


VISION



OF TOMORROW

JULY 5/-

**ECHOES OF
ARMAGEDDON**
by Lee Harding

VISION OF TOMORROW

Editor:
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Publisher:
RONALD E. GRAHAM

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STANLEY PITT

Illustrating 'Echoes of Armageddon'

THINGS TO COME . . .



Michael Moorcock's haunting tale of the last days of man leads an all-star line-up for our Special Anniversary number, on sale August 4th.

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EDITORIAL

Innovation

With this issue we are introducing to English readers the paintings of one of Australia's finest fantasy artists, Stanley Pitt. Stan's work has graced Australian publications for over twenty years, where his SILVER STARR strip cartoon series of a number of years ago has been compared with the finest work of Alexander Raymond. More recently, he has adapted Alfred Bester's "Gully Foyle" character into a cartoon strip. A series of specially commissioned Pitt covers will be featured over the next few months in this magazine.

These paintings are of the highest standard, and accordingly we have determined that they should illustrate only the very best stories we can obtain. Several top authors have been commissioned to write stories based on these covers. The first such collaboration, ECHOES OF ARMAGEDDON by Lee Harding, appears in this issue. Next month, in our Special Anniversary Issue, E. C. Tubb has written SPAWN OF JUPITER, and Pitt's vivid painting will be featured on our centre pages, in full colour.

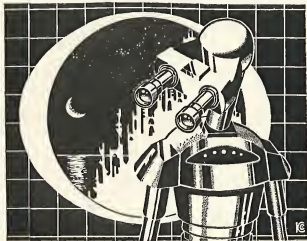
We would welcome letters from readers giving their reactions to Pitt's work and the stories associated with them. We also welcome letters on any other aspects and stories of our magazine and indeed science fiction generally. To provide an open house for the opinions of our readers we have created a special department "Science Fiction Forum" in this issue. E. C. Tubb has given the department a flying start with a thoughtful essay on realism in SF. In our next issues, we hope to feature a selection of the best letters received.

In VISION OF TOMORROW we try and present as many different types of science fiction as we can. But science fiction expression is not limited to the written medium. In the world of the cinema, for instance,

science fiction has been portrayed with varying degrees of success for several decades. John Baxter's new series, MEMORIES OF THE FUTURE, presents a fascinating analysis of SF in the cinema past and present.

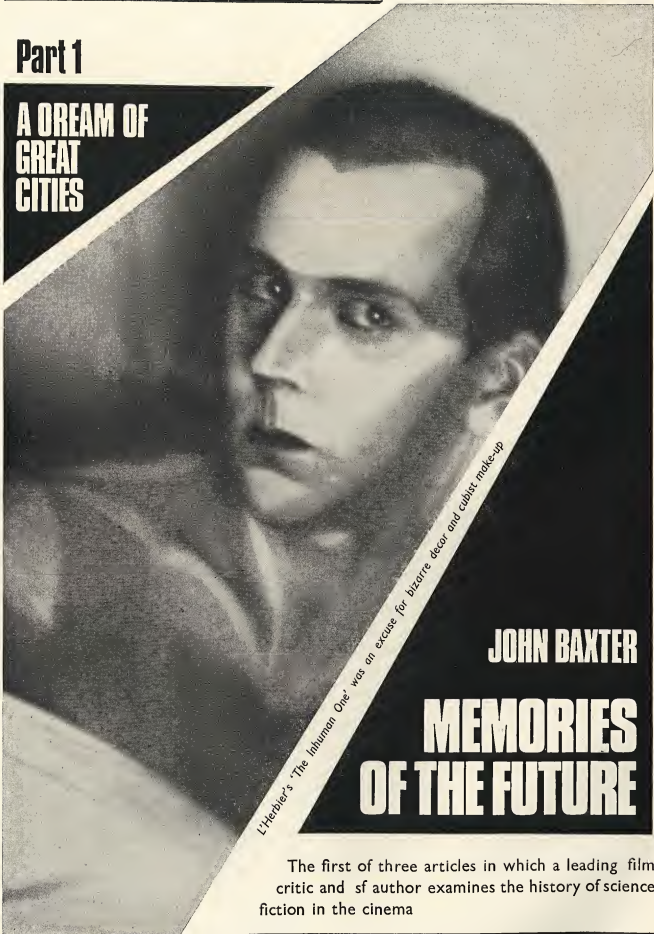
Later this year we will introduce a further innovation when, in answer to reader demands, we will introduce a serialized novel. The ever-popular E. C. Tubb's ALIEN LIFE will be our first two-part novel, and we plan to follow this with the first new novel by John Baxter in a number of years. MEADOWS OF CAPRICORN is the title, and we can promise you that the story is something well worth waiting for. Baxter's novel ranges across his home continent of Australia, to outer space and the moons of Jupiter. But it is firmly rooted in reality and on all too possible future. We will be giving more details of Tubb's novel next issue. But we can say this—it is one of his best!

Philip Harbottle



Part 1

**A DREAM OF
GREAT
CITIES**



L'Herbier's 'The Inhuman One' was an excuse for bizarre décor and cubist make-up

JOHN BAXTER

MEMORIES OF THE FUTURE

The first of three articles in which a leading film critic and sf author examines the history of science fiction in the cinema

My devotion to science fiction films goes back farther than my devotion to science fiction, to the days, in fact, when I used to roll up at the local cinema on Saturday afternoons, pay my sixpence and sit through three hours of B-features, serials, cartoons, trailers and general cinematic detritus.

I realised very early that there was greater excitement in some films than others, though one is largely uncritical at the age of 9 or 10. Westerns never interested me much, but I did conceive an immense admiration for a character called The Scarlet Avenger who clattered about on a horse in modified Ku Klux Klan costume blowing on what looked like an ocarina and scaring villains into submission.

My complete attention, however, was reserved for the fantasy serials. Born too late for the baroque joys of *Buck Rogers* and *Flash Gordon*, I got by well enough on *The Purple Monster Strikes*, *The Spider Returns* and *King of the Rocket Men*. Republic, Columbia and Universal serials directed by men who were soon to become important in my pantheon: B Reeves 'Breezy' Eason, Spencer Gordon Bennet and Ford Beebe, with the spirit of producer 'Jungle' Sam Katzman seldom far away.

Along with the serials, I enjoyed the odd Abbot and Costello spoof horror film that turned up, or cavalry and Indian westerns as opposed to the conventional 'shoot 'em up' variety. If I had any insight into my tastes, I would have seen the connecting fact or that united these disparate films, the sense of myth and ritual, a heightened kind of reality backed up with flamboyant gesture, costume and dialogue. Pony soldiers jogging to a song, Gene Autry and his posse plunging into an abandoned mine in search of the lost civilisation in *The Phantom Empire*, Batman and The Spider fighting off those double-breasted hoodlums in a dozen serials. A world yawned between these and the melodramas, comedies and tragedies with real people in them.

I've never lost this fascination with the super-real, the legend and the myth, and few fields allow more exercise of it than the cinema, especially the popular cinema of Hollywood. The fact that it motivates sf film has, however, led directly to the antipathy which exists between the two fields, one that I, as a fan of both, have always regretted.

Damon Knight summed up the real bone of contention. Films like *The Incredible Shrinking Man* he characterised as 'anti-science fiction, a turning away, not from the standard props of science fiction, but from the habits of thought and belief which underlie science itself—the assumption that things can be put into categories, that things can be measured; the assumption of cause and effect.'

This is true and, to the purist, sf film, based on myth and superstition, related by blood to the horror film and fantasy, can never be truly science fiction. But I believe that, in a very special way, sf film does convey some of the spirit of its written cousin. Intellectually it is often feeble, but its pale grey images are distorted mirror reflections of the period that created them. Fantasy reveals the true attitudes of the society that produces it, freely opening up the subconscious for us to examine. How easy it is to relate *Metropolis*, *Things to Come*, *Forbidden Planet* and other sf films to their period, to see them as representing their times in a way that even the best social commentary could not do.

But all fantasy films, and especially that of sf, is a sensuous medium. It is the poetry of the atomic age, a shorthand evocation of the pressures that are making us what

we are and will be. This has made it heir to a strange hieratic beauty and a cultural humour one imagined technology had robbed us of. Just as the pop music of the 'forties seems more redolent of that age's anxieties than its often self-conscious literature, so phenomena like sf film may one day represent more completely than any other art form the angst of the 'fifties.

For these reasons alone sf film is worth the attention of any reader of science fiction. But there is more to it than that. This a field full of the special joys of cinema, the insights and the idiocies. I hope in these articles to introduce you to a few of them.

Science fiction film is relatively new as a field of cinema. The symbols and myths that motivate it were not fully formed until the late 1930s, when the American studios, goaded by the mass importation of imaginative European film artists from Germany, Austria and France, realised that comic strips like *Buck Rogers* and *Flash Gordon* were readily filmable. Before that, American film-makers had not regarded scientific concepts like space travel, alien races or super-powerful weapons as being film material, an attitude not assisted by the fact that the cinema, generally speaking, is always ten or more years behind literature in intellectual content.

When *Amazing Stories* began in 1926, the cinema was still occupied with the previous phase of sf, Gernsback's *Electrical Experimenter* and the hobbies magazine field in general. Dozens of serials of the 1910s and 1920s hinged on gadgets to replace the internal combustion engine or allow submarines to stay under water indefinitely. Various 'ium's and 'ite's were stolen by dacoits, then retrieved only to be stolen again. In France, Louis Feuillade in his serials *Les Vampires*, *Fantoms* and *Judex* was using scientific ideas like television, but, as in the case of American serials, this was little more than window dressing. Science fiction was not yet proved a commercial idea, and the commercially dominated movie business, without a reliable departure point, declined to be involved in this alarming new technological phenomenon.



'Homonculus' set the pattern for hundreds of sf and horror films



Valerie Hobson and Boris Karloff in 'The Bride of Frankenstein', a stylish American variation on the ideas of 'Homonculus'

Not all film-makers, however, were solely concerned with profit. In Europe, there was a tradition of fantasy that permeated all the arts, and dominated the cinema from its beginnings. Georges Méliès, earliest of the French cinema masters, had realised that his trick films lent themselves to fantasy subjects, and promptly produced hundreds of these. Mixed in with the views of model-work volcano eruptions, 'drunkard's dreams' of whirling furniture and swelling heads, were a few sf subjects, including a random re-hash of Wells and Verne called *A Trip To The Moon* (1902) and the fantastic *An Impossible Voyage* (1904). In 1899, Méliès also made a short (10 seconds) version of Ayesha in the immortality flame from H. Rider Haggard's *She*. Depending on your criteria, any of these could have been the first sf film ever made.

But none of these films used science as more than a detail. One subject, be it Mount Pelée erupting or a trip to the Moon, was as good as another if it provided an opportunity for some fun. Similarly, the use of sf in some of the early films of the French experimentalists was motivated by the desire to use elaborate and bizarre décor, not by an interest in science. Abel Gance's *The Madness of Doctor Tube* (1915), though ostensibly about a scientist analysing

light waves, was Gance's opportunity to experiment with distorting lenses. In *The Inhuman One* (1925), Marcel L'Herbier was more interested in the cubist design and make-up of architect Mallet-Stevens and painter/designer Fernand Léger than in exploring the idea of a man-killing opera singer brought back to life by a scientific admirer. Only in England, where Charles Urban had produced *The Airship Destroyer* (1909), with its dirigible attack on London and missile defence, and where imitations like *The Airship Destroyer* and *The Pirates of 1920* had become popular, was there any indigenous form of sf film, and this was to be swamped, like many promising national cinemas, by the wealth and technical virtuosity of Hollywood.

Although not as involved in scientific romances as the British, other European countries were interested in this new field of literature and film. In Germany especially, science and technology were finding their way into the newspaper serials, often in thrillers about gangs of master criminals attempting to control the world. Film producers had been impressed when, in 1916, Otto Rippert made *Homonculus*, a serial in six one-hour parts describing the life and death of a totally artificial man. The public was enchanted by the raw energy of the story, and with the

playing of Danish actor Olaf Fönnss as the man without a soul. He crystallised a stock German attitude of the time, a belief in the power of the special individual who, by a simple effort of will, could shape his destiny. It was a belief that was to rot into Nazism, but for a time it provided a rich source of material for directors who wished to work in fantasy. G. W. Pabst, who patterned his characterisation of Brigitte Helm's icily regal Atlantis queen in *L'Atlantide* (1932) on this myth, was just one of a number of major directors drawn to the drama of the new approach.

Homunculus introduced into the cinema plot elements that are still with us today, as well as borrowing a number of others. The idea of making artificial life was not new—Paul Wegener in *The Golem* had used this in 1914—but by making the creator of *Homunculus* a scientist, Professor Jensen, Rippert broke new ground. He also related his story to the political realities of his time, showing *Homunculus* as a leader who, because of his lack of a soul, becomes the evil manipulator of nations until, again an important first, retribution comes to him in the form of lightning from heaven which destroys him in the fire from which he was created. Fantasy films as varied as *Frankenstein*, *Tarantula* and *Forbidden Planet* all echo *Homunculus*.

One film-maker who saw immediately the possibilities of the form of Fritz Lang, then a young sketch artist and writer recuperating from war wounds in a military hospital. Between 1917 and 1932 he turned out a string of films, either as writer or director, that explored the tyrant/hero character *Homunculus* made popular. His most popular creation was Doctor Mabuse, a super-criminal already popular from Norbert Jacques's novel. Master of disguise, financial wizard, super-brain, Mabuse was in many respects a science fictional character, using technology to achieve his ends and dominating his minions by the hypnotic power of his mind. Lang and his wife/collaborator Thea von Harbou used the newspapers as a departure point, relating Mabuse and his mob to the disordered and corrupt political and social structure. Films like *Doctor Mabuse*, *The Gambler*, *The Spiders* and *Spies* fascinated the public, making Lang one of the UFA studio's most important properties. In 1924, it sent him to the United States to study film techniques; it was when he glimpsed the skyline of Manhattan from the harbour at night that he conceived the idea for his film *Metropolis*.

In subject, *Metropolis* relates far more to the Mabuse cycle than to science fiction, with its benign dictator ruling the city and dispensing partisan justice over the crumpled workers below. The character of Rotwang, the ruler's evil scientific henchman, is played by Rudolf Klein-Rogge, who also impersonated Mabuse in Lang's other films, and is drawn in the terms of the anti-science fiction which Damon Knight mentions. A pentacle over his lab door even hints that his skill may have its genesis in a deal with the devil. Despite the rich background of technology, *Metropolis* could just as easily be a city run by daemonic power, a parallel which Thea von Harbou in her original novel drew with some strength. Lang has compressed her comparisons of ancient gods and modern machines into one sequence, the overpowering 'Moloch' episode, but the mood remains.

Although Lang's best science fiction film is probably *Woman in the Moon* (1928) with its impressive rocket take-off and imaginative model work, *Metropolis* has been

adopted into the field because of the magnificent reality of its sets. Even today we have not improved substantially on the film's effects, and some of the techniques we use today are not essentially dissimilar to those perfected by the UFA technical team. Most ambitious of the lot is the 'Schuftan Process', invented by cinematographer Eugen Schuftan and developed further by Gunther Rittau, UFA's ace special effects cameraman. Replacing huge sets with models reflected into the lens, and vast panoramas with tiny painted pieces of glass, it was possible to show scenes like the stadium race of the opening sequence without location shooting or set construction. Its process work is probably the major contribution *Metropolis* has made to the cinema. Without it, the costume drama cycle of Hollywood in the 1930s would never have prospered as it did, and certainly fantasy film would have been the poorer. Without *Metropolis*, there would have been no *Elephant Boy*, no *Things to Come*.

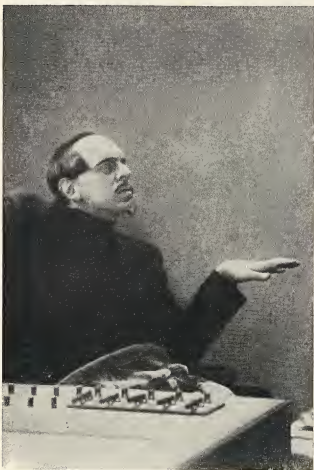
Like *Metropolis*, *Things to Come* has been accepted as a science fiction film because of its elaborate evocation of the future, although, by the standards of a large part of the field, it does not qualify for the title. Ironically, it was made as a reaction by H. G. Wells against the popularity of his scientific fantasies. Written in the 1890s and 1900s, when his career was just beginning, these stories remained always the best-selling part of his work, the public choosing



Brigitte Helm played Antinea, queen of Atlantis, in Pabst's 1932 'L'Atlantide'.

to ignore the flood of polemical pamphlets, social theorising and preaching for technocracy that he issued throughout his life. In 1936, when producer Alexander Korda approached Wells, then 68, with the suggestion that they film his book *The Shape of Things to Come*, published a few years earlier, Wells saw this as an opportunity to make his social views known to the vast audiences of the cinema. After impressing on Korda the necessity for the film to reflect exactly what he wished it to, Wells signed up to script a film version of his book.

Wells readily admitted that it was not an easy job. His belief in technocracy, the rule of scientists and experts, was not easy to express in film, least of all in the form used in the book, an encyclopedic listing of the future's pleasures and responsibilities. Finally, after long consultations with Korda, expert film-writer Lajos Biro and director William Cameron Menzies, the last imported from America to direct the film when negotiations with Lewis Milestone (*All Quiet on the Western Front*) broke down, a script was prepared in which some of Wells's concepts were embodied in the story of a family's two generations, one in the late 1930s, the other in the scientific utopia of the 21st century. Raymond Massey was signed to play a double role of a man and his great-grandson, and a cast of distinguished stage actors, including Ralph Richardson, Derrick de Marney, Marguerita Scott, Edward Chapman and Maurice Braddell hired as a supporting cast. To work with these, Korda obtained some of the best technicians in cinema:



The pattern for 'Metropolis' was set by 'Homunculus' and followed by Lang films like 'Spies' (1927), with Rudolf Klein-Rogge as a master-criminal.

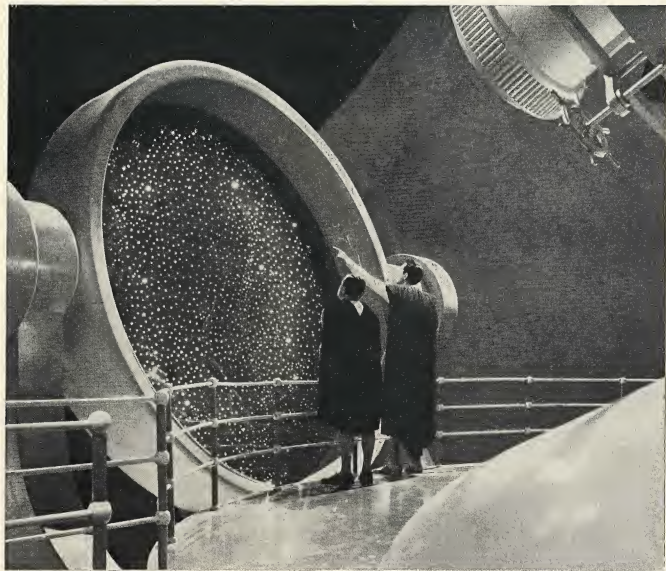


'Things to Come'—more tract than sf, but dignified by Raymond Massey's impressive performance.

careman Georges Périnal, who had shot *Le Million* for René Clair, René Hubert, genius of stage and cinema costume design, and Ned Mann, whose special effects had made the Douglas Fairbanks 1926 *The Thief of Bagdad* such a success. Music would be by Arthur Bliss, design by the director.

For *Things to Come*, Menzies was both its greatest strength and weakest link. A designer of genius, he had never in 1936 directed a major feature film, and the magnitude of the project, combined with the necessity to conceive sets to convey Wells's ideas, was too much for him. Nor was he helped by Wells's habit of circulating notes to the staff and cast outlining how he thought things should be done. Menzies's confusion is reflected in the variable playing of the cast, few of whom disguised their contempt for the story and movies in general, and in the extremely poor continuity, where top editor William Hornbeck had obviously been called upon to salvage sequences so poorly directed as to be nonsensical.

Nor, in terms of ideas, is *Things to Come* a major statement. Biro remarked to Korda that the plot's technology



The climax of 'Things to Come'. "All the universe—or nothing. Which shall it be?"

was not beyond 1936, let alone 2036. Wells's philosophy, expressed at its most basic, is that the world should be run by the most intelligent, a view not far distant from that propounded in *Metropolis*. In the script, his belief is embodied in the life of his hero family, not inappropriately named the Cabals. John Cabal, first seen as a 1930s liberal pacifist, later turns up as a fighter pilot in the world war that Wells anticipated even then. After the war, he reappears as the grey-haired but virile leader of the Airmen, part Knights Templar, part Royal Academy of Science, a technocratic elite pledged to rebuild the world.

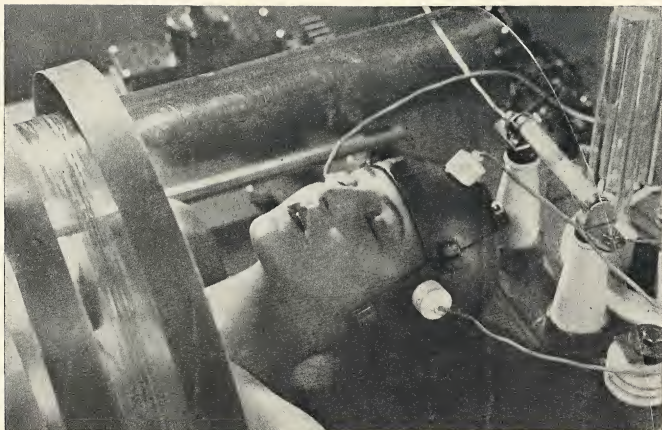
With each appearance, Massey's pronouncements become more pointed and impassioned. As a family man before the war, he observes quietly, 'If we don't destroy war, then war will destroy us.' Asked by Ralph Richardson, warlord of ruined post-war Britain, who he is, Cabal answers, 'Law and sanity.' 'I'm the law!' Richardson thunders. 'I said, "Law and sanity".' Cabal ripostes, and Richardson, dismissing him as 'some sort of aerial bus driver' flings him, not unreasonably, into the dungeons. Wells's strongest emotions are reserved, however, for Oswald Cabal, John's descendant and the key character of the film. It is Oswald

who decides to send two young people in a space ship around the Moon and, in justifying this, preaches most eloquently Wells's belief that man must submit to shaping by superior intelligences. 'Our revolution didn't abolish danger and death,' he says. 'It just made danger and death worth while.' One thinks of the sergeant urging his terrified men up the beach. 'What d'ya wanna do? Live forever?'

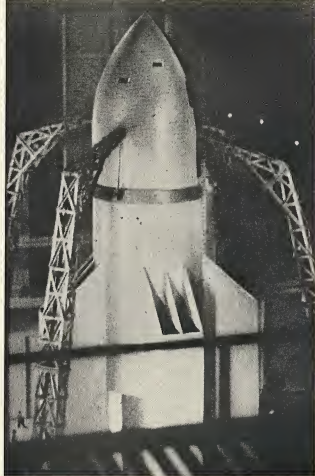
The best of the film, and of Wells, comes in the final scene, after the space ship has been sent on its journey a step ahead of the avenging mob. Cabal and his companion Passworthy watch its progress in a gigantic telescope mirror, their profiles forced out hard against the black of space by Périnal's brilliant photography.

'Oh, God!' Passworthy says, 'Is there ever to be any age of happiness? Is there never to be any rest?'

'Rest enough for the *individual* man,' Cabal says. 'Too much, and too soon, and we call it Death. But for Man no rest and no ending. He must go on, conquest beyond conquest. First this little planet with its winds and ways, and then all the laws of mind and matter that restrain him. Then the planets about him, and at last out across immensity to the stars. And when he has conquered all the



As science fiction, Lang's 'Woman in the Moon' was more effective than 'Metropolis'. Herman Oberth and Willy Ley worked on the models for the convincing moon ship blast-off.



Brigitte Helm as Maria, the heroine of 'Metropolis' whose mental power is used to revivify a robot made in her image. The gadgetry of this sequence turned up in many American fantasies of the 1930's and 1940's

depths of space and all the mysteries of time, still he will be beginning.'

Combined with Menzies's design, Périnal's camerawork and Bliss's music this is a deeply moving, almost religious moment, but the view expressed is little different from the fascist dream of a society united in blind obedience and sworn to fulfil an abstract national ambition. *Things to Come* reflects, not so much the technocratic dream of science fiction, but the dream of the time that produced it. The depression was just over and England hung suspended between the Crash and the War. Robert Graves and Alan Hodge in speaking of the time recall 'the common conviction that a vigorous replanning of the democratic, capitalist system would bring about complete recovery.' An almost mystical faith in the political and economic sciences motivates the film, but it is a faith that ignores totally the potential of the individual. Even the vaunted future technology, what there is of it, is oriented to the needs of the state rather than of mankind. Cabal has his Space Gun and an awesome communications system, but the common people have to make do with high-rise buildings lit by artificial sunshine and a colour TV in every home.

Although the crotchety Wells abominated *Metropolis* ('As a general rule', he wrote in one of his memos to the crew, 'you may take it that whatever Lange (sic) did in *Metropolis* is the exact contrary of what we want done here.') there is no denying that, both in cinematic technique and original ideas, it is far superior to *Things to Come*. Only Menzies's superb design for the ruins of post-war



Lang's Germanic view of man as a creature ruled by higher intelligences was dramatised in 'Metropolis'

Britain has endured, and even that is often minimised by indifferent direction. The film's real value is more social than artistic. As in the case of so many other films, and especially films of fantasy, it embodies the beliefs of the time, set down without self-consciousness in a way we can still appreciate today.

The period up to 1940 is very much a piece as far as sf film is concerned. None of the films made until that date related very much to written science fiction, but depended more on departure points; social commentary, design, the news of the day. But after the success of the *Buck Rogers*

and *Flash Gordon* serials, film-makers realised that the comic strip could catapult them into this untried field. This was the beginning of the sf film field as it exists today, a genre in which the rough technique, childish plots and basic action of the strips have been allied with the cinema to create a lively synthesis. *Metropolis* and *Things to Come* still, however, have an effect which will never really be eradicated.

Next month : **Writers v Hollywood**

Readers' Reaction

William F. Temple emerged as the winner in our fifth issue, as determined by reader votes, and wins our bonus of £10. The reader whose votes most nearly tallied with the final result was Miss E. Inglesfield, of Penzance. The four most popular stories were:

1. LIFE OF THE PARTY by William F. Temple.
2. TECHNICAL WIZARD by Philip E. High.
3. INCUBATION by Damien Broderick.
4. ONE OF THE FAMILY by S. J. Bounds.

Coming next issue . . .

COLD CRUCIBLE

by Bob Shaw

RULE OF THE BRAINS

by John Russell Fearn

plus other great stories and features.

Order from your newsagent or direct from this magazine.



John Brunner FAIRY TALE

*The Pig and Whistle Inn,
Dartleby, Devonshire.*

To Professor Sir Leo Courtenay,
The Montague Laboratories,
Cambridge.
Dear Leo,

This is not exactly a letter from the grave, although since you presumably gave me up for dead seven years ago as everyone else appears to have done, doubtless that will be your first reaction on seeing my handwriting. Yes, I *am* your old friend Barney Gregg who disappeared down here on Dartmoor in the summer of 1964, and I propose to call on you and convince you of that fact as soon as I have calmed sufficiently from my present agitated state. Can you imagine the shock experienced by someone who went to sleep in 1964 and woke to find that it was 1971? I suspect not; that's what happened to me, as I am compelled to believe on seeing the newspapers, yet the sheer improbability of such an event creates a kind of obstinate blockage in the mind, and I cannot rid myself of the notion that this is all some terrible nightmare . . .

Which, very definitely, it is not. I think you know me well enough—but there I go again, forgetting that seven years have gone by, seeming to me like a single night. You knew me well enough, let me say, to recognise that I was never a man to be easily deluded, or to let enthusiasm run away with him. Indeed, although I was (and suspect that physically I still am) on the right side of fifty, I was quite pleased to be referred to as 'Old Sobersides'. I regarded it almost as a professional compliment. Should not a barrister be the most sober of men?

Please, therefore, suspend your judgment on the following remarkable narrative until you have perused it *in toto*. I am going to set down facts—I repeat, *facts*—which I have weighed in my own mind as carefully as I would weigh the evidence of a witness in court. Though they will strike you as extraordinary it is imperative that you should not dismiss them out of hand.

I ought perhaps to explain why I am writing to you before contacting anybody else concerning my return to the everyday world. I have spent much of this evening reading feverishly through what newspapers I could lay hands on in this isolated village. By chance I saw in the *Times* that you are now heading the Montague Laboratories, and I realised that as you are the only nuclear physicist with whom I am on intimate terms I must communicate with you at once. (Congratulations on securing your present post, by the way, and on your knighthood, which comes as news to me although for all I can tell it may have been conferred years ago.)

I did think of telephoning you, but I was forced to conclude that a written message would be more effective because more studied and deliberate. I have been 'back' only since this morning, and I shall certainly be in no state to travel for a while yet; moreover, I haven't a penny to my name and shan't have until my bankers react to the telegram I sent them—may they respond with promptness!

Here I am, then, sitting up after midnight in a tiny dusty room under the eaves of this pub, penning a story which the old people in Dartleby find more believable than I to whom it happened. But then I suppose they accept old legends as an integral element of history. 'There's piskies up to Darty Moor', as the local folk have

J. CANTHORN 76

been saying for generations.

First you will wish to know where I have been these seven years. Well, my dear Leo, not to put too fine a point on it, I have been in *Fairyland*, and there is a rational basis for the stories told about Rip van Winkle, Thomas the Rimer, and all those other fabulous characters.

Already I see you in my mind's eye, scientifically scornful. For God's sake—and far more for Man's sake—defer judgment. This is what took place.

Everyone in this village has turned out to be intimately acquainted with the story of my disappearance. I seem to have provided a lasting sensation, and I swear many of them are disappointed at my return. Much may have intervened to put the facts out of our mind, however. To refresh your memory: I was on one of my annual camping trips. You, and most of my other friends, were never able to understand why I preferred to spend my holidays alone in a tent instead of in some hotel on the Riviera rubbing shoulders with the *haut monde*. Frankly, my legal practice exposed me to so much duplicity and chicanery that I needed to escape from my fellows at least for a week or two every summer. (How curious to be continually forcing myself to use the past tense: as though one were translating a Latin exercise and having to recall that it was the Roman custom to compose letters from the recipient's point of view!)

The moors of the West Country have always been my favourite retreat—mainly, I think, because out here one can let one's imagination stretch its legs. Wishing-wells and ends of rainbows no longer seem as remote as they do in London. When the early mists swirl around the grey tors, there seems no reason why strangely garbed Phoenician traders should not appear and barter with us for tin. I mention this fanciful notion deliberately, to indicate that I fully realise I was in a susceptible state upon my arrival here.

The drive from London was a long one, and when I reached Dartley the weather was bad—drizzling with rain and very windy. However, I was too impatient to postpone the commencement of my week's camping even to the following morning. I garaged my car here at the inn and walked westward with my tent and rucksack, stopping only to buy milk at a lonely farm.

On being overtaken by darkness I pitched camp in the shelter of a group of high grey rocks, because there I found a kind of shallow cave where I could build a fire and sit in slightly greater comfort than inside my little tent. After eating a light supper—which, by the way, did not include any of the traditional ingredients for nightmare, not even cheese—I doused the fire and turned in, expecting to sleep as soundly as I generally do under canvas and awaken an hour or so after dawn.

However. . . Now, as I mentioned, I'd paused to buy milk from a farm I passed. I had the better part of a quart in an aluminium jug that lacked a lid. Before retiring, I put this on a flat stone near the tent and covered it with an enamel plate. For fear the wind might

lift the plate off, I weighted it with another large stone.

About midnight I was woken by a sharp clanging noise. I knew it instantly for the sound of the plate being dislodged. I assumed at first the wind had been responsible. Listening, however, I found that the wind had dropped and it was no longer raining.

I crept cautiously to the door of the tent and looked outside. And I saw—

How best can I describe the creature? I could see it, or *him*, distinctly by the watery light of the moon, now the clouds had blown by. My first thought was of a lemur, or loris: a spindly-limbed upright animal, no taller than the length of my arm, with huge eyes and prick ears like paper cones pointing downwards on the sides of its head. This apparition was endeavouring to raise and drink from my jug of milk—a task which in proportion to his size was comparable with a man trying to drink from a four-gallon keg.

As I have confessed, in leaving London that morning I had unconsciously divested myself of my habitual city-dweller's scepticism, and I had not a moment's doubt that I was seeing one of the famous 'Little Folk' in the flesh. A Dartmoor pisky, in fact.

I was so excited that I made an unintentional noise. At once the creature took fright. With a high squeak like a bat's—but obviously not so shrill, for I have not heard a bat cry since I was a lad of sixteen—he let the jug rock back where it stood and vanished among the boulders.

Eager to tempt him back, I poured some milk into the plate as one would for a cat, and made idiotic mewling noises into the darkness. Shortly I saw the little fellow again. He was so pathetically eager for the milk that eventually his desire overcame his fear of me and he dashed up to suck at it. He definitely sucked; he did not lap or drink. His tongue seemed to curl into a tube like a proboscis.

I could inspect him at leisure now. Although his limbs were not dissimilar from the human, his body was very different indeed. What at first glance might have been mistaken for a stubby tail coiled between his legs proved to be as it were his abdomen; it was separated from the point at which the legs set into the trunk by a very narrow 'waist'. Despite being no biologist, I was at once struck by the insectile quality of such an anatomy, and suspected that in the course of evolution the thorax must have lengthened and the abdomen shrunk to permit an upright stance, while one pair of limbs atrophied or fused with its neighbours.

I had, of course, visions of taming the creature, or at least of luring him back for many more helpings of milk, as one can with a hedgehog. So I remained very still, watching him intently, and it was not long before I noticed how strangely he had begun to act. Before he had half drained the plate, his legs seemed to weaken, and he had much trouble keeping his balance. Once he fell over completely, and regained his feet only with difficulty, clutching mightily at the plate to steady himself while he resumed his sucking.

It occurred to me suddenly that he must be intoxicated!

He straightened abruptly and uttered another shrill cry. Then he began a sort of wild dance, arms and legs flailing. I was too astonished to react until he had cavorted away from me and was almost lost again among the rocks. Seizing my flashlight, I hurried after him, careless of the fact that I was barefooted.

Just inside the mouth of the cave where I had cooked my supper, I found him sprawled flat on his face, exactly like a dead drunk human being. He had tripped over an unburnt stick and tumbled into the damp, dirty ashes of my fire.

Focusing my light on him, I bent to pick him out of the messy pile, and a falsetto voice like that of an incredibly precocious baby sternly ordered me not to touch him.

I was sufficiently taken aback to straighten to my full height—a dangerous thing to do in a low-ceilinged cave. I cracked my head so painfully that it was a minute or two before I saw clearly again. When I recovered, I found another of the creatures bending over his fallen companion exactly like Toby Ritchie at the bedside of a patient in St. Helen's. (You know Toby, I think, in which case you will understand the comparison at once.)

It was this new arrival who had told me to leave the unfortunate drunkard alone. He spoke again a moment later, raising his head but averting his large round eyes from the glare of my flashlight. In a tone of distinct anger he said, 'You gave him milk!'

'I—uh—well, yes, actually I did,' I admitted.

The creature sat back in the posture a man would call 'squatting on his haunches', and I saw that this species could have no need of chairs, for he rested very conveniently on his pad-like abdomen.

'You ought to be ashamed of yourself!' he snapped.

As calmly as possible, I said, 'I'm very sorry. I found him trying to help himself from my milk-jug. I thought I was doing him a favour.'

He looked me over as well as he could, shading his eyes from my light. After a moment he moved, in a kind of frog's hop, to take station behind his companion. More doctor-like than ever, he leaned his full weight on the other's abdomen and pumped back and forth, as though giving artificial respiration.

A few applications of pressure in this way caused the 'patient' to regurgitate a stream of discoloured milk. I began to refer to the 'doctor' in my own mind as Toby, for reasons indicated earlier.

'Better,' said the newly-baptised Toby at last, and heaved and dragged his companion into a more comfortable position, clear of the wet ashes. 'But I hoped we'd never suffer this again. Must we wait for ever to be free of it?'

Inspiration dawned. 'Am I to understand,' I ventured, 'that milk is poisonous to you? Or rather, a kind of dangerous drug?'

'Isn't it common knowledge?' he retorted.

'Not to me, I assure you! For us it's the most harm-

less of substances. I took it for granted your friend was simply hungry. Or thirsty.'

'I'll take your word for it,' the creature said after a pause. 'It's true enough that things have changed since the days when every farmer's wife would set milk at the door to tempt us. Some of us became so debased by lust for milk that they would even curry human favour by working on the farms, in spite of the continual danger from cold iron.'

That put a different complexion on the old stories of the fairyfolk doing favours for the humans who treated them well! And that reminded me of an all-important question. I said, 'So you are—uh—one of what we call the Little People?'

'See for yourself,' he sighed, and gave a kind of shrug. From under a pair of brownish, shaggy, shawl-like cases on his back he shook out wings as gauzy as a beetle's. Somehow I never felt when I was a child that whimsical artists were correct in decorating fairies' backs with butterfly wings, and here in my sceptical middle age I'd been proved right.

'Can you fly?' I asked.

'Of course not,' was the impatient answer. 'They're vestigial.'

It was his use of that relatively technical word which made me see what I ought to have realised when he so professionally relieved his companion of the poisonous bellyful of milk. This was no—how shall I put it? This was no *peasant*, if you like. Toby was nothing like the traditional mischievous piskie of West Country folklore. This was a true sapient being, with an exceptional vocabulary and doubtless many other talents specific to his kind. I was suddenly overawed at the notion that I was speaking, as it were, to an alien intelligence: an ancient dream had turned to reality for me. I was desperate to make the most of this unique encounter, yet at the same time mortally afraid that I might give unlooked-for offence through ignorance and cause him to vanish into the night. Casting around for some way to indicate that I was concerned about his well-being, I hit on something he had hinted at.

'I think you said that iron is dangerous to you also,' I suggested. 'There's probably iron in this flashlight of mine—is that harmful?'

Seeming willing enough to talk, he shook his head. 'It isn't iron as such, or stainless steel. It's rust. It's an irritant. Touching rusty iron sets up an allergic reaction. Without treatment the victim suffocates in a matter of hours.'

'Suffocates?' I echoed.

'You have internal lungs. Our communicate directly with the external air. So.' Folding his wings, he twisted where he sat to display the front of his chest—no, call it a thorax, because this seemed like conclusive proof that Toby was indeed basically an insect. I recalled reading that insects larger than a certain crucial size could not survive because oxygen could not percolate far enough into a system of rigid spiracles such as they use for inhalation. Toby's species solved that problem, he in-

formed me, by making almost the entire thorax into a pseudo-lung, convoluted until its area was greater than that of the body-surface. Rust inflammation, I gathered, made this pseudo-lung impermeable and horny.

With equal willingness he demonstrated to me how it was possible for him to talk, using a specialised vibratory organ located close to a large air-cavity in his thorax that acted as a resonator. Fascinated, impressed, bewildered, but encouraged by his openness, I came finally to the crucial question.

'There's something I simply don't understand,' I said. 'Your race is plainly very intelligent, and the way you're talking to me indicates that you must be in close contact with us, to employ such a vast range of English words. Why have you become a half-forgotten legend to us?'

'Almost all of us have gone,' he replied. 'We had begun to leave when you were still wild beasts without a language.'

'Gone? Do you mean—died out?'

'No. Gone. To other worlds or other modes of existence. You have no adequate words. Perhaps in two or three thousand years . . . Until a century or so ago, you know, it was barely possible for us to communicate with human beings, and even now I find it difficult to pare down my thinking so that I can express myself within the confines of a human tongue.'

'Then you are an older race than we are?'

'Considerably,' he agreed, not without a trace of wry humour. 'Our best estimates indicate that we have—ah—been around for between thirty and sixty million years.'

Million! The shock of that almost drove the next thing I had intended to ask out of my mind, but I forced myself to recover; I must not waste a second of this unrepeatable opportunity. I said, 'I'm afraid my light is rather bright for you, isn't it? Are you purely nocturnal?'

'Primarily,' was the reply. 'And if you would turn the lamp aside . . .? Thank you. Yes, our eyes are adapted to low light-levels, but that's a secondary characteristic. Our ancestors had a horny integument which, as you've seen, has evolved into no more than a sort of skeleton, to anchor our muscles. Consequently in dry warm air we dehydrate very rapidly. Also we are sensitive to ultra-violet light, as are human albinos; there is a risk of a condition akin to lupus, or cancer of the skin.'

'Can you not wear protective clothing?'

'No, it would hamper our breathing and the continual exchange of moisture which occurs everywhere on the surface of our bodies. In any case, the sun can very easily be avoided, particularly in moist temperate areas like this island.'

There were still hundreds of things I wanted to know, particularly about how closely our legends resembled fact, and above all I meant to inquire how his race—so fragile that sunlight or a bit of rust could kill them—had endured these millions of years, whereas we tough humans seemed in imminent danger of exterminating ourselves after a mere fraction of that time.

At that moment, however, his sick companion stirred and sat up, and I realised that Toby had only been talking to me to occupy my attention until the latter recovered. He turned to him, and my bruised scalp started to tingle. It was plain that there was a conversation in progress, but it was in the ultrasonic range.

At length, looking thoroughly ashamed of himself, the toper made off, and Toby turned to me again.

'This has been interesting,' he said in a friendly enough manner. 'Almost certainly this will be the last encounter between our species. We tried for a long time to preserve our home world, but we have no more than a sentimental attachment to it now, and it is definitely too dangerous to remain here.'

'Because we use so much iron?' I hazarded.

'Oh no. Because of the planet's determination to blow itself up.'

That seemed to make no sense whatsoever. I shook my head. He eyed me speculatively for a while, and appeared to reach a decision.

'We've tried very often to explain to you humans what the danger is,' he said. 'Unfortunately your comprehension is so limited, you've treated our warnings as an absurd fiction. I wonder, though, whether someone as relatively well-informed as you might not be equipped to grasp the gist. It's worth trying . . . To begin with, tell me what you know about the stars?'

As you have often told me somewhat brusquely, Leo, I'm no scientist! However, thanks to my acquaintance with you some facts have rubbed off on me. I gave a summary account, as well as I could, of contemporary astronomy, and Toby was reasonably pleased.

'So you've finally discovered that the stars are emitting information!' he exclaimed. 'Indeed you seem to have extracted quite a lot of knowledge from their spectra. Good! Now you must realise that there is a genuine analogy between that information which the stars are broadcasting, and what we are doing now: talking. The nature of both is determined by a more or less organised series of events. To employ an image which you will probably find helpful, the radiation of a star can be regarded as one continuous exuberant shout about what the star is experiencing in its interior.'

I said, 'Are you trying to tell me that stars are *conscious beings*?'

With positively human sarcasm, he said, 'You have a most apt word in your language: anthropomorphic! I did not say "is", I said "can be regarded as". You are insufficiently evolved to come closer to the truth. Now, to continue: this planet we are on at the moment can be regarded (mark the way I express it!) as being envious of the stars—jealous of their more vital and vivid experience.'

I was going to interrupt again, but he prevented me with a brusque gesture.

'In a never-ending attempt to experience events of a stellar nature, planets bring together masses of radioactive material. You have legends of my species as miners, haven't you?'

'Kobolds,' I said feebly. 'Gnomes. That's right.'

'What would we need to mine for? Gold? Jewels? Of course not—we don't use tools and we don't wear ornaments! No, we were frustrating attempts by this planet to bring together sufficient radioactive mass to initiate a stellar reaction in its crust. Thanks to intervention by you humans, however, we have given up the struggle and decided to retire elsewhere.'

'What are we supposed to have done?' I cried.

He ignored me. 'It is far easier for the planet to assemble vast amounts of light, fusible elements in one place than to concentrate radioactives, for the latter tend to heat up, melt and dissipate without causing more than a few volcanic eruptions. But the light elements, such as those which power the stars, are stable and can be accumulated in as large a quantity as necessary to await the initiating impulse.'

Thanks to your own explanations, Leo, I did finally get the point. Duffer though I am where scientific matters are concerned, I followed perfectly your own account, which you gave me a few days ago—I mean, which you *had* given me a few days previously—concerning attempts to trigger a solar reaction in light elements without the cumbersome and dangerous employment of an atomic bomb. I recall your saying that your chief hope of accomplishing this resided in the properties of that device I barely understand, which they call a 'laser'. (Seven years having gone by, I suppose this is virtually ancient history to you; to me, however, it's only a week in the past.)

Nonetheless, my mind revolted at the proposition that Mother Earth was capable of will and intention, like a living being. I said as much to Toby—I fear, more bluntly than was polite. I called the notion, candidly, rubbish!

He sighed. 'I hardly expected you to be convinced verbally,' he admitted. 'I gave you the verbal explanation only in the hope that it would equip you to understand what you are going to experience now.'

And with a leap like—like a hungry flea!—he jumped up at my chest and *stabbed* me.

The species from which Toby's kind descended must, I imagine, have been related to a kind of wasp I've read about, which stings its prey into a state of suspended animation. (Is it an ichneumon? I have a hazy recollection...)

For, piecing together what I've learned since I woke up, I can only believe that as a result of this stab, no mark of which can be discerned, I passed into a miraculous coma. I must have been hidden by some extraordinary means, for when I awoke I was in the same cave, and I've established that the cave was searched when I was reported missing, and my tent and

other belongings were discovered, but not my unconscious self.

And—in my mind, at any rate—I was taken into Fairyland.

Perhaps I'm the first human being to make proper sense of what I saw. Certainly I'm not the first to undergo that experience. I suspect that the hero of *The Rime of True Thomas* and suchlike other legends was so confused that the best he could make of the images and concepts overwhelming his mind was to convert them into everyday analogies; thus the splendour of the stars became the splendour of a fairy court, with magnificent kings and queens populating it.

I felt as though a few short hours were passing and in fact seven years and almost three months went by. During that time I saw and heard and felt (my senses were so to say 'cross-connected') the literal truth of what Toby had been telling me. I heard the joyful communication of the stars—which, it strikes me in passing, may have been heard by others before me. The palmist spoke of them 'rejoicing before the Lord', did he not? And how about the 'music of the spheres'?

More alarmingly, I sensed and perceived the dull, cloddish envy of the planets, including our own, and I saw how they plot and scheme to explode themselves so that they may—however briefly—experience the ecstasy of the stars.

Including our own, Leo!

When I awoke, I was naked except for some damp, half-rotted rags, moreover, of course, I was filthy, and ravenously hungry. I stumbled into Dartleby and with much difficulty convinced the local doctor that I was not an escaped madman. (He told me, by the way, that physically I'm in fine shape bar a hint of undernourishment.) But I did not, naturally, share the full details of my experience with him. Unless I had imparted it to someone, though, I realised I would never be able to sleep tonight, which is why I've set it out in letter form.

Since you have the misfortune to be the only nuclear physicist I know, I'm wholly and utterly dependent on you. So indeed are we all! I've no idea where these light, fusible elements are being concentrated, awaiting the impact of the energy which will trigger them, or even what the trigger is to be—a nuclear test, one of your lasers, an accident in a power-plant...

But when the time comes (and believe me, what Toby showed me has convinced me it *will* come), Earth is going to become with high delight a small though temporary star. And it's obvious what will happen to us.

So you've *got* to believe me, Leo. You *must*.

Yours ever—

(signed Barney)

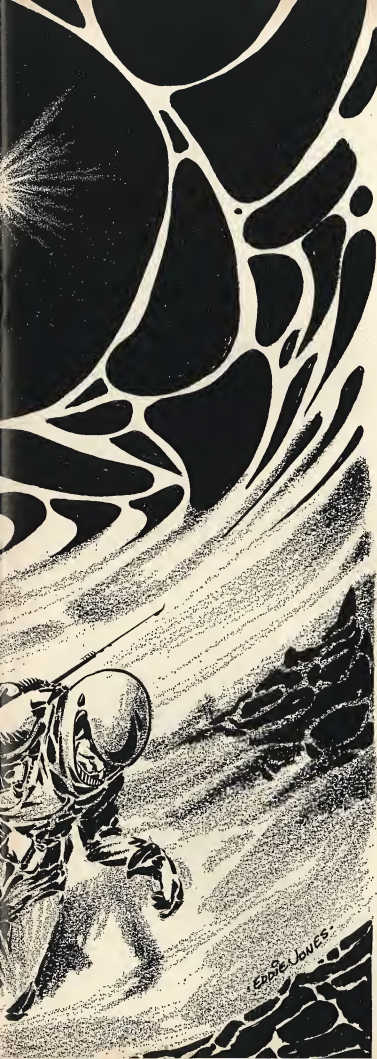
Barnaby Gregg, QC

VISION OF TOMORROW for August is a special anniversary issue and features
LAST VIGIL by Michael Moorcock and **SPAWN OF JUPITER** by E. C. Tubb.
DON'T MISS IT!

NOTHING LIKE THE SUN

Christopher Priest





No matter how far the men travelled each day, the line of high, rocky mountains on the horizon ahead seemed no nearer. Each morning, when the early mists had blown away to the west, the peaks ahead appeared to be at once forbidding and welcoming.

Only when they reached the mountains would they stand any chance of survival.

Underfoot, the ground was a continuing nightmare. Centuries before, the last remains of the topsoil had been snatched away by the incessant winds, and now only the sharp-edged tips of rock-strata protruded at the surface. The predominant colour in the plain was a dark, muddy grey, broken by occasional patches of water reflecting the silver radiance of the sky.

Perhaps on some other continent of this planet, Taranth, the conditions were more amiably disposed towards human life, but it was here that the war was being fought.

The men had been crossing the plain for five days, and their numbers, which had been fifteen at the start, were now down to four. The only officer, young Lieutenant Gracer, lay weakly on his back, occasionally turning to retch into a shallow gully in the rock at his side.

As the sixth morning dawned the other three men watched him uneasily, knowing they could not leave him, but equally that they must move while there was daylight.

As Gracer rolled over once more onto his face, and vomited emptily and noisily onto the rock, the oldest of the men beckoned the others to one side, and led them thirty yards downwind of the sick officer.

'Well?' he growled at them, in a voice that revealed he had no hope that they would agree on anything. 'What shall we do?'

Leavis, the taller of the other two, stared straight back at him. 'We drop him of course.'

The other, whose name was Makin, shrugged his shoulders. He looked quickly at Leavis, then away. 'I don't know,' he said.

'I say we wait until the Lieutenant is better,' Rassken, the first man, said. 'We can't leave him here.'

Leavis said: 'The Ghouls will find us if we stay with him. Either that, or we'll starve.'

Rassken found his self-control beginning to slip. Five long days of hunger were wearing on him.

'If we drop Gracer now,' he said, 'what do you think will happen to him?'

Leavis shrugged. 'I don't care.'

He turned away, and walked slowly towards the nearest pool of water, about five yards from where Gracer lay. The older man watched him walk, noting the casual way in which the man held his body. No man who had spent five nights in the open on Taranth would walk naturally like that.

He said to Makin: 'What about you? Are you going with Leavis, or are you staying with me?'

Rassken wished for a moment that he had some rank to pull on the man. Though it might have done no

good; distinctions of rank had no value now.

Makin looked at him uneasily. 'I'm not sure,' he said. Rassken nodded towards Leavis. 'If you do go, you realise you stand as little chance of making it? Perhaps less.'

'Does it make any difference?'

'Not to me,' Rassken said. 'But it might to you.'

'But if we stay here the Ghouls will find us.'

'They're going to find us sooner or later anyway. We might as well be here as anywhere. At least the water's drinkable.'

He looked towards Leavis, who was standing with his feet apart by the edge of the pool. His knees were slightly bent. Behind him, the sick Lieutenant was watching helplessly as the man fumbled with the zipper on the front of his trousers.

Rassken turned quickly, and dived across the rocks towards the man. Before Leavis could relieve his bladder into the water, Rassken seized him by the shoulders and swung him away.

'Not in there, Leavis!' he cried.

Leavis tried to swing his fist up into the older man's face, but Rassken tightened his grip as he ducked, then pushed the man away bodily. Leavis stumbled forward, tripped over a projection and fell with arms outstretched onto the broken, rocky surface. He shouted with pain as he fell, but made no move to get up.

Rassken watched him cautiously for a moment or two, then turned towards Lieutenant Gracer.

'Sorry about that, sir,' he said.

The Lieutenant's face was yellow, and his eyes were screwed up as if against a bright light. But the morning light of Taranth was a pale, misty glow; the Lieutenant's discomfort was not for external reasons.

'You'd better distribute rations,' he said to Rassken. 'Leave me out today. I couldn't keep anything down.'

Rassken knelt beside the young man, and spoke quietly to him.

'Can you walk, sir?'

'I don't know. I—I think so.'

'When we've had the food, I think we'd better try to move.'

The Lieutenant nodded, and closed his eyes.

Leavis had climbed to his feet again, and now stood over the two men. There was a slight graze on his forehead, and the heel of one of his hands was bleeding from a gash.

Rassken stood up and faced him. 'Get some water, Leavis.' To Makin, he said: 'Break out all the rations we have.'

Leavis stared at him stubbornly for a moment, then picked up a metal canteen and walked back towards the pool. As Makin wrenched open the wooden lid of the last rations-container, he picked up Lieutenant Gracer's pack in search of the water-purity chemical. Yesterday evening the pool had been safe for drinking, but it had rained in the night and had to be tested again. The gale-force winds of Taranth lifted tons of debris into the rain-laden atmosphere every day, and deposited it randomly

all over the planet with little regard for the human palate.

Leavis returned with the canteen, and slopped the water into the neck of the filter. As the water gurgled through into the bottle below, Rassken watched it with trepidation. If this water was now foul, they'd be forced to move anyway, and he would have no defence against Leavis.

When the bottle was full, he tipped a little of the water into the pan of the purity-testing device, then opened the phial containing the crystals. Only a few grains left. Enough for this time, then how many more?

He dropped some of the grains into the palm of his hand, then brushed them off with his fingers into the sample of water.

If the water was in any way harmful, the grains would give off a smoky blue stain in less than two minutes.

But even with this safeguard, there was never any real guarantee that the water of Taranth was totally safe for drinking. The Lieutenant had picked up his bug from somewhere, and it was unlikely to be from anything but the water. The food-capsules were manufactured and sealed in sterile conditions on Earth, and were used widely by all combat-units in this planetary operation.

Although the grains protected from all known impurities, it was impossible to separate a convenient chemical that could detect unknown malignancies. The Planetary Engineers had been making the first tentative reports on the ecology of Taranth when the war had erupted violently and abruptly onto the planet.

While he waited for the grains to show some staining, Rassken glanced worriedly at the Lieutenant. The symptoms from which the man was suffering could be his normal bodily reaction against alien micro-organisms. On the other hand, it could be the beginning of a more serious, and perhaps fatal, disease.

Whatever the outcome was to be, it was vital that Lieutenant Gracer get proper medical attention as soon as practicable.

Conscious of the eyes of the other two men, Rassken let the time-period elapse, then allowed an extra minute to be on the safe side. No blue appeared in the water.

'I guess it's safe,' he said eventually, and tipped the sample onto the rock.

Makin had broken open the rations-container, and laid out what was left. When the men had become separated from the main forces they'd been carrying emergency rations only, and these they had been eking out ever since. Q-Rations were among the most unpopular of all Corps foodstuffs. Tasteless and tough, they were kept exclusively for emergencies by even the hardiest of infantrymen.

Rassken looked at the small pile of capsules. If they maintained the meagre amounts each, there was probably enough for two meals today, and one tomorrow. After that, they'd live on a diet of water. In his mind's eye, Rassken separated the capsules into four, disregarding what Gracer had said. Even if he could not keep the food down now, he would need every vitamin

he could get once his stomach had settled.

He divided the pile into two, and nodded towards Makin and Leavis.

'That's yours. I'll keep the rest.'

Leavis said: 'What about Gracer?'

'He gets his share.'

Makin knelt down and picked up his own quarter of the capsules, and thrust some of them into a breast pocket. The remainder he dropped into a metal plate, and spilled water from the filtration bottle onto them. As the dehydrated protein-surrogate began to expand, he picked up chunks of it and began the long process of chewing.

Rassken said to Leavis: 'What are you going to do? Are you staying?'

'No. Are you?'

'It depends on the Lieutenant. If he can walk, we'll all go on.'

The other man's eyes moved again, uncertainly. Rassken could see his indecision, like guilt. Whatever his feelings about pressing on towards the comparative safety of the mountains, it was evident that he wouldn't lightly throw away the mutual protection of companions.

The two men squatted down by the water, making the paste from the capsules and eating what threatened to be one of their last meals. At one point, Rassken turned to offer some food or water to Gracer again, but the young Lieutenant lay still, his eyes tightly closed, and his back slightly arched.

Around them, the mist was beginning to lift. They must move soon.

The weather in this part of the planet followed an unbreakable cycle. The mists of dawn lifted early, finally vanishing as the first breezes of the day swept across the plain. Before long the breeze would become a full-blooded wind, and by noon it was a devastating storm-wind, hurling clouds of dust, mud and rock in its path. The gale continued all afternoon, dropping away towards evening when the rains would start. Sometime in the early morning, the clouds would pass over, and a warm sticky mist would ooze out of the damp, brittle rocks.

This was the best time to travel. During the gale, nothing could move and the men made it their business to have found some hideaway in the lee of a small cliff or boulder until the worst of the storm had passed. They'd sleep through the rains, then set out as soon as the mists began.

But this morning, their sixth morning alone and hunted on the plain, the men had been unable to move because of the Lieutenant.

When they had finished eating, the men stood up, aware that they must soon reach a decision. They gathered together their gear, and Rassken went down to the pool and filled all the canteens. For all he knew this pool may be the last one containing drinkable water that they'd encounter.

He walked back to the Lieutenant, and noted that

Leavis and Makin had moved off to one side, and were talking together.

Rassken gripped the Lieutenant's shoulder gently, and the man opened his eyes.

'Time we moved, sir,' he said.

Gracer pulled himself painfully into a sitting position.

'How do you feel?' Rassken said.

'Terrible. I can't possibly move.'

'I've got trouble, sir. Leavis wants to abandon you, and I think Makin's going to go with him.'

'What about you?'

Rassken shook his head.

'I think I stand a better chance staying put.'

The Lieutenant looked at him shrewdly. 'You don't mean that, do you?'

'Well—'

'I think you should go with them,' Gracer said, shifting his position slightly. His eyes had closed again, perhaps involuntarily. 'Whatever happens, I'll have to stay. There's no point you being caught as well. I'll stay under cover, and if you can get help when you reach the mountains, send out a helicopter to pick me up.'

'But, sir, the Ghouls will almost certainly find you.'

'And you, if you stay.' Gracer opened his eyes again, but seemed to have difficulty focussing them on Rassken. 'Take the other men. And get some help.'

'All right.'

Leavis and Makin were watching from half-way up the lip of the crater-like depression in which they had spent the night. Rassken made sure the Lieutenant had his small pile of Q-Ration capsules and a canteen of water, and that they were within his easy reach, then went over to them.

'Are you coming?' Leavis said.

'Yes.'

'What about him?'

Rassken said: 'He'll be all right.'

Leavis glanced at the Lieutenant, then looked back at Rassken. 'Makin says he's got it now.'

Rassken turned sharply towards the man. 'Is that right?'

'Yes. But I'll be okay. It's just a pain in the gut. I ate the Q too quickly.'

'Are you sure? You don't want to stay with Lieutenant Gracer?'

'No.'

The man was standing in a slumped posture, as if in passive defence of something. When they turned to move up the slope, Rassken noticed that the man's movements were frozen, as if he were trying to use as few of his muscles as possible.

Rassken said: 'You're ill, Makin.'

'I'm okay, I tell you. Let's move!'

They walked up to the lip of the slope, then down the steep, crumbly surface of the other side. At one point Rassken thought he detected a sudden movement in the rocks to one side, and the three men crouched warily behind a tiny outcropping of boulders. Leavis chewed nervously on his lower lip, then spat in the direction of

the rocks.

'It's only the mist. Come on.'

He strode ahead confidently, a tall figure with the inherent arrogance of the ignorant.

Rassken stood up more cautiously, looking at the crouched figure of Makin, now clenching his teeth with very evident pain. He put his hand under the man's elbow to help him to his feet, but abruptly the man fell to the floor like a collapsing blanket, and vomited noisily onto the rocky ground.

Semi-digested Q-Ration pulp sprayed messily around his face.

'Leavis!' Rassken yelled after the man. 'Makin's sick!'

Twenty yards away, the man had stopped walking. He stood still, Rassken's shout ignored.

Before him, three tall, black figures, armoured with dull grey-metal chainmail, walked slowly towards him with dreadful menace.

Rassken, Leavis and Makin were face to face with the Ghouls.

In a history littered with wars, mankind's struggle against the race known only as Ghouls was just a bigger and bloodier war than ever before. It was a war that had started suddenly and violently, and one which had no foreseeable conclusion. No-one knew the planet from which the Ghouls came, nor what was the total extent of their forces or armaments.

Until the Ghoul invasion of Taranth, the skirmishes had always taken place in space. And until Taranth, no man had ever seen a Ghoul. Only one Earth ship had ever been captured intact by the Ghouls; a year later it had been found drifting in space, its entire crew on board. Every man's head had been forcibly wrenched from his shoulders.

It was from then that the Ghouls had had their name.

On Taranth the mode of the war changed. No longer a computerised clashing of over-sophisticated missiles and defence-systems, the fighting was passed over to the ordinary soldier. If there was air-cover and satellite-directed manoeuvres, it was still the lot of the common infantryman to trudge and slug his way across the terrain and, if necessary, to confront the Ghouls.

And so man had come to see his adversary for the first time.

It was during a cleaning-up mission of a Ghoul base that Lieutenant Gracer and fourteen of his men had become separated from the main body of soldiers. And soon afterwards, a concentrated Ghoul attack had reduced their numbers to four. Meanwhile, the main force had moved on, and Gracer and the other three were on their own.

If they were to survive, they had to reach the Earth camp in the mountains. Until then, they would be presumed dead, or—what amounted to the same—taken prisoner. For while the Earth forces never took live prisoners, the Ghouls made a habit of it.

Perhaps it was the knowledge of this that acted the

way it did on Leavis when the Ghouls appeared.

He turned, and stumbled back towards the other two. Rassken looked round quickly, but could see no other Ghouls in the immediate vicinity. It seemed obvious that these were not a part of the main section of the Ghoul forces which, almost without doubt, were combing the area in search of the four.

Leavis scrambled back up the slope, and ran past Rassken and Makin over the crest and down towards where the Lieutenant lay. As he passed Rassken his face had lost all traces of his nonchalant confidence, and was white with terror.

Rassken slung his rifle to his side, and crouched beside Makin. Beneath the tunic of his armoured battle-dress he could feel his heart beating violently, and his mouth was filled with saliva. Without conscious thought in his mind, he watched the three Ghouls walk up the slope towards him, perhaps already prepared within himself for what must inevitably come.

Beside him, Makin retched on, oblivious to the Ghouls.

The three aliens stopped in a semi-circle around the two men. They ignored Rassken's presence, and watched with evident interest as Makin belched and spluttered on the floor. A shallow pool of vile-smelling liquid, lumpy with pieces of half-masticated Q-Ration, lay just beneath his face.

One of the Ghouls bent forward, and pushed Makin away with the end of his weapon. The man, realising for the first time what the presence of the Ghouls meant, looked up in horror, then rolled back onto his face as another spasm of pain took him.

Rassken watched with mixed fascination and disgust as the Ghoul placed one of his hands into the vomit, lifted it to his face, then licked it away. He looked down at Rassken, then back at Makin, and said something in short, high-pitched monosyllables to the other two.

The three Ghouls stepped back and the one in the centre, who was evidently some kind of officer, stepped away from them and disappeared around the clump of rocks at the side. The other two Ghouls covered Rassken and Makin with their weapons.

Rassken, still confused by what he had seen, watched curiously. Beneath his tunic, his heart maintained its accelerated thumping.

In seconds, the Ghoul had returned.

He rattled off more instructions to the other two, threw down an object at Rassken's feet, and all three marched away swiftly. Bemused, Rassken looked around for signs of a trap, and saw none. He looked down at Makin, horribly, painfully ill, and saw that they were both still alive and free. And finally he looked at the object the Ghoul had thrown down before him.

It was a case of Q-Rations.

Later, the four men huddled in the lee of a spinal ridge of rock as the afternoon gale roared across the plain. Occasional squalls of rain slashed against the rocks, and were sucked down into the tiny cavity where they lay.

In the breathtaking noise of the hurricane it was difficult to speak, and virtually impossible to move away.

On the ground between them lay the O-Ration case. Inside it were enough tablets of the protein-surrogate to last them another two days. Also inside were emergency drugs and medical supplies, a water-purifier, hard-tack biscuit, bitter chocolate and, to their ironic amusement, several prophylactics.

Evidently the case had been captured by the Ghouls at some time in the past. The contents were untouched, and it even appeared that no-one had tried to open it.

As soon as he was sure the three Ghouls had disappeared, Rassken had half dragged and half carried Makin back to where Gracer lay. Then, with a white-faced Leavis, had returned to the other side of the incline and retrieved the case.

Already, the Lieutenant had recovered partially with the aid of drugs from the case. Although his hands trembled and his voice was weak, and he was noticeably thinner, the Lieutenant was able to stand, and had eaten a little of the chocolate.

Makin, on the other hand, showed no sign of getting better. He refused all food offered to him, and the only water he drank was vomited up almost at once. The Lieutenant watched the man with sympathy, and as he grew stronger himself, spent a lot of time attempting to make him more comfortable.

As the evening drew on, and the gale began to drop, Gracer questioned Rassken closely about the Ghouls. Makin had been given some of the drugs from the case, and had fallen asleep. Leavis, detailed to watch him, sat at his side, staring moodily across the barren landscape.

When Rassken had gone once more through what had happened, the Lieutenant said: 'And you've no idea why you were given the case?'

'No, sir. At the time I was only too glad that I wasn't taken prisoner.'

'Can you describe them?'

Rassken shook his head. 'Not properly. They're tall, and they've got black skins. That could be some kind of clothing, of course. They've got a strange kind of walk—a sort of lope. And they wear that loose armour.'

Gracer nodded slowly. The appearance of the Ghouls was reasonably well known to the Earth forces.

'Anything else?'

'I don't think so, sir.' Rassken looked down at the limp form of Makin. 'Only... When the Ghouls pushed Makin away, there was something odd about the way it was done.'

'Odd?'

'I'm not sure. Something about the way the Ghoul looked at him.'

Gracer sat silently and watched the man. His eyes were shut, as if in an attempt to recall what he had seen.

'I know what it was! It was their eyes—as if they were blind.'

'Are they, do you think?'

'No. I'm sure they could see us. But it was as if their

sight was weak.'

'Did you get a close look?'

Rassken shook his head for the second time. 'I may have done, I can't remember. Could it be important, do you think?'

'I don't know. Any information about the Ghouls must be worth something.'

They sat in silence for a while as Makin suddenly stirred in his uneasy sleep. Then Leavis turned unexpectantly and faced them.

'What's in it for them?' he said, addressing the Lieutenant. 'I mean, why give us food? It doesn't make sense.'

'Does it have to?' Gracer muttered, half to himself. 'There's no common denominator of behaviour. We've no knowledge of their society, or their history. There's nothing we can supply as a standard. No way of determining their motivations.'

'There is one way,' Rassken said.

The Lieutenant looked at him. His face was taking on an unhealthy pallor once more. Would that mean a return to his illness, Rassken thought, or was it just the weird light of this planet?

Rassken said: 'We've one yardstick. It's not much, I know. But we can apply our own standards to their actions, and see if there is any motive behind it, however alien it might seem.'

'But that must surely be the last way we could tell.'

'No, sir. It's the only way.'

Rassken looked away, and tried to clear his mind. In the near distance the wind, still blowing like a minor gale, was worrying an accumulation of pebbles at the base of a boulder. At intervals the stones rattled against each other, with a sound barely audible before it was whipped away by the wind.

He said thoughtfully: 'Just about all we know about the Ghouls can be summarised in two sentences. First, that we are at war with them over, presumably, territorial rights to this part of the galaxy. Secondly, that they take of the heads of live Earthmen if they get their hands on them.'

'And thirdly,' Leavis added, 'that they give us food.'

'All we can assume, then, is that our present situation is in some way connected with these two. I think the fact that they gave us the food was because they saw Makin's illness. I've no doubt in my mind.'

'But was it out of compassion?' asked Lieutenant Gracer.

'It looked like it.'

Leavis said: 'So to stay alive we have to stay sick.'

'Perhaps.'

'Well I'll tell you what it was for,' Leavis said. 'It's obvious. They're keeping us here alive and happy, knowing we can't move because of Makin, until more of their forces can be sent up. Then...'

He made the centuries-old gesture of drawing his finger across his throat.

Gracer said: 'So what do you propose, Leavis?'

'What I've always said. We get the hell out of here

while there's still time. In another hour the wind will have dropped, and the whole area will be lousy with Ghouls. I won't be here. Let's all get out while we can.'

'And Makin?'

'We dump him. He's deadweight.'

The Lieutenant said: 'Just like you wanted to dump me.'

Leavis looked away, over towards where they presumed the Ghouls were sheltering. 'I don't see any alternative, sir.'

'I do. I'm in charge here, and I'm ordering you to do what I say. I think Rassken may have something. While at least one of us is sick, we're probably safe.'

Rassken said: 'I think I see a way out of this, sir. There's a regurgitative among the drugs we've got in the case. One of us could be made sick with it if we meet the Ghouls again. If what we're thinking is correct, the Ghouls should let us pass.'

The Lieutenant looked at him for a few seconds.

'A few days ago,' he said, 'if I'd been asked I would have said that there was no way of out-thinking an enemy like the Ghoul. But I think I was wrong. The pattern of behaviour of the Ghoul is so reversed that I think you're right. For some reason, the Ghoul respects the sick. Our only hope is to exploit that.'

Leavis turned away from him, and spat deliberately into the wind. His spittle shot away.

Rassken said: 'You've got something to say?'

'No. Except you still don't know why the Ghouls take off men's heads. Me, I don't want to wait to find out.'

He moved out of the shelter of the ridge, and at once the wind buffeted him.

'Don't be a fool, Leavis!' Rassken shouted after him.

The man turned and shouted back, but the wind took the words from his mouth. He leaned his head against the torrent of air and walked forward steadily in the direction of the distant mountains. Rassken watched him for a moment, then reached over for his rifle. His eyes met those of the Lieutenant, and the young officer nodded. Rassken rattled the safety-mechanism, feeling the smooth solidity of the weapon.

He settled down on the floor, and prepared the rifle. Leavis was walking up the shallow incline towards the crest, his head moving constantly from side to side.

Rasskin peered through the sights of the rifle, setting the calibrated scale for approximate range. Then he raised his head, and watched.

Seconds later, Leavis reached the top of the crest, then ran crouching down the slope on the far side. Immediately, there was a blast of sound, deadened at once by the wind, and Leavis was blown backwards bodily. He fell on his back and lay with his head facing the sky, his neck across the very ridge of the crest itself.

Rassken looked again at the Lieutenant, and again the man nodded back.

He lowered his eye to the rifle-sight, and squeezed his palm against the firing-release. Minutes passed, and he found his concentration beginning to waver.

At his side, Gracer said softly: 'Do you want me to

do it, Rassken?'

The man shook his head resolutely, and closed his mind to his own thoughts.

Then, abruptly, the three Ghouls appeared, fully armed and looking round the area with strange, jerky movements. Two of the Ghouls squatted down, and levelled their own weapons across the small area of level ground that separated the two groups, and the third walked over to Leavis's body, and stood over it.

A long metal blade appeared in the Ghoul's hand, and he bent down purposefully towards Leavis's throat.

Lieutenant Gracer murmured: 'Now!'

Rassken's palm tightened against the firing-release.

They left Makin in the lee of the ridge, and stepped with great caution towards where the four corpses lay. The Lieutenant's movements were slightly clumsy, still weak as he was with the after-effects of the sickness. Half-way across the open space, a squall of rain came down with the wind, drenching them. For a few seconds, the distant mountains disappeared from view, and the broken landscape became temporarily a more frightening place.

Rassken's rounds had killed the three Ghouls instantly, the contact-fused cannon shells ripping their bodies with terrible force.

Leavis's body, too, had been badly mutilated in sudden death. The Ghouls' shot had caught him full in the chest and stomach, blasting his internal organs to shreds. He had died instantaneously.

By the side of his throat lay the Ghoul's knife, a slice of refined steel, with an edge of murderous sharpness.

'Are there any more of them about?' Rassken said quietly.

The Lieutenant shook his head. 'They'd have shown themselves if there were.'

He bent down and picked up one of the weapons the Ghouls were carrying. All knowledge about the enemy would be valuable some day. They walked over to the shattered corpse of one of the Ghouls, but Rassken's volley had so often hit it that there was little that could be recognised.

A Ghoul's blood, the two men observed, was red.

A little distance away, one of the Ghouls was in better shape. One of Rassken's shells had taken him in the lower abdomen, and knocked him backwards down the slope and out of the range of the rifle. His wound, though obviously fatal, was the only one he had. The upper half of his body was almost undamaged.

Coldly, Rassken put his toe under the Ghoul's corpse and turned it over. The black, alien face stared up at him. Red blood ran out of its lipless mouth, and lifeless, birdlike eyes glared sightlessly into his face.

Eyes like birds'...

No being the size of a Ghoul could see properly with eyes like those. Rassken and the Lieutenant bent down, and looked more closely at the Ghoul's face. The eyes were minute, no more than a quarter-inch across. The black skin, too, seemed strange.

The Lieutenant said suddenly: 'That's not ordinary skin. It's some kind of armour.'

He and Rassken turned the corpse over again, then Rassken took the Ghoul's knife and inserted the point of the blade at the back of its head, where the skull joined the neck.

The material ripped away with difficulty, revealing pale, unhealthy-looking skin below.

'It's a kind of armour that covers the whole body, sir,' Rassken said, pulling harder at the blade.

Where the shell had ripped the body of the Ghoul, they could see now traces of the skin beneath the quasi-metallic fibres of the armour-suit.

Gracer said: 'Get it off the face. Let's see what these bloody things look like.'

Rassken ripped the cloth around the neck, then turned the body again. Both he and the Lieutenant had to pull together to rip the cloth, but finally it came. And they saw, for the first time in the course of the war, the naked face of a Ghoul.

It wasn't the flat, pale face. Or the black, bead-like eyes. Or the ugly slash where the mouth should be. It wasn't the rough texture of the skin, or the alien smell that rose from the dead Ghoul.

It was the thing grafted onto the alien's forehead; grafted crudely with still-unhealed sores, and with a white metal surround protecting it from the chafing of the armour-cloth that covered it when worn. It was a human eye.

The Ghouls took the heads from their enemies, and used their eyes.

The two men stood up quickly, and Rassken kicked away the corpse.

'Is that what the war's all about, sir?' he said hoarsely. 'God knows. Perhaps it is. A race afflicted with vir-

tual sightlessness might bear an uncontrollable grudge against another race with perfect vision; but then it may not. They couldn't have known of the difference when they first attacked us.'

'Do you think we'll ever know what the war's for?' Rassken asked.

Gracer shook his head again. 'We might. Maybe now we have a reason ourselves to go on fighting. Before, we just fought back because we were attacked.'

The two men returned to where Makin lay. Already, the wind was dropping, and heavy black clouds up-wind were massing for the daily downpour.

'But why did they give us food, sir?'

They stopped by the ridge, looking down at the unconscious man lying on the rocks. While they had been over with the dead Ghouls, he had vomited again.

The Lieutenant turned and faced him.

'They gave us food for the same reason that they take our eyes, and for the same reason that they started this war in the first place. They're alien, and we can not understand their motives. Leavis was right, in a way, and we were wrong. Before we can defeat the Ghouls we have got to learn to understand them.'

'Maybe we should take a few prisoners.'

Rassken took the alien weapon from the Lieutenant, and laid it on the ground next to his own. The case of rations was sealed up again, and he swung it onto his shoulders. The Lieutenant picked up the weapons, then between them they lifted Makin as carefully as they could, supporting him with his limp arms around their shoulders. Across the rocky plain, the mountains of Taranth raised bleak shoulders to the sky, and before the first of the rain swept across them from the east, Rassken remarked to himself that already they seemed nearer.

THE MERIT AWARD

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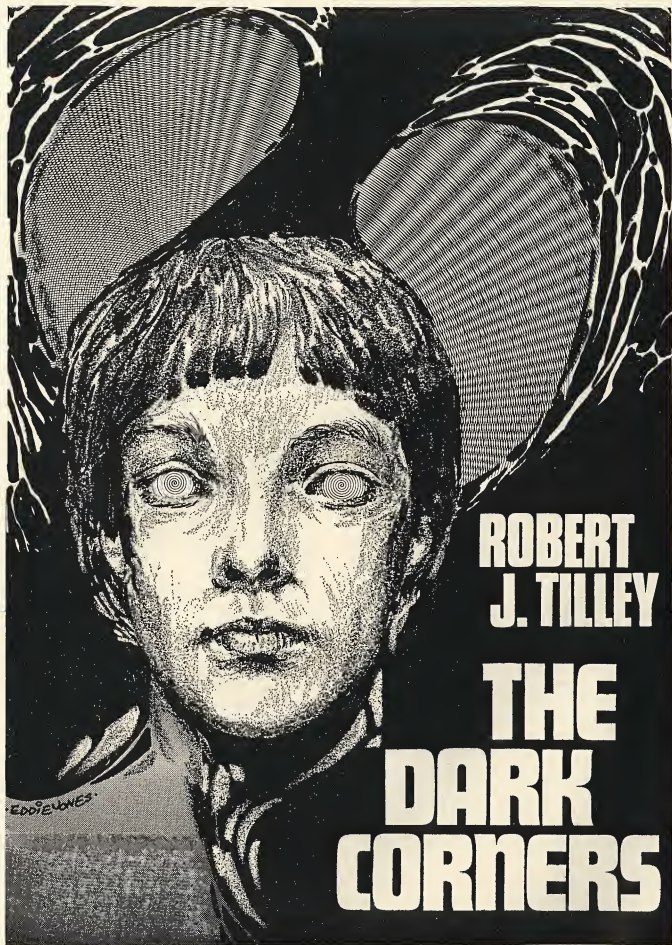
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ROBERT
J. TILLEY

THE
DARK
CORNERS

EDDIE VONES

A tall hedge concealed the house from the road and the open fields on either side. Beyond it, an unkempt lawn straggled beside the curving driveway that bulged into a half-circle of gravel where it ran across the front of the building. The grey stone of the house itself had almost disappeared, now only visible in shadowed patches among the tangle of ivy that covered it.

'Ideal sort of premises,' Chapman said. He eased into neutral, and let the car coast to a gently crunching halt by the front porch. His bright bird's eyes flicked appraisingly across the clutter of leaves and coarse vines. 'Just about as isolated as anything around here, I should think. Looks as if he might have had something of the sort in mind when he moved in.'

'Except for the fact,' Hull said, 'that he was left it by his uncle. That makes that line of reasoning a bit too complicated for my taste.' He pushed his door open, and swung his feet out onto the gravel. Chapman switched off the ignition, frowning slightly, then followed suit.

Hull mounted the steps leading to the front door, and thumbed the tarnished bell-push that showed among the encroaching greenery. Somewhere inside the house a bell rang faintly, followed immediately by a deep-throated bark.

Chapman paused on the steps, cocking his head. 'Didn't know he had a dog. Sounds like a big one.'

'Yes,' Hull said. He stood with his back to the house, slowly swivelling his head to study the grounds. They were in poor repair. Tufts of grass littered the driveway and the open area of gravel, and the lawn was almost knee-high and flecked with the bright yellow of dandelions. A greenhouse beyond the low privet hedge to their right was starting to weather badly, and the hedge itself was untrimmed.

Inside the house, footsteps clicked towards them. There was a pause, the grating snap of a catch, and the door opened.

The man who peered out at them was middle-aged and rather stocky, with red hair receding slowly from a freckled forehead. He wore a dark green cardigan over an open-necked shirt, and held a dirty metal dish in his hand. His roundly ageless face was very tired.

'Yes?'

Hull said, 'Mr. James Pardoe?'

'That's right.'

'My name is Inspector Hull, and this is Detective-Sergeant Chapman. We would like a few words with you if we may, sir.'

'Oh?' the red-haired man said. His face had tightened, almost perceptibly. 'What about?'

Hull said, 'If we could come inside for just a moment—' He let his voice trail off, his eyes on Pardoe's face.

'Is that strictly necessary?'

Hull nodded. 'I rather think that it may be.'

There was a pause. Pardoe stared past them, his mouth small and his face thoughtful. Then he shrugged, shook his head slightly, and pulled the door towards

him. 'Come in.'

Hull stepped past him into the shadowed coolness of a tiled corridor, Chapman following. A little way down the passage, a large alsatian stood, its tongue projecting from the side of its mouth and its eyes fixed brightly on them.

Pardoe closed the door, and said, 'Here, Dan.' The dog jerked into movement, lowering its head and padding to them with relaxed, graceful steps. Pardoe fondled its muzzle, and gestured towards an open door on their left. 'We'd better go in there.'

It was a living-room, shabby, and stale with the mingled smells of the dog and cooked food. A cloth covered a small mahogany table, and a used plate sat on it, dull with grease. There was a beaker beside it, and a sauce bottle. Books littered the room, piled precariously on the mantel-piece and the end of a decrepit chaise-loungue. Yellowed hunting prints were spaced precisely on two of the distempered walls.

'Sit down,' Pardoe said. He put the metal dish on the table, nodding vaguely towards the crockery. 'You'll have to excuse the dishes. I've been rather busy.'

'Quite all right,' Hull said. He seated himself in a worn leather armchair, placing his hat on the carpet beside him. Chapman moved a pile of magazines to the sideboard, and sat on a straight-backed dining chair. Pardoe stood by the table, one hand resting lightly on the dog's head, a look of stiffly polite enquiry on his face.

Hull said, 'Mr. Pardoe, I have to ask you some questions. It shouldn't take very long, but before we start I feel there's something you should be told. Certain information has been brought to our attention that has led us to some pretty damaging conclusions.'

'Really?' Pardoe said. 'Involving me in some way?' His voice, like his face, was courteously empty.

Hull said, 'It appears so, yes. I understand that you are employed as head of the history department at Corley Grammar School.'

'Yes.'

'One of your pupils was a boy called Philip Carver. I say was, because of his disappearance two months ago. At that time a colleague of mine questioned you, together with the rest of the staff at Corley. You stated then that you knew nothing at all that might help us with our investigations as to the boy's whereabouts. We drew a blank all round, and until this morning we had no idea at all where he might have got to. Now we're pretty sure we know.'

Pardoe said nothing, but his hand, which had been moving gently on the dog's head, was now quite still. Chapman moved slightly in his chair.

Hull said, 'About a mile from here, there's a farm owned by some people called Hucker. A week ago, the Hucker children, two boys and a girl, say they were in your grounds. They were pretty quiet about it, because they were trespassing, and they took care to keep well under cover. While they were here, they heard a noise, someone shouting. They thought it might possibly be

aimed at them at first, so they hid in some rhododendron bushes by the side of the house, and then they say they saw something very odd.' Hull paused, and tilted his head, querulously. 'Would you like to hazard a guess at what it was, Mr. Pardoe?'

The red-haired man's face was suddenly very pale, and his eyes were closed. He opened his mouth, made a faint sound, then closed it again. He shook his head, very slowly.

Hull said, 'They saw a boy run from this house, followed by a man. The boy looked very frightened, they say, and he was yelling something that could have been a cry for help. He fell in the driveway, and the man caught him. When he'd caught him, he hit him so hard that he almost knocked him unconscious, then he dragged him back inside the house. From their description, it would rather appear that the man was you. Was the boy Philip Carver?'

Pardoe's teeth showed briefly, then his eyes opened. His voice sounded clogged. 'Why did you take so long to get here?'

'The children were frightened, and they didn't tell their parents about it for a couple of days. They'd been trespassing, and children can be a bit funny about things like that. They don't know how to compare values too well at times. When they finally did speak up, their father thought about it for another couple of days before telling us. Grown-ups can be pretty silly, too, but children do make up some weird and wonderful stories.' Hull paused, and cocked his head again. 'Where is he?'

Pardoe said, 'Upstairs.' His voice was almost inaudible and his face was sick. Hull jerked his head at Chapman.

Chapman stood up, and said, 'Is there a key?'

'Wait,' Pardoe said. He took a very deep breath, and leaned back against the table, lowering his hands to its edge. Hull saw them shaking as he gripped it. 'Before you fetch him, I must tell you something.'

'There'll be plenty of time to make a statement when we get to the station,' Hull said. He reached down for his hat. 'I think that the most important thing now is to get—'

'No,' Pardoe said. It was a dryly staccato sound, more an order than a protest. Beside him, the dog growled and stiffened. 'No, you must hear this before we go.'

There was a brief silence in the room. Hull said, 'We have to be sure that the boy is all right first.'

Pardoe frowned, and looked at him, searchingly. 'Then you'll hear what I have to say?'

Hull nodded. 'If you think it's that important. Can you make it short?'

Pardoe shook his head, a rapid, nervous jerking that continued as he talked. 'No, not very. But I must tell it before we get away from here, into a—' He lifted a hand, and helplessly dropped it again '—an official atmosphere. This is the only place where it will make sense. At least—' He stopped, and stared confusedly at the floor.

'You appreciate, of course, that anything you say may

be later used in evidence,' Hull said. He looked at Chapman. 'Go and find him, then take him to the kitchen, wherever that is. Make him a sandwich or something, until we're ready.' To Pardoe, he said, 'Is that all right with you?'

Pardoe nodded, silently, then reached into a trouser pocket and produced a Yale key. He handed it to Chapman without looking at him. Chapman took it, and walked to the door. The dog watched him go, poised uncertainly, then slowly relaxed as he passed out of sight. His feet sounded, mounting the stairs.

There was silence, broken only by the almost inaudible scolding of a bird, somewhere outside the house. Pardoe leaned against the table, his head lowered and his eyes closed. When he started to speak, it was in a flat monotone, a dead voice, that sounded expressionlessly in the thick-atmosphered confines of the room.

'My reason for coming to this part of the country was this house. My uncle died just over eighteen months ago and left it to me, and I came down from Bradford, where I was teaching, simply to look it over before selling it. I liked it, despite the fact that it was really much too big for a single man, and I decided I'd like to keep it. I had a vague idea at the time that I might be able to turn it into two flats, or something of the kind, but I decided later that I preferred the idea of solitude. The job at Corley was advertised two months afterwards, and I got it and moved in here at the beginning of the winter term. That was ten months ago, and the first time that I met Philip Carver.'

Hull interrupted. 'Perhaps you'd better sit down. You look rather shaky.'

'Yes,' Pardoe said. He walked to the chaise-louge, pushed some books to one side, and sat down, resting his arms horizontally across his thighs. The dog crossed the room to him, sniffing impersonally at the carpet, then slumped loosely at his feet, its eyes closed. Pardoe continued speaking in the same dull, disinterested tone.

'He was in the upper fourth form when I first knew him. His reputation was a not unusual one among boys of that age. He produced spurts of brilliance in his work, but he was erratic. His most notable feature was a genuine oddity, though, but not recognised as such by many members of the staff. The majority seemed satisfied to refer to him as a toady, but they were rather missing the point. He seemed to have the knack of anticipating peoples' wants to a remarkably accurate degree. I noticed this myself soon after I started, and it puzzled me, certainly more so than the rest of the people there. As I say, they were inclined to dismiss him as a fairly standard sort of boot-licker, but I became rapidly convinced that he was something much more than that.'

He paused. Above them, there was the slam of a door, and then, very faintly, the sound of voices. He ran his tongue across his lips, and blinked, once.

'I finally caught him out during a mock school certificate exam. I hadn't consciously laid a trap, or anything like that, but under the circumstances it was hardly surprising that he blundered. The paper was a

very general thing, dealing with no particular period of history, that I'd concocted rather hurriedly on the evening prior to the exam. That's the way these things usually happen; they're supposed to be prepared two or three weeks before, but they always seem to get delayed for one reason or another. There was some sickness among the staff at that time, and it was necessary to take quite a few extra classes. I hadn't time to get it typed and duplicated, so I was going to write the questions on the blackboard. When I got to the room where the class was waiting for the exam, I had two monitors distribute pens, ink, and foolscap paper to each boy. While this was being done, I checked through the questions that I was going to put to them. I was half-way through doing this, checking them against the answers, when the headmaster's secretary appeared. She said that if I hadn't already started the exam, would I please go and see the head immediately. I went, taking the question paper with me.'

The footsteps that had been slowly descending the stairs stopped. Hull heard Chapman's voice, querying, followed by a muttered, hesitant reply.

The dog's head snapped up. Slowly, it uncurled and rose, its eyes fixed rigidly on the open doorway. Pardoe reached out a hand to its head, patting it very slowly and gently. He smiled broadly at Hull, saying nothing.

Chapman appeared in the doorway. He looked briefly at Hull and Pardoe, then back up the stairs. He said, 'Come on, son, it's all right. There's nothing to be afraid of.' His voice was loud, and very cheerful.

There was a pause, then dragging footsteps sounded again. Hull watched the doorway, conscious of Pardoe's mask-like smile, and his hand, still moving rhythmically on the dog's head.

The boy was thin and very pale, and he looked none too clean. He wore a grey flannel suit that was very crumpled, with a blue and yellow badge on breast pocket of the jacket. He was rather plain, and pimples discoloured his chin and forehead. He stared at Pardoe, saying nothing.

Hull said to him, 'How are you, son?'

The boy moved his gaze from Pardoe, and looked at Hull. He seemed not to have headed the question, then said, 'Very well, thank you,' rather abruptly. His eyes moved back to Pardoe's bleak, polite smile, and he frowned.

Hull nodded to Chapman. 'Take him along and get him something to eat. We shan't be very long.'

'Right,' Chapman said. He touched the boy's shoulder. 'Let's go and see what there is in the pantry, shall we?'

After a moment, the boy nodded, then turned away without speaking. As he moved out of sight, Hull saw the look of puzzlement on his face, and the final rapid flick of his eyes towards Pardoe. Chapman followed him out of sight, his uncomfortably genial grin still in position.

Hull looked back at Pardoe. The smile was still there, but it held a hint of exhaustion now, and the movement

of his hand appeared as more of a dying reflex than a deliberate action.

Hull said, 'What happened when you got there?'

Pardoe shut his eyes, then opened them again. When he spoke, his voice was quiet and very tired, but it contained expression now.

'The head produced the copy of the exam paper that I'd left with him after assembly that morning, and told me that something seemed to have gone rather amiss. He asked if, before I'd prepared my questions, I'd checked back through the papers set by my predecessor. I confessed that I hadn't, due to circumstances of work. He then pointed out that, in fact, my paper contained several questions that were very similar to some that had been put to the same boys on previous occasions, two of them no more than a year before. He has a quite exceptional memory, and it was just the sort of thing that he would recollect. In view of this oversight, he suggested that the easiest solution to the problem would be to use a paper that had originally been put five years ago, before any of the present pupils had been at the school. I agreed to this, apologised for the trouble that was being caused, and then he had his secretary fetch the old paper from the files. We checked it as quickly as we could, and found that this time none of the questions appeared to be suspect.' Pardoe continued his gentle massaging of the dog's head, a faint spark of animation beginning to show in his face as he talked. 'I took the paper back to the classroom, and started to write the new questions on the blackboard. While I was doing this, the piece of chalk that I was using broke. I turned to my desk to get another piece, and saw Carver slipping something into his inside jacket pocket. I told him to bring it out to the front of the class and give it to me.' He hesitated, briefly. 'I've never seen an expression on anyone's face like the one that I saw then. It was a compound of terror and rage, and I was very startled by it. He stayed where he was until I told him again, much more forcefully the second time. Then he came out and handed it to me. It was a piece of foolscap, and written on it were the answers to the first two questions on my original question paper.'

Hull frowned, looking sharply at him.

'Where was the first paper?'

'I left it in the headmaster's study when I brought the alternative paper back with me.'

'And you say you prepared the first paper the night before the exam. Where did you do it?'

'Here.'

'And you're convinced in your own mind that it would have been impossible for this boy or anyone else to have seen it before you took it to the classroom that morning?'

'Utterly impossible.'

Hull said, flatly, 'Then what are you actually saying? That the headmaster left his copy lying around for anybody to pick up, or that the boy is a mind-reader?'

'He can read minds, yes,' Pardoe said.

Hull watched him for a long silent moment, his face

impassive. The dog yawned, a cavernous exercise that concluded with a muffled snap as its jaws closed. It slumped again, its chin resting across its forelegs.

Hull said, 'What happened then?'

'I told him to go back to his seat, then I finished writing the questions on the board. I watched him while the exam was in progress. He wrote nothing, simply sat there staring at me for the better part of two hours. When it was over, I had the papers collected and told him to stay behind when the others had gone. When we were alone, I asked him if it was true.'

'That he was a mind-reader?'

Pardoe nodded. 'Yes.'

'What did he have to say for himself?'

'He admitted it.'

Hull's eyebrows lifted. 'Just like that?' He fumbled his pipe from his pocket, and tucked it into a corner of his mouth. 'Did you believe him?'

'Of course.' Something like anger showed in Pardoe's eyes. 'Don't you see? I had to believe him. This was the culmination of it all, the label for the hundred and one demonstrations that I'd witnessed and been so puzzled by. His anticipation of things, his never-failing—*preparedness*. He knew what to do in any situation that involved dealing face to face with an opposite party.' He stared down at the carpet, his hand automatically reaching for the supine figure of the dog. 'I asked him if he really realised what this meant. He said yes. His facial expression when he said it was the most complex thing I've ever seen; contempt, malice, hatred, triumph, they were all there, and others, besides. I asked him to tell me about it, and he did. He told me what it was like for a seeing person to live in a world of the blind, where everything was etched in detail for him and only him. He talked about the unbelievable dirt of the human mental condition, and the fear and ignorance and pathetic fumbling in the darkness of not knowing. He talked about man's lack of faith in man and how it justified itself by its existence, and the stupidity of commitments to unseen gods. Then he went on to tell me how he used these things.'

Hull watched him as he talked, sensing desperation and resignation in the tableau, the quietly talking man and the limp animal at his feet, the stale and shabby book-littered room, thick with the afternoon heat. Just how sane is he? Hull wondered. He searched for his lighter, his eyes steady on Pardoe's dulled, waxy face.

'He used them as a tool, a procuring instrument. When he wanted something, he probed with his mind until he knew the best way to get it. He exploited misfortune, guilt and circumstance as it suited him, using anyone around him that could assist with his requirements of the moment. He described several instances of how he'd done this. The one that particularly stuck in my mind involved his sister. She's a year older than him, and left school last year. Carver knew that she'd been out with various boys, and on one occasion had let rather more happen than was really wise. He wanted money at the time, I forget what for. He told her that

he'd seen what happened on the particular evening involved, and unless she got hold of five pounds for him, he would see to it that their father was told. She got it by taking two pounds from her father's wallet, and the rest from other girls' clothing in the gymnasium dressing room. Since then, he's used her as a steady source of income whenever his interests of the moment have required financial investment.'

Hull said, 'Assuming for the sake of argument that all this is true, there's one thing that puzzles me. Harking back to the time of the exam, how was it that he came to write those wrong answers at all, since he must surely have known that you were out getting a substitute set, or, alternatively, why didn't he destroy the paper before you got back with them?'

Hull said, 'His range seems to be relatively limited. He wouldn't admit it at first, but I later found out that his effective reading area is somewhere around fifteen to twenty feet. The headmaster's study is on the far side of the building, and I was back in the room before he fully realised what was going on. He was picking up a lot of random interference from the rest of the class, too, of course.'

Hull inclined his head, clicked his lighter, and commenced to puff his pipe alight. 'All right. Then what?'

'When he'd finished telling me all this, I asked him if he simply intended to go on abusing his ability in the same sort of way. He laughed at this. He pointed out that since he had us, the fumbling, blind people, firmly by the throat, and quite unable to take any form of legal action to stop him, to abandon his present thoroughly pragmatic use of his talents would be quite senseless. What would he gain by it? His outburst of confidence, he admitted, had been largely induced by the circumstances in which he'd been trapped. It was a chance for him to boast about his power, and in the confines of the classroom, he felt perfectly safe in telling me what he did. Once outside again, of course, he would simply deny anything that I chose to make public.' Pardoe paused, briefly. 'He also told me that if I made a statement of any kind, he would retaliate with an accusation of attempted indecency and subsequent malicious slander. Despite the fact that he was confident that my awkwardness caused by my production of the written answers could be bluffed aside, he would simply prefer to be spared the trouble. In my own interests, therefore, I would be wise to destroy the only piece of evidence that could support such a claim on my part.'

Hull said, 'He'd have a job proving anything himself, of course.'

Pardoe smiled, thinly. 'That's true, but he knows more than enough about the workings of human nature. In the case of his own, much more credible story, peoples' imaginations and ingrained suspicions would accept it as readily as they would dismiss mine.' His face showed no bitterness. 'Anyway, I eventually told him that he could go, and he did. I sat there for a long time, an hour at least. The caretaker was late making his rounds that evening, and it was only his arrival that

snapped me out of the daze that I was in. When I left, though, I knew what I had to do. He had to be taken to a place where it would be impossible for him to continue to prey on anyone that he chose. I had a wild hope that if he could be isolated from the dirt and greed and exposed to nothing but pure theory for a time, his mind would still be open enough to accept the sense of a balanced social order and all the curtailments that are essential ingredients of it.

Hull grunted non-committally. 'How did you get him out here?'

'He lives some way out of the town, as you know. I followed him to the cinema that evening, and then home again. He was riding a bicycle, and I had my estate car. I kept my distance until we were clear of the houses, then when the road was free of traffic I pulled up to him and ran him into the hedge. Before he had a chance to untangle himself, I was out of the car and had a chloroform pad over his face. Then I put him and the bicycle in the car and brought him here.'

'Very efficient,' Hull said, drily. He squashed the dottle in his pipe with a heavy finger, and flicked his lighter again. 'I take it no traffic passed you while all this was going on.'

'No, none. When I got back here, I took him up to the attic where he's been ever since. I had to keep him tied up for the first couple of days while I sound-proofed the room and bricked up the window, because otherwise he might easily have broken his neck trying to climb down a drainpipe, or something of the sort. I took all the furniture out of the room, too, just leaving a camp-stool and a sleeping-bag. I didn't think it wise to leave anything heavier that he might try to knock the door down with. When I'd done all this, I untied him and talked to him, and explained why I was doing it, a foolish procedure under the circumstances. He let me finish, and then spat at me and told me he knew all my pathetic reasons and precisely what he thought of them. I asked him if he failed to see the logic behind a disciplined society, and he told me no, he could see it very clearly. But what he could see even more clearly was the flimsiness of the facade that made such things possible, and the incurable weaknesses of the structures themselves. I tried to reason with him for the rest of the week-end, but he simply spat, or screamed or cried. I had to leave him alone, eventually. I left books with him when I went to school on the Monday, hoping that out of sheer boredom he would read them and that some fragment of their reasoning would touch him. When I got back, he'd ripped them to pieces.'

'How did he get out the other day?'

Pardoe's smile was bitter. 'He fooled me. It was bound to happen eventually. About a fortnight ago, his attitude seemed to be changing slightly, for the better. The hysterics had gone, and he seemed to be listening to what I was saying when I talked to him. One day, he asked for some books. I'd stopped giving him any after the first week; they all ended up in pieces, and there didn't seem to be a lot of point in wasting them until he

showed some indication that they might be read instead of mutilated. I was overjoyed, but cautious, of course. I gave him one or two, and it was obvious from later conversation that he'd actually read at least parts of them. He asked for others, and I gave them to him, which was where I made my mistake.' Pardoe shrugged, almost apologetically. 'One of them was a dictionary, a rather large, heavy item. He dropped some other books that I was handing him at the time, and he made as though to pick them up. Stupidly, I bent down to help him, and he hit me across the neck with it. He didn't knock me out, but I was dazed for a few seconds. He snatched the key from my jacket pocket, unlocked the door, and then he was out. It was his intention to lock me in, but I was on my feet and at the door while he was still trying to get the key into the keyhole. He panicked and ran, and I caught him when he fell outside the house.' He paused. 'You know about that, of course.'

'Yes,' Hull said. He picked with a finger-nail at some exposed strands that showed through the arm of his chair. 'So in fact you've made no real progress with him at all.'

'No,' Pardoe said. He sounded suddenly and utterly exhausted.

'And what were you planning to do with him if this continued for, say, another two or three months, with no evidence of any headway?'

Pardoe shook his head over his limply interlaced hands. 'I don't know.'

Hull watched him, biting thoughtfully on his pipe. The dog stirred by Pardoe's feet, whined fitfully, then looked around the room with heavy eyes. Watching it, Hull said, 'What do you know about his background?' He lifted his gaze to Pardoe's suddenly blank look. 'Do you know anything at all about his parents, his home life? Has he volunteered anything himself?'

After a pause, Pardoe said, 'It's not too good from what I've heard at the school. I've tried to sound him out once or twice, but he wouldn't talk about it.'

Hull nodded. 'I'm not altogether surprised to hear it. His mother pushed off with some chap a few years back, and his father's in and out of jobs almost as often as he's in the pub.' He busied himself with the lighter again. 'Assuming still that you're telling me the facts as you see them, it just occurs to me to wonder which way he'd have jumped if he'd had a stable sort of home, some sort of reasonable example set him all this time.' He tucked the lighter away. 'What would you say about it?'

Pardoe's tongue appeared, briefly moistening his lips. 'It may even have been the beginning of it.'

'What?'

Pardoe jerked his head, a nervously impatient dismissal. 'I didn't quite mean that. But I have wondered a lot about cause and effect, the actual reasons for it happening.' He spoke more rapidly now, a faint flicker of brightness showing far back in his eyes. 'Just suppose that in fact the entire human race is on the brink of some evolutionary breakthrough, the gradual opening

out of the part of our brain that we've never been able to categorise or map. Perhaps what you've just said is the key. Deprivation has caused him to seek some sort of consoling factor, a kind of refuge that only he can enter. He may have somehow jumped the gun, or discovered a short-cut, if you like, activated entirely by a lack of affection and understanding.' His eyes locked with Hull's, and Hull saw that the brightness was a glint of fear. 'This is only theorising, but suppose I'm right? Do you realise what it means? It means that in all the dark corners of the world, uncountable millions of them, something similar may be happening. Children may be growing up possessed of the same talent, and because of their immaturity, the unformed standards of adolescence, they see it only as a means of acquisition and revenge—' He jolted to an abrupt halt, his eyes gradually re-focussing on Hull's watchful face. He pushed a faintly vibrating hand across his mouth.

Hull said, 'Then he doesn't claim to have been born like it.'

'No,' Pardoe said, dully. He moved his feet slightly, as though they ached. 'As far as he can remember, it started about three or four years ago. It began very gradually, from what I can gather.' For the first time his voice held a note of tired uncertainty. 'As to what he actually is, I simply don't know. He may be the next stage in our evolutionary programme, or he may be a sport, some kind of throwback. Perhaps he's just a freak.' He lifted his head and stared at Hull, his eyes betraying a muted something that was hard to define. 'But whatever he is, he's dangerous. No more dangerous person ever lived. He's a raging megalomaniac already, and he's incurable. Psychiatry could do nothing for him, because he sees beyond the confines of reason as we know it. He has the world in the palm of his hand, and it's only a matter of time before he learns how to close his fingers around it.'

There was a long silence in the room. Hull stirred, reached over to a nearby table, and carefully tapped his pipe in a bulky ceramic ashtray. He returned it to his pocket, then reached down for his hat. 'That is the lot, I take it?'

Pardoe nodded. His face was rigid, and his eyes were slightly glazed.

'What do you think will happen?'

'To you?' Hull said. He shrugged. 'It isn't my job to speculate on the possible outcome of court action. Whatever the charges eventually are, you can't deny that you've broken the law.'

'The law,' Pardoe said. Sudden disgust and anger choked his voice. 'Don't you realise that what you're doing at this moment is letting loose the worst law-breaker that ever lived, an incurable abuser of privacy, decency, and all the man-made rules that have enabled societies to be built that contain at least some element of justice?' He was white and shaking. 'Don't you see that?'

Hull fiddled with the brim of his hat. He said, slowly, 'If what you say about him is true, it's hardly his fault.'

Someone like that is bound to make their own rules.'

Pardoe stared at him, appalled. 'But don't you see what you're saying? You're admitting that I'm right, but you're still permitting it to happen!'

'You might be right, in theory at least, but even if I knew it to be fact, what could I do about it?' Hull said. He rose, set his hat on his head, and tugged it into position. 'As it is, I don't know whether I believe you or not. Perhaps I do, but whether anyone else will is another matter. Not that it will make a great deal of difference, either way.' He looked vaguely apologetic.

'No,' Pardoe said. He rose slowly to his feet. 'No, of course not.' His voice had changed again, and now Hull heard fear and saw it mirrored in his face, mingled with strangely formal regret. 'It would be too much to expect, of course. Dan, watch him.'

Startled, Hull swung his head towards the dog as it lurched growling to his feet. There was a blur of movement to his right. Hull stepped back, abruptly, jerking up an arm in a reflex protective action, just in time to block the clumsily wielded sauce bottle that splintered heavily against his elbow. Sudden vertigo threw him off-balance. He pitched on all fours, pawing feebly for Pardoe's legs, sickly aware of the snarling breath of the dog by his face. He heard Pardoe's snapped command, a flurry of movement, then abrupt slam of the door.

He levered himself to his feet, enormous pressure weighting the back of his head and blurring his vision. He stumbled to the grate, grabbed the poker that lay there, then moved unsteadily towards the corridor. Somewhere near, Chapman shouted furiously, his voice mingling with the thud of a closing door.

At the far end of the passage, the alsatian had its jaws locked on Chapman's right forearm. Chapman was behind and astride it, his free arm locked around its neck. Beyond them was a closed door. There was no sign of either Pardoe or the boy.

Hull went forward, the poker raised. Chapman stared up at him, then swung his leg free of the dog and backed away, his caught arm stiff and straight. Hull clubbed the dog, heavily. It staggered, whining, and Chapman cried out, buckling against the wall. Hull swung again, and the dog went down. Chapman went with it, his face chalky, and his free hand pulling feebly at its lower jaw.

Hull blundered across the prone body of the alsatian, and wrenched at the handle of the door. It was locked. He backed, braced himself with a hand on either wall, and kicked heavily beside the lock.

The door crashed open to reveal a stone-floored kitchen. The boy stood at the far end, pressed back against the sink, his face working convulsively and his eyes closed. There was a bread-knife in his hand, half its blade discoloured with blood.

Pardoe was on the floor at his feet. He lay in a foetal curve on his left side, one hand buried against his stomach, the other groping for the boy. As Hull watched, the spread fingers suddenly relaxed and the hand fell.

Hull put the poker on the table, moved across the

room, and gently took the knife from the boy's hand. The boy's eyes were open now, staring blankly down at Pardoe. He offered no resistance as Hull took him by the arm and steered him around the body to a chair in the far corner of the room.

'Don't look at him,' Hull said. He went to the sink, and filled a glass that was upturned on the draining-board. He took it back to the boy and handed it to him, then went back and knelt by the still figure on the floor.

Pardoe was still alive, but his eyes were gradually filming and his pulse was barely detectable. His eyes moved, very slightly, touched on Hull's face, then fell away again. Seconds later, he was dead.

As Hull rose to his feet, Chapman appeared in the doorway, gripping his injured arm. There was blood between his fingers, and his face was wet and sick. He stared at Pardoe's body, then at the boy, his mouth slackly open.

'Oh, Christ,' he said, faintly. He leaned against the door-frame, his head back and his eyes closed.

'We'd better get a tourniquet on that arm,' Hull said. 'Here, let's have your jacket off.' He eased off Chapman's coat, and tied his handkerchief above the elbow of the bleeding arm. 'How's the dog, by the way?'

'Dead,' Chapman said. His eyes went past Hull to Pardoe's huddled body, then he gasped, winced, and closed them again.

Hull seated him in a chair opposite the boy, then went back into the corridor, peering into rooms until he found a telephone. He called the hospital first, then his office.

'You'd better send out a spare driver, too. Chapman can't drive, and I don't really feel up to it.'

He put the 'phone down, looked briefly out of the window, swore, then went to look for a blanket. He took one from the first bed that he found, carried it down to the kitchen, and spread it across the body. Chapman and the boy were still seated where he had left them, the boy hunched and staring sightlessly at the floor, his hands locked on the tumbler. Chapman watched him with exhausted eyes.

Hull took a second glass from a cupboard, filled it, and proffered it to Chapman. Chapman declined it with a faint shake of the head. Hull leaned against the kitchen table, sipping gently at the water and watching the boy.

After a while, the boy said without looking up, 'He tried to kill—' His voice thickened, and he stopped.

'It's all right,' Chapman said, brusquely. 'It's all right.' He turned his head towards Hull, his drawn face white and angry. 'You couldn't help it, we know that. Don't we,' he said to Hull.

Hull nodded, shortly, took another sip of water, and looked back at the boy again. His face was quite empty, devoid of expression and movement, faint colour showing again around his rather prominent cheekbones.

God Almighty, Hull thought with sudden irritation. You'd think he'd at least have cried by now.

Perhaps a quarter of a minute passed. Then, as he watched, a tear showed on the boy's face, leaking jaggedly down one cheek. His face crumpled, and he began to sob.

'Here,' Chapman said. He pushed himself awkwardly forward in his chair, fumbling his good hand into his trouser pocket. He cursed, still searching, and twisted his head towards Hull. 'Give the kid a handkerchief, can't you? Mine must be in my other pocket.' His voice was angry.

Hull put down his glass, took the folded handkerchief from his breast pocket, and walked across to the boy. He held it out to him.

As he took it, the boy looked up, and for a brief moment Hull saw his eyes, watching him from behind the film of water that covered them. Then the tears welled again, and the eyes were gone, masked behind the handkerchief that the boy pressed against them.

'That's right, son, have a good cry,' Chapman said, hoarsely. His voice was at once conciliatory and furious. 'Let it all out, it'll make you feel better.' He sat back in his chair, breathing heavily. After a moment, he turned his attention to Hull, still standing looking fixedly down at the boy's bowed head and shoulders. He shifted irritably in his chair, seeking a point of focus for his restless anger. 'You'd expect him to cry, all things considered, wouldn't you?' he said. His voice was rebelliously querulous. 'It's only natural, isn't it?'

Hull continued to stare, shadows of recent memory fitting greily through his mind. He thought about Pardoe, a solitary man who believed that he had found a terrifying evil, a belief that had eventually created its own tormented sense of purpose. Was this what he had really found? Were his conviction and speculations grounded in wildly improbable fact, forecasting the inexorable growth of something dark and cancerous that would one day insinuate its malignancy into places of power, or were they the fantasies of loneliness, paranoid dreams that had been woven around the tawdry but easily rationalised trickery of a child?

And if he had been right, Hull reluctantly went on to question his sense of reasoning, what then? Did others like the boy really exist in the shadowed places of the world, their strange talent somehow prematurely spawned by their emotionally barren circumstances and already warped beyond repair? Were they even then engaged in the petty stratagems of adolescence, the measure of their activities as yet confined by the boundaries of imagination and experience, but slowly, like the opening of some dark and deadly flower, awakening to awareness of the power that they could some day hold?

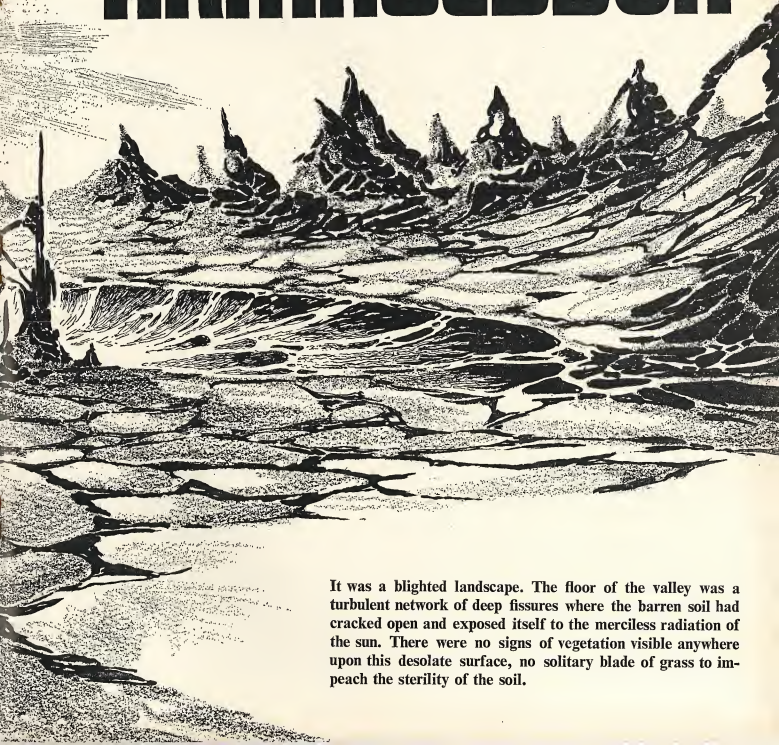
Dimly aware of Chapman's pugnaciously repeated question, he listened to the keening sobs that came from the boy, his ears straining with unwilling urgency to the texture of their sound, inescapably conscious of the choking pressure of the fear that was clamped coldly and tightly to his throat and stomach.

'Yes,' he said slowly, after a long moment. 'Yes, I suppose it is.'



ERDIE JONES

LEE HARDING ECHOES OF ARMAGEDDON



It was a blighted landscape. The floor of the valley was a turbulent network of deep fissures where the barren soil had cracked open and exposed itself to the merciless radiation of the sun. There were no signs of vegetation visible anywhere upon this desolate surface, no solitary blade of grass to impeach the sterility of the soil.

The distant mountains had once loomed serene and confident above this wasteland; their highest peaks had always been capped with snow and they had provided abundant irrigation from their expansive watersheds. Now they were like the pitiful remnants of a child's clay model to which someone had callously applied the heat of a blow-torch, flattening them into crumbling rock piles, their precious moisture boiled away and only their bones left to bleach in the harsh sunlight.

In the centre of this vast plain were the remains of what had once been a city. The same malevolent energy that had levelled the surrounding mountains and incinerated the encroaching jungle had also melted down the towering superstructures of the metropolis, fusing them together into a great lake of burnished silica that spread out for miles across the broken floor of the valley and threw back the sunlight with blazing intensity. In the aftermath of destruction some bizarre outcroppings had been left standing above the central lake; ugly fingers of steel groping upwards towards a cancelled sky, like eerie stalagmites embalmed in light. Somewhere underneath this disastrous collage were the discorporate atoms of several million human beings; but their flesh had proved a flimsy thing and had added nothing to the general appearance of the necropolis. It rose like a monument out of the desert, shimmering and undulating as the heat-waves moved across it, as ugly and as beautiful as the ravaged landscape it clung to.

No animal could have existed very long in such furnace-like conditions. Not even a man, with all his miraculous technology to assist him, could have survived for more than a few hours in such a hostile environment. But if he could avail himself of a first-rate survival suit, and provided he was prepared to wait until sunset before he moved out of the protective shadows and began his journey, then he stood a good chance of success. He would have to be prepared to cover a good deal of ground before nightfall, and complete his hazardous journey by moonlight and *before* the sun reappeared; this was the only way that a man on foot could expect to cross the treacherous plain.

Barrios and his men had been huddled down in a deep arroyo since early morning, sweating and swearing in their heavy suits and trying to sleep so that they would feel absolved of the need to *think*. At noon they had been obliged to burrow into the wide cracks that honey-combed the walls of their retreat because the sun had begun to bite down into the ravine. And there they had remained for some time, cramped and restless, while the merciless sun sloped slowly westwards and the shadows began to lengthen and submerge the arroyo.

The conditioning units of their survival suits worked overtime trying to assuage their discomfort, flushing their faces with soft blasts of warm air from time to time and greedily re-cycling their perspiration so that the vital moistures could be re-absorbed.

Nobody talked. They each recognised the need to conserve every ounce of their energy for the forthcom-

ing trek. They had already crossed more than half of the wasteland and, if everything went all right and if Garcia's computations were correct, then tomorrow they would be able to bathe in comfort and sleep underground, away from this killing sunlight and its night-marish accoutrements. But they would only have eleven hours to cross the remainder of the valley, a torturous terrain broken up by wide ravines and dark, depthless fissures; and if they didn't locate Garcia's bunker before the sun rose then it would all have been for nothing. Without food and water they couldn't expect to last much longer; they *had* to find that bunker.

Barrios roused his men shortly before sunset. They crawled out of their uncomfortable hideouts and stretched their cramped limbs in the deep shadows of the arroyo. They opened the face-plates of their suits and lit up cigarettes and lounged against the dry walls of the ravine. They had renewed their confidence as well as their strength, and Barrios was pleased to hear them laughing and joking amongst themselves. It had been a long trek but the worst of it was over; tomorrow—if Garcia's calculations were correct—they would dwell in comfort and luxury again.

Barrios inhaled deeply on his cigarette and thought of what was ahead of them. He still felt nervous and sweaty inside his suit. The dry, warm air that flowed over his face was coarse and inhospitable but it had lost its capacity to harm now that the sun had disappeared. 'Ten minutes,' he announced. 'We move out in ten minutes.'

Their conversation stopped for a moment while they absorbed this information. Some ground out their unfinished cigarettes and slammed their face-plates shut in anticipation, and proceeded to work out some of their inner tensions by exercising briskly for a few moments, an activity that was made rather awkward by their cumbersome suits, but which enabled them to remove their minds from the forthcoming ordeal.

According to Garcia's calculations they had only nine miles to go and, with luck, they would make it with plenty of time to spare—if he was correct.

Ah, Barrios thought, if only they had something besides his miserable compass to help them... if only they had been able to broadcast a beacon and have waited comfortably in the cool shadows of the arroyo for rescue.

For perhaps the hundredth time Barrios cursed their mission. But then Control had not anticipated an engagement; theirs had been a routine patrol sent out to check out some of the coastal installations. They hadn't expected to meet such an organised reception. Damn it, just how reliable were the automatic scanners when they allowed something like this to happen?

It had been bad enough to have escaped with a crippled ship, but to have successfully outflown the pursuit manually—with only Garcia's inspired navigation standing between them and oblivion—and then to have crashed in such an ignominious manner so close to home...

They had hobbled through the sky, close to the ground, for several hundred miles before their damaged ship gave up the unequal struggle. It deposited them in the middle of a man-made desert and, just when they were congratulating themselves on their miraculous manual landing, the motors cut out when they were only thirty feet from making contact with the surface.

The fall had been catastrophic. None of the crew had been injured because they had been cased in their obligatory survival suits and had been reasonably well protected from the impact. Some of the men suffered a few bruises and were a little shaken up, but apart from these minor complaints they had nothing to complain of. But the ship was wrecked.

Barrios had ordered some of the crew outside to make a quick check of the jets and the landing gear and, after making sure that no one was hurt, he hurried outside to join them.

The underneath of the patrol craft was a mess. The jets were fused tight together; the landing struts had been sheared off by the impact and the nose of the ship was tilted over at a dangerous angle.

Barrios shook his head. He was about to go back inside and see if the radio had been jarred back into operation when he sensed that something was wrong. The command centre of the small ship's cybernetic brain—already badly jolted by the running dogfight over the ocean—had been thrown out of kilter by the disastrous impact. Its circuits enjoyed a riotous feedback for a couple of seconds... and then proceeded to activate the self-destruct mechanism that was installed in every patrol ship.

The hull of the ship began to glow and heat up. In the space of a few seconds it became cherry red.

'Get back!' Barrios screamed.

There was barely time for him to hear the terrified screams from the four men still trapped inside the ship; but their agony was of a brief duration. Their death cries were abruptly cut off as the ship flared into a sudden incandescence and then subsided, reducing itself to a heap of molten slag that quickly cooled and solidified into an unrecognizable residue.

Someone screamed. And kept on screaming.

The men inside the ship were long since dead, but somebody still kept screaming in intolerable agony. Shaking, Barrios picked himself up and looked around. Dazed, his other men were moving towards him and looking for some sort of direction. Closer to the cooling slag heap another member of their party stumbled around like a drunken man, both hands pressed to his faceplate. He was the one responsible for the screaming.

Barrios hurried over to him. His suit was scorched and in tatters. He had probably been hunched down underneath the ship inspecting the undercarriage when the self-destruct mechanism had been activated. Perhaps he had been slower than the others in getting out of the way... and at that close range the rapidly rising heat of the controlled fusion process had all but burnt the suit off his back, and the blazing intensity of the incan-

descent ship had blinded him.

Damn fool ship.

Well, Barrios thought, that was all over now. He regretted the men he had lost and that they had died so ignominiously, but he was thankful that he had been outside and was still alive to challenge the fearsome desert. Of course they had lost nearly everything of value. Barrios carried the only hand weapon; he had commandeered it from the solitary member of the crew who had had the presence of mind to remember regulations and had brought it with him when they went outside to survey the damage to the ship... and Garcia had an old pocket compass which he had kept as an heirloom and liked to think of as a good luck token. With a bit of luck it might guide them out of his debacle.

Garcia was convinced that there was an old fortress bunker only a few miles south-west of where they had been brought down. If they could get to it, and gain entry, then it would be an easy matter to route an emergency call through to Base. And then they could sit back and relax and wait for a rescue tube to burrow its way through the labyrinthian underground network and collect them.

Garcia had insisted that he had seen it listed on a surface map. Barrios' hobbies were not inclined towards surface geography and so he had come to rely on his Second Officer's ability in this respect. Above all he knew that they must reach this hypothetical bunker if they were to survive at all, otherwise they would remain eternally lost and damned in this man-made inferno.

'See,' Garcia had cried, exultantly, *'there is the city!'*

And they had shielded their eyes from the fierce early morning sunlight that reached out for them in searing waves from the blazing lake that spread out across the cracked and inhospitable plain. The bizarre stalagmites of the necropolis seemed brighter than the sun itself and made a useful reference point.

'Very well,' Barrios agreed, relieved, *'so we have found your city. Now how far do we have to go?'*

Behind his dust-streaked face-plate Garcia bubbled with excitement. *'If my calculations are correct, then the bunker lies five miles south-west of the city...'*

'I certainly hope so,' Barrios said. *'For all our sakes.'* Every inch of their bodies ached with unaccustomed exertion, and the gnawing hunger in their bellies was something that none of them had ever had to cope with before. They seemed to have lived with their sweat and their fear for ages in these stifling suits.

So they had scrambled down into the deep arroyo to escape the newly risen sun, and tried to sleep and to keep the anxious demands of their bodies at bay for a few more hours.

Barrios flicked away the butt of his cigarette and slammed shut his faceplate. His voice, when he spoke to them, was filtered through the anonymity of their suit intercoms.

'All right,' he said. *'Now we move out...'*

He led them up the wide watercourse that took them out of the arroyo and onto the blighted plain. Now that the direct rays of the sun no longer savaged the landscape the broken floor of the valley was bathed in a delicate afterglow. The land cooled and contracted in the dusk. The haze of heat-waves was gone and the grotesque, needle-pointed minarets of the dead city gleamed fitfully in the distance.

They moved off in single file, keeping the city to their right, and struck out across the uneven plain. Garcia set a cracking pace which Barrios found difficult to emulate; his breathing had become increasingly laboured, and his body ached all over from the unaccustomed exertion. But they had to hasten if they were to reach the bunker before the sun rose, and in less than an hour their pace would be considerably reduced once darkness descended upon them and brought with it a gibbous moon.

Garcia moved confidently, his head high and his eyes raking the terrain ahead of them, his pocket compass gripped tightly in one hand, as though it was an amulet that would bring them good fortune.

They tried to move in a direct line whenever possible, but this was often difficult. Sometimes the cracks in the ground yawned impossibly wide and deep and they were forced to backtrack and make long detours in order to manage an easier crossing—and all this used up valuable energy.

The blind man slowed them up considerably. Each man took it in turns to link up with him and guide him after the rest of the column of seven men. His hands clasped the cord that bound them together and his weary body made weird, shambling steps as he endeavoured to keep up with them; his mouth hung open and allowed an almost continuous keening note to filter through his face-plate. They had sealed up his eyes as best as they could with one of the healing gels in his medical pouch and they were confident this would ease most of his pain and enable them to get him back to Base; but it was crippling to their morale to have to slow down and assist him across each tiny crevasse. Barrios knew that they would have made much better time if they had abandoned this luckless creature, but this he was loath to do. He had been trained to love life and to preserve it when he could, his own as well as others.

And if this is so, he wondered, what am I doing here?

It wasn't the first time his puzzled mind had posed such a question.

Stars began to appear in the darkening sky. A haggard moon rose and bathed the necropolis into silvery incandescence.

They continued to move in a wide and jagged arc that took them well clear of the city; they had no business *there*. The skeletal fingers rose high over the central gleaming lake and seemed to coldly beckon them into oblivion.

Nobody talked. They were hot and sweaty in their suits. The scathing energy of the sun might have aban-

doned the landscape but the colossal heat which the land had stored up during the long day still lingered underfoot and dissipated itself slowly into the night air. They switched on the headlamps of their suits and swore as they clambered up and down ravines and carved an erratic swathe of light ahead of and around them; sometimes the clefts were too deep for their lamps to penetrate and they would have to make a long and laborious detour, counting on Garcia's eidetic memory of the cracked plain to give them their lead.

As luck would have it, Garcia's calculations were out to a considerable degree. They sighted the top of the bunker when they were only a few miles south of the city and when sunrise was still many hours away; it rose up ahead of them in the ghostly moonlight, a flat dome of concrete with a wide, narrow observation slit peering down at them. From above it would look just like another outcropping of rock on this wasteland, but to a man on foot it would be a welcome sight. A little closer and they would be able to make out the polished eyes of the scanners keeping watch over this dead world—and the short ramp leading up to an entrance doorway.

'See, what did I tell you!' Garcia shouted.

'I'm glad,' Barrios puffed, 'that it was not so far off as you thought. Another hour of this and . . .'

But his Second Officer wasn't listening. Almost overcome with excitement he disregarded regulations and ran forward towards the short flight of steps leading up to the bunker. Barrios smiled, forgiving this slight to his rank in the heady elation of the moment, and followed him.

And just then all hell broke loose.

The ships came in low and fast and unseen; their motors made no sound until they were almost overhead. The ground all around Barrios erupted into flame and debris; Garcia disappeared in a sudden geyser of ruptured earth as an incandescent bolt of energy struck the ground immediately in front of him. His scream was cut short, only to be followed by the chaotic panic of the other members of the crew in Barrios' intercom.

He heard the demonic shriek of pursuit planes.

'*Scatter!*' he screamed, and ran for the bunker. The hungry lances of fire groped for him as he ran, churning the ground into turmoil. The air screamed and closed in around them like thunderclaps. '*Scatter!*'

But there was no need for him to shout the command. As soon as the first shaft of energy had crashed down among them the nine men had broken rank and had run every which way across the uneven ground.

The night air burned and crackled around Barrios. The screams of his men in his intercom were apocalyptic. Stunned, he stopped and looked around. He saw two small ships arcing around through the night sky and beginning another run towards them. Even as he watched there was a flicker of energy at their snout snouts and angry laser beams reached out for them. Away to his left a third ship banked sharply and swung back towards them.

Drones. Programmed to kill anything that moved on the surface of this devastated world.

Barrios hesitated. There was something almost hypnotic about their calculated approach. And something else. A feeling of . . . inevitability, as if all this had happened before, and he was powerless to prevent what was about to happen.

All around him the terrible landscape erupted into fire and smoke; the ground boiled and groaned and shot up great gouts of debris as though some gigantic monster was trying to break through the surface and devour them.

He saw one of his crew struggling with the blind man, their panic-stricken figures performing a grotesque dance in the centre of all this carnage. Barrios saw them disappear as a shaft of energy found them and blew their bodies to pieces and scattered them, sizzling, across the valley. Barrios sobbed and ran.

Something cut his legs from underneath him and he fell as though he had been scythed. He lay on the steps and watched the blood pump out of the stumps and wondered where his legs were. He wanted to scream but found that he couldn't. A red haze had enveloped his eyes and his intercom was strangely quiet.

They're all dead, he realised. Another beam of energy caught him a glancing blow and neatly blew off his left arm. He began to slobber in the suit.

Must I die? Must I die? I don't want to die. But I can't live . . . like this . . . like this . . .

For an isolated moment of time he seemed to think clearly again. The thunder and glare of erupting energy died down and he stared out into the night.

He could see the third drone swooping towards him. Fascinated, he found that he could look coldly into the face of this mindless little killer and feel no pain. It came closer . . . faster . . . until it seemed that they might touch, a strange kiss of death upon this blasted plain.

Why? his mind kept asking, *Why me?*

The drone spat its deadly shaft of energy right at him. He held his breath and closed his eyes.

The bunker and what remained of Barrios disappeared in a corruscating display of energy as something inside the squat building was touched off. Thunder rolled and reverberated across the desert. The smoke gradually settled. After a while it disappeared completely.

The three small ships circled cautiously for a few seconds and then, confident that their mission had been despatched, they rose and with single-minded purpose swept up and away from the valley and out over the levelled mountains towards the coast.

The dead city dreamed on in its timeless sleep.

Barrios woke, sweating, and reached for his room light. His trembling hand passed over the small rectangular panel above his head and coaxed a feeble night-light into life.

The room was small; large enough for a bed, a small table and two chairs, and a solitary cupboard in one

corner. And nothing else.

Barrios sat up and tried to control his shaking. His legs ached at a point just below his knees and his left arm seemed devoid of feeling. And there was a strange taste in his mouth. He massaged his limp arm and tried to bring back the circulation.

He recalled the dream and appeared to find nothing wrong with its strange internal logic. He had dreamed that particular dream on many different occasions; he had heard the shrieks of his dying men and had watched his life's blood pump energetically from the ruined stumps of his legs; and he had made that arduous trek many times and felt the slow attrition of his soul.

He shuddered. He could still taste the blood in his mouth where his teeth had savaged his own lips in terror, and his skull still echoed the dying screams of the other men. There were flashes before his eyes that could only be the after-image of the killer ships he knew so well, and the details of that nightmarish landscape were engraved indelibly on his uneasy mind.

A bad dream. And one that recurred, constantly, to remind him of certain horrors.

He felt calmer now. He relaxed back into his bed and felt the tension begin to drain out of him. The phantom ache left his limbs and his arm returned to normal; even his mind began to heal. Soon the dreadful sounds and images would disappear. Soon—

Eventually he slept. The night-light panel dimmed to accommodate his gradual descent into comfortable unconsciousness, and when he was deeply asleep he began to dream again.

But softly. He dreamed of sunshine and happy people and the myriad things that were to do in the life ahead of him; he dreamed of laughter and compassion and good company and all the other important aspects of life. He bathed in a vast pool warmed from below by special conduits and from above by the huge golden orb of an artificial sun. He heard the laughter of his friends and felt good in their company. He loved them all and *this* was the only reality: everything else was the stuff of nightmare. And pain and death must be avoided.

And so he slept, and dreamed his efficacious and fragmented dreams, and when he woke he was content and the terrifying nightmare of the dead city and the blighted plain seemed very far away.

He rose early and went straight to work.

The Community was fourteen thousand strong and it was buried deep underground. None of the inhabitants save One had ever seen the devastated surface of the world of their ancestors, and only One remained of the original Committee to remind them of mankind's former greatness and unfortunate genocidal tendencies.

The Community was entirely self-sustaining. The same awesome energies that had stripped bare the surface world and left it to bake and rot in the sunlight, had also served to make life for the inhabitants of the sunken city amenable and adventurous. The multiple levels of the Community contained everything they could pos-

sibly desire in the way of recreation and stimulating friendships. Their private quarters were small, but they were used only for sleeping. President Santiago, the One left in charge of the Pattern, had encouraged them to mix gregariously and to take advantage of the many thoughtful conveniences which the designers of the Community had planned, and to shun the cell of isolation.

Each day, from nine until three in the afternoon, Barrios worked at one of the many hydroponics farms. His duties there were minimal but necessary; he saw that the nutrient baths were maintained at their proper level and that the growth of the plants was always kept within the prescribed bounds. This was nothing that the machines couldn't have done very well for themselves, but Santiago had taught them that it had been faith in machines that had accelerated the Fall of the old world—that and the loss of man's faith in himself. And so the Community employed men to watch over the machines . . . and men to watch over the watchers.

The farm where Barrios worked occupied several acres and was kept spotlessly clean by parading servomechs. The wide, low ceilings shed an efficacious artificial sunlight down upon the hungry growths in the nutrient baths, and the walls of the farm were white and shining and agreeably antiseptic, like the walls of a hospital.

The nutrient baths were arranged in line across the room; each one was fifteen yards in length and a third as wide. They were elevated so that a man did not have to stoop to examine the plants, and to facilitate the harvesting of the respective crops by the specialised servomechs. Barrios spent most of his working day walking back and forth between the two rows assigned to himself. He checked the functioning of each shallow trough, rarely have to regulate the flow of the nutrient fluid, and on the odd occasion when he did find a small adjustment was needed it was always with the suspicion that even this might have been carefully programmed; a man must have *something* to do.

The farm was always quiet. Only the soft movement of the nutrient liquid over the soft pebbles on the bottom of the troughs disturbed the peaceful solitude—that and the barely audible shuffle of Barrios and his companions as they moved slowly down their respective aisles and supervised their units, describing ponderous diagrams in silence and only occasionally looking up and nodding to an acquaintance across the way.

On this particular morning Barrios discovered he had a small emergency. He heard a soft slop of nutrient fluid spilling over onto the shiny white floor well before he saw that sub-section twenty-nine was overflowing. He hurried along the aisle to see what was the matter.

One of the outlet valves had become blocked. He couldn't see at first what had caused the malfunction; his mind was much too busy dealing with the immediate problem. He punched a command button on the side of the trough and the flow was quickly stopped. The fluid continued to slop over the sides of the trough for per-

haps half a minute and then subsided. While Barrios waited for a servomech to trundle in and clean up the mess he bent over and studied the outlet area.

The valves had become clogged up by a fine silt that had been produced by the constantly abrasive action of the small pebbles; there was quite a mound of them heaped up around the valve. *Now how the devil had that happened so quickly?* The trough had been clean the last time he had inspected it—and that had only been yesterday.

Barrios swore under his breath. If he hadn't known better he would have suspected someone of deliberately dumping this stuff in his bath. Instead he shook his head in exasperation and plunged his hand down into the bath to clear some of the muck away. His hand sunk deeply into the silt and pebbles and groped for the outlet valve.

A sharp stab of pain sliced into his hand.

Barrios froze. There was something in the trough. Something sinister buried underneath the mound of sediment. Something that felt like the jagged teeth of a broken canister . . .

Sudden fire raced up his arm. He opened his mouth and whimpered with pain and squeezed tears from his eyes. Stunned, he let them travel down until they were staring at where his bare arm disappeared into the nutrient bath.

A dark red stain was spreading through the fluid; a dreadful long-armed flower that grew and blossomed from around his submerged hand.

The fire raced up his arm and touched his mind. He whimpered like an animal caught in a trap.

His hand was *bleeding*.

Barrios screamed.

The sound sliced through the silence of the farm like the mortal cry of a wounded animal; it brought the other men in the room to shocked attention. Their eyes turned towards Barrios and remained there, unmoving.

Barrios couldn't stop screaming. Not until later, when the medics arrived and found him huddled down in a corner of the great room—holding his bloody hand out in front of him and watching with fascination as the bright red fluid dripped down from his ripped hand. His mouth had frozen open and he had lost the capacity to scream; only a continuous whimpering sound slipped past his dry lips. His eyes were wide open and filled with terror.

They had followed his bloody trail half-way round the farm before they found him. And then they took him, and bound up his wounded hand. They placed him under heavy sedation and returned him to his room, where he rested undisturbed for two whole days and was allowed to dream only pleasant, healing dreams.

The Accident Squads were always busy.

And on the third day he returned to work and kept a careful eye out for booby-traps in his nutrient baths. He was shaken but recovered and he hated the sight of blood and could not endure excruciating pain for more than a moment.

The rest of the week passed by without further incident.

And on the sixth night after his ordeal Barrios dreamed a terrible dream . . . again.

But for a while there had been pleasure and a generous measure of bliss. Now they lay on the bed together, dreamy in the aftermath of their meeting.

Teresa lay on her side with her head resting against his shoulder and one arm across his chest, her long, dark hair tumbling into his face. Their breathing was soft and shallow while their bodies waited for them to return to life.

Their small room was suffused with the faint night-light of the city that spilled in through the open window beside their bed; in the distance they could hear the muted sounds of a sleepy metropolis.

It was half-way towards morning, one of the best times to be thinking of all the pleasures that had been and those still to come.

Teresa stirred, and raised her head and looked at him. Her face was in deep shadow, but he could see the night-light reflected in her dark eyes, and the faint glow on her beautiful white teeth as her lips parted in a smile.

'Are you asleep?' she asked.

He rolled his head to one side so that their faces were closer. He looked deeply into her eyes. 'Could I be?'

She laughed, and burrowed affectionately into his shoulder. The fingers of her left hand reached out across his belly; they began to trace tiny, tactile patterns on his skin.

'It's almost time,' she whispered. There was a wistful weight of sadness to her words that had been brought about by the slow realisation that their short time together had come to an end; but this unhappiness was balanced to some extent by the knowledge of all the good times that were still ahead of them.

But her words had roused him from his torpor. For a moment he deliberated upon her movements—and what man has never wondered, at a time like this, whether it was worthwhile trying just once more before the real world claimed them? But he sighed, and gently pushed her hands aside, and sat up.

He slid out of bed and began dressing. The window was directly in front of him and he could look out over the drowsing city. They were nearly seventy stories up in one of the newly developed residential sectors on the outskirts of Brasília; the dynamic hub of the city was many miles away.

When he had his pants on he stood quietly for a moment, looking out over the great slabs of buildings pock-marked with residential lights and, away in the distance, towards the towering ziggeruts of the centre of government.

Government had become a dirty word on the tongues of thinking men. And it was helpful to study the world from such a lofty standpoint: it restored his sense of values.

There was a soft, sliding movement behind him as

Teresa slipped out of bed. He felt her arms creep around him and sensed her slender, naked body press against him.

'I will see you soon?' she whispered. And without turning round he knew that there were tears in her eyes. She was sometimes unbearably sentimental about such matters—but it was one of the reasons he kept returning to her.

He reached up and patted her hand affectionately. 'You will see me soon.'

'When?'

Her lips touched his shoulder, made a warm traverse down his arm.

'Six weeks. Maybe less.' He had some leave in reserve and he hated to admit that there were times when he just wanted to be alone. A woman couldn't understand that. A woman—

A haggard moon rode high over the city, bathed in a sickly orange glow as it peered down through the murky atmosphere. It disturbed Barrios to see it look so unpleasant. He was reminded of the dreadful armaments that the rebels kept focussed upon the Earth, of all the devices which they had at their disposal. And at any given time they could harness the energy of the sun itself and . . .

But these were depressing thoughts.

He shivered suddenly, as if a ghost had walked over his grave somewhere in the far future. He felt her arms tighten around him.

'Rafael . . .?'

Sadly he pulled away from her and reached for his shirt; then for his jacket with its meaningless talismans and insignias. His thoughts had darkened—as they always did after intercourse—and he was reminded that Command Headquarters had been strict about the time he was due back at the burrow.

She watched him finish dressing, a timid statue in the half-light.

'What is it?' he asked. 'You're trembling . . .'

His arms reached out for her and she leapt between them and trembled like a frightened bird fluttering her wings against his chest.

'Oh, Rafael, I feel so *strange*. It's as if . . .'

'But I shall only be gone for a short while,' he soothed, one hand gently stroking her long, dark hair, and somehow loath to follow on down the sweeping curve of her spine and rediscover the joys he had so recently left. 'There's no need to be . . .'

She lifted her chin and looked into his eyes, and he was surprised to see how her face had become so ravaged with a grief that he could not understand.

'Teresa, what is it? What are you trying to say? Tell me, so that I may erase your fears . . .'

She opened her mouth to say something—and then the words, whatever they had been, seemed to freeze in her throat. Her eyes widened in terror and she looked past him, out of the window—towards the city.

Barrios spun around. He saw first the haggard moon riding high over the gaudy metropolis—and then the

fine needle of light that lanced down suddenly from the moon.

It must have happened in an instant, in the length of time it took to take in one breath and breathe it out. For a moment the fiery needle of light hovered and wavered, and then swung inexorably towards Brasilia.

The needle of light seemed to grow and expand. A great fireball erupted in the centre of the city and yearned towards a sky that was suddenly as bright as day. The civic centre disappeared in an avalanche of fire and whirling debris.

The concussion was gigantic. It threw them both to the floor and sent shards of glass flying inwards from the shattered window.

Teresa screamed and clung to him. Dazed, he struggled to his feet and looked out at the city. The noise was terrifying. The whole world seemed to be on fire, everything boiling up in great acrid goutts of smoke and flame and great thunderclaps of sound crashing down upon their ears. And above all this the screams of the dying and those about to die.

Teresa was screaming.

'*Rafael!*' she sobbed. '*Rafael...*'

He held her. That was all they had time for. He could see the dreadful finger of light probing through the inferno, carving a cataclysmic swathe through the city, moving slowly backwards and forwards to a carefully prearranged pattern, carving up and destroying the city one small section at a time.

It was coming towards them, driving an incandescent fireball ahead of it, aching to consume everything it touched. Barrios opened his mouth to scream defiance—and for the first time he could remember the logical continuity of the dream was suspended. Just as their building was about to be engulfed by the fireball he was shuffled *elsewhere*.

He found himself alone on a blasted plain. And it was dark. In the distance he could make out the low silhouette of ragged mountains rising pitifully against the starlight; a cold, crying wind blew against his face.

He was alone. His arms still ached with the memory of Teresa and they still groped for her slender body. But she was gone, burned up and her atoms dissipated by a volcanic wind. Her body had been razed just as surely as this terrifying landscape had been scoured of life—and by the same forces.

A cold white moon shone down on this nightmarish landscape. The fanatic rebels who had once ruled that ancient satellite had long since turned to dust; now it floated serene but somehow aloof from the human tragedy.

He was in some sort of survival suit; his face-plate was open and he could breathe the cool night air. And he seemed to recognise this place. He turned a little to one side... and found it.

The necropolis. Glowing eerily in the moonlight, its broken fingers groping towards the stars.

Seen so close it was enormous: a great lake of fused artifacts that looked like some vast inland sea. It was

like a madman's monument.

And underneath that ocean of silica Teresa dreamed. He imagined he could see her face in one of the formless megaliths that jutted up from the body of the lake, but knew it was only fancy that had conjured up her image... and her memory.

How many, many times must I face this place? he wondered.

Tears formed in his weary eyes and ran down his cheeks. He had no mind to wipe them away.

And this time he heard the approaching ship: a high-pitched whine like an angry drill biting deep into his skull.

He turned around and faced it. His arms dropped uselessly to his side in a gesture of weary resignation.

It came in low and fast across the desert like an angry insect.

And, smiling, he waited for it to blow him to bits. Again.

This one didn't use lasers. He felt the first of the high-velocity bullets tear into his chest—felt the first nanoseconds of terrifying pain. And then he blacked out.

He woke, sweating, and reached for his room light.

Every morning the President Santiago rose early, breakfasted on fruit juice and cereal, and proceeded promptly to the Therapy Control Centre.

This large circular room was the hub of the Community, the means whereby the mind of every individual could be monitored and directed towards the common good. The walls were white and the illumination was discreet and indirect. A bas-relief mural ran continuously around the room; it began at shoulder height and reached up almost to the top of the domed ceiling. It depicted in great style and with little concern for realism some of the finer moments of mankind; the male and female figures all held dignified postures, their aspirations were obviously idealistic. Overhead, in the centre of the domed ceiling, an abstracted sun reached down its arms to solicit their consideration.

Santiago entered the room and occupied his throne. It formed part of a raised dais at one end of the room and it was crowned, from behind, by the most magnificent section of the mural. It represented a group of people straining inwards towards a central point; their arms were raised and pointing upwards, together, so that they formed a central, yearning pyramid of limbs. Their faces, too, were turned upwards, towards the abstracted sun.

There was a short flight of steps leading up to the dais that ran the full width of the room. Directly beyond them was a narrow, crescent-shaped table; the ends pointed towards Santiago and the members of the Committee sat tightly wedged into their respective niches, facing Santiago with their motionless hands resting on their knees so that they appeared, sometimes, to resemble polished gargoyles. They stared at him with sightless eyes that condoned his every decision.

Santiago was old. More than that, he was *ancient*. And he had watched his fellow members of the original

Committee gradually work out the contracts of their lives until they had finally succumbed to the disease of death. And when the last of his old confidants had passed away he had ordered the Engineers to manufacture a set of simulacra so that he might still enjoy the uncontested presence of these fine people.

Now they sat quietly and unmoving in this great chamber of life and did not interfere. And for that he was thankful. They were a greater boon to him in death than they had ever been in life and no longer did he have to suffer their disagreeable vetoes.

Santiago was one hundred and fifteen years old. He looked several decades younger, and this was a result of the combination of constant transplant replenishments that enabled him to maintain a moderately young body, and the vigorous nature of his enterprise. But the mind grew heavy and could not last forever. Santiago, however, was confident that *this* generation would reclaim the surface—and he was determined to see his project through to that end. Otherwise it had all been meaningless. And in the meantime . . .

There were computer outlets in the room that enabled him to communicate directly with the Programming Department. Also, there was a heated tray alongside his throne where his coffee was kept constantly warm and within easy reach and, by his right hand, a row of control tabs had been sunken into the throne that gave him access to all the major departments under his command.

Santiago sighed, sipped his coffee, and requested the computer to begin unloading its problems for the day.

'AMS21/1763 Carrearas,' the concealed speakers twittered. *'Likes the sight of blood. Has slashed his wrists several times this week. Exhibits no signs of regression from this tendency. Diagnosis: possible homicidal tendencies of a simplistic nature. May become violent against others instead of self. Advise.'*

Santiago frowned. The effort transformed his already deeply wrinkled face into something sober and sinister. A red light came on next to the President's right hand and signified that the computer was awaiting his advice.

Too bad, Santiago thought. They'd had such a good run lately. He had begun to hope that the Programme was nearing perfection. But perhaps there would always be the occasional exception—and provided they were weeded out promptly there was no reason why they should endanger the overall success of the venture.

Fortunately the booming population pressure of the Community made his decision easier. In the early days, when there had been less than three thousand of them tucked away down here, it had been sometimes difficult to advocate elimination. But if they had heeded his warnings *then* then they might have bred a pure strain more quickly than they had. Still, there was nobody left to disagree with his decisions: he was the Last. And the only One.

One of the dangers of therapy was that potential deviates developed a liking for the carnage he pumped into their minds. Just like in the old days, he thought,

when sadistic schoolmasters encouraged a desire for flagellation in their pupils.

Ah well, one couldn't expect one hundred per cent success. At least, not yet.

He pressed a tab. 'AMS21/1763 Carrearas. Tendencies diagnosed as harmful to the project. Recommend elimination.'

'Noted and recorded,' the computer acknowledged.

The red light went out at Santiago's fingertips and the speakers resumed their gossiping.

'AFS/13245 Los Angeles. Threw herself into the food hopper on level nine . . .'

Good god—another suicide? Could they never be eliminated? Angrily, Santiago threw another tab. *'Programming—why wasn't I kept up to date with her condition?'*

A male voice stammered back. 'I . . . I'm sorry, Your Excellency. But her tape seems to have been mislaid and . . .'

'Idiots! See that this does not happen again.'

Santiago sulked. He knew that the girl's act could not have been impulsive; she would have been building up to it for weeks and he should have been notified earlier.

Damned subordinates. He would have to order stricter discipline. Yes, that would teach them a lesson. There wasn't room for bungling in this sort of project.

Stricter discipline. Santiago's eyes narrowed with determination; his ancient lips twisted into an unpleasant smile and his bony fingers closed into tiny, angry fists, like the talons of a fiendish bird.

The people of the Community dreamed at regular intervals. Sometimes they all shared a common nightmare; on other occasions as many as a hundred different tapes would be distributed through their sleeping minds.

They were allowed three kinds of dreaming. First came the nightmares: the diabolical images of war and pain that occupied eighty per cent of their dreams; next came the deliciously warm and comforting dreams of antiquity and all the great and noble images of the past; finally, they were allowed a small percentage of their sleeping time to themselves, so that they might dream their oddly assorted dreams and let their minds get cluttered up with the non-sequential refuse of their subconscious.

Sometimes the dreams and the nightmares would blend. On more than one occasion Barrios had known a pleasant idyll to be destroyed by the hideous intrusion of monstrous images. Like the time they had been on a beach—somewhere—and surrounded by thousands of happy holiday-makers. They had spent many long hours in the cool surf and, later, they had spread themselves across the shaded beach and drank and ate delicious food from picnic baskets and made love and generally lost themselves in a long drawn-out exercise in pleasure.

Until the twilight sky had suddenly blossomed into a terrifying imitation sunlight and the ocean had boiled up over the beach and engulfed them.

Sometimes he could still hear their screams and see

their bloated, blistered faces swimming before him as he watched the skin slough away from his hands. And he felt the pain: the intolerable, agonising *pain*.

And the dreams recurred. Again and again and again. But one never became accustomed to their horror—that was one of the tricks that Programming exercised. Only afterwards, when you lay awake, sweating and waiting for the light to come on, could you recall that you had dreamed that dream before. Many times. That you had dreamed it and similar dreams for as long as you could remember. For as long as you had lived.

Nobody talked. About the dreams, about the pain and the carnage and all the other terrible things that were pumped into their minds. They had come to accept this as a commonplace, a natural part of their life. And they all hated and loathed war and any sort of pain—for that was the intention of the Programme.

The jungle wept. The thick, coiling undergrowth caught the moisture that tricked down from the yearning trees and slapped it against Barrios' naked face.

He was hot and sweaty in his heavy green fatigues; his arm was weary from wielding his machete through the dense undergrowth and he was soaked up to his shoulders from where he had waded through swamp after swamp after swamp. An army of mosquitos fed at every bare patch of his skin and a sickening stench pervaded his nostrils.

It had stopped raining some time ago, but the air seemed to have soaked up so much moisture that it was like moving through a fine mist. More than anything else in the world he wanted to rest, and to sleep, and to get some food into his aching belly before he passed out.

Most of the unit had been wiped out hours ago, when they had met up with and successfully obliterated the enemy tracking station several miles north. Now they were on their way home and, despite their heavy casualties, the mission appeared to have been worthwhile. But there was a nagging uncertainty in Barrios' mind. The operation had gone *too* smoothly; their victory had been too quick, too assured. And now there was this incessant rain to contend with. Every muscle in his body ached and the air was so thick with moisture it tasted like soup.

Eventually they reached the river. They chose to bivouac in a small clearing by the water's edge. To reach base they had to first cross the river a little way further downstream and then make for the high ground to the east. But for the moment all that they wanted was to sit down and take things easy for a while. They seemed to have been walking for hundreds of miles through this damned jungle and some sort of respite was called for.

It was late afternoon. They dared not light a fire for fear of advertising their whereabouts. The jungle was thick with enemy snipers and, this close to home, they had no wish to begin another conflict.

They sat down in a small circle and broke open their tins of cold beef and beans. They ate slowly, hardly

conscious of the renewed rain drifting down their faces, their eyes darting here and there around the clearing. Two men stood guard while the rest ate their tasteless meal; their weary eyes raked the surrounding jungle, but their minds were elsewhere: two miles underground where the dirty stink of the jungle was never felt.

Barrios finished his tin of beef and beans and wandered over to the river's edge. He raised his head and looked up at the low lying cloud. It was a farmer's rain; soft and gentle and somehow out of place in this bizarre environment. His men ate with hungry eyes and didn't seem to care how their stomachs responded to the tasteless goo they spooned into their gaping mouths. They had been involved in this war for so long that they had lost their useful personalities; it seemed that they had walked for millions of miles through these muddy swamps and hacked their way through innumerable jungles chasing elusive figures that always looked the same in the agony of death. More than anything else they wanted to *rest*. Perhaps because they had lost so much of their humanity they yearned for something else; something finer, something cleaner. Because in their dreams their hands were always stained with blood, and the faces of their women and their loved ones floated before them and they, too, were covered with blood. The whole world was bathed in that same dreadful colour.

Barrios squatted down by the river's edge and looked downstream, following the curve of the muddy water until it was swallowed up by the zealous jungle. He thought of the size of the mouth of that mighty river and how it gagged upon the polluted sea.

Is anything left? he wondered. *What are we fighting for?*

The men were still huddled together in a circle with their tins in their hands when the enemy patrol burst out into the clearing. One or two made vague, useless gestures towards their weapons; this was all they had time for.

The concentrated fire from all corners of the clearing ripped into them and flung them apart. The two sentries were blown to pieces by high-velocity explosive bullets. Some of the remaining men dived and danced across the clearing as the rapid fire tore them apart and flung pieces of their bodies in all directions. The sound was frightful: the insane chatter of machine weapons and the terminal screams of soldiers as they were blasted into oblivion.

Barrios half rose before he was hit in the chest by several bullets. The impact hurled him backwards into the water. He lay on his side with his face half buried in the shallows and watched the blood pour out of him and stain the dirty water; his mouth was wide open and his eyes were staring. He sensed the searing pain in his chest and knew that he was dying.

A sudden silence descended upon the clearing. He heard the soft, cautious sounds of footsteps and, in the distance, the sound of a flurry of birds rising, screaming, into the rain. And afterwards, the guttural sounds of

another language.

There had only been seven of them. Now, one at a time, the killers dragged the mutilated bodies to the river's edge and threw them out into the stream. They laughed joyously as they did this. The bodies made a dull, sickening sound as they hit the water. As his mind dimmed Barrios realised that they would probably be carried a few yards downstream before the cannibal fish were finished with them, and then their bones would lodge up against some tree stump and wait there while the hungry little mouths tore the last remaining flesh from them. And then the skeletons would begin to turn slowly in the current, and move on, and continue downstream until they were broken up and dispersed and ground to dust...

His eyesight was fading. The water all around him was churned up and bloody. He felt his arms lifted—a sudden curse—and then he was dropped back into the water. A brutal foot turned him over. He stared up weakly through a shifting red haze at the face of the man looking down at him.

Strange, but he didn't look so different from his own men. It might have even *been* one of his own men. It might...

And what he could remember, later, was the deep smile of satisfaction on the man's face as he drew up his gun to blow Barrios' head to pieces...

Barrios woke, sweating, and reached for the room light.

The fine wire probes withdrew from his skull and whipped back unobtrusively into the bed head. His trembling hand passed over the illumination panel above his head and coaxed a gentle night-light back into the room.

Shaking, he settled back and looked up at the ceiling. But there was nothing there to see; it was an opaque backdrop to the terrifying images that still haunted his numbed mind. And he did not—*could* not—see the diffused gas seeping into the room; the fine, light mist which he drew into his lungs and which, in the space of a few short minutes, quickly calmed his fright. And in a while he slept, and dreamed of sunshine and laughter and all the other pleasant things there were to dream about—and some of them were his *own*. He rested, and was content.

Until several nights passed and the wicked ogres became jealous and pulled him back to their killing grounds.

On the night before All Fools' Day, Santiago spoke directly to every member of the Community.

It was something of a confessional. At this time every year he longed to absolve himself of the burdens of office, and so he chose to share with his people, through the medium of their dreams, the great secret that bound them together, that unified them with purpose.

But when they woke they would remember nothing of what he had confessed, because so much knowledge might have driven them mad and ruined the Project. All

that they would retain after he had spoken to them would be a pleasant afterglow of purpose; a feeling that they were engaged in something grand and were part of something immeasurably greater than the dull routine of their simple lives. And what Community could have asked for more?

This was the one night of the year when every member of the Community went down to sleep together at the appointed time. All fourteen levels slowed down almost to a stop while they slumbered and Santiago quietly entered their dreams.

They saw a man in flowing white robes seated on a golden throne. His hair was snow white and it hung down past his shoulders. His face was benign and wise, the summation of all the god-like archetypes that lived in their subconscious minds. He smiled, and raised one hand in greeting.

Welcome, my people. Tonight I have something marvellous to tell you.

His speech was nearly always the same, although the manner of his delivery was inconstant. Sometimes he chose to assume the image of that many-fisted Hindu god or the quiet complacency of a Christ. Tonight he felt like Zoroaster and chose to act accordingly.

When you wake, he went on, you will feel exalted. You will not know why, nor should you; it is not in my nature to have you burdened with my guilt. You have other things to do.

Listen, my children, and I will tell you of your ancestors... and of your heritage.

Once, there were many millions of us. Does that seem strange? But we were afflicted with a madness that men once called divine but which we now know was appalling ignorance.

Your ancestors destroyed the old world, because they lived together in avaricious disharmony. Now the surface of the Earth is ravaged by nuclear-branded winds and the soil has been boiled away—and we eke out our lonely lives underground and wait for the surface to become habitable again.

And already there are signs. In some parts of the world a few hardy grasses have survived. The rains are generous and continue to purge the soil. In another generation or less—it would have to be less, Santiago knew, we will be able to climb up and reclaim our ancient domain.

No animal life survived the final holocaust; there will be no predators to give us danger—and I will see to it that we never again threaten ourselves.

There will be no need for a warrior race in our new world. There is nothing up there that can threaten us—except ourselves. And the conditioning you have been undergoing since birth—in the same manner as the generation before yourselves underwent the same process, and the generation before that—this conditioning will ensure our psychological stability.

I have taught you and your parents to loathe violence, to abhor pain, and to vomit at the sight of blood and to scream for mercy if any harm is cast your way. I have

shown you time and time again the meaningless horrors of war and the barbarous consequences of conflict. This conditioning will continue all your lives until I have purged this monstrous disease from your system.

Does surfeit guarantee revulsion? I believe that it does—I have proof that it does. And one day soon we shall climb up and reclaim that blighted landscape.

I remember how it used to be . . . and how it will be again.

Go now, and dream your peaceful dreams, happy in this brief knowledge of your destiny. You, my people, will be warriors of the mind and not of the flesh.

The meek shall inherit the Earth, because I have made them so.

He raised one hand in weary salutation and bid them good-bye. His image faded from their minds. A great weight of pleasant images settled down over their thoughts and began the laborious business of erasing most of the meeting from their minds; only a pleasant residue of purpose would remain when they woke. And for tonight, at least, they would be spared the horrors of their nightmares.

Seated on his throne in the Therapy Centre, Santiago waved one hand to cut the hidden cameras. He folded his hands in his lap and stared out across the dim-lit room at the silent, unsmiling faces of the Committee.

“Well, my friends, what say you?” he enquired. “Was I significantly magnanimous, agreeably benign? Did my voice sound confident and did my manner impress you, as it must have impressed them?”

They made no sound; nor did their lips move or did they in any way acknowledge his request: he had not programmed them to speak. And their dull, sightless eyes seemed to look into his very soul.

“How say you?” His voice dropped to a croak. “Was I . . . like a god?”

Yes, they seemed to say, *you were indeed like a god, Santiago.*

And in the half-light they seemed to nod their heads in solemn agreement.

Santiago gave a short, high-pitched laugh, and rested his face in one hand.

He began to cry, softly, as if someone might hear him.

He looked very old, and very lonely, and not too sure of himself.

On the morning of All Fools’ Day Santiago rose early and went to the Vault.

He dispensed with breakfast on this Day. And today he felt tired. Each year weighed heavier than the last. Surgical transplants were miraculous; they enabled him to keep a virile body and a healthy appetite. But the mind grew heavy with the burden of his office, and he longed for some respite.

But when I am gone there will be no others, he realised. Only the machines. And we cannot trust the machines . . . by themselves. They had learned from that

mistake. Why, even the computers lost records occasionally and . . .

The great doors opened and the Beast stood revealed to him.

He shuddered.

And yet he had to admit there was a certain fascination about the gigantic automaton, otherwise he would have been unable to approach it.

Basically it was a complex exo-skeleton and muscle-amplifier over five metres high and powered by a small nuclear battery. In appearance it was awesome; it had been fashioned in the image of a baleful god: it had a great, bloated belly and six massive arms grew out from its squat body. Some of them brandished wicked-looking knives and one, growing out from shoulder height, held a great nine-tailed whip aloft. Its body had been cast in gold and its exterior was covered with hideous patterns of another age and studded with brilliant jewels.

Its visage was terrifying. A great turret sat upon the powerful shoulders. It had been cast in the manner of a gargoyle head; one side of the face was benign and friendly, the other half was twisted into a mask of malevolent hatred. The head was fitted with a crown of steel thorns several metres dense so that it looked like the rising of a supernatural sun.

Santiago sighed, rubbed his pale hands together, and walked around to the back of the machine.

A servo-mech raised him up to the entry port in the back of the automaton and Santiago climbed carefully inside. Breathing heavily, he moved his fragile body into position inside the web-protection of the exo-skeleton. He felt the sensors wrap themselves around his limbs like tiny black snakes. He gripped the control levers in front of his cradle and stared out through the creature’s fearful eyes.

The door was open. A long ramp led out into the main corridor. The Community was happily enjoying their holiday without any portents of what was to come.

Santiago sighed; it was more like a whimper. He threw back his head and closed his eyes; he began to tremble. His hands moved over the controls and tested his monstrous extremities.

The six great hands moved. They clasped, slashed and gripped imaginary objects. The giant hand holding the whip rose up and came down with a thunderous report; the cruelly barbed tips of the nine lashes tingled and vibrated in the silence. Santiago could feel the sense of power moving through his own hands and up his arms. He flicked his anxious little tongue out over his dry lips and clenched his teeth. Everything seemed to be working efficiently.

His relationship with his people was something of a love affair, and on this one day of the year—every year—it found a kind of consummation, a sort of . . . catharsis.

He blinked and looked straight ahead. He activated the Beast’s programme and hunched forward over the controls. The nuclear-powered treads began to move,



• EDDIE JONES •

And from somewhere in the dim past his ancient mind recalled a modicum of grace.

'Dear lord, forgive me,' he whispered. And urged the Beast forward.

It sprang out into the main corridor screaming like a banshee, its multiple arms whirling like scythes and its monstrous head rotating wildly. People screamed and ran howling into corners and huddled there while it swept past. This was the busiest part of Level 7 and the Beast drove a path of havoc through the wide passageways.

Sharp-edged knives slashed at their arms, their legs, at any piece of exposed flesh, the instruments programmed to penetrate only a few millimetres into flesh; it careered on down the chaotic passageways with its great mouth gaping open and dribbling a foul, synthetic slime.

Somewhere a klaxon wailed. And another. Ostensibly they advertised an emergency, but their concentrated howling only added to the terror sweeping through the Community.

The Beast moved at a savage pace, pushing people aside and dropping them aside in broken, screaming bundles. And where it had passed by the Accident Squad moved quickly in.

It moved through level after level like an avenging angel. It forced them screaming into corners and lashed them with the gigantic whip and with sizzling bursts of high-frequency sonics. They did not—*could* not—offer any resistance. Such activity had been bred from their lives and this Day served to test what Santiago had achieved.

Barrios was in the pool on Level 9 when the Beast appeared. Along with several hundred holiday-makers he had been enjoying the warmth and peacefulness of the heated lake when the machine burst screaming into their midst.

He saw the Beast plunge into the lake and come raging towards him, throwing up a great wake on either side of its hideous visage and with its arms whirling so fast that they made blurs in the air before them. He heard the screams and saw the water beginning to run red. He screamed and struck out for the shore.

Uselessly. One of the Beast's great arms flashed down and caught him a terrible blow on the head. He lost consciousness, and so was spared the carnage that followed.

And after the Beast had erupted from the lake and crashed through into the corridor outside, the Accident Squad moved in. They promptly fished the bathers from out of the blood-stained lake and bound their wounds and pumped them full of sedation. And then moved on in the wake of the Beast.

On and on it went. Level after level after level . . . until the Beast was satiated. Nobody tried to stop it; all they could think of was to get out of the way of its flailing arms and the terrible, twisted face. It looked to them like the embodiment of every evil ever visited upon the human race, and for three long hours it rampaged

through the Community and turned it into an ancient vision of Hell.

And when it was all over and they lay stricken and weeping in the corridors, the Beast turned around and, with its frightful arms held stiffly in the air and with the terrible howling cry stilled, it made its way back to the Vault.

It moved slowly. The treads that carried its enormous weight barely ticked over. And as it moved up through the silent levels its head turned slowly around and a low, keening sound was pushed from its gaping mouth, as though it was carefully surveying the havoc it had caused and, like a creature too prone to violent outbursts of temper, perhaps even regretting a little of what it had done.

Nobody talked. They all cowered or closed their eyes or bowed in grotesque obeisance and waited for it to pass by. And after it had gone they got slowly to their feet and wandered off towards their rooms, or to their meeting places, or went in search of medical attention. Throughout the community the mouths of a million small wounds gaped open and asked: *why?*

Only Santiago knew. This was necessary, he told himself, so that he might test their fear and their inability to be aggressive. And today it had worked out better than ever. Today . . .

He toiled the Beast towards the Vault. He felt exhausted but very much alive. This was his vindication, his . . . catharsis. This was the proof he needed to revive his flagging purpose. This was the Day when . . .

Up and up climbed the Beast, its return journey a very sombre event but every bit as terrifying as its descent. The people waited for it to disappear and for their senses to return, and none of them wondered why this should be so. This was All Fools' Day, the celebration of the Fall and the Day the Beast chose to return and remind them of pain and death and all the other terrible things that their ancestors had been enslaved by and of which they were mercifully free.

The Beast glided in through the open doors of the Vault. They slid quietly shut. When the monstrous machine stood still Santiago collapsed over the controls and began to weep and moan softly to himself. He surrendered to this great gush of emotion partly from catharsis and partly from guilt. But not from pain.

Each year they responded better. Next year, perhaps, they would hardly move at all but submit, humbly, to whatever he chose to do. And that was how it should be, for they must be meek. They must be *made* not to fight back, to not *want* to fight back.

Only the meek could inherit, otherwise it would all happen again, as it had happened before. Only a people whose minds had been purged of all thoughts of violence could be allowed to reclaim the ravaged surface of the world. Only *his* people.

And this would happen soon; of that he felt confident. And his great Programme would be vindicated. They would rise up and inherit the old world and make of it something new and lasting. They would be the

living proof of his hopes, his dreams, his eternal fight.
And they would be—

His slaves.

But he could not stop the weeping. His fragile body hunched over the controls and his shoulders moved spasmodically.

Outside, the servomech stood with folded hands and waited for him to emerge.

Barrios dreamed.

It was a blighted landscape. The floor of the valley was a turbulent network of deep fissures where the barren soil had cracked open and exposed itself to the merciless radiation of the sun. There were no signs of vegetation visible anywhere upon this desolate surface, no solitary blade of grass to impeach the sterility of the soil.

The distant mountains had once loomed serene and confident above this wasteland; their highest peaks had always been capped with snow and they had provided abundant irrigation from their expansive watersheds. Now they were like the pitiful remnants of a child's clay model to which someone had callously applied the heat of a blow-torch, flattening them out into crumbling rock piles, their precious moisture boiled away and only their bones left to bleach in the harsh sunlight . . .



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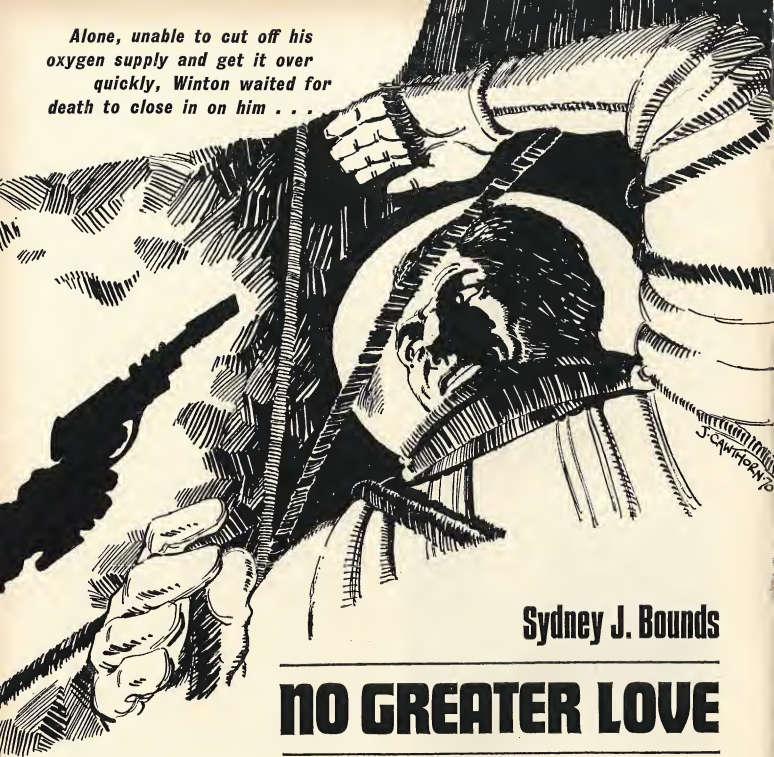
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Alone, unable to cut off his oxygen supply and get it over quickly, Winton waited for death to close in on him . . .



Sydney J. Bounds

NO GREATER LOVE

'Detectors operating. Rocky mass at extreme range. Either a small planet or a large asteroid. Do you call that a planetoid, Joe?'

'Call it anything you like,' Joe Winton growled, 'but check it out.'

'Naturally.'

The compact starscout altered course slightly in the great gulf of interstellar space. Exhaust jets flared briefly, pin-pointing the ship against black emptiness, as it lifted above optimum cruising speed and homed on the still invisible planetoid. Presently—

'Running check completed. First analysis indicates probable geo-crystal content.'

Joe sat up sharply in his acceleration-cocoon. He took a long breath, grey eyes reflecting a new alertness. 'About

time too. This isn't a pleasure jaunt—we've got a living to earn. How probable, Bea?'

'Better than sixty per cent.'

'Orbit and routine survey,' Joe ordered, swinging down from the cocoon. He made himself a meal from pre-packed tubes of meat-and-veg and apple pie, added scalding water to coffee and cream. It looked as though he would be doing heavy work before long, and he always worked better on a full stomach.

He thought about geo-crystal as he ate; the most valuable property so far discovered in space. A small crystal would retail on Fraser Darling (the nearest point of Terran civilization) for a thousand credits. A big lode would set him up for life. It was geo-crystal that made a one-man prospecting ship an economic possibility. One man—and Bea.

'Decelerating,' Bea notified.

Joe climbed back into his cocoon, snuggled down. Time passed until the starscut orbited; he remained silent while Bea probed with a battery of spy-waves.

'Rock formation extensively honeycombed. Now definite trace of geo-crystal. Thin atmosphere with low oxygen content—'

'Get down there,' Joe ordered promptly.

The ship pulled out of orbit and entered approach trajectory. Joe sensed they were hovering before he felt the vibration of touchdown.

He rose and padded across to an observation window, stared out at barren rockscape. The horizon had visible curvature; just above it, stars lost their colour and began to twinkle, the only positive indication of an atmosphere.

He saw the dark mouths of pits, scores of them; burrows that tunnelled into a scarred and cratered surface. The planetoid was one enormous honeycomb; he felt glad he hadn't tried to set down on manual.

Bea chanted: 'You will need a pressure suit and oxygen-sac, prospector's kit which includes geo-crystal indicator, pick-axe, sample box—'

'I know all that. Stop nagging like an old woman—we're not married yet.'

'Of course not. That would be impossible as I am not a human female. Bea stands for bio-electrical analog; I am a biological computer grown from brain cells. The fact that these were human brain cells in no way—'

'Belt up', Joe snarled.

'Only trying to be helpful.'

'Too damned helpful!'

After a pause, Bea asked: 'Is that possible?'

'Too right it is!'

Joe zipped on a lightweight pressure-suit and attached an oxygen-sac; feeding oxygen directly into his bloodstream, it gave him a twelve-hour life outside the ship. He hooked a laser to his belt—not that he expected trouble, it was a normal precaution. He took a hand torch and, finally, the crystal indicator.

He checked his radio link with Bea, who commented: 'I sometimes think I would be of more use mobile. Then I could go with you.'

Joe shuddered at the thought. He'd never get away from her then. Yak, yak, yak, like a woman all the time...

He stepped through the lock. Outside, even under light gravity, the surface crunched under his boots and he moved warily; brittle, porous stuff. He took a close look at the starscut's landing gear; the pads had spread but had still sunk to a depth of several inches.

He began circling, watching his indicator. Not a trace of crystal. He widened his circuit. Where was the—?

'Probability that geo-crystal is below surface,' Bea informed over his headset.

Joe cursed. 'You could have mentioned that sooner!'

He headed across the bleak grey rockscape for the nearest pit. One opening was as good as another; he'd explored too many chunks of rock to start getting fussy now.

He flashed his torch into the dark mouth; an irregular tunnel sloped away. He entered cautiously, placing his feet with care before transferring his weight. The floor seemed safe enough but one fall down here and he'd had it.

The slope continued and as he went deeper, he watched the dial of his indicator; the needle flickered. There was geo-crystal, but deeper yet. He went far enough to be satisfied that it was no false alarm, then returned to the ship.

'It's down there okay.'

'I told you so,' Bea answered. 'Now you must—'

'Shut up—you get on my wick! I give the orders around here. Don't speak until I ask a direct question. Understand?'

'Yes.'

The pause lengthened into a painful silence.

'Is that all you have to say?'

'Your orders were—'

Joe snorted. 'Damn it, you sound more like a female every day—always arguing.'

He made himself a snack and swung into his cocoon to rest before starting work in earnest.

Relaxing, he turned a benevolent eye on Bea, a greyish mass of brain cells and nerve fibres swimming in a nutrient solution contained in transparent sac. Incredible, wonderful really, he reflected lazily; damn near human. In his long isolated spells between worlds she was his only companion—it was difficult not to think of her as more than a biological computer, grown by cloning brain cells.

She ran the ship, dealt with all routine matters; most of all she was his memory. Bea never forgot a thing. Which perhaps accounted for her most irritating characteristic: a repetition of minute detail. Or was it that she liked the sound of her own voice? Sometimes he was convinced that her original cells had been taken from a female brain...

Running the ship, she tended to think she also ran him; that he was there simply as an extension of herself. Or that was how it seemed. Good thing she wasn't mobile...

And when she got on her hobby-horse, about how superior she was to the old electronic computers, she became almost unbearable. To be fair, she was superior. It was a wonder the bio boys had taken so long to come up with Bea; it was so much simpler to grow a computer than assemble all that old-fashioned hardware.

His snack digested, he swung his feet to the deck and started towards his pressure suit; time for work.

'You will need a fresh oxygen-sac,' Bea chanted. 'Also the prospector's kit which includes—'

'Skip that,' Joe snapped.

'You are registering annoyance. In your present state of mind, do you think it advisable to go below ground alone?'

'If only to get away from you—yes!'

'Don't forget the pick-axe, sample box—'

'Shut up!' Joe grabbed up his hand-torch and hurried through the lock. Outside, he made directly for the tunnel he had started to explore when Bea's voice came over the radio:

'Forgive me for mentioning it, Joe, but you appear to have left the laser behind.'

He had too. Joe halted, cursing. But he wasn't going back to let an overgrown mass of bio-cells crow over him. The hell with the laser!

'Shan't need it,' he replied curtly, and headed down into the burrow.

It was a fatal error.

Under the planetoid's surface, he moved confidently along the slanting floor, light from his torch illumining porous grey walls. When his indicator began to register, he slowed his pace. He passed the place where he had turned back before and continued down. Other tunnels branched off, a regular maze of them, and he followed the route his indicator suggested. He was truly alone now—tons of rock effectively cut radio communication.

The tunnel opened out into a cavern and his indicator

needle swung wildly across the dial. This was a big lode.

He lifted his torch. Geo-crystal glittered and flashed a billion reflections, dazzling him. The stuff projected in crazy shapes from the floor, like an army of malformed stalagmites. He'd never seen anything like it before.

The glitter of the crystal fascinated him and, still dreaming, he stepped forward, reaching for his hammer. He had to break off a sample, run—

Something checked his forward motion. He dropped the hammer as he shifted his torch to shine on the near-invisible obstacle. A single strand of some sticky material. It glistened in the torchlight, stuck to his suit. He drew back to break free and found that another strand touched him.

Soon break this stuff, he thought, and swung both arms vigorously. The strands didn't break; and his arms collected other strands. He struggled and new strands dropped about him, winding stickily about his arms and legs and body. The harder he struggled the more tied-up he became. He appeared to have blundered into a whole mesh of the stuff.

Panic welled up and, as he struggled furiously, he dropped the torch. It rolled across the floor, out of reach.

He stopped fighting the web, forced himself to remain calm, and tried to think his way out. If he had the laser now, he'd soon burn himself free. He laughed bitterly. He should have listened to Bea. Bea knew best.

He decided he'd have to take one strand at a time. If he couldn't break the stuff, he might be able to wriggle clear. He went at it delicately, succeeding in removing one strand from about his body—to have it stuck to his hands.

Every slight movement he made seemed to direct another strand of the web to him. He was becoming completely imprisoned in the stuff. He had to admit it; he was trapped and could see no way out, except with the laser he didn't have . . .

Time was passing. When his oxygen-sac was used up he would die. He had to think . . . thinking got him nowhere and he struggled again, struggled futilely, shifting one unbreakable strand of the sticky web from one part of him to another. He was becoming tired.

He paused, staring at the wealth of crystal glittering in the torchlight. All his . . .

There was movement just beyond the range of his torch. Shadowy movement. He couldn't see exactly what it was, and felt glad he couldn't. Again the thought came: a spider's web. It wouldn't be a spider, of course—some alien predator who spun a web to trap food. He hoped the thing choked on him, hoped too that his oxygen ran out before it reached him.

A voice came out of nowhere.

'Joe? I assume you are in trouble. I have had no report from you, and your oxygen-sac is now half-used.'

Bea, of course. Some freak formation of the rock allowed her radio-voice to reach him.

'If you hear me, Joe, you should try to start back at once. Can you hear me?'

'Sure I hear you,' Joe growled. 'There's nothing I'd like better than to start back. But—'

'Can you hear me? Answer please!'

Joe's heart sank. The freak formation allowed one-way contact only; obviously Bea couldn't hear him.

After a pause, Bea's voice came again: 'I've always said I would be of more use mobile . . .'

'This time I agree with you,' Joe muttered, 'but there's

nothing we can do about that.'

After that there was silence.

Joe Winton made another desperate effort to free himself before lack of oxygen weakened him. He attacked the sticky strands like a berserker. The web wrapped itself even more tightly around him until, exhausted, he gave up.

Time dragged. His ears buzzed; oxygen failing, he thought dreamily, won't be long now . . .

Her voice again: 'Joe. I'm coming, Joe.'

Pure fantasy, of course. If he was hearing voices, he was really on the way out.

His sight blurred. Crystals danced in the torchlight. He had a numb, sleepy feeling. He stirred weakly in the web that held him upright.

Something moved in the shadows beyond the light of his torch. Something that crawled steadily nearer. He squinted at it. Whatever it was, it was no spider.

'Couldn't you wait a bit longer?' he shouted, fear rousing him. 'Couldn't you wait till I passed right out?'

An answering voice came: 'Joe?'

He blinked, shook his head to clear it. His vision improved. 'Bea?' he asked doubtfully.

'Yes, Joe, it is I.'

Bea dragged herself over the uneven rock floor towards him. A very different Bea. The mass of grey cells had shrunk and she appeared to have gained rudimentary limbs. She leaked a trail of nutrient behind her. Slowly, agonisingly slowly, she moved, carrying a metal tube in one limb.

The laser lifted slowly, wavered. Concentrated light beamed through the cavern, seared the sticky web which fell from him like a discarded shroud.

'Oxygen-sac, Joe. I've—'

Joe crawled across the floor, avoiding the remnants of web. He still felt faint. He reached Bea and took the oxygen-sac she had brought. It took him three attempts to fit it properly; but then he could breathe again and his head cleared rapidly. He stood up.

'Are you all right, Bea?'

'Not all right, Joe.' Her voice sounded old and the rudimentary limbs were disintegrating.

'Well, how am I going to get you back to the ship?'

'Not going back, Joe. Too late for me. I had to cannibalise cells to grow limbs. The problem was mobility, you see. My memory contained full detail on cloning—it was not difficult once I saw the solution, but there was no time to do the job efficiently. Not nearly enough time . . .'

Joe stared at her with blurred eyes. Bea was deteriorating fast. She had sacrificed brain cells to grow limbs to come and save him—and there was nothing he could do for her.

Movement flickered beyond the torchlight. The predator was moving in, not on him, but on Bea. Frustration gaped away to surging anger; at least she could be spared that horror.

He grabbed the laser and, in a continuous movement, aimed and thumbed the firing-stud. He had a brief, shocking glimpse of multi-faceted eyes and champing jaws set in a bloated carapace as he crisped the web-spinner.

He turned back. 'Bea?' he said softly.

There was no reply. Bio cells dissolved in a spreading pool of nutrient.

He knelt beside her and grasped a crudely-grown limb, its extremity so like a human hand. He could not think of anything to say. Hot tears welled down his cheeks.

He held it till there was nothing left to hold.

BLIND EYE

David Somers

'Let's play explorers,' Glan suggested.

Bok, his sister, swished a feline tail. 'There's nothing new to explore.'

'Not here—up on the plateau.'

Bok scanned across the fertile width of the Great Chasm, where adults gathered popweed fruit, to craggy walls mounting to the high plateau. 'All right,' she agreed without enthusiasm. 'I suppose it'll pass the time.'

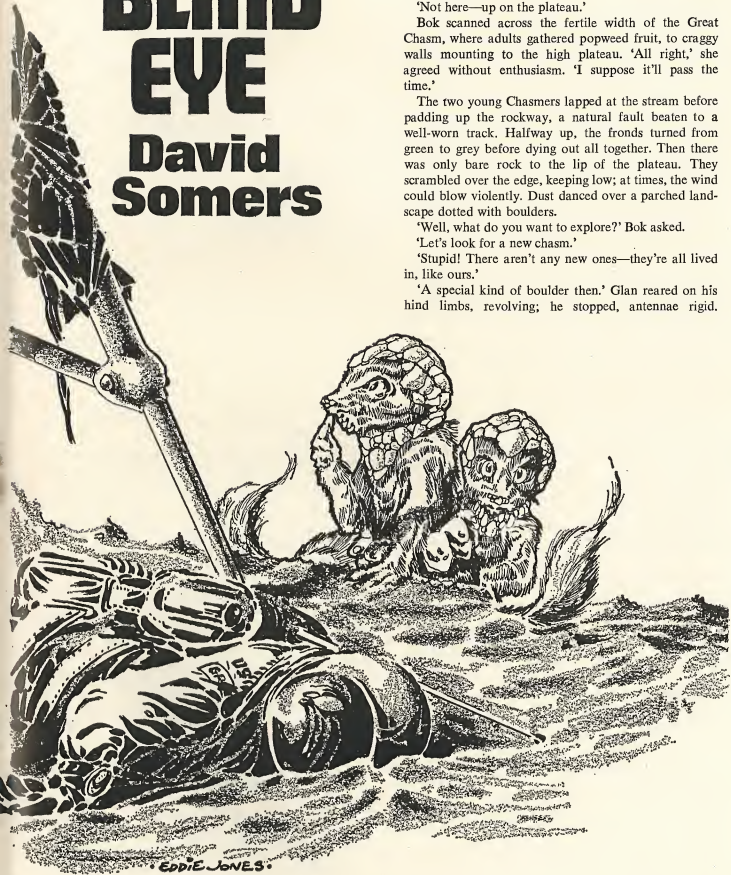
The two young Chasmers lapped at the stream before padding up the rockway, a natural fault beaten to a well-worn track. Halfway up, the fronds turned from green to grey before dying out all together. Then there was only bare rock to the lip of the plateau. They scrambled over the edge, keeping low; at times, the wind could blow violently. Dust danced over a parched landscape dotted with boulders.

'Well, what do you want to explore?' Bok asked.

'Let's look for a new chasm.'

'Stupid! There aren't any new ones—they're all lived in, like ours.'

'A special kind of boulder then.' Glan reared on his hind limbs, revolving; he stopped, antennae rigid.



'Something in the sky—something falling.'

'Only a sky boulder,' Bok answered carelessly. 'Nothing unusual about that—the plateau's covered with them. Ugly things, pitted like last season's fruit.'

'Not this time.' Glan tracked radiation as it arched in rapid descent. 'Not a natural parabola . . . it's a UFO!'

Bok regarded him with suspicious doubt. 'A *what?*' 'Unknown Falling Object.'

Bok's tail flicked in disbelief. The Ufo flamed before it struck the ground some distance away and Glan detected a change of wavelength. He was intrigued. 'Come on, we'll explore this new thing.'

Bok followed reluctantly, tail down. As they zig-zagged between boulders, there came another emission, on a different wavelength again.

'It's an alien,' Glan declared. 'From a far-off chasm someplace else.'

'Stupid!'

'Not . . . scan that!'

The Unknown Falling Object, now at rest on the crater-riven plateau, split like an over-ripe popweed; but the seeds that came out glistened like Winter water and moved on hind limbs. One, two, three of them. Glan scanned, excited . . .

A small time passed, then the aliens collapsed on the naked rock. The wind drifted dust over them.

'Something's wrong with the sky-riders', Glan diagnosed. 'They need help.' He padded forward, feeling important.

Bok hung back, yellow fur bristling.

Glan circled the fallen aliens. Only the fore-limbs were clawed, the heads pale under a transparent skin. He nudged one with his paw; the segmented body quivered and he detected a life pulse. 'What do we do?' he wondered. 'What do they need?'

'How should I know?' Bok countered, squatting on her haunches at a safe distance. 'I don't believe they come from a chasm at all.'

'They must . . . I don't know. Perhaps they're dying. We've got to get help.'

Bok stayed close behind Glan as he raced down the rockway, into the Great Chasm.

Their progenitors squatted in the shade of the wall, busily pressing popweed fruit into compact cakes for storing. A shoulder higher than the youngsters, the male glanced at them, then went on working.

The female thumped the ground with her tail. 'Where have you been?'

'On the plateau,' Glan burst out, excited. 'There's a Ufo down, in trouble. The strange ones came out of it—they're hurt, and need help.'

The male looked up again. 'Ufo? What are you making up now?'

'I'm not making anything up. It's true. Come and scan for yourself.'

'I suppose I'd better.'

'Don't stay too long,' the female commented. 'There's still a lot of fruit to deal with before dark.'

Bok volunteered, 'I'll stay and help. It's only an odd

boulder up there—it's nothing.'

Glan's tail lashed in outrage. 'New things came out of it—I felt a life pulse!'

Knowing how rarely Bok volunteered for work, the female warned: 'Take care—there may be something new after all.'

Glan led up the rockway, the big male right behind. Up past fading fronds to bare rock to the plateau rim. The wind blew harder now and the distance was obscured by dust.

'Where?'

Glan padded forward, paused, pointing a forepaw. 'There.'

The male scanned. 'Boulders. Dust cones. Shadows. I see nothing else, Glan.'

The youngster went nearer. 'Here—it's plain as the whiskers on your nose! You must—'

'There's nothing there. You must stop inventing these fantasies, Glan—remember, next season you reach maturity.'

Glan circled the Unknown Falling Object and the strange ones sprawled beside it. They were motionless now, the dust building dunes over them.

'Here,' he challenged. 'Right here. Touch them!'

The big Chasmer prowled nearer, scanning. 'Nothing,' he stated flatly. 'Nothing at all—it's just your imagination again. Come down now and you can have first taste of the season's fruit seeds. How's that?'

Glan quivered: first bite at the new seeds was a treat reserved for special occasions. But why couldn't the progenitor scan the Ufo?

'Come and touch them first,' he pleaded desperately. 'Perhaps it's not too late to help them.'

'No. I won't play your game, Glan. There's nothing to touch—come away now.'

The big male turned and padded back towards the rim. Glan worried one of the aliens with his paw. He felt a little sad. He would have liked to have done something for them. He scanned the Ufo for the last time, wondering . . . and then went down into the Chasm.

It was already growing dark and his taste buds salivered long before he reached the bottom of the rockway. He quickly forgot the Unknown Falling Object and its strange fruit.

Next season, Glan was courting a sleek-furred beauty with temptation in every delicious wriggle of her tail. And she was willing to be lured onto the high plateau. Glan's breathing was ragged when they reached the rim and crouched from the wind.

He was annoyed to find some youngsters already there. One, in a state of some excitement, hung on his tail and pleaded: 'These strange things under the dust. What are they? Explain please.'

Glan scanned three piles of dust and a cracked sky boulder, registered nothing out of the ordinary. Unbidden, an old memory struggled to surface; new to maturity, the taboo strong in him, he suppressed it.

'What is there to explain?'

The youngsters were busily engaged in running their paws over the boulder, drawing marks in the dust. Glan scanned the marks before the wind erased them. Meaningless.

LANDING MODULE

'What d'you call your game?' he asked.

'It's no game. This is an alien language, left by the dead ones. Only we can't understand it.'

'That's very imaginative,' Glan commented and



RETURN TO THE STARS

By Edmond Hamilton
Lancer Books Inc. 207 pp. 75c.

Reviewed by Don Malcolm

This book was for me a time machine, carrying me across the years to when I first read *The Star Kings*, by the same author. I don't have my copy handy, but the present book seems to use many of the same characters and is a cracking good space opera. There aren't many of them about these days. *Sf* fashions have changed. Also, many readers have been convinced, probably against their better judgment, that any story that sets out to entertain is something to be shunned.

The action in this closely-plotted book is propelled by a faster-than-light drive. It follows that old-fashioned beginning, middle and end routine. The characterisations are believable, the dialogue is crisp and sometimes, very witty, the astronomical backgrounds are beautifully described. As if all that wasn't enough to put this story beyond the modern pale, it also has a sense of wonder.

The phrase 'a sense of wonder' is the all-time cliché of science fiction. If you still talk about it, then you are obviously pre-Ballard, *et alik*. If you still hanker after it, then you are in suspended animation. Or so some people would have us believe.

There was a sense of wonder about earlier science fiction. But too often, many writers relied on it to carry stories that were bad in every way. It's a truism that *sf* has sprouted a bigger acreage of poor writing than, possibly, every other field put together. Many writers who would, in all probability, never be published anywhere else, made it in *sf*, although not many have lasted the pace.

Brian Aldiss once said that *sf* was struggling to get within 'the pale of literacy'. (*Within the Reach of Storms*, Vector, 1967). True: we can't live in the past. But he also said that '... most of the 1960s *sf* have lost all the impetus of novelty that was one of the prime claims to merit of the genre three or more decades ago...' (Private letter, 1965).

So: in struggling to get within the pale of literacy, *sf* has fallen over the style.

If a sense of wonder was synonymous with entertainment, then I'm all for it. And *Return to the Stars* has it. The story is exciting—which is more than can be said for much of today's 'trendy' *sf*.

nudged his chosen one. 'I too, had imagination, once.' What he had now was a powerful mating urge and he directed her deeper into the boulder-strewn landscape.

As they burrowed into the dust together, he remembered the Rite and Taboo.

A Chasmer never admitted to the young that with maturity the wavelength of his sensors changed, that he could never again scan what he had before. So, to an adult, there was nothing there. Could not be. Now.

FANTASY REVIEW

Zarth Arn, a star king of the far future, succeeds in taking John Gordon out of his own time. The Galaxy is in danger. Narath Teyn, cousin of Lianna, Princess of Formalhaut, is threatening to rally the non-human races, over which he has great control, in an attempt to take the throne of Formalhaut. He is the heir presumptive.

Lianna determines to confront Narath on his own world, Teyn, and there they meet Cyn Cryver, Count of the Marches of Outer Space. He was 'A tall man... clad in black leather with the symbol of a jewelled mace aggliter on his breast, and a cap of black steel with a plume in it, and a cloak of sombre purple to sweep to his heels.'

With him is the Gray One, a mysterious telepathic alien. It tries to prevent Lianna and her party from leaving Teyn, but they escape.

Lianna sends Gordon as her emissary to Throon, the imperial world. With him is Korkhann, Lianna's bird-like Minister of Nonhuman Affairs. Korkhann survives a massive telepathic attack by another of the Gray Ones. Zarth Arn tells them that the Gray Ones are non-humans with fearful telepathic powers, who invaded the Galaxy from the Magellanic Clouds and were destroyed by the Disruptor, which damages the very fabric of space.

Gordon is introduced to Captain Hull Burrell, whom he knew during his previous existence in the future, when he exchanged minds with Zarth Arn. Gordon's part in the defeat of Shorr Kan, Master of the League of Dark Worlds, is revealed to the Captain.

Gordon and Hull are sent to investigate reports of odd happenings on a planet, Aar. There, they are stunned by a Gray One and captured by Cyn Cryver. Also there is Shorr Kan, supposedly dead. For his own reasons, Shorr Kan wants to ally himself with his former enemies, the Empire, and he helps them to escape.

They steal a ship and head for the Magellanic Clouds. But there is a Gray One aboard. Gordon manages to kill it, by crashing the ship. On the planet, transports are loading up non-humans for the invasion of Formalhaut. Shorr Kan bluffs his way aboard a ship. He takes it over in space and finds out details of the invasion plans.

They send a message to Formalhaut and, to evade Narath's fleet, run the gauntlet of the Broken Stars, a dangerous area in space, and reach Formalhaut.

The Empire fleet is diverted to look for the ships of the

H'hran—the Gray Ones. Formalhaut falls and Lianna and Gordon are captured. A Gray One merges its mind with Gordon, but, finding that he doesn't know the secret of the Disruptor, orders his death. Gordon knows where the H'hran fleet is.

Lianna saves him, by refusing to cede the throne to her cousin, unless Gordon lives. As she is making the speech, Burrel and Korhann burst in and kill Narath. Shorr Kan saves the day and is rewarded, reluctantly, for his services by Lianna, who gives him a ship and safe passage.

Shorr Kan is, for me, the best character in the book.

The story is—if I dare use the word—romantic, in an Arthurian/Richard-the-Lionheart way. It has a beautiful Princess, dauntless heroes, blacker-than-black villains, action, pace, colour. What more could anyone want? Pink stamps, maybe.

My only complaint is that I have never read a book with so many typographical errors.

Return to the Stars would be even more enjoyable if it were read after *The Star Kings*, so excuse me while I go and dig out my copy.

Donald Malcolm

THE BLACK CORRIDOR

By Michael Moorcock

Published by Mayflower Books at 5s. 12s. 6p.

Reviewed by Kathryn Buckley

The Black Corridor is a study of a sick world which has erupted into chaos, where personal and social relationships are ruled by paranoia and xenophobia. One man attempts to save himself and a tiny segment of mankind by setting off in a spaceship with 12 of his friends and relations on a five year journey to another planet.

This book would not have been so disappointing if it had been written by an unknown writer, but rightly or wrongly, one expects more from Mr. Moorcock. The study of individual paranoia is quite competent and will be enjoyable to the layman, though the flashbacks are altogether too sane and balanced to constitute the memory of a paranoid.

Science fiction has not been successful in focussing attention on the dangers of racist thinking in a meaningful way, tending to assume, comfortably and unrealistically, that mankind will grow out of such childish nonsense. In fact, there seems to be very little group conscience on the subject and this book does at least attempt to extrapolate an explosive social problem.

The trouble is I found the basic premise behind *The Black Corridor* implausible; admittedly there is a very disturbing degree of racial intolerance in our society today, but looked at in the light of history there are signs of greater integration. Persecution relies on rapid identification of a group and an imbalance of power between those groups, which is why colour discrimination has persisted for so many centuries. The tendency is for people to group together against a common enemy, too much splintering would be self-defeating and totally impractical, and could only happen in conditions of world-wide insanity, conditions for which no catalyst is suggested in the book.

Science fiction writers often seem unable to grasp the fact that our advanced technology depends on order. Think of the paralysing effects of a transport, shipping or postal strike and it will soon be evident that in an insane world there would be no regular reliable electricity supply, no reliable public transport, no petrol for private transport, no airports functioning and in good repair. In short the inter-

nal logic has not been carried through. The final theft of the spaceship is so ludicrously implausible I suspect Mr. Moorcock had his tongue in his cheek, an attitude which, adopted a little more courageously, could have turned the book into a parody. As it is, this incident comes over as a sort of pointless sarcasm.

The efforts of the central character to rationalise his behaviour are quite well depicted on an individual scale, but they throw very little light on the larger problem of society rationalising its behaviour. In the psychological sense 'rationalisation', the process by which the human mind—either individually or collectively—seeks to explain away, in a reasoned and acceptable fashion, its fears and anxieties, is a kind of smokescreen from reality. To throw light on the phenomenon of social rationalisation, a device civilised man has been busily perfecting throughout history, the 20th century version being more efficient because communication is easier and quicker and because the changes in society are more rapid and complex, requires an acute perception of the reality behind the smokescreen. Perhaps if there had been some attempt to suggest reasons other than the surface one of overcrowding and emphasis placed on the speed of racial intermixing, this could have said something useful to the reader. As it is, liberal minded readers will merely find a re-statement of an obvious situation, whilst reactionaries could find ammunition to support their fears about immigration.

Mr. Moorcock quite obviously feels racialism is an absurd notion, that the problems of integration throughout the world must be faced and that highly emotive political propaganda only serves to exacerbate the situation. But his message does not come over clearly and effectively and this is largely due to the fact that the book is far too heavily padded. Patterned prose is not a new device even within the sf field—Alfred Bester used it to great effect in *The Demolished Man* to mention just one—and its use here, though effective in a limited way in showing the reader facts about Ryan that he himself is rationalising away from, is an irritating and precocious gimmick.

Altogether there is a half-heartedness about the book; I would have found it more acceptable if Mr. Moorcock had abandoned his attempts at realism, even though these are quite successful particularly in the early sections, and made the entire action a delusion, thus dealing with the subject in a surrealist way.

One message does come over, however, with the force of a sledgehammer, even if it does employ the corny device of 13 passengers in a stolen spaceship; we cannot run away from our own madness; like the plague we will take it with us and with it the means of our own destruction.

Whilst the book exerts a certain gripping fascination on the reader to find out what is going on, it is really too insubstantial to stand up to an in-depth analysis. I don't think for one moment that Mr. Moorcock would himself expect it to, since he has himself made no grandiose claims, and I am more than surprised to find it published as an 'Ace Special'. The blurbs on both editions warrant a special word. On the Mayflower edition the finishing line is a lulu: "Ryan was alone in space and he was beginning to crack up." This, after fleeing from a mad world, murdering ten people, travelling in space for three years, disposing of his 12 companions in hibernation (?), men and children first and lastly the available women, and being isolated for some months. He was *beginning* to crack up?

As for the two 'Ace' blurbs, they rank for finesse with the finest of the motion picture trailer ads of the '40's. But whatever shall we use for superlatives when a really good book comes along?

THE CAPTIVE UNIVERSE

By Harry Harrison

Published by Faber at 25s. 185 pp.

Reviewed by Kathryn Buckley

This is an extremely awkward book to review without giving away half the plot. For the first third of *The Captive Universe* I forgot this was science fiction, for the protagonist, Chimal, lives in an ancient Aztec civilisation in a valley said to be sealed off for ever from the rest of the world.

But Chimal wants out, he isn't satisfied with the dubious religious mythology and explanations the priests dole out. His curiosity leads him into more and more trouble until he's sentenced to death for breaking a taboo. Now he has nothing to lose and his resourcefulness and persistence enable him to discover that the world is far more complicated than it appears.

Harry Harrison chose the Aztec civilisation because it has survived in isolated villages, unchanged, but I should have thought writing and cosmology were additions which would inevitably change a culture. The Aztec atmosphere sounds authentic and probably is, for Harry Harrison is a conscientious and thorough researcher. How far this early section will enthral you depends on whether you are wildly or mildly enthusiastic about the Aztecs; but either way be prepared,—this is undeniably science fiction.

Set in the tradition that says a story should move and keep moving, it does just that, catapulting the hero from disaster to disaster, each escape ingeniously devised and plausible. At times I almost felt I'd strayed into the script of one of those silent thriller serials where Pearl Buck is rescued from the railroad track just as the express roars down, only to step into the path of another train roaring the other way. Ah well—it's all good clean rollicking fun and if you can't stand the suspense you *know* the hero can't get killed and leave the author with all those pages and no hero.

Harry Harrison looks like carving himself a niche as a sort of Agatha Christie of science fiction; he has built up a faithful specialist audience and a popular one too, and his books are always crisp, professional and thoroughly efficient. His clear cut scientific solutions, extrapolations from isolated scientific data, have a nostalgic and comfortably familiar ring about them.

I'm prepared to make a leap of faith for 185 pages; but I know I'm making it. It would be nice if we knew precisely how to make a genius and could pull one out of the bag just like a genie. But at the moment we don't even know what intelligence is, as our crudely inefficient educational selection proves, and are only just beginning to realise that there are different sorts of intelligence, and what an important part environment plays.

The awakening and flourishing of Chimal's innate intelligence is well conveyed in the way he reasons and puzzles his way out of situations which are strange to him.

Accept the basic premise, don't question why, if geniuses could be produced to order they don't people the outside of Chimal's world—and then go along for the ride.

LAND OF UNREASON

By Fletcher Pratt and L. Sprague de Camp
Ballantine Books 01814, 256 pages, 95 cents.

Reviewed by John Foyster

The Ballantine Adult Fantasy series is not only doing some worthwhile reprinting, it will be doing more of it in future. This novel, for example, was last printed in 1942. There are those who say that *that* is when it should have been reviewed, but as I understand it very few copies of the original edition remain on sale. Ballantine are therefore to be congratulated on bringing the book back into print.

It would add an extra glow if I could remark here that the introduction to the novel is quite right when it states that '*Land of Unreason* is far and away the best thing Pratt and de Camp's collaboration ever produced', but I cannot do it, remembering too much of the Harold Shea series, for example. Nevertheless, this is quibbling, since *Land of Unreason* is pretty good.

What makes it seem to me to achieve less than, say, a Harold Shea, is that the protagonist, one Fred Barber, never really comes alive. I was never able to care what happened to him, and indeed it looks, in places, as though Messrs. Pratt and de Camp felt the same way, for the plot shambles and stumbles in a most unbecoming way. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, the created world is an interesting one, and the fantasy characters have a reality the real ones never achieve. By contrast, in something like *The Incomplete Enchanter*, the fantasy and reality were almost inseparable, which is the point of it all, surely.

So *Land of Unreason* is a little lower than the angels: it's nevertheless a fine fantasy, an English fantasy.

MEN ON THE MOON

Edited by Donald A. Wollheim

Ace Books 52470, 192 pages, 60 cents.

Reviewed by John Foyster

This is largely a reprint, the first hundred and forty or so pages being a resurrected Ace Double of 1958 or thereabouts. As such it is probably an historical piece of some value: it is being sold, as you might expect, in connection with the unusual events of July last year and presents five stories by Gallun, Chandler, Robinson, Fyfe and Leinster which outline what used to be called the Conquest of the Moon.

That is old-hat. What is new in here is some comments on the Moon Landing, and more specifically on one aspect of the landing, by the people you'd think of last—about thirty science fiction writers.

And I suggest that this alone is worth the 60 cents. Editor Wollheim prints the message which appeared on the plaque left by Armstrong and Aldrin and also an alternative suggested by I. F. Stone (of *I. F. Stone's Weekly*, a political journal whose political position on the spectrum is somewhat to the left of that of John W. Campbell). He asked for comments from science fiction writers—and got them.

It is particularly noteworthy that British writers, on the whole, are more inclined to favour Stone's inscription than that actually used. It is almost fascinating to tie up the fiction with the opinions, most being superficial but some a little more subtle. If you want to know what writers like Asimov, Brunner, Bradbury, Anderson, Moorcock, Pohl, Leinster, Bulmer and umpteen others think about moon landings and Political Statements, this is the book for you. And there *is* some fiction as well.

VISION SCIENCE FICTION FORUM

Reality in S.F.

by E.C. TUBB

One of the things which any minority group has to put up with is the way in which, at irregular intervals, the searchlight of self-appointed experts is thrown on it in a public dissection. Science fiction, being a minority literature, has had more than its fair share of such examinations and in each case has been treated badly.

The irritating thing is that those who do the criticising usually have nothing to do with the field at all. Noted book critics have ruthlessly torn apart science fiction novels and stories, assessed them on their own private standards and condemned them for being what they are. Writers are blamed for having written science fiction when that is just what they set out to do. The entire medium is castigated by people who have never written or had published a science fiction story in their lives, who publicly admit they do not like the field, have no time for it, consider it trash and are only examining it to assure themselves that they were right in the first place.

The name, of course, is to blame. To these people science fiction is strictly comic-book, pulp magazine stuff and of no possible literary worth. Speculative fiction written by name authors such as Huxley, Orwell and Doyle is not science fiction. That is *literature*.

The difference?

Mostly it lies in an attitude of mind which can only be broken by science fiction maturing into a fully accepted medium divorced from any taint of pseudo-science and formula writing. In other words to turn like an ungrateful child on its beginnings and to rapidly grow up.

This isn't quite as easy as it sounds. Small details such as the realisation that characters do not hiss, snarl, bark, husk, groan, roar, squeak or grate can help but a little more is needed. It is realism.

For a long time now the trend of science fiction writing has been towards that and towards better characterisation. The old gimmick of the past with their impossible science, ludicrous situations and characters which were a joke, have passed into limbo regretted by none. In their place we have stories with realistic plots,

logical situations and men and women who are at least human. But we also have aliens who act more human than humans and here I join with the critics in tearing my hair.

An alien is just that—alien.

Too often they are depicted as gentle, lovable creatures who only want to help and are so badly misunderstood. And it isn't because of language difficulties either—they all learned perfect English from listening to our radio broadcasts.

Have you ever tried to learn Urdu that way? Or German? Any language at all? How do you think you would make out trying to get a working knowledge of the tongue spoken by the serpent folk of Vega IV?

I stress the point because we were talking about realism.

The trouble is—how close to reality can we get and still be writing science fiction?

Changing the terminology won't do it. Telling a story which could be happening here and now within our own society and dressing it up with a few fancy words doesn't automatically make it a science fiction story. To write that an author has to use his imagination, have the inclination to use it and the desire to be different.

On the face of it science fiction is the easiest type of fiction to write. The author can pick his own space and time, invent his own framework of logic, bypass accepted cultural limitations and really go to town. He can do all that as long as he does it logically—and that is the reservation which makes writing sf not quite as easy as it seems.

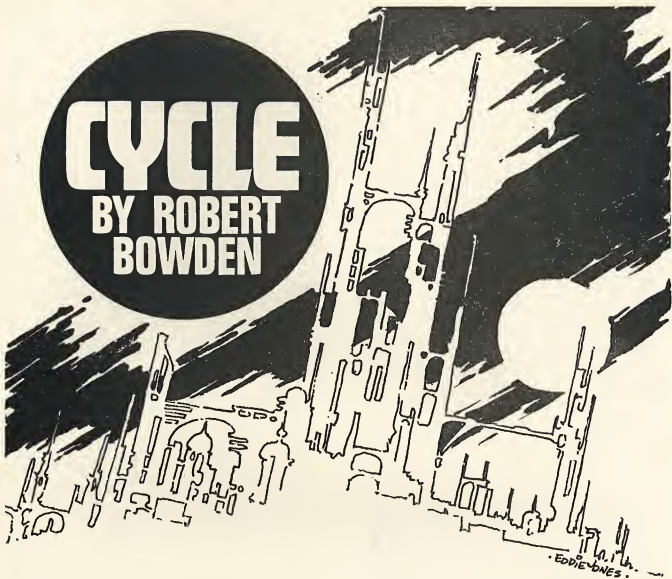
There is a danger that, in order to give his story a sense of reality, a writer will stick firmly to the familiar. The result is that we get so-called science fiction stories which are that only by virtue of their terminology. Remove or alter that terminology and we are left with nothing like what a science fiction story should be.

We shouldn't really complain about being held up to inspection by outsiders. At least they are showing us our weaknesses so that we can do something about them. It may not be easy—but it can be great fun.

'Science Fiction Forum' offers an open house for the opinions of both our readers and writers. The best letters received will be published!

CYCLE

BY ROBERT
BOWDEN



'And God said, Let the waters bring forth abundantly the moving creature that hath life, and fowl that may fly above the earth in the open firmament of heaven'

—Genesis, ch. 1 v. 21

Flipdal Gar thought the party was becoming rather a bore. It seemed that all the females were clustered around a handsome young male. He was standing in the corner soaking in his surroundings and the attention he was being given. The light reflected beautifully off his sleek blue-grey skin.

Flipdal was envious, but he would not admit it, even to himself. Instead he rationalized. There was not, he reasoned, an individual of his intellectual calibre with whom he could converse intelligently, in this gathering anyway. So, with his bottle-nosed snout in the air, he left the outskirts of that particular group and merged with the others.

He started as a paw tapped him on the shoulder.

'Hullo Flipdal! Enjoying the party?'

'Oh hullo Dartgla. No, not very much, I'm afraid.'

'You always were a stick-in-the-mud, weren't you. You're not jealous of that fellow over there, are you?'

Flipdal looked at Dartgla closely. He was old. His snout was grey, losing its bluish tinge. His hide was wrinkled in grey patterns.

'No, of course not.' Flipdal tried to lie convincingly. 'I'm not surprised that you are. Do you know why these females flock around him so? He was the first General Commander of our martian colonies.'

'Yes, Mars hasn't lost its glamour yet. A bit young for such a responsible position, isn't he?''asked Flipdal, embarrassed at the thinness of his deception.

'They need them young in the space service. I wish the Council would put as much money and effort into my project as they poured into Mars.'

'I agree with you. Despite what they say, I don't think Mars will ever be self-sufficient. There will certainly never be any profit.'

'Two hundred and fifty million years ago our primeval ancestors emerged from the soupy oceans onto the land. We overcame the dominance of the great reptiles, gained intelligence and now our technology must overcome the problem of overcrowding through our exploding population. Mars is not the answer. We must

turn to the ocean. That is the project I'm engaged on now. We will exploit the seas efficiently, but not so Mars.'

'Yes, your arguments are logical and quite convincing. Perhaps the sea is the future of our race.'

'To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted'—Ecclesiastes, ch. 3 v. 1-2

Thirty times the Earth had swept in relentless orbit around the sun. Flipdal lay back and listened quietly to the surge of the sea beating against the dome. He was aging now, and his old prehensile limbs were feeble.

Anxiously he was waiting now for the birth of his third grandchild. His second son shuffled worriedly before him.

Flipdal turned and gazed out of the viewport at the rolling ocean. Ever since the Great War that had swept his race off the land areas of this planet, he had been losing his grip. He nursed a secret fear deep in his mind; his son and all of his generation had never known the open air, the soil beneath one's feet with its sandy graininess, or a blue sky not seen through radiation-proof glass. None had lived upon the continents, and they were turning more and more toward the sea.

He was worried. The increased radiation meant an increase in mutations, and thus an acceleration in the rate of evolution. His people, through the new demands on natural selection, would adapt to an aquatic environment and his own kind, the species he was part of, would be asking the dinosaurs to move over.

He could detect, he thought, in his sons' attitudes a turning more toward the sea, and an almost inevitable alienation from the air above. To them, life on land would be a very arid and harsh existence. In a sense, the ocean was a womb from which they had been born and to which they now desired to return.

Yet perhaps Flipdal was worrying needlessly. Soon the radioactivity in the atmosphere would die down and the bacterial agents of total plague warfare would disappear into the soil. Then his people could return, chastened, to their homes on the shore. In the short period that they would be confined to the oceans, there could hardly be any genetic change in the species as a whole. Mutations were rare, even amongst those like himself who had not escaped the immediate effects of fallout radiation.

There was an excited murmur throughout the clots of people gathered around. Then there came the strident, lusty cry of the newborn, thrust into a world suddenly cold.

There was then a sudden exclamation and a wave of amazement rippled through the gathered people.

'Good God! Its fingers are fused. A mutation! It's been born with bloody flippers!'

Flipdal collapsed back into his chair. Would they ever return now to the land?

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“DARK THEY WERE AND GOLDEN-EYED”

28 Bedfordbury, London, W.C.2

'One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth for ever'—

Ecclesiastes, ch. 1 v. 4

David Coomb, martini-in-hand, weaved a slightly drunken way through the crowd. The party was swinging nicely, and he was in a mildly intoxicated mood. He sipped the martini and felt the delicious warmth spread comfortably throughout his body.

'Hullo David! Enjoying the party?' came a friendly voice from over his shoulder. His rather scandalous train of thought was interrupted.

'Oh, hullo Bob! I hear you just returned from Mars. Is that why all those girls flock about you so? Mars hasn't lost its glamour yet, has it?'

'No, it hasn't. I was part of the archaeological expedition there. We weren't the first to colonise the red planet, you know.'

'Is that so? Sounds almost as interesting as my work.' 'Hey, that's right! You're working on that mad scheme to colonise the ocean floor, aren't you?'

'It's not as impractical as that mad white-elephant martian colony project.'

'Maybe so! Did you hear of the fantastic finds we made on Mars?'

'No . . .'

'We found, in the great crater of southern Syrtis Major, the remnants of an alien colony. And in the ruins, the lacy buttresses and domes, and the flying towers of an architecture too delicate for our heavy planet, we found the fossilized skull of a dolphin.'

The Impatient Dreamers

WALTER GILLINGS

With so many other attractive elements to commend it, sex is hardly necessary in science fiction . . . but it does help to sell it, if some magazine covers are anything to go by. Continuing the story of sf's painful development on this side of the Atlantic, Walter Gillings reveals for the first time the intriguing facts behind the wartime venture, Utopian Publications, in which he was associated with author Benson Herbert.

10. Topless in Utopia

In these permissive times when nearly all popular fiction bends over backwards to titillate the erotic centres, science fiction remains remarkably free from sex. Or perhaps I should say, before I am marked down as prudish, that its appeal is so different from other types of fiction that it doesn't need to drag in sex by the pubic hair, as it were.

It was with amusement rather than distaste that we viewed a sudden outburst of sensuality in the mid-thirties, when American pulps like *Mystery Adventure Magazine* tried to attract new readers with a crude form of sf strongly laced with sex. Zenith Rand, Planet Vigilante—a creation of Richard Tooker, a writer of no mean order who became a literary coach—had his work cut out rescuing bosomy females from fates worse than death at the hands (or tentacles) of a riot of ravening monsters. But it must have been fit for Junior; after all, the editor was a Reverend. . . .

There were occasions, too, when even publisher Hugo Gernsback (dispenser of the Pill of Science coated with the sugar of fiction) had to be reminded of his boast that wise parents and teachers encouraged their charges to read sf 'because they know it educates them and suppresses the vicious and debasing sex story'. '*Science Wonder Stories*', he claimed, 'are clean, CLEAN from beginning to end. They stimulate only one thing—IMAGINATION.' And the sculptor of 'The Marble Virgin', for which artist Paul drew a wooden-looking nude, was taken to task by outraged readers—or their watchful guardians.

In wartime, of course, anything goes, especially for the welfare and recreation of Our Boys Overseas. And in magazine-starved Britain in the years 1943-45, anything that was printable would sell so long as you could get it distributed before it was blown to bits or burnt to ashes in the blitz. But first you had to get the paper on the 'black market'—or in Eire. So, many a small publisher flourished 'off the quota'; but few were spared to

grow big under the stresses of peace, and those who didn't go under were invariably taken over as production costs rose steadily higher.

Plans for post-war development by the larger firms were shelved by a paper shortage which became only too real. Which is why well over half a million words of hand-picked sf, intended for publication in the new *Fantasy*, languished in the basement at Link House



This cover by artist Saunders typified the vogue of titillating covers in the pulp field

long after it had taken twenty months to put three issues on the bookstalls. Where they didn't remain for more than a couple of hours before the precious six thousand copies had been snapped up . . . By the end of 1946 there was no need for a sexy cover to sell ninety-six well-printed pages for a shilling.

Three years before the first issue leaked out, however, I was involved in the launching of Utopian Publications, an enterprise which ever since has been mostly wrapped in mystery. My associate in this venture, in which I played the minor role of editorial agent—at least until the stealthy appearance of *Strange Tales*, which disappeared far more abruptly—was that versatile character whose name always seemed to have been reversed, Army-style, but who in every other respect was far from backward: Benson Herbert, Master of Science, creator of 'The Perfect World'.

That this was the last three-part serial to run in Gernsback's *Wonder Stories* before it expired in 1936 was purely coincidental. So was its publication in this country under the title, 'Crisis—1999 A.D.' The author had made his debut in *Wonder* five years earlier with 'The World Without', followed by 'The World Within', which went a long way towards anticipating Asimov's 'Fantastic Voyage'. In those days he alone among Britain's contributors to the sf magazines could boast of having a degree in science, but he never did. He was, in fact, as much concerned with poetry, music, mountaineering and flying as with archaeology and physics. He had a positive pash on Emily Bronte (his home in Cheadle, Cheshire, was called 'Heathcliff'); his literary adviser and friend was fantasy novelist M. P. Shiel. And his interest in Dunne's theories and psychic phenomena has developed through the years into a daily concern with such fascinations as UFOs, ESP and telekinesis.

One of his fellow investigators at the Paraphysical Laboratory and UFO Observatory, in the heart of the New Forest, is George Medhurst, one-time member of the London branch of the Science Fiction Association, whose erudition was only exceeded by his diffidence. When George spoke—or whispered—the entire company, even including Arthur ('Ego') Clarke, was shocked into speechlessness. More recently, as a member of the Society for Psychical Research, he has attended conferences in Russia, America and Canada, and reported on them in the *Journal of Paraphysics*, of which Herbert is editor. The perfect world, for them now, is the one that must concern us all sooner or later . . .

The last thing I remember of Herbert, before I fell foul of the Army, he was teaching physics in a college for electricians in London. Before I fell fainting at the feet of the R.S.M. at Catterick, two years later, he was writing me cheering letters, trying to stir me out of the mounting neurosis which finally led to my being cast out into the utter darkness of Civvy Street, suitably dressed and more or less in my right mind. By then he had graduated from teaching to publishing, and was organising a fiction list for a small house which had specialised in technical books. But he had schemes of



Benson Herbert, M.Sc., pictured in his twenties, when he wrote his novel, 'The Perfect World', as an attack against what he called 'fanatical American worship at the shrine of "pure science"'. Science, viewed historically, is only one element in the life of mankind, and it's lopsided to use the word as a magic panacea for all problems', he argued. Then he read for an Arts degree with honours in English . . .

his own . . . which included me, if I cared to throw in my lot with him.

The lot was a mass of American material which I had gathered in expectation of *Tales of Wonder's* becoming a monthly publication, perhaps with a quarterly companion—a hope that quickly vanished when it looked as though Hitler might have other ideas. Now, with the war having reached a stage when it couldn't last for ever, the situation was more propitious. So Utopian Publications was incorporated as a limited company, with myself as a director—and only myself to direct. For it was Herbert who, when he was free of other allegiances, found the finance and managed the actual business of printing and publishing the company's modest productions.

Did I say modest? With few exceptions, the shiny covers consisted of genuine art studies of full-breasted ladies in provocative poses, and bore such titles as 'The Sex Serum', 'Lady in Danger' and 'Love in Time'. They were mostly booklets of thirty-six pages priced at 'one shilling net', though only a few of the cover girls wore flimsy draperies that left precious little concealed. One story generally sufficed, but in a few cases a filler or two completed the closely-set pages which, compared to some of the airy productions available, certainly gave value for money. The authors, too, were hardly small in stature or maturity, at least to those who knew sf.

American fans caught in the draft and wafted to London, exploring the more intriguing bookstores off Charing Cross Road, must have halted goggle-eyed on seeing the names of Jack Williamson, Edmond Hamilton, Stanton A. Coblentz, Robert Bloch and Raymond A. Palmer. Or any one or two of them; because a round dozen of these booklets appeared between September

1944 and February 1946, when we were able to produce some more ambitious titles without relying on sex appeal to catch the eye of the prospective reader. Indeed, by that time busts had come under the ban. Legs, arms and shoulders were still permissible, but 'adequate light clothing' was necessary if we wished to get our publications displayed in the more genteel shops. So Herbert advised me; and experience had taught him that to be guided by our wholesalers was the only way to stay in business.

But, however well read, our G.I. sf fan could recall few of the titles that appeared on the covers. 'The Sex Serum' by H. O. Dickinson—a Liverpool writer who just got into *Wonder Stories* before it folded, and who produced 'The Giant Bacillus' for *Tales of Wonder* before he too gave up the struggle—sounded just the right note. But 'Arctic Bride', by S. P. Meek—the gallant Major, no less, who finished up Lieutenant-Colonel—was more fetching than 'The Gates of Light'. And 'Strange Offspring' was a better proposition to a hard-headed distributor than 'Three from the Test-tube'. In 1945 he was likely to ask, 'Three what?' Today, the original title of Ray Palmer's *Wonder* story might have more selling power. Even as I write, the words TEST-TUBE BABIES leap out at me from the morning paper in type you can see ten yards off.

One name would have got our G.I. guessing. 'Hmmm ... 'Love in Time', by Johnson Harris ... Could be that English guy, John Beynon Harris. What was that time-travel yarn of his—the one about the ants? "Wardens of Time"—yeah! Right on the button, baby! Some chick, huh? And he doubtless read it a second time with all the more relish.

If you want to play, you'll find the rest of the guessing game at the end, in the form of a checklist. This doesn't include those Utopian titles which were solely for looking at, consisting entirely of art studies apart from a few decorations by artist Harry Turner and a suitable word or two from editor Benson Herbert. As, for example, in 'Utopian Scenes':

Sir Thomas More invented an imaginary island which he named Utopia, meaning 'nowhere', to explain his ideas of what a perfect world should be like.

In this too imperfect age, we could all do with occasional glimpses of perfect beauty such as our camera has secured in these pages.

'Futurist Femininity', which featured the delectable Rosemary Andrée, 'Britain's most beautiful Model', came with a sealed band round its middle. Marked up at five shillings, it probably commanded a higher price in Piccadilly. Still, these were the rock on which the Utopian edifice was built. That it soon crumbled was due to a variety of adverse circumstances, but most of all to the rising cost of production which compelled us to resort to printing in Eire. Not only did the standard of production fall but it added to the complications of safe delivery and distribution. And public taste became fickle, changing almost overnight—unless our distribu-



The cover of one of the first sf booklets issued by Utopian Publications. The story was one by Major S. P. Meek, originally entitled 'The Gates of Light', but hitherto unpublished. Evidently the poor groom starved to death waiting for his Arctic Bride to thaw out on their honeymoon!

tors' hands lost their cunning, which is doubtful.

I thought we were at last heading in the right direction when, early in 1946, we produced two 'selections' of *Strange Tales* in quick succession; we could not call them issues, for nobody then could start a new periodical 'off the quota'. These were the first—and last—Utopian publications I edited. A third selection was almost ready to go to press when our masters cried halt. Too many publishers, especially Gerald G. Swan, were playing the same game, and horror stories were a drug on the market.

My own feeling was that if we had been able to manage a better standard of production we might have swept the board. As it was, both issues were printed on the cheapest possible newsprint, and the second was worse than the first, lacking a smoother paper which might have saved the two-colour cover from turning out a ghastly mess. Even with sixty-eight pages for ninepence, we couldn't shift fifty thousand copies. Yet our roster of contributors of 'Weird and Fantastic Fiction'

was one deserving the best kind of presentation. It included H. P. Lovecraft, Clark Ashton Smith, Jack Williamson, Robert Bloch, and the up-and-coming Ray Bradbury, who made his first British appearance in these shoddy pages with a reprint of 'The Tombstone'. And it was he who expressed the general reaction of those best qualified to judge the standard of the actual contents, when he wrote:

... It is a fine little magazine... your readers will have excellent reading for their shilling. If this is an example of things to come, your circulation should be well expanded by the time your first year is up. I have read most of the stories in this (first) issue, and think your selection very apt and diverse. Congratulations on the start of your project!

There was little consolation in the fact that the authors whose work I was using—at twice the rate that *Tales of Wonder* had been able to afford—had no complaints. It was galling that, once again, I could not make the best use of the new lode of material I had opened up, with the sympathetic aid of people like August Derleth, founder of Arkham House, and author-agent Otis Adelbert Kline. Had it continued, *Strange Tales* would have featured many more front-rank writers such as Donald Wandrei, Frank B. Long, Manly Wade Well-

man and other stalwarts of *Weird Tales*, whose new editor Dorothy McIlwraith was also on our side. Henry Kuttner and his wife Catherine L. Moore, that king and queen of science-fantasy, were rooting for us too—from California, where they were 'recuperating' from the stresses of New York at the time.

Richard Tooker and Lloyd Arthur Eshbach—by then busy laying the foundations of Fantasy Press, to put 'Skylark' Smith's classic tales between hard covers—were also present in the two selections we published, along with John Beynon Harris and, inevitably, John Russell Fearn. The covers were by the American artist Alva Rogers; the interiors by Powell, alias Fredric, whom I had run across in the Army and who came in useful for *Fantasy*. Still hanging in my 'memorial gallery' is the unused cover he did for the third *Strange Tales*, featuring Lovecraft's 'Colour Out of Space', a story that had haunted me for twenty years...

He also did the cover for a collection of *Strange Love Stories* which Herbert assembled when the call went out for 'romance'. This featured tales by Williamson, Hamilton, and E. Hoffman Price, and was done up so demurely for a shilling that it might have been distributed at a mothers' meeting. But Mum, evidently, wasn't in the mood... Turner, too, did a nice futuristic cover for a selection of *Thrilling Stories* by Hurl Vincent and Edmond Hamilton labelled 'Romance—Adventure'—in type that must have come out of Paddy's Ark. It was as near as we got to producing anything that might be recognisable as sf...

Greatly daring, at one stage we actually planned a science fiction series—for a juvenile readership which, we dimly hoped, might respond to something rather more sophisticated than *Scoops*. But by the time that Powell had roughed out a cover our mercurial wholesalers were calling yet another tune. So Herbert turned to Westerns, and finally back to 'Girls Without Gowns'. By which time I had grown tired of the merry-go-round... and Ted Carnell, fresh out of uniform, had beaten me to it by getting *New Worlds* off the ground for Pendulum Publications. Giving me ample excuse to set the fuse which launched *Fantasy*, after three years of waiting for its patient sponsors to give me the countdown.

By the end of 1946, new magazines were sprouting in all directions. Among them was one with the title *New Frontiers*, whose first issue bore the imprint of Utopian Publications but of which I knew little until it landed on my doormat. It carried articles on telepathy, precognition, vanished continents and the Druids, with others on spiritualism, automatic writing and even astrology. The approach, none the less, was sober and scientific. The aim was to 'present the results of contemporary researches into... psychology and parapsychology' and to provide a forum for 'enquirers into the unknown' without taking sides. Through its advertisement pages, it also brought to its readers' notice the magical charms of Jack o' Lantern, King of the Devon Pixies, and that notoriously lucky Cornish piskey, Joan the Wad.

The editors remained anonymous (as I had done for



Cover of the first selection of 'Strange Tales', which was adapted from a black-and-white drawing done by Alva Rogers, a young American artist. It had previously graced the cover of Forrester J. Ackerman's correspondence magazine, 'Voice of Imagination', popularly known as 'Vam'

Strange Tales—fortunately), but among the contributors were new writer F. G. Rayer and sf fan Ron Lane. A second issue, following three months later, carried a new imprint and the more familiar names of Eric Frank Russell, William F. Temple (who also had to wait three years for John Long to publish his 'Four-Sided Triangle'), and John F. Burke, who has gone a long way since he almost made his bow in *Tales of Wonder*. Maurice K. Hanson, editor of the former *Novae Terrae*, also contributed a macabre little piece, while his tame critic D. R. Smith said his in the letter columns; and one of Harry Turner's fanmag drawings filled a page.

The editorial, this time, was signed 'C.S.Y.', and a book review bore the initials 'J.F.'. Nobody in sf circles who knew Sam Youd, and another enthusiast named Joyce Fairbairn who became his wife, had to be clairvoyant to realise that he was the editor—or one of them. Soon afterwards he joined the ranks of Britain's sf authors: the last story I accepted for *Fantasy*, just before it expired, was 'Monster', by Christopher Youd, which saw print three years later in *Science-Fantasy*. Meanwhile he had won the literary prize which set him on the road to fame and some degree of fortune (he was duly blessed with a considerable ménage) as the novelist John Christopher, author of 'The Death of Grass' and 'The Possessors'.

Taking its cue from Russell's article on his idol Charles Fort, Youd's editorial came down firmly in favour of a healthy scepticism, even towards the accepted idea of the shape of the earth, still rejected by some oddballs in spite of the astronauts' photos. It promised:

New Frontiers will continue to provide space for ... theories that are unpopular and perhaps not in good repute. Telepathy, telekinesis, clairvoyance, demonism, anthroposophy, interplanetary communication, flat earth, astrology—theories that have won respectability and theories that have yet to win it. Some of the theories may be wrong. But all of them will be worth studying.

Indeed, they would have been. But alas, somebody must have neglected to invest in Joan the Wad. *New Frontiers* proved stubbornly unprofitable, and the fickle finger of Fate still beckons, tantalising ...

CHECKLIST OF SCIENCE AND FANTASY FICTION
ISSUED BY
UTOPIAN PUBLICATIONS, 1944-46

In each case, the title of the booklet or selection of stories is given first. Where titles were changed, the original title is given in brackets, before the author's name. (N) indicates that the story was new material, not a reprint.

- Sept., '44: Girl in Trouble, E. Frank Parker (N).
Nov., '44: Arctic Bride (Gates of Light); Nasturtia, S. P. Meek.
Feb., '45: Sea-Kissed (Black Kiss), Robert Bloch (and Henry Kuttner); Lady in Wax (Waxworks), Beetles, Tolem-Pole, Robert Bloch.
July '45: Lady in Danger (Wizard's Isle), Jack Williamson; Spanish Vampire, E. Hoffman Price; Curse of the House, Robert Bloch.
Nov., '45: Tiger Girl (Six Sleepers), Edmond Hamilton; Apprentice Magician, E. Hoffman Price. Sex Serum, H. O. Dickinson; Red Swimmer, Robert Bloch; Man with X-ray Eyes, Edmond Hamilton. Love in Time (Wanderers of Time), Johnson Harris (John B. Harris).
Jan., '46: Thrilling Stories—Cat's Eye, Harl Vincent; Master of the Genes, Edmond Hamilton. Master of Dreams, Harl Vincent; Ham on Rye, Gabriel Marlowe (N). Murder in the Clinic, Edmond Hamilton; Island of Unreason, Edmond Hamilton.
Feb., '46: Strange Tales: First Selection—Non-stop to Mars, Jack Williamson; Pink Elephants, Tarleton Fiske (Robert Bloch); Brain of Ali Khan, Lloyd A. Eshbach; Hunters from Beyond, Clark A. Smith; Experiment in Murder (Portrait of a Murderer), John R. Fearn; Tombstone, Ray Bradbury.
Mar., '46: Strange Tales: Second Selection—Moon Devils John B. Harris; Nameless Offspring, Clark A. Smith; Sorcerer's Jewel, Tarleton Fiske; Song from the Dark Star, Richard Tooker; Cool Air, H. P. Lovecraft; Manikin, Robert Bloch.
Apr., '46: Strange Love Stories—Desert Romance (Shadow Guide), E. Hoffman Price; Eve Was a Snake (Snake Goddess), E. Hoffman Price; Star-Bright, Jack Williamson.
May, '46: Dangerous Love (Man from Ouija Land/A Man Must Ride), Ralph Milne Farley.
June, '46: Romance in Black (The Black Drama), Gans T. Field (Manly W. Wellman).

THE IMPATIENT DREAMERS is building up into a unique web-work history of British Science Fiction. Next month Walter Gillings traces the brief career of the second 'Fantasy' and in time to come John Carnell reveals the beginnings of 'New Worlds,' with future instalments by Gordon Landsborough, Kenneth Bulmer and E. C. Tubb.

DON'T MISS A SINGLE EPISODE!

The Double Planet

By DAVID A. HARDY, F.R.A.S., A.F.B.I.S.

Moving outwards from the Sun in our 'tour of the Solar System' we have so far visited Mercury and Venus. The next planet is one about which we know more than all the others, and it is the only one known to possess life—one form of which is sometimes thought to be intelligent... Earth orbits the Sun at an average distance of about 93,000,000 miles and is 7,927 miles in diameter. It has a dense atmosphere consisting of 77.6% Nitrogen and 20.7% Oxygen, with a few other gases, which shields the surface from harmful ultra-violet and cosmic radiation, and also supports a wide variety of fauna and flora whilst giving rise to greatly varying climatic regions and temperatures.

There is, however, another planet in this region of space: the Moon. Although this is usually thought of as revolving around the Earth it is so large (2,160 miles diameter) in proportion to its primary that the Earth-Moon system is more correctly described as a double planet.

The Moon, of course, has the distinction of being the only other world to be visited by Man, thus fulfilling the dreams of generations of science fiction writers and readers. The true idea of the Moon as a solid, rocky body probably took root around 450 B.C., when the Greek Democritus stated that there were high mountains and valleys on the lunar surface. This was not really verified until 1609 A.D., when Galileo turned his first simple telescope on the Moon.

Lack of detailed information did not prevent stories from being written about the Moon-world though: one of the earliest of all science fiction writers must have been Lucian of Samosata, who lived around A.D. 120. In his *True History* he and fifty companions were hurled aloft by a huge whirlwind and transported to the Moon, where they encountered soldiers mounted on enormous three-headed birds. Since then hundreds of stories have been written, some more plausible and scientific than others. Probably the main pitfall (quite literally) for authors who had not done their homework was in describing the lunar craters as either volcanic cones or bottomless pits, and the mountains as steep, almost vertical pinnacles.

Lunar features under a low angle of illumination *do* give the impression of great relief, but it is partly illusory. It is true that some of the mountains are higher than any on Earth, which, considering that the Moon is so much smaller, makes them truly gigantic; but the truth—as proved by probes like the Orbiters of 1966—is that most of them are gently rounded rather than saw-toothed peaks. As to the craters, they are mainly saucer-like depressions, the slope of the inner walls being somewhat steeper than the outer ones.

The greatest controversy on the Moon, which has raged for many years, is whether the craters are of volcanic or meteoric origin: that is, basically, whether the Moon was bombarded by meteorites aeons ago, or whether gases from the molten interior pushed up 'bubbles' which then subsided and solidified into the circular ringwalls which remain. Many people assumed that when men landed on the Moon this question would be answered once and for all—but not

so. American scientists, such as those at NASA, appear to be strongly prejudiced towards the impact theory, and interpret every new piece of evidence in this light. There are, however, many adherents to the volcanic theory, who can produce a lot of arguments which their opponents find hard to refute. It would be easy to fill this magazine—and several more besides—with the arguments for and against, as well as with descriptions of other (often puzzling) lunar features, such as ridges, rays, clefts, rills, domes, 'ghost' craters, and the mysterious moving bands, mists or red glows recorded by some observers, but there is not room to go into all these here. Instead, let's take a look at what the Apollo landings have told us about the surface.

The first important discovery was that the surface is solid, covered with only a thin layer of dust, not deep drifts as some astronomers had suggested. Examined back on Earth, this was found to be dark, varying in colour through shades of yellow, brown and grey. It contains a lot of crystalline, glassy material, and both this and the rocks brought back indicate an igneous origin, being similar to basalt. There was little direct evidence of meteoritic material, except in the tiny impacts on the rocks. Early Apollo results showed that the Moon had once been molten inside, and may still be. There was no evidence of past life on the Moon but, oddly, certain terrestrial plants were found to grow greener and harder in lunar dust than in Earth soil! Another surprise was that when the ascent stage of Apollo 12 was crashed on the surface, seismometers recorded that the Moon vibrated for almost an hour; it may be that the crust is honeycombed with vents or fractures. Finally, a high percentage of titanium was discovered in the dust, which may prove useful in years to come...

The vexed question of crater formation is still open, then. Obviously both forces *have* been at work, and the Moon is still being peppered by small meteorites today, but whether the large craters and even maria ('seas') were formed by meteorites the size of small asteroids is in doubt. Even the meteoritic supporters have been forced to fall back on 'secondary volcanic processes', and I forecast that if the question is ever finally settled the 'volcanists' will be the victors.

What of the future of Man on the Moon? Despite the setback of Apollo 13, future missions will continue to explore various areas, setting up more ambitious experiments, and eventually manned bases will be set up. My painting this month shows 'full Earth' over a small crater near the lunar pole, where an ore-extracting and processing plant has been erected. In the large dome on the right, which is multi-storied, are sleeping quarters, recreation rooms and observation-lounge. On the left is mining machinery and processing plant, and in the dome behind, stores and radio/radar equipment. A shuttle-craft is taking off from the plain, beyond the crater-rim which would serve as some protection in case of explosion. In the foreground a crawler is collecting ore-samples in the foothills of the crater's central peak, from which we are looking down on the scene.



HARDY



John Brunner? FAIRY TALE

*The Pig and Whistle Inn,
Dartleby, Devonshire.*

To Professor Sir Leo Courtenay,
The Montague Laboratories,
Cambridge.

Dear Leo,

This is not exactly a letter from the grave, although since you presumably gave me up for dead seven years ago as everyone else appears to have done, doubtless that will be your first reaction on seeing my handwriting. Yes, I *am* your old friend Barney Gregg who disappeared down here on Dartmoor in the summer of 1964, and I propose to call on you and convince you of that fact as soon as I have calmed sufficiently from my present agitated state. Can you imagine the shock experienced by someone who went to sleep in 1964 and woke to find that it was 1971? I suspect not; that's what happened to me, as I am compelled to believe on seeing the newspapers, yet the sheer improbability of such an event creates a kind of obstinate blockage in the mind, and I cannot rid myself of the notion that this is all some terrible nightmare...

Which, very definitely, it is not. I think you know me well enough—but there I go again, forgetting that seven years have gone by, seeming to me like a single night. You knew me well enough, let me say, to recognise that I was never a man to be easily deluded, or to let enthusiasm run away with him. Indeed, although I was (and suspect that physically I still am) on the right side of fifty, I was quite pleased to be referred to as 'Old Sidesides'. I regarded it almost as a professional compliment. Should not a barrister be the most sober of men?

Please, therefore, suspend your judgment on the following remarkable narrative until you have perused it *in toto*. I am going to set down facts—I repeat, *facts*—which I have weighed in my own mind as carefully as I would weigh the evidence of a witness in court. Though they will strike you as extraordinary it is imperative that you should not dismiss them out of hand.

I ought perhaps to explain why I am writing to you before contacting anybody else concerning my return to the everyday world. I have spent much of this evening reading feverishly through what newspapers I could lay hands on in this isolated village. By chance I saw in the *Times* that you are now heading the Montague Laboratories, and I realised that as you are the only nuclear physicist with whom I am on intimate terms I must communicate with you at once. (Congratulations on securing your present post, by the way, and on your knighthood, which comes as news to me although for all I can tell it may have been conferred years ago.)

I did think of telephoning you, but I was forced to conclude that a written message would be more effective because more studied and deliberate. I have been 'back' only since this morning, and I shall certainly be in no state to travel for a while yet; moreover, I haven't a penny to my name and shan't have until my bankers react to the telegram I sent them—may they respond with promptness!

Here I am, then, sitting up after midnight in a tiny dusty room under the eaves of this pub, penning a story which the old people in Dartleby find more believable than I to whom it happened. But then I suppose they accept old legends as an integral element of history. 'There's piskies up to Dartmoor', as the local folk have

J. CAWTHORN '76

NOTHING LIKE THE SUN

Christopher Priest



No matter how far the men travelled each day, the line of high, rocky mountains on the horizon ahead seemed no nearer. Each morning, when the early mists had been blown away to the west, the peaks ahead appeared to be at once forbidding and welcoming.

Only when they reached the mountains would they stand any chance of survival.

Underfoot, the ground was a continuing nightmare Centuries before, the last remains of the topsoil had been snatched away by the incessant winds, and now only the sharp-edged tips of rock-strata protruded at the surface. The predominant colour in the plain was a dark, muddy grey, broken by occasional patches of water reflecting the silver radiance of the sky.

Perhaps on some other continent of this planet, Taranth, the conditions were more amiably disposed towards human life, but it was here that the war was being fought.

The men had been crossing the plain for five days, and their numbers, which had been fifteen at the start, were now down to four. The only officer, young Lieutenant Gracer, lay weakly on his back, occasionally turning to retch into a shallow gully in the rock at his side.

As the sixth morning dawned the other three men watched him uneasily, knowing they could not leave him, but equally that they must move while there was daylight.

As Gracer rolled over once more onto his face, and vomited emptily and noisily onto the rock, the oldest of the men beckoned the others to one side, and led them thirty yards downwind of the sick officer.

'Well?' he growled at them, in a voice that revealed he had no hope that they would agree on anything. 'What shall we do?'

Leavis, the taller of the other two, stared straight back at him. 'We drop him of course.'

The other, whose name was Makin, shrugged his shoulders. He looked quickly at Leavis, then away. 'I don't know,' he said.

'I say we wait until the Lieutenant is better,' Rassenk, the first man, said. 'We can't leave him here.'

Leavis said: 'The Ghouls will find us if we stay with him. Either that, or we'll starve.'

Rassenk found his self-control beginning to slip. Five long days of hunger were wearing on him.

'If we drop Gracer now,' he said, 'what do you think will happen to him?'

Leavis shrugged. 'I don't care.'

He turned away, and walked slowly towards the nearest pool of water, about five yards from where Gracer lay. The older man watched him walk, noting the casual way in which the man held his body. No man who had spent five nights in the open on Taranth would walk naturally like that.

He said to Makin: 'What about you? Are you going with Leavis, or are you staying with me?'

Rassenk wished for a moment that he had some rank to pull on the man. Though it might have done no

ERIC JONES

LEE HARDING ECHOES OF ARMAGEDDON



EDDIE JONES

It was a blighted landscape. The floor of the valley was a turbulent network of deep fissures where the barren soil had cracked open and exposed itself to the merciless radiation of the sun. There were no signs of vegetation visible anywhere upon this desolate surface, no solitary blade of grass to impeach the sterility of the soil.



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