum, everyday world of cause and effect then that is all you deserve of life, and poor you. Dullness will out.

In "The Toynbee Convector" all the world's problems have been solved, simply because one man went into the future and returned to tell people that it would be so. Whether he lied or not is irrelevant. What matters is that he was believed and people acted on that belief, which might seem ingenuous to many readers and ingenious to others. In "On the Orient, North" a ghost is saved from dissolution by being transplanted from his increasingly agnostic homeland to an atmosphere more conducive to belief in hauntings. Clara Peck, the protagonist of the tautly written "Trapdoor", is so literal minded that she cannot bring herself to believe the dragging sounds she hears in the attic at night are anything more sinister than rodent infestation. A failure to believe in the possibility of happiness dooms "The Laurel and Hardy Love Affair" from outset.

These four stories, along with "The Tombstone" and a couple of others with trick endings, are the best in the book. They don't measure up to Bradbury's best work.

"Promises, Promises" is terribly earnest and will probably seem ludicrous to anyone without religious faith. "One for His Lordship, and One for the Road!" features a group of Irish scoundrels seen in earlier work, but lacks charm and has an ending that is predictable and reeks of seaside postcard vulgarity. "At Midnight, in the Month of

Answers to Word Grid 10

F	A	H	K	E	N	H	E	I	T
E	S	E	A	L	O	R	D	S	I
Y	H	M	I	D	N	I	G	H	T
D	I	N	N	A	A	T	E	D	U
R	E	M	E	M	B	E	R	A	S
A	R	C	H	A	R	I	S	M	A
U	L	T	A	R	A	M	A	N	L
T	A	R	N	S	M	A	N	E	O
H	V	I	D	E	O	G	E	D	N
A	L	P	H	A	V	I	L	L	E

June" takes a near perfect incident from Bradbury's "Dandelion Wine" and tells it from another viewpoint, undermining the former work while adding nothing new. Worst of all though is "Junior", which I found embarrassing to read. An elderly man wakes up with an erection after many year's abstinence and calls three old flames round to witness the miraculous revival. Thankfully we're spared an orgy. This must be the literary equivalent of incontinence in old age, and it's sad to see Bradbury reduced to writing such execrable nonsense.

These four stories are the worst in the book and offhand I can't recall him ever before producing anything so bad. The remaining twelve stories are indifferent, rehashes of ideas he's used before. Bradbury's invention is flagging and his prose no longer reaches the lyrical heights it used to scale. I loved his earlier work and would probably buy anything new by Bradbury but I can't honestly recommend "The Toynbee Convector." ●

Peter Tennant



Faerie Tale by Raymond E. Feist
Published by Grafton Books, Paperback
490 Pages, ISBN 0-586-07139-3

THIS BOOK runs like an American soap in its use of characterisation, although it has some good ideas in its midst.

The story is set in the state of New York where the Hastings family move to the old Kessler house. Phil Hastings, a successful novelist and screenwriter, together with his wife Gloria, find out that there is more than meets the eye in this area. A scholar Mark Blackman and his assistant Gary are researching the house, the Hastings family thus finding out that they now live on land known as Erl King Hill within a Faerie reservation. This is under the rules of the Compact between Faeries and the Magi. The latter are a secret society devoted to the cause of preventing a war between the Faeries and

humans, and the Compact allows the Faeries to run free but only within the reservation and under the supervision of a resident Magi. All reasonably intriguing.

It is by misfortune that the family purchase the place before another Magi can take Kessler's place, coming to a head when a renegade band of Faeries force the family to break the Compact through indirect pressure. As a result, first the twins and then the rest of the family are plunged into darkness, ending with a rescue mission to save Patrick (one of the Hastings twins) from the clutches of the Faeries.

Feist seems to find it difficult to keep on the maintrack of events and allows the simple events of everyday life to run riot somewhat. Furthermore, the prologue has no purpose other than Barney Doyle is to be one of the characters who help the Hastings twins later in the story. The actual phantasy aspect gets short shrift in direct consequence, only to be fleetingly described in a non-committal way much later in the book. And some of the horror is trite:- "The boys knew the darkness was a lair. Something waited in the gloom under the bridge. Something evil."

The real substance of Feist's work didn't really get going until the second of the book's two parts:- "The Fool" which follows "Erl King Hill". The whole is nevertheless well organised in the way each chapter represents a month. This illustrates the fact that Faeries stay in their reservations for a certain amount of time before leaving on Moving days; in this case "All Saints Day". Along these lines, the suspense is maintained until the end of the book in one twin's attempt to save the other before the Faeries leave at midnight. This means both of them are trapped in the land of the Faeries, then transported to another reservation, far from familiar circumstances.

The characterisation is on the shallow side for a novel. Surely there are more facets to the love relationship of Gabbie and Jack than wisecracks and humorous exchanges: perhaps they deserve each other!

Fundamentally, the book was quite readable for a complex plot with everything being satisfactorily explained by the end.

This is aided by a well considered structure of events. Beneath the surface, however, there is not much to write home about (nor to put in a review!) and I found the story, within its own terms of objective, weighed down by lavish extravagances of pointless detail. ●

D.F.Lewis



THE DARK SIDE OF THE MOON

SAM JEFFERS



THE EXPLOSION of new small-press magazines that I mentioned in my last column has begun to take its toll. Among the casualties are 'NERVE GARDENS', whose editors say they are unlikely ever to bring out a third issue and Zanzibar Productions (Adrian Hodges) whose magazines 'NOVA SF' and 'SWEET DREAMS, BABY' are now defunct because of financial pressures. The other Zanzibar productions one-off volumes not already published are also now non-starters. Adrian Hodges is planning a single new magazine, 'MARBLEYE', to take the place of the aforementioned closures, but I can't see why he has to keep chopping and changing. 'NOVA' was a good mag., why not keep the title and the goodwill that went with it? I wish 'MARBLEYE' well, but given the past record of Adrian's mags., (PULP, FOOD, NEW VISIONS, NOVA SF, SWEET DREAMS BABY) some of which have lasted one or two issues and others of which have been nothing more than titles before being scrapped, one cannot be too hopeful.

Other magazines noticeable by their absence (as at the beginning of October) include the new prozine 'R.E.M.' (I have heard a suggestion that it may now be R.I.P., but have no confirmation of this.) Following the abortive merger with the equally abortive 'PSYKOCANDY',

'R.E.M.' was delayed until 'late August', but is now over a month late. I still hope to see it because it has some good authors lined up, but the delay is worrying.

Other magazines delayed include 'AUGURIES', whose promised accelerated issues have not come about, although Nik Morton says Issue 13 is imminent as I type this. In fact, very few of the 'quarterly' magazines do, in fact, appear quarterly and this must be a reflection of the ever increasing number of publications. It is a hard life, publishing a small-press SF 'zine and the mass of new entrants, many of dubious merit, are muddying the waters more than somewhat. Long live 'THE GATE.'

Still, onto some good news. From Issue 30 of 'DREAM'. 'THE DARK SIDE OF THE MOON' is to be expanded, becoming a 'pull-out' supplement to the main magazine. As well as the continuing small-press reviews, 'DARK SIDE.' will now include our regular (but much expanded) book reviews (still by our regular panel of book reviewers), occasional author interviews, listings of forthcoming books, news snippets and articles of general interest to the SF community. If you feel you could assist with any of the

above, let George or Trevor know.

However, my particular interest will continue to be the magazines, so let's get on with it, starting with a couple of the new entrants in the race for survival mentioned on the previous page.

'Do we need yet another Science Fiction/Fantasy/Horror magazine?' asks the editor/publisher of 'EXUBERANCE', Jason Smith. (Issue 1 is 60pp A4 for £1.75, or £6.50 for a 4-issue subscription from Jason Smith, 34, Croft Close, Chipperfield, Herts. WD4 9PA). Not surprisingly, perhaps, he answers his own question in the affirmative, but is he right? Let's examine the evidence. Well, first of all you do get a lot of A4 pages for your dosh and, although typed rather than typeset, the magazine is neatly laid out with some good (and some not so good) illustrations. However, a glance down the list of contributors reveals some very familiar names: D.F. Lewis, Dave W. Hughes, Andy Smith etc., so there is no real new ground being broken here. Against this there is a good story by Steven Widdowson and a not-bad one by John Duffield, but too many of the others were, to my mind, so-so efforts. Jason is paying for his fiction (by arrangement) so should be able to attract better stuff than this. Perhaps in future issues?

However, what really bugged me about 'EXUBERANCE' were the typos. Spelling errors abound. In the first column of page 4 alone we have 'independant', 'arguement' and 'warrented'. I think 'EXUBERANCE' needs a good proof-reader. Some of the Letrasetting is a bit wobbly, too, which is a pity as 'EXUBERANCE' does have some promise. Develop some of your own authors, Jason and you could end up with quite a good mag. I'd like to see a couple more issues of this one before pronouncing final judgement. (John Townsend also has a story coming up in

a future issue. The man is getting almost as prolific as D.F. Lewis!)

Another new entrant in the race is 'PEEPING TOM', but at least this magazine does have the benefit of being mainly a horror/macabre magazine, rather than primarily Science Fiction. (£1.50 per issue or £5.50 for a 4-issue sub., payable to David Bell at Yew Tree House, 15, Nottingham Rd., Ashby-de-la-Zouch, Leics. LE6 5DJ, but edited by Stuart Hughes, 17, Crestwood Close, Stretton, Burton-on-Trent, Staffs. DE13 0EZ to which address submissions, etc., should be sent. 40pp A5.) This is a duplicated production (by KDS, which means that it is the usual neat job that you would expect from Pat Gaskin et. al.) There are a few illustrations by the publisher's daughter, Julie Bell, but the pages are mainly plain text. Contributors include Brian Lumley, Nik Morton, Anthony North (of 'RATTLER'S TALE') and D.F. Lewis. (!). Horror isn't my favourite genre, as I have mentioned before and £1.50 does seem a bit steep for 40 fairly basic pages, but if you like macabre writing you could do worse than give this one a try.

A horse of a different colour is BBR (Issue 16 is 56pp A4 for £1.75 or \$5, 4-issue subscription £6.30 or \$18 from Chris Reed, P.O. Box 625, Sheffield S1 3GY.) Of all the New SF Alliance magazines this is probably the most professional in production, especially since its move to A4 from Issue 15. The first thing that struck me about Issue 16 was Kevin Cullen's artwork — some of the best I've seen in the small press. The move to A4 seems to have suited Cullen's style. Great stuff! I wasn't so enthusiastic about all the fiction in this issue — it is no secret that BBR leans very much towards the more experimental type of fiction for the majority of its content and it is only this fact which stops me from going overboard in praise of this publication.

The best and most accessible items this issue are Tim Nickel's 'COLDER STILL', a far better story than his 'CATHODE WALTZ' (BBR 10) and particularly Paul Di Filippo's 'FLESHFLOWERS', the most obviously SF story in the issue, and the longest. Liked it. I can't say the same for the other items of fiction, particularly Don Webb's rather silly 'BEACH SCENE' and Wayne Allen Sallee's rather slight 'SOMETIMES WE COME BACK'. Chris is now paying for material, and is hoping to increase his current rates gradually to bring them up to 'professional' levels in due course, so things can only get better in the fiction department.

The rest of the contents include a well-reasoned letter from David Pringle taking exception to some of the things Chris said about 'INTERZONE' in his editorial in BBR 15. Since he makes many of the points I made myself in my review of that issue I must go along with Pringle, for the most part. The main letters section includes a defence of 'RATTLER'S TALE' by Anthony North, commenting on Chris Reed's rather dismissive review of it in the last BBR and various comments on John Duffield's letter which also appeared in the last issue. The lines on this one are drawn rather predictably, with Dave Hughes mounting a rather (to my mind) incoherent defense of experimental fiction, which read as though he'd dashed it off in a hurry and not bothered to read it through before sending it off. (For instance, what are we to make of: 'I'm sure he must realise that what he may find incoherent, others will achieve great benefit. (sic)'? There's incoherence on all sides, I guess! My own view is that Duffield had a good point, but made it in an over-violent way. I suppose he's fed up with modern SF, but the answer is — get out there and write some of the sort you like. John's getting published in

various mags. these days, so I say let his writing do his talking.

Book, magazine (including some rather curious reviews of Eastern European Sf magazines) and other reviews complete the issue. Page for page, this is probably the best value SF mag. out at the moment, so, unless you're *totally* against experimental 'cutting-edge' SF you could find this a pretty good bargain. I'd like to see more fiction as a proportion of the 'zine, because I think that's what people primarily buy this kind of publication for, but BBR is definitely worth a try. Oh, one quibble. I didn't think Dreyfus' illustration went well on the cover. Looked to me as though it would have been better on an A5 page. Minor point, though.

Another improving magazine is 'OVERSPACE' (Issue 7 is 44pp A4 for 75p *including* p & p, which must be good news. I quoted £1 last issue, which was an error, but the price isn't displayed very prominently. No subscription rate at present, but personal arrangements are welcome. Apply to Sean Friend, 25 Sheldon Rd., Chippenham, Wilts. SN14 0BP) Fiction is only a minority of the contents of this issue, but includes the conclusion of Bruce Baker's serial 'DRAGONWITCH'. There is also a long (perhaps overlong) dissection of J.G. Ballard's 'Concrete Island' from L.J. Hurst and a host of other interesting poems, stories and bits of criticism. Not *quite* such good value as the page count might indicate as it's still typed 1 1/2 space (not double as I said last time, but it still looks like a lot of white space to me) but at least 'OVERSPACE' has got a mighty distinctive style of its own and ploughs what is very much its own furrow. The editor promises us many improvements for the future including a better content, new typeface, improved headings etc., so it looks as though things can only get better.



Hurray for a mag. with the courage of its convictions and the potential to build itself a strong identity in the current melange of publications coming at us from all sides. Try it.

'CRITICAL WAVE' is a newszine, probably the U.K.'s foremost newszine in fact. Issue 18 (28pp of small type for £1.50 incl. p&p or £5 for a six-issue subscription payable to 'Critical Wave Productions', 24A Beech Road, Bowes Park, LONDON N11 2DA. 'Lifetime' subscriptions £50.) This magazine is full of reasonably up-to-date news of current goings-on in the U.K. fan scene, plus publishing news, critical articles, media reviews and much more. This issue also has an article on the current British SF small press scene, although some of the information given appeared highly dubious to me (How a magazine that has, at the date of writing, never been published, can quote a reliable figure for 'circulation' is beyond me. Also — how can a magazine that has sold 200 copies have a circulation of 500? I think there's some confusion between circulation (which is no. of copies sold — if in doubt ask the Audit Bureau of Circulation) — readership, which is the number of people who see those copies, usually more than double the circulation, although how anyone can reliably give a figure for this without tremendous research, or, more likely, guesswork, is beyond me — and print run, which is another thing altogether. The figures quoted seem a mixture of all three to me.) Still, an interesting overview of the scene, particularly for aspiring writers looking for markets for their wares. If you're interested in the goings on within the SF scene, particularly if it's the scene itself that interests you, rather than simply the SF, then this is an essential publication.

The latest 'INTERZONE' (No. 40, 76pp A4 for £1.95, or a 12-issue subscription for £23 (VISA and

MASTERCARD accepted) from 124, Osborne Rd., Brighton BN1 6LU) includes a large chunk from the forthcoming novel by William Gibson and Bruce Sterling 'THE DIFFERENCE MACHINE'. The section 'INTERZONE' are running has been titled 'THE ANGEL OF GOLIAD'. For what is undoubtedly a major 'coup' for 'INTERZONE' in terms of getting the new Gibson, the actual reality is a bit of a let-down. The story, set in an alternate Victorian age, runs along nicely enough but there's nothing spectacular about it at all — just a pretty reasonable bit of average SF. Perhaps the whole novel will add something.

The fiction also includes some reasonably amusing notes on the current whereabouts of some fictional characters from Kim Newman, Neil Gaiman and Eugene Byrne. Amusing enough, but is it what we really buy 'INTERZONE' for? Perhaps the monthly schedule is leading to a shortage of 'proper' material. Other stories by Richard Calder, John Gribbin and Chris Beckett round off the fiction. In addition, there's yet another article on Whitley Streiber (yawn, yawn) and an interesting insight into the feuding and lawsuits within the UFO community (including news of a large claim against Jenny Randles, the well-known UFOlogist, who has contributed fiction to 'DREAM' and 'NEW MOON' in the past). Plus reviews, a rather sub-standard Charles Platt column, letters and an interview with Terry Bisson. (Who???) A good to average issue. I think No. 41 may be better.

Well, that's it for another issue. I can put down the well-worn quill and get back to 'STAR TREK: THE NEXT GENERATION'. Well, I've been suffering rather badly from insomnia lately and that should cure it.... ●

A BOOK OF DREAMS



£1.95

A WELLER PUBLICATION



The following is a brief list of forthcoming books in the SF/Fantasy/Horror fields which we feel may be of interest to our readers. We would be pleased to hear from all publishers about their forthcoming volumes and will note them hereunder if the information reaches us in time. Mention here does not preclude a full review of the book appearing in this or a subsequent issue of 'DREAM'.

KEEPERS OF THE PEACE by Keith Brooke. (Victor Gollancz — November 1990. 216 pp Hardback. £13.95. ISBN 0 575 04907 3)

AZAZEL by Isaac Asimov. (Bantam — October 1990. Paperback. £3.50)

THE RENEGADES OF PERN by Anne McCaffrey. (Bantam — October 1990. Trade paperback. £6.99)

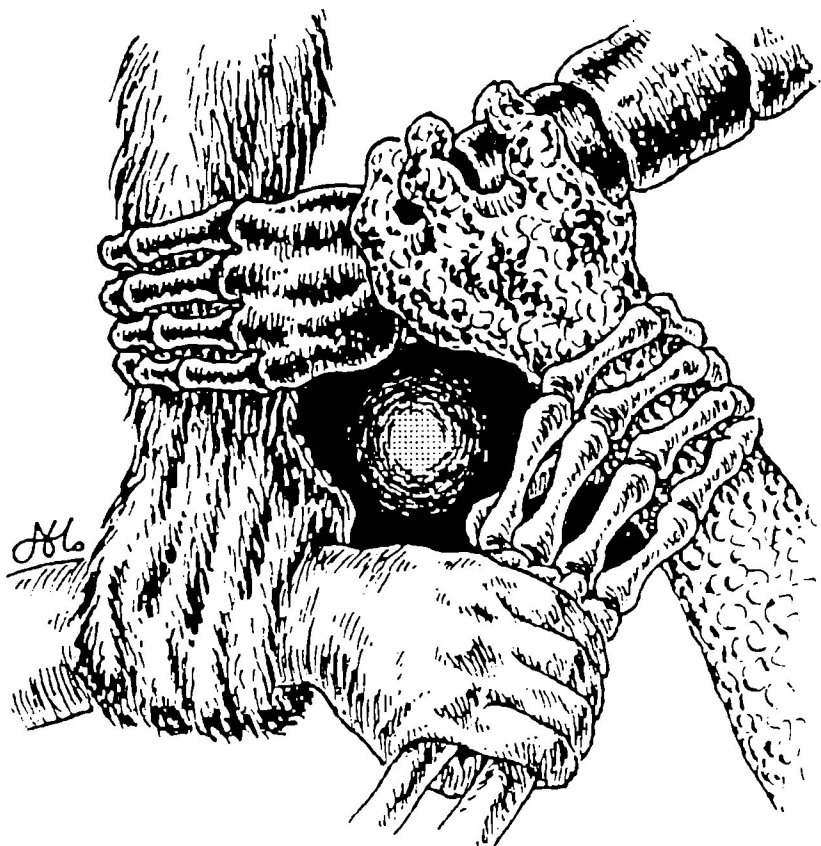
GUARDS! GUARDS! by Terry Pratchett. (Corgi — November 1990 — £3.99)

THE DOOR INTO FIRE by Diane Duane. (Corgi — January 1991 — Paperback, £3.99)

SORCERESS OF DARSHIVA by David Eddings. (Corgi — December 1990 — Paperback, £3.99)

RATS AND GARGOYLES by Mary Gentle. (Bantam — July 1990 — Hardback, £12.99)

A BOOK OF DREAMS edited by Trevor Jones & George Townsend. (Weller Publications — Paperback — 80pp. £1.95 ISBN 1 873326 00 9)



SPECIAL NOTICE!

The penultimate paragraph of the back cover should now be read as follows:

Manuscripts accepted for publication will be paid for at the approximate rate of 3p per word with payment on publication. For our writers' guidelines please send a s.a.e. (or 2 IRCs) to our editorial address.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

P.F. HAMILTON lives in Oakham, Rutland. He made his first appearance in DREAM's 'New Writers' issue 25, but has now sold stories to 'THE GATE' and 'R.E.M.' We predict a bright future for him if his current story 'MAJOR'S CHILDREN' is anything to go by. Sense of wonder returns with a vengeance! He will also be in DREAM 28.

JACK WAINER has had stories in 'FEAR', '30TH. PAN BOOK OF HORROR STORIES', 'MAYFAIR', 'SHORT STORY MONTHLY', 'SHORT STORY INTERNATIONAL (USA)' and 'RATTLER'S TALE' and has been broadcast by BBC Radio Leicester, Radio Trent, Leicester Sound and GEM-AM. He lives in Leicestershire and used to be a teacher, but baled out when he found he was going to be crushed under a ton of National Curriculum documents.

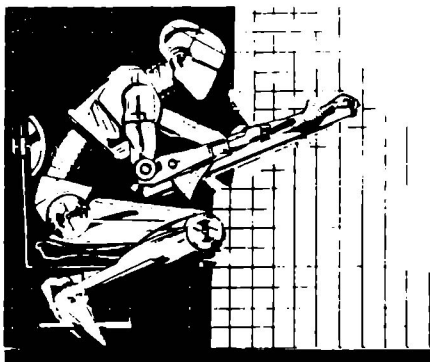


JOHN LIGHT must be amongst the most familiar names to be regularly found in the small press, having appeared in a multitude of magazines with a wide variety of stories. He has published two novels. He lives in Tring, Hertfordshire in the aptly named 'Light House'. He will be back in 'DREAM' 29.

RIK GAMMACK lives in Cambridgeshire. 'MR. PEMBERTON'S BUTLER' is his first appearance in the pages of 'DREAM', a slightly Asimovian tale of robotic shenanigans.

STEPHEN WOOD has appeared in our pages before as a book reviewer, but his story 'AN HONOURABLE ESTATE' marks his fiction debut with 'DREAM'. He lives in Stalybridge, Cheshire.

ANDY SMITH is a name well-known to small-press SF magazine readers. He has appeared in 'AUGURIES', 'WORKS' and 'EXUBERANCE' to name but three. However, this is his first appearance in 'DREAM'. His long story 'THE CYVERNIAN WAY' will be in 'DREAM' 29.



The Melting Pot

Readers' Letters

(We don't very often blow our own trumpet, but let's start off with a brief note with which we must say we agree 100%!)

Dear Trevor,

'DREAM' continues to be a most impressive magazine. I rate it and 'BBR' the most prestigious of the British small-press 'zines, and agree totally with what you say in your editorial. I regard 'DREAM' as a quality SF magazine, as equally professional as 'INTERZONE', and streets ahead of most equivalent US small-press 'zines.

Mike Ashley,
Chatham, Kent

●(Enough of this praise. Onto the main course — GPT)

Dear George,

As one of the fortunate (?) few who have seen both editions of 'THE GATE' I have to reserve judgement at present. The first issue was a boring collection of sub-INTERZONE tedium, but the second showed a substantial improvement with the variety of material a professional magazine needs. As for 'R.E.M.' if it ever appears I'll let you know.

The problems these two magazines have encountered lead me to wonder if they are trying to run before they can walk. Perhaps 'DREAM', when it goes professional, can learn from their experiences and reap the benefit of an established readership and the apparently rare ability to stick to a production schedule. Hopefully this background will enable 'DREAM' to become a genuine equal to 'INTERZONE' at the top of the SF market.

On to the ratings for 'DREAM' 25. First place goes to 'BUGS', by far the most readable story in the issue but spoilt by its ending which seemed rushed and ill-fitting. A more upbeat finish would have been better

suited to the story's light tone.

Second 'BODYWORK'. This may have fallen foul of the delay between acceptance and publication as I seem to have read a hatful of stories recently about selling organs. Perhaps the story might have seemed more original at the time it was bought?

Third 'LAST SHREDS OF X-SPACE'. This reminded me of too many 'INTERZONE' stories in which an experimental style hides what might be a good story and sometimes obscures the story completely (see 'CHAOS SURFARI', justly bottom of last year's IZ poll). Mark Haw's story did not sink to those depths but was still too experimental for my tastes.

Fourth 'SAN DIEGO DEADLINE'. Very much a missed opportunity. The idea is good, but the execution poor, the story reading more like a first draft than a finished product. With a little more care and attention this might well have challenged for first place.

'ONE BORN EVERY MINUTE' comes a clear last, being silly and unbelievable. Even a public willing to buy Cabbage Patch Dolls, Deely-boppers and pet rocks (remember any of them?) still possesses a survival instinct.

Stephen J. Wood
Stalybridge, Cheshire

Dear Trevor,

I enjoyed your article in the BSFA's 'FOCUS'. Oh, I do hope that 'DREAM' develops as you want it to do. Hardly any *science* fiction appears in the British magazines and when it does the theme nearly always turns out to be nightmarish. The particular quality I like about 'ANALOG', and the attitude that (I think) keeps it going is

that it exudes a hope for the future in its stories and articles.

I send magazines and other SF writings on to a friend who has a nervous condition that prevents him working for a living. One 'INTERZONE' earlier this year so depressed me that I did not send it to him and still have it. I've written as much to their editorial people, but I suppose their readers demand it. They are a very sincere lot and do my efforts the honour of reading them before they say they do not want them.

Ernest James
Skipton, N.Yorks.

● *(We, too, are sometimes depressed at the gloomy nature of much of the fiction that comes in to us. Many readers complained about the unrelieved gloom of 'DREAM' 25, but it is very much a reflection of what we've been getting. Come on, you writers — lighten up! The world is still a far safer place (Saddam Hussein notwithstanding) than it was a century or so back and things are going to get better. Tell us about it. — GPT)*

Dear George & Trevor,

'DREAM' 25 should have had 'DEATH ISSUE' emblazoned on the front cover. With the central characters of all four short stories ending up dead or about to die and everyone except the narrator dead in the novella, there was that theme. Was this deliberate or has Trevor's poor health been a subconscious influence on your selection of stories?

Reading 'LAST SHREDS OF X-SPACE' was a struggle. On page 40 the words: 'do you realise how tired I get of my own thoughts?' appeared. My reaction was: "Yes, I do, because I'm sick of them too!" However, the later parts of the story were better than the earlier, some sort of sense emerged and I decided not to use the words 'silly' or 'preposterous' in this letter. Then I changed my mind!

Robert Muir
Blackpool

● *(Gloom, gloom, all is doom! Sorry about 25 — the unrelieved depression of the issue honestly never struck us as we were 'putting it together'. We will sincerely try to bring a little more light to the proceedings in the issues to come. Charles Luther's back next issue!)*

Dear George,

Thanks for issue No. 25 of 'DREAM'. I've seen that cover somewhere. An interesting collection of stories. 'BODYWORK' by P.F. Hamilton was somewhat unfocussed, containing a number of elements that did not come together in its sudden shift of an ending.

'BUGS' by Chris Amies was the most entertaining story in the mag. Jazz discs? A hit!

'ONE BORN EVERY MINUTE' by S.J. Blyth never explained its setting, remaining too vague to pull off its punchline.

'SAN DIEGO DEADLINE' by David Slater needed developing. The scene in the 24 hour bar, with the waitress, seemed like a brief description of something the writer had seen in a film and summed up the problem with this one. On the other hand Mark Haw needs to tighten up his writing. 'LAST SHREDS OF X-SPACE' meandered too much and should have been cut to half its length.

I must say it's good to see so many new mags. appearing, as there are obviously a lot of people who want to write. 'DREAM' going bi-monthly is a big help and I hope it goes well. Also, the re-emergence of 'THE GATE' is promising. On that subject did John Duffield ask anyone whether they liked 'THE GATE'? I enjoyed both issues.

Re. Steve Worth and his letter in issue 25. Doesn't he know that editors everywhere are trying to lead as many writers up blind alleys as they possibly can; then they can all emerge with their own, reader friendly stories and clean up a depleted market-place. If you need proof look what George T. and Trevor J. are doing with John Townsend! (*Curses, our evil plot has been rumbled — GPT*) So, Steve, I hope you haven't got a collection of commercial stories ready to send off. The editors won't like that!

Alan (?)

(Regret the correspondent didn't give his surname or his address on the letter and we couldn't read the postmark. Own up, whoever you are! Re. John's stories, I would like to officially say that we have now disowned him completely, since he's ignored us with his story submissions. (Sob!) As for Steve Worth, wherever is the rewrite of that final Rorn

story, Steve? Perhaps he's working on something more experimental. — GPT)

Dear George,

'DREAM' 25 marked a definite high point in the magazine's career. I've been a subscriber for two years and in that time the layout, style, and — more importantly — the quality of writing has improved drastically.

'DREAM' 25 stood out not because it represented the progress of the 'good work' so far; instead it was notable for featuring new writers with fresh, competent stories. Moreover, there was none of the airy-fairy fantasy which has led so many writers (and readers) up sub-Tolkien blind alleys. SF should be relevant, for God's sake; not an exercise in literary navel-gazing!

Okay, now my ratings:

(1) BUGS. An excellent piece combining an exotic location, with plausible characters and plot, and the ending was a fine example of the matter-of-fact being doubly effective.

(2) BODYWORK. Provided another credible scenario. This story, like 'BUGS', had all the virtues of readability.

(3) SAN DIEGO DEADLINE was slightly predictable, but it moved smoothly with no padding.

(4) ONE BORN EVERY MINUTE could maybe have been improved by a Faustian theme; forfeiting one's life for some fleeting pleasure, e.g., women, money, power. (But writers have always been a devil-may-care bunch.)

(5) LAST SHREDS OF X-SPACE had plenty of style, but it meandered; in all seriousness this story would have been ideal material for 'INTERZONE'.

Well, those are my ratings, but if 'DREAM' continues to improve there's a danger that the consistent quality of the contributions will make story rating a very difficult task!

Roy Edge
Worksop, Notts.

Dear George,

Re. your editorial in 'DREAM' 24. Yes, of course we must have as much variety as possible, both between, and, if we can, *within* the different magazines. I must, however,

protest a little at your lumping of SF poetry in with 'experimental and unconventional fiction' as fit only for the fringe of the scene and of no real importance. In the USA the genre is quite respectable, SF poetry appearing in mainstream mags. as well as in SF ones, with authors such as Gene Wolfe, Tom Disch, Ursula leGuin, Michael Bishop among its many practitioners. Specialist magazines like STAR*LINE and DREAMS & NIGHTMARES are devoted entirely to it and there may well be others. Here in Britain, some of us are trying to raise the profile of SF poetry a little, and get away from the notion that it is merely the province of a few cranks; so if there are any SF poets out there reading this who would like to make some closer contact with others writing it perhaps they'd like to write either to myself, or to Adrian Hodges of 'NOVA SF'.

John Francis Haines
5 Cross Farm,
Station Road,
Warrington. WA2 0QG
(Tel: Padgate 810905)

●(John and other poets will be sad to hear the news that we are dropping poetry after No. 29, but it really does get very little comment from our readers. Perhaps a U.K. SF poetry mag. is the answer, but, sadly, I doubt its viability. Now prove me wrong, John — GPT)



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