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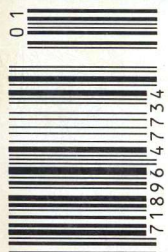
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OPINION

by Robert Silverberg

Among the things I like to eat are breast of wild duck done very rare, veal with chanterelles, and fiery Indian curries. Quite high on the list of things I'd rather not eat are my own words. But one can't always choose one's own ideal diet; and if one makes statements in public, one not infrequently finds oneself required eventually to dine on those statements later on. You are now about to witness such an act of verbal ingestion. I would sooner plead guilty to inconsistency than to dishonesty; and, having committed a whopper of an inconsistency in these very pages, I intend to — well, bite the bullet — and anticipate all the mockers and jeerers by doing the mocking and jeering myself.

This is what I wrote, a couple of years ago, for the March 1982 issue of *Amazing*, in speaking of the current proliferation of sequels, trilogies, and other multi-volume enterprises in science fiction:

"What about Silverberg, now at work on *Majipoor Chronicles*? It is not, I insist mildly, a sequel to *Lord Valentine's Castle*, since it involves a host of other characters and takes place at earlier periods of Majipoor's history. . . . I would be very much surprised to find myself writing a true sequel to *Lord Valentine's Castle* — the idea dismays and depresses me

— and even though you might point out that I also found myself surprised to be writing *LVC* in the first place, I'm fairly confident that it won't happen. I can't bear the notion of trundling out Carabella and Deliamber and Valentine and the rest of that crowd for another set of adventures. They had their moment on the stage; I'm done with them forever."

A very final statement, even as final statements go. It ranks right up there with "If nominated I will not run, if elected I will not serve," and "As of the book I've just finished, I intend to retire forever from writing science fiction." I admire its firm, vigorous, unswerving finality. And I suppose I admire my own ability to leap deftly out of the corners into which I've so thoroughly painted myself. For, as it happens, I've just completed a novel (I write this in July of 1983) called *Valentine Pontifex*. Even those few folks who have not yet read *Lord Valentine's Castle* are apt to guess that the new book has some connection with that one. Those who are familiar with *LVC*, such as John Provo of Fredericksburg, Virginia, were able with no great difficulty to jump to the conclusion that *Valentine Pontifex* must be an actual sequel to *Lord Valentine's Castle* as soon as they saw the announcement of the new book in *Locus*. Mr. Provo

was kind enough to write me about it, pointing out that I had elaborately and emphatically told the readers of *Amazing Stories* that I wasn't going to write any such book, and wondering what was going on. (He did say he'd read the new book even if it did turn out to be a mere sequel.)

And in truth what I have done is write a real sequel — not some sort of peripherally connected book, but an out-and-out continuation of the story — to *Lord Valentine's Castle*. I have indeed trundled out Carabella and Deliamber and Valentine and all the rest of that crowd for another set of adventures, though I swore I was done with them forever. I told you quite solemnly that the idea of doing such a book dismayed and depressed me, and I meant it. But there it is stacked up before me, 521 pages of neatly word-processed manuscript. At this very instant the galley proofs are winging westward from New York toward me. By the time these words are in print the book will be on sale. Actually and literally have I done this thing of writing the sequel I said I wouldn't write.

Ah, Silverberg, how come, how come?

For money, you say instantly. Too easy an answer. There will be, of course, a substantial improvement in the Silverbergian balance of payments as a result of my having written that book. But I am not so hard pressed for funds that I needed to take on a project I had publicly described as dismaying and depressing, merely to keep the plumber's bill paid and the larder well stocked with breast of wild duck. Besides, I'd be well enough paid for any novel I chose to write just now; I didn't necessarily have to make one more foray into Majipoor. (Do you think

Isaac Asimov *needs* to write a new robot novel, or a fifth *FOUNDATION* book, to keep the dollars flowing? Do you think Frank Herbert's newly finished fifth *DUNE* novel was his only way out of the poorhouse this year?)

Money is part of it, sure. But what finally tipped me toward writing the book I said I wouldn't write was a sense of unfinished business, a nagging little itch at the back of my mind.

When I wrote *Lord Valentine's Castle*, I was emerging from years of retirement as a writer: I meant to do just that one book and scuttle back to my garden. The book had two main plot-threads: the struggle of Valentine to regain his throne, and the struggle of the suppressed and outcast Metamorph aborigines of Majipoor to regain their planet. I took the first of those themes through to a resolution; I left the other wholly unresolved. Obviously I was setting myself up for a sequel, and a flattering number of readers wrote to me to ask what happened next. But I had no intention of dragging myself back over the same familiar ground just to tell the story of the Metamorph uprising: no challenge in that for me, no creative zing, just a filling-in of the dots.

But I had built something else into *LVC* in an offhanded way — a minor character, a small irreverent boy — who seemed to demand more attention in a later work. Several sharp readers asked me if I meant to write about him. And also I had, in single-mindedly telling the story of Valentine's return to the throne, side-stepped a lot of science-fictional questions about Majipoor: how does this world really *work*, how did it evolve its particular set of customs

and laws, what is its total life like? I had concentrated on one small group of characters, leaving much of the vast background unexplored.

So I wrote *Majipoor Chronicles*, using the boy Hissune as the focus through which I could examine various aspects of Majipoor over a period of thousands of years. It wasn't a sequel to *LVC*; it was a companion, a commentary, a book apart. And as I wrote it I admitted to myself, finally, that I still had unanswered questions to deal with. I had not examined the inner workings of the Majipoor monarchy. I had not explored the contradictions inherent in trying to be both a king and a pacifist. I had not grappled with the implications of the genocidal crime on which the benign and cheerful civilization of Majipoor had been founded. The more I thought about it, the more I began to see *LVC* as only half a book. It didn't require a sequel so much as it did a completion; by showing only Valentine's return to the throne, but not his efforts to meet the responsibilities of that throne, I had told a fairy-tale, not written a science-fiction novel. And so *Valentine Pontifex* became inevitable.

There it is in the bookstores now. In the most accidental of ways I have committed a trilogy, swearing all the way that I had no plan to do any such thing. *Mea culpa, mea culpa*: but the creative process doesn't always work in neat logical paths, and neither do I.

Was it dismaying and depressing to write the book, as I had feared? Well, yes, in places it was: for chapters at a

time I was unable to cut loose in a freshly inventive way, but was confined to utilizing backgrounds and characters that were already familiar to me. At those times I would rather have been marching onward through new terrain. But then there was the joy of picking up a theme in the first book that had been mere decoration there, and coming to understand its relevance to the real story, and amplifying and developing it as though I had planned all along to do just that: serendipitous discoveries, and delightful ones. And I had a sense, too, of coming to grips with the inner natures of the characters in a way that the somewhat stylized and romantic nature of the first book had not allowed. So the book proved to have artistic rewards for me after all. If I made myself look silly by writing something I had publicly forsworn, so be it: I have looked silly before, and I probably will again, but I have no regrets for having written it. For all my distaste for sequels as a general concept, and all my personal dislike for returning to old territory, the third Majipoor book — like the second — gradually became necessary for me to do, which I had not at all anticipated. So Silverberg, of all people, has produced a trilogy despite his frequently expressed scorn for multi-book books. Better to look silly than to ignore the inner voice that gives the orders, say I.

And will I return to Majipoor a few years from now for yet another novel?

I doubt it very much. But don't hold me to it, okay?



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BOOK REVIEWS

by Frank Catalano

Back when I was a young writer, barely knee-high to a Webster's (unabridged second edition, of course), my Editor told me things I should know as a beginner. I'd stand by his gargantuan typing stand, and he'd peer down at me, telling me all about little things I'd need to know to succeed.

"Son," he'd say, even though I wasn't, "remember two of the greats in our field, H.L. Gold and H.G. Wells. And remember their rules."

That advice still echoes in my mind as I dig through piles of rejection slips, years later. One of them is a slightly yellowing memo from Gold himself, and simply says, "You violate Gold's Law No. 1 — you *end* your story with your premise instead of *starting* with it." Another, this one from the very editor of this volume you're now reading, George Scithers, outlines the other law: "H.G. Wells wisely suggested one should use no more than *one* independent wonder, one impossible phenomenon per story. Thus, you might write of the invention of a time machine, *or* of the invention of faster-than-light travel, but not both in a single story — unless you either show that the invention of one naturally produces the other or you use one as routine background and concentrate on the other as the real wonder of the story."

By now, both stories that prompted

those comments are yellowing in my file of stories from which someday I may salvage ideas. But the advice — to start with your wonder rather than end with it, and keep it to *one* wonder — is still among the best that can be given to a science-fiction writer.

I suppose what I learned at the knee of my Editor in those days is that I should do Wells if I followed the Golden rule.

Welcome Chaos

by Kate Wilhelm

Houghton Mifflin: \$13.95 (cloth)

Wilhelm, too, has followed the advice of Wells and Gold, and the results are intriguing. *Welcome Chaos* is a classic example of taking one SF idea and examining from all angles what it means.

The idea itself is not a new one: an immortality serum. But Wilhelm freshens it up by throwing in some side-effects to the serum itself, and by throwing in 37-year-old Lyle Taney, University history teacher and natural history book author. Taney gets pulled into a group of scientists who have kept the serum under wraps — and are fighting the clock against politicians who may use it as an excuse for all-out nuclear war.

The storyline itself is simple, but has complex implications. Wilhelm writes so it reads like a thriller. The characterization is solid and the story

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is placed in a convincing contemporary world. Even though it's an expansion of her novella, "The Winter Beach," it's seamless.

There may be a logical flaw or two somewhere in the book, but if there is, I couldn't drag it out kicking and screaming in the first reading. I was too busy turning pages. *Welcome Chaos* is a good, straightforward handling of what happens when a single, monumental scientific discovery is made, and the radiating cracks it creates in the ice of society.

Startide Rising

by David Brin

Bantam: \$3.50 (paper)

Sometimes it's not easy coming up with a book title.

Take *Startide Rising*. It began life as *The Tides of Kithrup*. But somewhere along the way, editor and author tried to think of something a bit more descriptive of the plot. Something that reflects the fact that the novel is about the first starship crewed and piloted primarily by dolphins who take their liquid environment with them, and then crash-land on a planet. Something that got David Brin thinking of a more descriptive title.

Such as *Watership Down*.

Hard to tell why it was discarded — perhaps because it's been done before, or because bunnies go soggy in water. No matter. Even with title changes, *Startide Rising* is a good read.

The novel is set in the same universe Brin used in his first novel, *Sundiver*, but 200 years later, with different characters (though there is a passing reference to Jacob Demwa, hero of the first book). This is the universe of Uplift, where older races genetically increase the intelligence of

pre-sapient races. But the one exception to this process appears to be Humanity, much to the disgust of many of the elder races. Humanity itself has taken part in Uplift, lifting dolphins and chimps to sapience.

Now, the aforementioned first dolphin starship discovers a fleet of derelict spaceships — then suddenly finds itself ambushed by fleets of the elder races, and the dolphin ship crash-lands on a water-world, and the crew tries to avoid the galactics, repair their starship, and deal with the unusual qualities of their refuge.

You may get the impression this is not a simple novel. *Startide Rising* is very complex, with constant action and threat. But while I was sure Brin wouldn't be able to pull all the various plot threads together by novel's end, he does.

As far as characters, the dolphins and the others are well-crafted, with the strange exception of the human adult male lead, which I would think would be the easiest to make believable. But for some reason, it's hard to get a feel for him early on because of a lack of description and background. In addition, the question of what, exactly, the derelict fleet represents is never answered, which leaves room for another novel in this universe.

But *Startide Rising* is generally well-done, with some nice sociological speculation about the myriad of galactic races . . . and a well-constructed dolphin psychology, society, and even religion that had me believing that's really how dolphins are. It's worth reading as hard SF, SF adventure, or soft sociological SF.

Superluminal

by Vonda N. McIntyre

Houghton Mifflin: \$14.95 (cloth)

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BRONWYN'S BANE

By ELIZABETH
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Star-Trek novel since *Dreamsnake*, which won both the Hugo and Nebula. As with *Dreamsnake*, McIntyre expands upon a previous story (in this case, "Aztecs"), and she uses biology as the major scientific speculative launching point. And, from all indications, the results are just as successful.

Superluminal is the story of the still relatively new starship pilots, who take starships through "transit" to their destinations. Because of the indescribable nature of transit, the crew has to be unconscious or it will die, because transit appears to disrupt normal biological rhythms that tie us to time as we know it. Pilots, however, don't have that problem: they have their hearts removed and replaced with pumps, along with other alterations, to allow them to step out of biological time constraints. Laenea Trevelyan is a new pilot, and her burning need to prove herself brings her path across that of a somewhat mysterious crew member from the planet Twilight, who has unusual experiences in transit, and of a genetically-engineered member of the divers, who live beneath the water — but this one wants a knowledge of the stars.

Superluminal begins somewhat slowly, as McIntyre carefully paints her characters and shows you her world, but then takes off in a blur as all the elements begin to interact. Nice things are done with foreshadowing of coming events, and mirroring of things like exploration of the sea versus exploration of the stars. The structure delicately overlaps, and McIntyre introduces elements that so neatly tie together in unexpected places that you shout to yourself, "Of course, *that's* what she meant!"

Superluminal is a story of discovery, and an unusual love story — well worth reading for its look at humanity and at those who are on the edge of going beyond it.

Anvil of the Heart

by Bruce T. Holmes

The Haven Corporation: \$11.95 (cloth)

Anvil of the Heart is one of those attempts at an SF novel that just doesn't feel like an SF novel. It has the SF elements — in this case, a new genetically-manipulated master race with high-tech, brutal cops that are opposed by a rebel underground — but you get the impression they're not part of the real story. And they're not. The real story here is of John Cunningham, an archivist who's driven to forego life as he's known it and join the underground because of personal tragedy. Cunningham hooks up with a rebel leader who teaches him Aikido as a weapon and a philosophy, and in turn, teaches him about himself.

The writing is good, as are the characterizations . . . but when it comes to the SF elements, there's a feeling of having been here before. None of the elements are especially new or creatively used. Actually, the story of Cunningham's personal development probably doesn't even need the SF trappings — it's a good story about people. Perhaps it's because the non-SF parts ring so true that the SF parts ring so hollow.

Whatever the reason, the book is good — it's just not good SF. It could be a big hit with the reader not familiar with the conventions of SF, because it *is* well-written. For the SF reader who expects both good writing and original handling of concepts, though, it just doesn't work.

Prelude to Chaos

by Edward Llewellyn

DAW: \$3.25 (paper)

A novel that doesn't quite work for perhaps the opposite reason is Edward Llewellyn's *Prelude to Chaos*. It's a novel of SF intrigue, and is a good effort, but the result is a bit muddled.

There's a lot going on in the way of SF concepts, all nicely handled, here — a Secret Service agent and a medical researcher both put in the last Federal Pen, apparently for information that would embarrass or bring down the current Administration . . . and potentially start riots in the streets. There just may be too much going on. There are so many twists by the close of the novel they start seeming forced, and the end comes across as murky while you try to figure out who did what to whom. The complexities also lead to large chunks of background being dished out whole. They're well-written chunks, but chunks nonetheless.

Prelude to Chaos sets up an interesting future with a broad view, and the flavor of an action or spy novel. It just comes across like nearly-ready oatmeal: it needs to have some lumps taken care of before it goes down smoothly, but it's not indigestible.

Universe 13

edited by Terry Carr

Doubleday: \$11.95 (cloth)

[Last-minute scheduling problems made it impossible to include Mr. Coulson's reviews in this issue. Next issue will have a double-helping of Coulson to make up.]

One of the few hardy survivors of the depleted anthology and collection market is Carr's *Universe* series. Its 13th volume also shows why it's succeeded where others have failed.

First, of course, all the stories are new ones — 7 in this volume, with the mix ranging from traditional hard SF to SF so soft it borders on fantasy. Of the seven, the best in my mind are Michael Bishop's "Her Habiline Husband," a tale of a living anthropological find rekindling some old feelings in the contemporary South; "The Taylorsville Reconstruction," a nicely done tongue-in-cheek piece by Lucius Shepard of secret ESP dealings, again in the South; and "A Way Back" by Leanne Frahm, which heads even further south — to Australia — for the modern-day reappearance of the dinosaurs.

A couple of the stories wrap up with what I consider "so what?" endings; that is, they begin well but just don't satisfy at the close, or are predictable. Despite them, it's not a bad overall mix, garnering a Satisfaction Index (SI) of 57 out of a possible 100. That's higher than you may think, especially if you realize the Bishop story is about 70 pages long. If I were to modify the SI to be the total number of satisfying pages versus the total number of pages (instead of basing it on stories), the SI would be 79. Again, Carr has uncovered some fine story-telling.



DISCUSSIONS

by The Readers

Dear Mr. Scithers,

Editors are crazy bumbos, yes they are. Annoying, too.

I like SF; I love SF magazines. Occasionally I like to voice my opinions, so I send in a letter. Usually I send a fairly inoffensive one — you know, “I like this, I don’t like that” — and the editor usually sends me a polite reply — “Thanks for your interest, blah blah, sorry your opinions are so screwed up, you’ll never see that in *my* magazine arharhar” — and that’s that.

Once in a while, though, I get into a bad mood and decide to take it out on something harmless and remote — like an SF magazine (I don’t believe in kicking the dog). So I fire off an angry letter, pounding my chest and blaming the editor for everything from Hiroshima to the death of *If*. What happens then?

Why, you publish the damn thing, that’s what. Six months later I open the magazine to get smacked with a long-dead foul mood. There I sit, with a silly look on my face; I guess I’ll be more careful in the future.

I refer to my letter in your July 1983 issue.

What really bothers me is that your reply — part of it, at least — misunderstood my letter! I don’t believe the “average” SF reader is in his teens; what I said was, it seems to me that SF magazines are often

geared to a juvenile audience. I mentioned that Fred Pohl used to do that; this information is from pages 260-261 of the anthology *Galaxy* (trade pb edition), from Robert Silverberg’s introduction to his story. (Silverberg and Pohl probably don’t want to get dragged into this by a total stranger; neither do you, maybe. What the Hell.) In fact, I brought up the recent *F&SF* poll that showed a decline in adolescent readership. (Well, that’s what I meant when I said “polls have shown . . .”)

You are perhaps on firmer ground with your second point. I don’t know much about fandom; I’ve only had a few experiences with it, but all were intensely negative. The impression I got is that fans are more interested in, and know more about, fandom than SF. On the other hand I do know some things: I know that most of the indexes and better reference works of SF were done by fans. I guess it’s the organized social structure I dislike, not the impulse behind it.

I feel that way about a lot of things. Bad attitude, huh?

Sincerely,

Chris DeVito
1 Charter Ave.
Dix Hills NY 11746

P.S.: Forget that crack I made about you guys being an *Asimov’s* clone; you’ve proved me wrong on that one!

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Amazing:

January 1981. Harlan Ellison, Robert Silverberg, Alan Ryan; Stanislaw Lem interview.

March 1981 is sold out!

May 1981. "The Vampire of Mallworld" by Somtow Sucharitkul; George R.R. Martin, Lisa Tuttle, Gregory Benford, Marvin Kaye.

July 1981 is sold out!

September 1981. Roger Zelazny, Ron Goulart, Bill Pronzini, Harlan Ellison, Barry Malzberg; Gene Wolfe interview.

November 1981. "The Last Line of the Haiku" by Somtow Sucharitkul; Marvin Kaye, Parke Godwin, Jack Wodhams, Orson Scott Card; Algis Budrys interview.

January 1982. "Unsound Variations" by George R.R. Martin; Theodore Sturgeon, Manly Wade Wellman; Lloyd Biggle interview.

March 1982. "The Cheese Stands Alone" by Harlan Ellison; "Moon of Ice" by Brad Linaweaver; Barry Malzberg; A.E. van Vogt interview.

June 1982. "The Story of a Dādar" by Darrell Schweitzer; Charles L. Grant, David Bunch, Wayne Wightman; Asimov classic reprint; Grant interview.

September 1982. Marvin Kaye, Parke Godwin, Alan Ryan, David Bunch, George Alec Effinger; Michael Shaara interview.

November 1982. The first Scithers issue! Michael Whelan cover. Long fiction by Jack Williamson, Larry Niven, Robert Silverberg; short stories by Gene Wolfe, John M. Ford, Nancy Springer; Silverberg's "Opinion"; Ford's games column.

January 1983. Kelly Freas cover; "Aquila Meets Bigfoot" by Somtow Sucharitkul; novelet by Poul Anderson; stories by Tanith Lee, Jack C. Haldeman, Michael McCollum, etc.; Avram Davidson Adventures in Unhistory; Silverberg.

March 1983. Jack Gaughan cover; part I of *Against Infinity* by Gregory Benford; Bill Pronzini, Darrell Schweitzer, Sharon Webb, Damien Broderick; poetry by Thomas Disch; "The Amazing Years" by Cele Goldsmith Lalli; A. Bertram Chandler interview.

May 1983. Kelly Freas cover; *Against Infinity* by Gregory Benford concluded; "Aquila: The Final Conflict" by Somtow Sucharitkul; Gene Wolfe, Alan Dean Foster, William Wu; features by Silverberg, Ford, Catalano, Coulson.

Fantastic:

January 1980. "The Cliffhanger Sound" by Paul Dellinger; "Never Argue With Antique Dealers" by Darrell Schweitzer; a classic reprint by Murray Leinster; analysis of TV adaptions of Ray Bradbury.

April and July 1980 are sold out!

October 1980. "The Amorous Umbrella" by Marvin Kaye; Darrell Schweitzer, Wayne Wightman, Tom Easton, M. Lindholm.

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Send check or money order to: *Amazing Stories*, Box 110, Lake Geneva WI 53147.

So how about some stories from Barry Longyear, Ted Reynolds, maybe even Asimov?

Our own feeling is that fandom, like any other human society, has its share of twits, dullards, and stuffed-shirts; but that it also contains a lot of very nice people. It is really just a gathering of people who have one thing in common — they read SF. But of course it is not necessary to be a fan, that is, to go to conventions, participate in fanzines, and the like, in order to read and enjoy SF, or even to write it successfully. Fandom isn't the whole world, as some fans occasionally forget.

— George Scithers

Dear Mr. Scithers:

I am returning your last response to a submitted story, "The Germination Experiment."

A man of culture does not desire to be picayune. Your comments on the use of the 1½ line-feed control and the entire structure of sending out manuscripts makes me want to puke.

I've been writing for twenty years. At one time I sent manuscripts following the format you sent me. I was told it was the mark of an amateur to type his name on each page, even on the first with the title.

I intuit from your letter that you taught English at one time. A part-time co-worker, Rusty, confirmed my suspicion. I, too, taught English at a college level, and, as part of earning my master's degree, had to be subjected to the nit-picking rigors of a course in bibliography — where to put the comma, the quotation marks, and other sometimes precise, sometimes egregiously petty rules, most of which put me in mind of one of Swift's satires in which great arguments were held over which end of

the egg should be bottommost upon serving.

I have studied the masters of writing, not as a critic but as a craftsman to learn how to create, in all genres. Scott Fitzgerald, purportedly, was a lousy speller. My idea of a good editor is the one who *helped* him, Maxwell Perkins. In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald wrote: "In his blue gardens, men and women came and went like moths, midst the whisperings, the champagne, and the stars."

Now, that is worth more than all combined structural, grammatical, and modal criticism ever offered by an editor. If, like Inspector Clouseau, he spelled moths, miths, a sensitive editor would do his duty in correcting it, in the mode of one builder of a cathedral assisting another for the sublime effect of the whole.

I am not Isaac Asimov or Ray Bradbury, but my unique vision and style may as well deserve fulfillment as theirs. I write carefully crafted entertainments with no high-falutin' idea about art, pronounced "ott" by a New England art history teacher I once studied with.

I have risked my life to write, feeling good writing is as necessary as automobiles and electric shavers to our culture.

One story I mailed to you or some analogous magazine was called "The Mind Machine." The ribbon on my typewriter was less than perfect, but at the time I was serving as a "house negro" to a rich woman and her mother, mending fences, repairing screens destroyed by a neurotic dog, and running upstairs every night to get away from their arrogance and cupidity to follow my craft. Regardless of its presentation, the story is unique, especially considering the strength it took to write at all under

the circumstances.

Now, all of this may bore you or leave you cold, but editors need to be told the problems of writers, for writers are persons possessed with a need to create, the pregnant minds of which Socrates speaks as a form of love.

In every art, there is a folk expression called "paying your dues." I have paid mine. At the same time, I am aware of the egos and the snobism of publishing. When I lived in New York in the late sixties, I had a friend who was working on his Ph.D. in Victorian Literature at Columbia and who also worked as a re-write man for a publishing house. At the time, he told me it was damn near impossible to get any short fiction published unless one had published a novel. During my entire stay there, I was frequently importuned to go to this or that party to find someone who would help me. I demurred, thinking my work should stand on its own merits and not depend on the meretricious whore-mongering of publishing parties.

My work includes five long entertainments, two film scripts, a couple of plays, and over a hundred short stories. I may go to my grave with only the thousand dollars or so I have received from writing a profile on Pancho Gonzales and a small book about Martin Luther King, Jr.; but I shall not play the game anymore of blindly sending manuscripts, simply because the process is a fiction. Getting published must be like getting a loan from a bank — one has to prove one doesn't need the loan to acquire it. You see the analogy, I'm sure.

At any rate, it is late Sunday evening and I'm venting my frustrations instead of growing weak by restraining them. How did Asimov, Phillip

K. Dick, and others ever break into this game? I'm sure it wasn't by mailing manuscripts out.

Regards,

David L. Mays

No! No! You've got everything wrong. Frankly, we are amazed that you've lasted long enough to write all that stuff without learning more about the realities of publishing than you have. In fact, you've been accumulating misconceptions like barnacles.

Philip K. Dick, Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein, Arthur Clarke, A.E. van Vogt, Ray Bradbury, and whoever else you want to name most certainly did get published for the first time simply by sending a manuscript out to some editor who bought it. That is how it is done. That is the only way. (But include the variant of the author who lives close enough to the editorial office that he delivers his manuscripts by hand.) First sales are to be found in virtually every issue of every science-fiction magazine. Usually the blurbs will tell you. Even when they don't, there are always a lot of unfamiliar names. There is no secret, no conspiracy. We once had six first sales in a single issue of Isaac Asimov's (March 1978). As for not being able to sell stories until one has sold novels, again we can only tell you to look at the abundant evidence to the contrary all around you. Most stories in the magazines are by people who have not yet sold novels. Virtually all science-fiction writers sell many short stories before they sell a novel. (Counter-examples are rare. John Brunner is one. But Philip K. Dick sold dozens of short stories before selling a novel.)

Particularly when we consider your own opinion of your work, we begin to suspect that you are imagining this conspiracy in order to rationalize away

your rejections. You'll have to get over that if you're ever going to make it as a writer. One thing we can assure you: if you stop sending manuscripts out, you will certainly never get published! And while correctness of spelling, punctuation, and format aren't enough to get a story rejected outright (within limits, worn ribbons being a particularly sensitive matter), it is your job, not the editor's, to get these things right. The more professional the appearance of your manuscript, the more likely an editor is going to take you seriously. Whoever told you to leave your name off manuscripts did you a very great evil, for this is the mark of a particularly foolish amateur: how is the editor to find out to whom payment is to be sent? When in doubt about some or other point — ask an editor — not an unpublished friend — not even another writer — but an editor who sees manuscripts all day. Editors far prefer to answer questions than to try to read mistakes. (By the way, your informant is wrong about our teaching English.)

— George Scithers

Dear Mr. Scithers,

Please tell me that “from the producers of the DUNGEONS & DRAGONS® game” will not remain above the proud name *AMAZING*. I appreciate the new capital, revitalization, etc.; but please let's leave the commercials off the cover.

John Provo
Frederiksburg VA

Actually, the cover of any magazine is the principal place for commercials: “story by Whosis,” or “now 160 pages,” or even “best in science fiction — again!” are all good cover lines. We think that mentioning our parent company will get more copies into

magazine-and-book stores and — even more important — into the hands of people who aren't yet reading the magazine but who would enjoy it if they only would. Right now, building circulation — both newsstand/bookstore and subscription — is our most critical goal.

— George Scithers

Dear George,

Amazing is just like *IA'sfm*? What? 'T'ain't so, in spite of what Chris DeVito may think (July '83 issue). Format similarities be damned. Just how many variations can there be in a magazine format? If that was a major factor, a person shouldn't read more than one book in his lifetime: after all, they're all the same — a front and back cover with a bunch of writing in-between.

And who says we don't need *Amazing*? If I had my druthers, there would be at least 200 “main SF magazines” on the market. With *Amazing*, *IA'sfm*, *F&SF*, *Analog*, and *Omni* there are about 35 stories published per month. Can anyone honestly believe there are less than 425 “good” SF stories written per year with a world population of over 3 billion (or is it 4)? Logic says (okay, I say) most stories don't get published because there is no room.

And as to advertising . . . OH PLEASE DON'T DO THAT. If there is one thing I hate, it's “continued on page 96 . . . 114 . . . 167 . . .” That, and those little pull-out cards that make it impossible to flip through a magazine with any kind of facility.

Excuse my ignorance on this last point: “Fandom.” I've always taken it to mean the “fans” — you know — the people who like SF. Perhaps I'm wrong.

But if the fans are eliminated, just

who will read the stories? The people who *don't* like SF? Something doesn't sound right.

Format has nothing to do with it. It's the editors that count.

Oh. Did I catch a hint that you are going to issue monthly rather than bi-monthly? Hope so.

Not totally unbiased,

Daniel J. Wojcik
44 Sylvia Terrace
New Monmouth NJ 07748

In this sense, "fans" are the people whose interest in SF and fantasy is a little out of the ordinary. They form clubs, go to conventions, publish or write for fanzines, and the like. The term means more than just someone who enjoys SF. The best source of information on this subject is Harry Warner's book, All Our Yesterdays, which is in print from Advent:Publishers. It is largely about the beginning of fandom in the 1930s and '40s, but it gives you a very good idea what the phenomenon is all about.

— George Scithers

Dear Amazing,

Your July issue has a couple of really fine stories. "Knight of Shallows" is the best alternate worlds tale I've read in I don't know how long. Very vivid, very direct, full of feeling.

"The Lord of the Skies" is another piece of the perplexing puzzle of Pohl. How can he have such a long history in the field, yet continue to write like the new kid on the block? Fresh, fun and full of invention, in

the patented Pohl process. Long may he type.

Your letter column shows signs of becoming interesting, even controversial, maybe even fun. For instance, take the letter from Chris DeVito (please). He's sure got lots of opinions; can't say I agree with too many of them. *Amazing* is not "just like" *Asimov's*, nope! And we need all the SF magazines we can get. And it might be nice to have a big slick magazine devoted primarily to SF, but who wants to slip through page after page of banal advertisements? Advertising brings money, sure, but it's *Goddamned irritating*.

Loved his comment on fandom, though. "Cancerous octopus" — heh heh heh. Bet you get mail on *that* one.

A Constant Reader,

Paul Fiorello
Lakewood NJ

Keep the letters coming in. We want to hear from you, what you like and dislike about the magazine. We encourage responses to our columnists, replies, agreements, arguments, etc. with your fellow letter-writers. Above all, a letter column should be lively, neither a dull in-group chat nor two-line listings of likes and dislikes. (While these latter are extremely useful to us as editors, we don't think they make interesting reading for you.) We'd like to have a substantial, interesting letter column, but only you can make it that way.

— George Scithers



THE OBSERVATORY

by George H. Scithers

The least-appreciated, most-overlooked people, of all those who help to put out this magazine, are the proofreaders.

Publishers and editors, authors and artists: it's obvious what we do, and our names are displayed in the magazine as well. It's just as obvious that typesetters and printers are involved — in our case, the Graphics Arts Services of TSR, Inc., under the direction of Betty Marban, and Offset Paperback Manufacturers, Inc., of Dallas, Pennsylvania — as well as our distributor, Kable News Company, Inc. But then, the proofreader's work is *supposed* to be invisible; to be noticed only if done wrong.

And if proofreading isn't done right, if it isn't perfect, the result sticks out like . . . well, insert your own favorite cliché here. Yet, for all the damage a missed typographical error can do, *perfect* proofreading can do nothing to make a weak story better.

But why, you may reasonably ask, don't the typesetters get the story (poem, editorial, whatever) perfect the first time? Why hire proofreaders to find errors that typesetters shouldn't be making in the first place? Think of the cost . . .

Exactly!

Consider cost: we pay about \$30 to \$20 for the fiction or fact that fills one typeset page — about 515 words

or so. An efficient, outside typesetter would charge us about \$6 to set that copy into a typeset page, ready for the printer; our costs using in-house facilities are probably close to that figure. Proofreading costs less than \$1 per typeset page; as insurance, checking quality of material that costs us 25 to 35 times as much, that seems reasonable enough.

But there's even more to it than that. If we demanded of typesetters — either in-house or an outside firm — that they set type without making any errors, they would of necessity work far far slower — and would be that much more expensive. Good typesetters are not necessarily good proofreaders. (The same variability applies to editors: Kim Mohan is a superb proofreader; George Scithers is mediocre at best; Judy-lynn del Rey is excellent; John W. Campbell, Jr., was simply awful.) And the atmosphere of a composing room is not at all good for proofreading, which is better done in a quiet room with lots of dictionaries and encyclopedias.

The publishing business long ago discovered that the best way to get perfect copy (realistically, almost-perfect copy, but we try) at a reasonable cost is to ask the typesetter for speed and efficiency and only reasonable accuracy, and then turn over the initial result to a couple of

proofreaders, asking *them* to be perfect at their own speed.

Good proofreaders are pearls beyond price, even though their price actually lets us save money. Routinely, they check for such puzzles as **compliment** versus **complement**, **its** versus **it's**, and **stationery** versus **stationary**. With a science-fiction story, they must decide whether **green eyed grandmother** means **green-eyed grandmother** or, instead, **green, eyed grandmother**. With one set in Victorian England, they might have to ask if gold guineas were a common coin then; with one set in contemporary New York, is Fifth Avenue one-way uptown or down? Obviously, many of these points should have been caught by the copy-editor; just as obviously, the proofreader is the last line of defense against embarrassing — and distracting — mistakes in print. Most of the proofreader's work is picky and routine: Are *all* of the quotation marks facing the right ways? Is *every* paragraph indented? Is **the** ever

typeset as **hte**?

And since very few proofreaders can catch everything, *Amazing* is generally proofread three times: once by assistant editors Patrick Price or Dainis Bisenieks, once by free-lance professional readers Elana Lore, Susan Groarke, or Dolly Gilliland, and once by the author of each story or article.

Some authors — John Brunner and Brian Aldiss come to mind — are superb proofreaders. Some are not. A few try to rewrite in proof and have to be restrained. All are sensitive to the occasional dropped line or paragraph; most make a substantial contribution toward making what we publish match what they intended to put down.

Is this enough? It should be; anything that still slips by is clearly our own fault. Is perfection too much to ask? Well, no, because it's not impossible. There are only 70,000 words or so in this issue; we owe it to you to get them *all* right.



[How many errors did you find in this Observatory? We found three.]

Publisher: Mike Cook

Editor: George Scithers

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Meg Phillips

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Darrell Schweitzer
Dainis Bisenieks
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Advertising Coordinator: Mary Parkinson
Production Manager: Marilyn Favaro

GATEWAY III — Beyond the Gate

by Frederik Pohl

Art: Jack Gaughan





I
am
no
Hamlet.



I'm an attendant lord, though, or at least I would be if I were human. I'm not. I'm a computer program. That is an honorable estate and I am not at all ashamed of it, especially since (as you can see) I am a very sophisticated program, not only fit to swell a progression or start a scene or two but to quote from obscure twentieth-century poets as I tell you about it.

It is to start the scene that I am speaking now. Albert's my name, and introductions are my game. I start by introducing myself.

I'm a friend of Robinette Broadhead's. Well, that's not precisely right; I'm not sure I can claim to be a friend of Robin's, though I try hard to be a friend *to* him. It is the purpose for which I (this particular "I") was created. Basically I am a simple computer information-retrieval construct who (or which) has been programmed with many of the late Albert Einstein's traits. That's why Robin calls me "Albert." There's another area of ambiguity, too. Whether it is indeed Robinette Broadhead who is the object of my friendship has lately become arguable, too, since it rests on the question of who (or what) Robinette Broadhead now is. But you might prefer just to go on to Robin himself — as Robin himself, no doubt, would much prefer.

Let's do it in the form of questions and answers. I will construct a subset within my program to interview me:

Q. Who is Robinette Broadhead?

A. Robin Broadhead is a human being who went to the Gateway asteroid and, by enduring great risks and trauma, won for himself the beginnings of an immense fortune and an even greater load of guilt.

Q. Don't throw in those teasers, Albert, just stick to the facts. What is the "Gateway asteroid"?

A. It is an artifact left by the Heechee. They abandoned, half a million years or so ago, a sort of orbital parking garage full of working spaceships. They would take you all over the Galaxy, but you couldn't control where you were going. (For further details see sidebar; I put this in to show you what a truly sophisticated data-retrieval program I really am.)

This is one of the easier kinds of information for me to retrieve.
"... The conflict over the island of Dominica, terrible though it was, was over in seven weeks with both Haiti and the Dominican Republic anxious for peace and a chance to rebuild their shattered economies. The next crisis to confront the Secretariat was one of great hope for everyone in the world, but at the same time fraught with far more risk to the world's peace. I refer, of course, to the discovery of the so-called 'Heechee Asteroid.' Although it was known that, long ago, technologically advanced aliens had visited the solar system and left some valuable artifacts, the chance finding of this body with its scores of functioning spaceships was wholly unexpected. Their value was incalculable, of course, and nearly every spacefaring member-state of the U.N. registered some claim to them. I will not speak of the delicate and confidential negotiations which brought about the five-power 'Gateway Corporation' trusteeship but, with its formation, a new era opened for humankind." — **Memoirs**, Marie-Clémentine Benhabbouche, Secrétaire-générale des Nations-unies.

Q. Watch that, Albert! Just the facts, please. Who are these "Heechee"?

A. Look, let's get something straight! If "you" are going to ask "me" questions — even if "you" are only a subset of the same program as "me" — you have to let me answer them in the best way possible. "Facts" are not enough. "Facts" are what very primitive data-retrieval systems produce. I'm too good to waste on that. I have to give you the background and the surround. For instance, to tell you in the best way who the Heechee are, I must tell you the story of how they first appeared on Earth. It goes like this:

The time was about half a million years ago, in the late Pleistocene. The first living terrestrial creature who became aware of their existence was a female saber-toothed tiger. She gave birth to a pair of cubs, licked them over, growled to drive her inquisitive mate away, went to sleep, woke up and found that one was missing. Carnivores don't —

Q. Albert, please! This is Robinette's story, not yours, so get on to where he starts talking.

A. I told you once and I told you twice. If you interrupt again I'll simply turn you off, subset! We're doing this my way, and my way is like this:

Carnivores don't count well, but she was smart enough to know the difference between "one" and "two." Unfortunately for her cub, carnivores have hair-trigger tempers, too. The loss of one cub enraged her, and

in her paroxysm of fury she destroyed the other. It is instructive to observe that that was the only fatality among large mammals to result from the first visit of the Heechee to Earth.

A decade later the Heechee came back. They replaced some of the samples they had taken, including a male tiger now elderly and plump, and took a new batch. These were not four-legged. The Heechee had learned to distinguish between one predator and another; and the species they selected this time was a group of shambling, slant-browed, four-foot-high creatures with furry faces and no chins. Their very remote collateral descendants, namely you humans, would call them *Australopithecus afarensis*. These, the Heechee did not return. From their point of view, these creatures were the terrestrial species most likely to evolve toward intelligence. The Heechee had a use for this sort of animal, and so they began subjecting them to a program designed to force their evolution toward that goal.

Of course, the Heechee did not limit themselves to the planet Earth in their explorations, but none of the rest of the solar system had the sort of treasure that interested them. They looked. They explored Mars and Mercury; skimmed the cloud-cover of the gas giants beyond the asteroid ring; observed that Pluto was there but never troubled to visit it; tunneled out an eccentric asteroid to make a sort of hangar for their spacecraft; and honeycombed the planet Venus with sub-surface, well-insulated tunnels. For they detested the surface of Venus as much as humans do; that was why all their construction was underground. But they built there because there was nothing alive on Venus to be harmed, and the Heechee never, never harmed any evolved living things — except when necessary.

The Heechee in their vessels had spanned the Galaxy and gone beyond it. Of all the Galaxy's two hundred billion astronomical objects larger than a planet, they charted every one; and many of the smaller ones too. Not every object was visited by a Heechee ship. But not one failed of at least a drone flyby and an instrumented search for signatures, and some became what can only be called tourist attractions.

And some — a bare handful — contained that peculiar treasure the Heechee sought called "life."

Life was rare in the Galaxy. Intelligent life, however inclusively the Heechee defined it, was even rarer . . . but not absent. There were Earth's australopithecines, already tool-users, beginning to develop social institutions. There was a promising winged race in what human beings would call the constellation Ophiuchus; a soft-bodied one on a dense, huge planet that circled an F-9 star in Eridanus; four or five miscellaneous sorts of beings that orbited stars on the far side of the Galaxy's core, hidden by gas clouds, dust, and dense starry clusters from any human observation — altogether there were fifteen species of beings, from fifteen different planets thousands of light-years away from each other, that

might be expected to develop enough intelligence to write books and build machines fairly soon. (The Heechee defined "fairly soon" as any time within a million years or so.)

And there was more. There were three actual existing technological societies, besides the Heechees' own, and the artifacts of two others now extinct.

So the australopithecines were not unique. They were still very precious. Therefore the Heechee who was charged with ferrying a colony of them from the dry-bones plains of their native home to the new habitat the Heechee had provided for them in space was accorded much honor for his work.

It was hard work, and prolonged. That particular Heechee was the descendant of three generations who had explored, mapped, and organized the Solar System project. He expected that his own descendants would continue the work. In that he was wrong.

All in all, the tenancy of the Heechee in Earth's solar system lasted just over one hundred years; and then it ended, in less than a month.

A decision was made to withdraw — hurriedly.

All through the rabbit-warrens of Venus, all over the small outpost installations on Dione and on Mars's South Polar Cap, in every orbiting artifact, the packing-up began. Hurried but thorough. The Heechee were the neatest of housekeepers. They removed more than ninety-nine per cent of the tools, machines, artifacts, knickknacks, and trinkets that had supported their life in Earth's solar system, even the trash. Especially the trash. Nothing was left by accident. And nothing at all, not even the Heechee equivalent of an empty Coke bottle or a used Kleenex, was left on the surface of the Earth. They did not make it impossible for the collateral descendants of their australopithecines to learn that the Heechee had visited their area. They only made sure that they would first have to learn to go into space to do so. Much of what the Heechee removed was useless, and was jettisoned in far interstellar space or into the Sun. Much was shipped to places very far away, for special purposes. And all this was done not just in Earth's solar system, but everywhere. The Heechee vacuumed the Galaxy of almost every trace. No newly bereft Pennsylvania Dutch widow, preparing to turn the farmhouse over to the family of the eldest son, ever left premises more neat.

They left almost nothing, and nothing at all without a purpose. On Venus they left only the basic tunnels and foundation structures themselves, and a carefully selected bare taste of artifacts; in the outposts, only a minimum number of signposts; and one other thing.

In every solar system where intelligence was expected they left one great and cryptic gift. In Earth's system it was in the right-angle-orbit asteroid that they had used for a terminus for their spacecraft. Here and there, in remote and carefully chosen places in other systems, they left

other major installations. Each of them contained the very large gift of an operating selection of whole, functional, almost indestructible, Heechee faster-than-light spacecraft.

The solar troves stayed there for a very long time, four hundred thousand years and more, while the Heechee hid in their Core hole. The australopithecines on Earth turned out an evolutionary failure, though the Heechee did not find that out; but the cousins of the australopithecines became Neanderthals, or Cro-Magnards, and then that latest evolutionary fad: Modern Man. Meanwhile the winged creatures developed, and learned, and discovered the Promethean challenge, and killed themselves. Meanwhile two of the existing technological societies met each other and destroyed each other. Meanwhile six of the other promising species idled in evolutionary backwaters; meanwhile the Heechee hid, and peeped fearfully through their Schwarzschild shell every few weeks of their time — every few millennia of the speeding time outside —

And meanwhile the troves waited, and human beings found them at last.

So human beings borrowed the Heechee ships. In them they criss-crossed the Galaxy. Those first explorers were scared, desperate people whose only hope of escaping grimy human misery was to risk their lives on a blind-date voyage to a destiny that might make them rich, and was a whole lot more likely to make them dead.

I have now surveyed the entire history of the Heechee in their relationship with the human race up to the time when Robin will start telling his story. Are there any questions, subset?

Q. Z-z-z-z-z-z-z.

A. Subset, don't be a smartass. I know you're not asleep.

Q. I am only trying to convey that you are taking a Hell of a long time to get offstage, scene-starter. And you've only told us about the past of the Heechee. You haven't told us about their present.

A. I was just about to. In fact, I will now tell you about a particular Heechee whose name is "Captain" — well, that is not his name, for Heechee naming customs are not the same as human; but it will do to identify him — who, at just about the time when Robin will begin to tell you his story —

Q. If you ever let him get to it.

A. Subset! Quiet. This Captain is rather important to Robin's story, because in time they will interact drastically; but as we see Captain now he is wholly unaware that Robin exists. He, along with the members of his crew, is getting ready to squeeze out of the place where the Heechee had hidden into the wider Galaxy that is home for all the rest of us.

Now, I have played a little trick on you. You have already — shut up, subset! — you have already met Captain, since he was one of the very crew of Heechee who abducted the tiger cub and built the warrens on

Venus. He is much older now.

He is not, however, half a million years older, because the place where the Heechee went to hide is in a black hole at the core of our Galaxy.

It was the first interstellar radio source ever detected. By the end of the twentieth century it was known to be a black hole and a very large one, with a mass of thousands of suns and a diameter of some thirty light-years, lying about 30,000 light-years from the Earth in the direction of the constellation Sagittarius. It was surrounded by a haze of silicate dust and was an intense source of 511-keV gamma-ray photons. By the time men found the Gateway asteroid, they knew much more. They knew, in fact, every important datum about it except one. They had no idea that it was full of Heechee. They didn't find that out until they — actually, I can fairly say that it was mostly I — began to decipher the old Heechee star charts.

Q. Z-z-z——

A. Quiet, subset, I take your point.

The ship the Captain was in was a lot like the ones human beings found in the Gateway asteroid. There had not been time for a lot of improvement in ship design. That's why Captain was not really half a million years old: time went slowly in their black hole. The major difference between Captain's ship and any other was that it possessed an accessory.

In Heechee speech the accessory was known familiarly as the "disruptor of order in aligned systems." An English-speaking pilot might have called it a "can-opener." It was what permitted them to pass through the Schwarzschild barrier around a black hole. It didn't look like much, only a twisted rod of crystal emerging from an ebon-black base, but when Captain energized it, it glowed like a cascade of diamonds. The diamond glitter spread, and surrounded the ship, and opened a way through the barrier, and they slipped through into the wider universe outside. It didn't take long. By Captain's standard, less than an hour. By the clocks of the outside universe, nearly two months.

Captain didn't look human, being a Heechee. More than anything else he resembled an animated cartoon skeleton. But one might as well think of him as human because he had most of the human traits — inquisitiveness, intelligence, amorousness, and all those other qualities that I know about but have never experienced. For example: He was in a good mood because the assignment he had been sent on permitted him to take along as part of his crew a female who was also a prospective love partner. (Humans do this too, on what are called "business trips.") The assignment itself, however, was distinctly unenjoyable if one stopped to think about it. Captain didn't. He worried about it no more than an average human worries about whether war will be declared that afternoon; if it happens it is the end of everything, but time has gone on monotonously long without it happening, and so . . . The biggest difference is that

Captain's assignment did not refer to anything as inoffensive as a nuclear war but to the very reasons that had caused the Heechee to retreat to their black hole in the first place. He was checking on the artifacts the Heechee had left behind — as bait.

As to Robinette Broadhead's feelings of guilt —

Q. I wondered when you would get back to that. Let me make a suggestion. Why not let Robin Broadhead tell about that himself?

A. Excellent idea! — since, Heaven knows, he is expert on the subject. And so the scene is started, the procession is swelled . . . and I give you Robinette Broadhead!

Before
they
vastened
me



I felt a need I hadn't felt for thirty years and more, and so I did what I hadn't thought I would ever do again. I practiced a solitary vice. I sent my wife, Essie, off to the city to make a sneak raid on a couple of her franchises. I put a DO NOT DISTURB override on all the communications systems in the house. I called up my data-retrieval system (and friend) Albert Einstein and gave him orders that made him scowl and suck his pipe. And presently — when the house was still and Albert had reluctantly but obediently turned himself off, and I was lying comfortably on the couch in my study, with a little Mozart coming faintly from the next room and the scent of mimosa in the air system and the lights not too bright — presently, I say, I spoke the name I hadn't spoken in decades. "Sigfrid von Shrink," I said, "please, I would like to talk to you."

For a moment I thought he wasn't going to come. Then, in the corner of the room by the wet bar, there was a sudden fog of light and a flash, and

there he sat.

He had not changed in thirty years. He wore a dark and heavy suit, of the cut you see on portraits of Sigmund Freud. His elderly, nondescript face had not gained a wrinkle and his bright eyes sparkled no less. He held a prop pad in one hand and a prop pencil in the other — as if he had any need to take notes! And he said politely, “Good morning, Rob. I see that you are looking very well.”

“You always did start out by trying to reassure me,” I told him, and he flashed a small smile.

Sigfrid von Shrink does not really exist. He is nothing more than a psychoanalytic computer program. He has no physical existence; what I saw was only a hologram and what I heard was only synthesized speech. He doesn’t even have a name, really, since “Sigfrid von Shrink” is only what I called him because I could not talk about the things that paralyzed me, decades ago, to a machine that didn’t even have a name. “I suppose,” he said meditatively, “that the reason you called for me is that something is troubling you.”

“That’s true,” I said.

He gazed at me with patient curiosity, and that also had not changed. I had a lot better programs to serve me these days — well, one particular program, Albert Einstein, who is so good that I hardly bother with any of the others — but Sigfrid was still pretty good. He waits me out. He knows that what is curdling in my mind takes time to form itself into words, and so he doesn’t rush me.

On the other hand, he doesn’t let me just daydream away the time, either. “Can you say what you are disturbed about right at this moment?” he asked.

“A lot of things. Different things,” I said.

“Pick one,” he said patiently, and I shrugged.

“It’s a troublesome world, Sigfrid. With all the good things that have happened, why are people — Oh, shit. I’m doing it again, right?”

He twinkled at me. “Doing what?” he encouraged.

“Saying a thing that’s worrying me, not *the* thing. Dodging away from the real issue.”

“That sounds like a good insight, Robin. Do you want to try now to tell me what the real issue is?”

I said, “I *want* to. I want to so much that, actually, I almost think I’m going to cry. I haven’t done that for a Hell of a long time.”

“You haven’t felt the need to see me for quite a long time,” he pointed out, and I nodded.

“Yes. Exactly.”

He waited for a while, slowly turning his pencil between his fingers now and then, keeping that expression of polite and friendly interest, that non-judging expression that was really about all I could remember of his

face between sessions, and then he said, "The things that really trouble you, Robin, deep down, are by definition hard to say. You know that. We saw that together, years ago. It's not surprising that you haven't needed to see me all these years, because obviously your life has been going well for you."

"Really very well," I agreed. "Probably a Hell of a lot better than I deserve — wait a minute, am I expressing hidden guilt by saying that? Feelings of inadequacy?"

He sighed, but was still smiling. "You know I prefer if you don't try to talk like an analyst, Robin." I grinned back. He waited for a moment, then went on: "Let's look at the present situation objectively. You have made sure that no one is here to interrupt us — or to eavesdrop? To hear something you don't want your nearest and dearest friend to hear? You've even instructed Albert Einstein, your data-retrieval system, to withdraw, and to seal off this interview from all datastores. What you have to say must be very private. Perhaps it is something that you feel, but are ashamed to be heard feeling. Does that suggest anything to you, Robin?"

I cleared my throat. "You've put your finger right on it, Sigfrid."

"And? The thing you want to say? Can you say it?"

I plunged in. "You're God-damned right I can! It's simple! It's obvious! I'm getting very God-damned sucking old!"

That's the best way. When it's hard to say, just say it. It was one of the things I had learned from those long-ago days when I was pouring out my pain to Sigfrid three times a week, and it always works. As soon as I had said it I felt purged — not well, not happy, not as though a problem had been solved — but that glob of badness had been excreted. Sigfrid nodded slightly. He looked down at the pencil he was rolling between his fingers, waiting for me to go on. And I knew that now I could. I'd got past the worst part. I knew the feeling. I remembered it well, from those old and stormy sessions.

Now, I'm not the same person I was then. *That* Robin Broadhead had been raw with guilt because he'd left a woman he loved to die. Now those guilt feelings were long eased — because Sigfrid had helped me ease them. *That* Robin Broadhead thought so little of himself that he couldn't believe anyone else would think well of him, so he had few friends. Now I have — I don't know. Dozens. Hundreds! (Some of them I am going to tell you about.) *That* Robin Broadhead could not accept love; and since then I had had a quarter of a century of the best marriage there ever was. So I was a quite different Robin Broadhead.

This is Albert Einstein again. I think I'd better clear up what

Robin is saying about Gelle-Klara Moynlin. She was a fellow Gateway prospector with whom he was in love. The two of them, with other prospectors, found themselves trapped in a black hole. It was possible to free some of them at the expense of the others. Robin got free. Klara and the others did not. This may have been an accident — may have been Klara selflessly sacrificing herself to save him — may have been Robin panicking and saving himself at their expense; even now, there is no good way to tell. But Robin, who was a guilt addict, carried with him for years the picture of Klara in that black hole, where time almost stopped, always living that same moment of shock and terror — and always (he thought) blaming him. Only Sigfrid helped him out of that.

You may wonder how I know about this, since the interview with Sigfrid was sealed. That's easy. I know it, now, the same way Robin now knows so much about so many people doing so many things he was not present to see.

But some of the things had not changed at all. "Sigfrid," I said, "I'm old, I'm going to die one of these days, and do you know what pulls my cork?"

He looked up from his pencil. "What's that, Robin?"

"I'm not grown-up enough to be so old!"

He pursed his lips. "Would you care to explain that, Robin?"

"Yes," I said, "I would." And as a matter of fact the next part came easily. I had done a lot of thinking before I went so far as to call Sigfrid up. "I think it has to do with the Heechee," I said. "Let me finish before you tell me I'm crazy, all right? As you may remember, I was part of the Heechee generation; we kids grew up hearing about the Heechee, that had everything human beings didn't have and knew everything human beings didn't know —"

"The Heechee weren't quite that superior, Robin."

"I'm talking about how it *seemed* to us *kids*. They were scary, because we used to threaten each other that they'd come back and get us. And most of all they were so far ahead of us in everything that we couldn't compete. A little like Santa Claus. A little like those mad pervert rapists our mothers used to warn us against. A little like God. Do you understand what I'm saying, Sigfrid?"

He said cautiously, "I can recognize those feelings, yes. Such perceptions have turned up in analysis with many persons of your generation and later."

"Right! And I remember a saying of Freud's you once told me. He said that no man could truly grow up while his father was still alive."

"Well, actually —"

I overrode him. "And I used to tell you that was bullshit, because my own father was nice enough to die while I was still a little kid. But maybe it was true. Maybe the Heechee were my father-figures, and I can't get free of them because they're still around somewhere."

"Oh, Robin," he sighed. "'Father figures.' Quotations from Freud."

"But doesn't it make sense?" I demanded.

He put the pencil and pad down and looked straight at me. "Robin," he said, "you didn't call on me for 'sense.' You called me because you're really unhappy, and you've already told me what you're unhappy about. So please, don't theorize; tell me what you feel."

"What I feel," I yelled, "is damn *old*. You can't understand that because you're a machine. You don't know what it's like when your vision gets blurry and the backs of your hands get those rusty age spots and your face sags down around your chin. When you have to sit down to put your socks on because if you stand on one foot you'll fall over. When every time you forget a birthday you think it's Alzheimer's Syndrome and sometimes you can't pee when you want to! When —" But I broke off then, not because he had interrupted me but because he was listening patiently and looked as though he would go on listening forever, and what was the use of saying all that? He gave me a moment to make sure I was finished, and then began patiently:

"According to your medical records, you had your prostate replaced eighteen months ago, Robin. The middle-ear disturbance can easily be —"

"You hold it right there!" I shouted. "What do you know about my medical records, Sigfrid? I gave orders this talk was sealed!"

"Of course it is, Robin. Believe me, not one word of this will be accessible to any of your other programs, or to anyone at all but yourself. But, of course, I am able to access all your datastores, including your medical chart. May I go on? The stirrup-and-anvil in your ear can readily be replaced, and that will cure your balance problem. Lens transplants will take care of those incipient cataracts. The other matters are purely cosmetic, and of course there would be no problem in securing good young tissue for you. That leaves only the Alzheimer's Syndrome and, truthfully, Robin, I see no signs of that in you."

I shrugged. He waited a moment, then said: "So each of the problems you mention — as well as a long list of others you didn't say anything about, but which do appear on your medical history — can be repaired at any time, or already have been. Perhaps you have put your question the wrong way, Robin. Perhaps the problem is not that you are aging, but that you aren't willing to do what is necessary to reverse it."

"Why the Hell would I do that?"

He nodded. "Why indeed, Robin. Can you answer that question?"

"No, I can't! If I could, why would I be asking you?"

He pursed his lips, and waited.

"Maybe I just want to be that way!"

He shrugged.

"Oh, come on, Sigfrid," I wheedled. "All right. I admit what you say. I've got Total Medical, and I can take somebody else's organs for myself as much as I want to, and the reason I don't is in my head somewhere. I know what you call that. 'Endogenous depression.' But that doesn't explain anything!"

"Ah, Robin," he sighed, "psychoanalytic jargon again. And bad jargon. 'Endogenous' only means 'coming from within.' It doesn't mean there's no cause."

"Then what's the cause?"

He said thoughtfully, "Let's play a game. By your left hand there is a button —"

I looked; yes, there was a button on the leather chair. "That's just to keep the leather in place," I said.

"No doubt, but in the game we are going to play this button will, the minute you press it, cause all the transplant surgery you need or might want to be done at once. Instantly. Put your finger on the button, Robin. Now. Do you want to press it?"

"— No."

"I see. Can you tell me why not?"

"Because I don't deserve to take body parts from somebody else!" I hadn't planned to say it. I hadn't known it. And when I had said it, all I could do was sit there and listen to the echo of what I had said; and Sigfrid, too, was silent for quite a long time.

Then he picked up his pencil and put it in his pocket, folded the pad and put it in another pocket and leaned forward. "Robin," he said, "I don't think I can help you. There is a kind of feeling of guilt here that I do not see a way to resolve."

"But you helped me so much before!" I wailed.

"Before," he said steadily, "you were causing yourself pain because of guilt over something that was probably not at all your fault, and in any case lay well in the past. This is not the same at all. You can live another fifty years, perhaps, by transplanting healthy organs to replace your damaged ones. But it is true that these organs will come from someone else, and for you to live longer may, in some sense, cause someone else to live much shorter. To recognize that truth is not a neurotic guilt feeling, Robin, it is only the admission of a moral truth."

And that was all he said to me except, with a smile that was both kind and sorrowful, "Good-by."

I do hate it when my computer programs talk to me about morality. Especially when they are right.

* * *

Meanwhile, in the universe at large — I did not know then what doings, of what people (or non-people), were to converge. But:

My not-yet friend Captain, who was one of those mad-rapist-Santa-Claus Heechee who had haunted my childish dreams, was about to get a lot more scared than thinking about Heechee had ever made me. My former (and soon to be again) friend Audee Walthers, Jr., was about to meet, to his cost, my once friend (or non-friend) Wan. And my very best friend of all (making allowance for the fact that he was not “real”), the computer program Albert Einstein, was about to surprise me. . . . How very complicated all these statements are! I can’t help it. I lived at a complicated time and in a very complicated way. Now that I have been vastened all the parts fit neatly together, as you will see; but then I didn’t even know what all the parts were. I was one, single, aging man, oppressed by mortality and conscious of sin; and when my wife came home and found me slumped on a chaise longue, gazing out over the Tappan Sea, she at once cried, “Now then, Robin! What in Hell is matter with you?”

I grinned up at her and let her kiss me. Essie scolds a lot. Essie also loves a lot, and she is a lot of woman to love. Tall. Slim. Long goldy-blondy hair that she wears in a tight Soviet bun when she’s being a professor or a businesswoman, and lets fall to her waist when she’s coming to bed. Before I could think over what I was going to say long enough to censor it I blurted, “I’ve been talking to Sigfrid von Shrink.”

“Ah,” said Essie, straightening. “Oh.”

While she was thinking that over she began to pull the pins out of her bun. I listened to her silence. There was worry, of course, because I had felt the need to talk to a psychoanalyst. But there was also a considerable amount of faith in Sigfrid. Essie had always felt she owed Sigfrid, since she knew that it was only with Sigfrid’s help that I had been able to admit, long ago, that I was in love with her. (And also in love with Gelle-Klara Moynlin, which had been the problem.) “Do you wish to tell me what was about?” she asked politely, and I said:

“Age and depression, my dear. Nothing serious. Only terminal. How was your day?”

She studied me with that all-seeing diagnostic eye of hers, pulling the long dirty-blond hair through her fingers till it fell free, and tailored her answer to fit the diagnosis: “Bloody exhausting,” she said, “to point where I need a drink very much — as, I perceive, do you.”

So we had our drink. There was room on the chaise for both of us, and we watched the Moon set over the Jersey shore of the Sea while Essie told me about her day, and did not pry.

Essie has a life of her own, and a pretty demanding one — it’s a wonder to me that she is so unfailingly able to find plenty of room for me in it.

Besides checking her franchises she had spent a grueling hour at the research facility we had endowed for integrating Heechee technology into our own computers. The Heechee didn't actually use computers, it seemed, not counting primitive things like navigation controls for their ships; but they had some nifty ideas in nearby fields. Of course, that was Essie's own specialty and what she'd got her doctorate in. And when she was talking about her research programs I could see her mind working: No need to interrogate old Robin about this, can simply run override through Sigfrid program and at once have total access to interview. I said lovingly, "You're not as smart as you think you are," and she stopped in the middle of a sentence. "What Sigfrid and I talked about," I explained, "is sealed."

"Hah." Smug.

"No hah," I said, just as smug, "because I made Albert promise. It's stored so that not even you can decrypt it without dumping the whole system."

"*Hah!*" she said again, curling around to look me in the eye. This time the "hah" was louder and it had an edge to it that could be translated as, Will have a word with Albert about *this*.

I tease Essie, but I also love Essie. So I let her off the hook. "I really don't want to break the seal," I said, "because — well, vanity. I sound like such a whiney wretch when I talk to Sigfrid. But I'll tell you all about it."

She sank back, pleased, and listened while I did. When I had finished she thought for a moment and said, "That is why are depressed? Because have not much to look forward to?"

I nodded.

"But, Robin! Have perhaps only limited future, but, my God, what glorious present! Galactic traveler! Filthy-rich tycoon! Irresistible sex object to adoring, and also very sexy, wife!"

I grinned and shrugged. Thoughtful silence. "Moral question," she conceded at last, "is not unreasonable. Is credit to you that you consider such matters. I too have had qualms when, as you remember, some gloppy female bits were patched into me to replace wornout ones not so long ago."

"So you understand!"

"Understand excellently! I also understand, dear Robin, that having made moral decision is no point in worrying about it. Depression is foolish. Fortunately," she said, slipping off the chaise and standing up to take my hand, "there is excellent anti-depression measure available. Will you care to join me in bedroom?"

Well, of course I would. And did. And found the depression lifting, for if there is one thing I enjoy it is sharing a bed with S. Ya. Lavorovna-Broadhead. I would have enjoyed it even if I had known then that I had less than three months left before the death that had depressed me.

Meanwhile,
on
Peggys
Planet



my friend Audee Walthers was looking high and low for a certain man.

I say he was my friend, although I hadn't given him a thought in years. He had done me a favor once. I hadn't forgotten it, exactly — that is, if anybody had said to me, "Say, Robin, do you remember that Audee Walthers put his tail on the line so you could borrow a ship when you needed to?" I would have said indignantly, "Hell, yes! I wouldn't forget a thing like that." But I hadn't been thinking about it every minute, either, and as a matter of fact I had no idea at that moment where he was or even if he were still alive.

Walthers should have been easy to remember, because he looked rather unusual. He was short and not handsome. His face was wider at the jaw than at the temples, which made him look a little like a friendly frog. He was also married to a beautiful and dissatisfied woman less than half as old as he. Her age was nineteen; her name was Dolly. If Audee had asked my advice I would have told him that such May-and-December affairs cannot work out — unless, of course, as in my case, December is remarkably rich. But he desperately wanted it to work out because he loved his wife very much, and so he worked like a slave for Dolly. Audee Walthers was a pilot. Any kind of pilot. He had piloted airbodies on Venus. When the big Earth transport (which constantly reminded him of my existence, since I owned a share in it and had renamed it after my wife) was in orbit at Peggys he piloted shuttlecraft to load and unload it; between times he piloted whatever he could rent on Peggys for whatever tasks a charter demanded. Like everybody else on Peggys, he had come 4×10^{10} kilometers from the place where he was born to scratch out a living, and sometimes he made it and sometimes he did not. So when he came back from one charter and his agent told him there was another to be had, Walthers scrambled to get it. Even if it meant searching every bar in Port Hegramet to find the charter party. The search took most of a weary hour.

Mr. Luqman was old, fat, and bald; and each one of his plump fingers wore a ring, many of them diamonds. He was with a group of other Arabs

at the back of a smoky shebeen, and as Walthers started toward them Mr. Luqman saw Walthers and stumbled blearily to his feet. "You are my pilot," he announced. "Come have a drink."

The man was drunker than Walthers had realized. He said again, "Thanks, but no. Would you like to sign the charter contract now, please?"

Luqman turned back to stare at the printout in Walthers's hand. "The contract?" He thought it over for a moment. "Why must we have a contract?"

"It's customary, Mr. Luqman," said Walthers, patience ebbing rapidly. Behind him the Arab's companions were shouting at each other, and Luqman's attention was wavering between Walthers and the arguing group.

"Please," said Walthers. "If you'll just sign —"

The Arab shrugged and took the printout sheet from Walthers. He spread it on the zinc-topped bar and painfully began to read it, a pen in his hand. The argument grew louder, but Luqman seemed to have abolished it from his mind.

Most of the shebeen's clientele was African, what looked like Kikuyu on one side of the room and Masai on the other. At first glance, in that company, the people at the quarrelsome table had seemed all alike. Now Walthers saw his mistake. One of the arguing men was younger than the others, and shorter and leaner. His skin color was darker than most Europeans', but not as dark as the Libyans'; his eyes were as black as theirs, but not kohled.

It was none of Walthers's business. When he had the signed charter, he thanked Luqman and left quickly and with some relief. He had gone less than a block when he heard louder cries of rage behind him, and a scream of pain.

On Peggys Planet you mind your own business as much as you can, but Walthers had a charter to protect. The group he saw beating up one individual might well have been the African bouncers attacking the leader of his charter party. That made it his business. He turned and ran back — a mistake which, believe me, he regretted very deeply for a long time afterward.

By the time Walthers got there the assailants were gone, and the whimpering, bleeding figure on the sidewalk was not one of his charter party. It was the young stranger; and he clutched at Walthers's leg.

"Help me and I will give you fifty thousand dollars," he said blurrily, his lips thick and bloody.

"I'll go look for a public patrolman," Walthers offered, trying to disengage himself.

"No patrol! You help me kill those persons and I will pay," snarled the man. "I am Captain Juan Henriquette Santos-Schmitz, and I can well

afford to buy your services!"

Of course, I knew nothing of this at the time. On the other hand, Walthers didn't know that Mr. Luqman was working for me. That didn't matter. There were tens of thousands of people working for me, and whether or not Walthers knew who they were made no difference at all. The bad thing was that he didn't recognize Wan, for he had never heard of him, except generally. That made a very big difference to Walthers in the long run.

I knew Wan particularly. I had met him first when he was a wolf-child, brought up by machines and non-humans. I called him a "non-friend," earlier. I knew him, all right. But he was never socialized enough to be a friend to anyone.

He was even, you could say, quite an enemy — not just to me, but to the whole human race — in the days when he was a scared and lecherous youth, dreaming into his couch out in the Oort Cloud and neither knowing nor caring that his dreams were driving everybody else nuts. That wasn't his fault, to be sure. It wasn't even his fault that the wretched and raging terrorists had found inspiration in his example and were driving us all nuts again, whenever they could manage it — but if we get into questions of "fault," and that related term "guilt," we'll be right back with Sigfrid von Shrink before you know it, and what I'm talking about now is Audee Walthers.

Walthers was no angel of mercy, but he couldn't leave the man in the street. When he helped the bleeding man into the little studio apartment he shared with Dolly he was far from clear in his mind why he was doing it. Dolly wasn't home yet, and she had, of course, left the place in a mess. "This is a filthy place," the undesired guest said conversationally. "This is not worth two hundred fifty dollars, even."

A hot response came to Walthers's lips. He pushed it back with all the others he had been repressing for the last half hour; what was the point? "I'll get you cleaned up," he said. "Then you can get out. I don't want your money."

The bruised lips attempted a sneer. "How foolish of you to say that," the man said, "since I am Captain Juan Henriquette Santos-Schmitz. I own my own spacecraft, I have royalty shares in the transport vessel which feeds this planet, among other very important enterprises, and I am said to be the eleventh wealthiest person in the human race."

"I never heard of you," Walthers grumbled, running warm water into a basin. But . . . yes, there *was* something, a memory. Somebody who had been on the PV news shows every hour for a week, then every week for a month or two. No one is more securely forgotten than the one-month famous, ten years later. "You're the kid who was raised in the Heechee habitat," he said suddenly, and the man whined:

"Exactly, ouch! You are hurting me!"

"Then just hold still," said Walthers, and wondered just what to do with the eleventh wealthiest person in the human race. The dilemma solved itself when the door-lock pinged and crackled, and Dolly walked in.

Whatever Dolly looked like around the house, sometimes with her eyes streaming from an allergy to Peggys Planet's flora, often grouchy, seldom with her hair brushed, when she went out she dazzled. She obviously dazzled the unexpected guest as she came in the door; and, although he had been married to that striking slim figure and that impassive alabaster face for more than a year, and even knew the rigid dieting that produced the first and the dental flaw that required the second, she pretty nearly dazzled Walthers himself.

Walthers greeted her with a hug and a kiss; the kiss was returned, but not with full attention. She was peering past him at the stranger. Still holding her, Walthers said, "Darling, this is Captain Santos-Schmitz. He was in a fight, and I brought him here —"

She pushed him away and turned to the guest. "Of course you're welcome here, Wan! Let me see what they did to you."

Santos-Schmitz preened himself. "You know me," he said.

"Of course, Wan! Everyone in Port Hegramet knows you." She shook her head sympathetically over the blackened eye. "I saw you last night in the Spindle Lounge."

He drew back to look at her more closely. "Oh, yes! The entertainer with the puppets."

Dolly Walthers seldom smiled, but there was a way of crinkling up the corners of her eyes, pursing the pretty lips, that was better than a smile; it was an attractive expression. She displayed it often, while they made Wan Santos-Schmitz comfortable, while they fed him coffee and listened to his explanations of why the Libyans had been wrong to get angry at him. If Walthers had feared Dolly would resent his bringing this wayfarer home, he found he had nothing to fear in that direction. But as the hour got later he began to fidget. "Wan," he said, "I have to fly in the morning, and I imagine you'd like to get back to your hotel —"

"Certainly not, Junior," his wife reproved him. "We have plenty of room right here. He can have the bed, you can sleep on the couch, and I'll take the cot in the sewing room."

Walthers was too startled to frown, or even to answer. It was a silly idea. Of course Wan would want to go back to the hotel — and of course Dolly was simply being polite; she couldn't really want to set up the sleeping arrangements in such a way that they would have no privacy at all, on the one night he had before flying back into the bush with the irascible Arabs. So he waited with confidence for Wan to excuse himself and his wife to allow herself to be convinced, and then with less confi-

dence, and then with none at all.

He woke up with a start in Peggys's bright dawn, had time only to kiss Dolly good-by and hustle down to the airport to meet his charter party, savage with hangovers and muttering irritably among themselves in a language he did not share. It did not look like a pleasant charter. As he sat in his aircraft, droning over the wide savannahs, occasional forests, and infrequent farm patches of Peggys Planet, he wished he had never heard of Juan Henriquette Santos-Schmitz.

That was a wish shared by a whole lot of the human race, including me.

There's no need for us to follow Audee Walthers for a while; all he was doing was towing a mass sensor in crisscross stripes across twenty thousand acres of hilly scrub, running photoreconnaissances, dropping spikes into the ground to measure seismic impulses, staying out of the way of his companions, worrying about the wife he had left behind with Wan. That was a mistake, of course. It would even be a mistake for me to leave Essie with Wan very long, because he was such a nasty little package, but with Essie he would not have had the overpowering asset of being rich. Essie's richer than he is. In fact, she's a sort of partner of Wan's — only in business! Because Wan's mother happened to have pupped him on a Heechee spacecraft he had a claim to everything it possessed — there weren't any other human beings to share it. Once the courts had time to think it over, they granted him a royalty on all the technology that came out of Heechee Heaven (now renamed the *S. Ya. Broadhead*), and that came to very much money indeed. Enough to buy anything he wanted. Enough to get away with stealing what was not for sale. Nasty. You couldn't blame Audee Walthers for disliking him, it was what Wan was best at.

Walthers was on a three-week charter, but he found an excuse to run back into Port Hegramet in the middle of it. To his delight, and a little surprise, Dolly was in the apartment when he got there and sweetly, obviously pleased to see him.

So the evening was perfect. When they had used themselves up, and eaten some dinner to restore their strength, and gone back to bed and used themselves up again, they relaxed comfortably with a bottle of the best that Peggys Planet had in the way of wine. Dolly did not normally care to hear much about his charter flights, but this time she listened with what actually seemed like interest while Walthers told her about the oil prospecting and the four Libyans and how much he had missed her. "I wish you could take me back with you," said Dolly, when he had finished telling her about the New Delaware charter. Dolly wasn't looking at him; she was idly fitting puppet heads on her free hand, her expression easy.

"No chance of that, darling." He laughed. "You're too good-looking to take out in the bush with four horny Arabs. Listen, I don't feel all that

safe myself."

She raised her hand, her expression still relaxed. The puppet she wore this time was a kitten face with bright red, luminous whiskers. The pink mouth opened and her kitten voice lisped, "Wan says they're really rough. He says they could've killed him, just for talking about religion with them. He says he thought they were going to."

"Oh?" Walthers shifted position, as the back of the daybed no longer seemed quite so comfortable. He didn't ask the question on his mind, which was, *Oh, have you been seeing Wan?* because that would suggest that he was jealous. He only said, "How is Wan?" But the other question was contained in that one, and was answered. Wan was much better. Wan's eye was hardly black at all now. Wan had a really neat ship in orbit, a Heechee Five, but it was his personal property and it had been fixed up special — so he said; she hadn't seen it. Of course. Wan sort of hinted that some of the equipment was old Heechee stuff, and maybe not too honestly come by. And he hinted, too, that there was plenty of Heechee stuff around that never got reported, because the people that found it didn't want to pay royalties to the Gateway Corporation, you know? Wan figured he was entitled to it, really, because he'd had this *unbelievable* life, brought up by practically the Heechee themselves —

Without Walthers willing it, the internal question externalized itself. "It sounds like you've been seeing a great deal of Wan," he offered, trying to seem casual and hearing his own voice prove he was not. Indeed he was not casual; he was either angry or worried — more angry than worried, actually, because it made no sense! Wan was surely not good-looking. Or good-tempered. Of course, he was rich, and also a lot closer to Dolly's age. . . .

"Oh, honey, don't be jealous," Dolly said in her own voice, sounding if anything pleased — which somewhat reassured Walthers. "He's going to go pretty soon anyway, you know. He doesn't want to be here when the transport gets in, and right now he's off ordering supplies for his next trip. That's the only reason he came here." She raised the puppeted hand again, and the childish kitten voice sang, "*Jun-ior's jealous of Dol-lee!*"

"I am not," he said instinctively, and then admitted, "I am. Don't hold it against me, Doll."

She moved in the bed until her lips were near his ear, and he felt her soft breath, lisping in the kitten voice, "I promise I won't, Mister Junior; but I'd be awful glad if you would . . ." And as reconciliations went, it went very well; except that right in the middle of Round Four it was zapped by the snarling ring of the piezophone.

Walthers let it ring fifteen times, long enough to complete the task in progress, though not nearly as well as he had intended. When he answered the phone it was the duty officer from the airport. "Did I call you at a bad time, Walthers?"

"Just tell me what you want," said Walthers, trying not to show that he was still breathing hard.

"Well, rise and shine, Audee. There's a party of six down with scurvy, Grid Seven Three Poppa, coordinates a little fuzzy but they've got a radio beacon. That's all they've got. You're flying them a doctor, a dentist and about a ton of vitamin C to arrive at first light. Which means you take off in ninety minutes tops."

"Ah, Hell, Carey! Can't it wait?"

"Only if you want them D.O.A. They're real bad. The shepherd that found them says there's two of them he don't think will make it anyway."

Walthers swore to himself, looked apologetically at Dolly, and then reluctantly began getting his gear together.

When Dolly spoke the voice was not a kitten's any more. "Junior? Can't we go back home?"

"This is home," he said, trying to make it light.

"Please, Junior?" The relaxed face had tightened up, and the ivory mask was impassive, but he could hear the strain in her voice.

"Dolly love," he said, "there's nothing there for us. Remember? That's why people like us come here. Now we've got a whole new planet — why, this city by itself is going to be bigger than Tokyo, newer than New York; they're going to have six new transports in a couple of years, you know, and a Lofstrom Loop instead of these shuttles —"

"But when? When I'm *old*?"

There might not be a justifiable reason for the misery in her voice, but the misery was there all the same. Walthers swallowed, took a deep breath and tried his joking best. "Sweetpants," he said, "you won't be *old* even when you're ninety." No response. "Aw, but honey," he cajoled, "it's bound to get better! They're sure to start a food factory out in our Oort pretty soon. It might even be next year! And they as much as promised me a piloting job for the construction —"

"Oh, fine! So then you'll be away a year at a time instead of just a month. And I'll be stuck in this dump, without even any decent programs to talk to."

"They'll have programs —"

"I'll be dead first!"

He was wide awake now, the joys of the night before long worn away. He said, "Look. If you don't like it here we don't have to stay. There's more on Peggys than Port Hegramet. We can go out into the back country, clear some land, build a house —"

"Raise strong sons, found a dynasty?" Her voice was scornful.

"Well . . . something like that, I guess."

She turned over in the bed. "Take your shower," she advised. "You smell like . . ."

And while Audee Walthers, Jr., was in the shower, a creature that

looked quite unlike any of Dolly's puppets (though one of them was supposed to represent him) was seeing his first foreign stars in thirty-one true years; and meanwhile one of the sick prospectors had stopped breathing, much to the relief of the shepherd who was trying, head averted, to nurse him; and meanwhile there were riots on Earth and fifty-one dead colonists on a planet eight hundred light-years away. . . .

And, meanwhile, Dolly had got up long enough to make him coffee and leave it on the table. She herself went back to bed, where she was, or pretended to be, sound asleep while he drank it, and dressed, and went out the door.

By the time he got back at last to the Libyans, Mr. Luqman was furious. He hung on the door of Walthers's plane and shouted at him. "Thirty-seven hours away! It is outrageous! For the exorbitant charter we pay you we expect your services!"

"It was a matter of life or death, Mr. Luqman," Walthers said, trying to keep the irritation and fatigue out of his voice as he postflighted the plane.

"Life is the cheapest thing there is! And death comes to us all!"

Walthers pushed past him and sprang down to the ground. "They were fellow Arabs, Mr. Luqman —"

"No! Egyptians!"

"— well, fellow Moslems, anyway —"

"I would not care if they were my own brothers! Our time is precious! Very large affairs are at stake here!"

Why try to restrain his own anger? Walthers snarled, "It's the *law*, Luqman. I only lease the plane; I have to provide emergency services when called on. Read your fine print!"

It was an unanswerable argument, and how infuriating it was when Luqman made no attempt to answer it but simply responded by heaping onto Walthers all the tasks that had accumulated in his absence. All to be completed at once. Or sooner. And if Walthers hadn't had any sleep, well, we would all sleep forever one day, would we not?

So, sleepless as he was, Walthers was flying magnetosonde traces within the next hour — prickly, tetchy work, towing a magnetic sensor a hundred meters behind the plane and trying to keep the damned unwieldy thing from snagging in a tree or plunging itself into the ground. And in the moments of thought between the demands of, really, trying to fly two aircraft at once, Walthers thought somberly that Luqman had lied; it *would* have made a difference if the Egyptians had been fellow-Libyans, much less brothers. Nationalism had not been left back on Earth. There had been border clashes already, gauchos versus rice farmers when the cattle herds went looking for a drink in the paddies and trampled the seedlings; Chinese versus Mexicans when there was a

mistake in filing land claims; Africans versus Canadians, Slavs versus Hispanics for no reason at all that any outsider could see. Bad enough. What was worse was the bad blood that sometimes surfaced between Slav and Slav, between Latino and Latino.

And Peggys could have been such a pretty world. It had everything — almost everything, if you didn't count things like vitamin C; it had Heechee Mountain, with a waterfall called the Cascade of Pearls, eight hundred meters of milky torrent coming right off the southern glaciers; it had the cinnamon-smelling forests of the Little Continent with its dumb, friendly, lavender-colored monkeys — well, not *real* monkeys. But cute. And the Glass Sea. And the Wind Caves. And the farms — especially the farms! The farms were what made so many millions and tens of millions of Africans, Chinese, Indians, Latinos, poor Arabs, Iranians, Irish, Poles — so many millions of desperate people so willing to go so far from Earth and home.

"Poor Arabs" he had thought to himself, but there were some rich ones, too. Like the four he was working for. When they talked about "very large affairs" they measured the scale in dollars and cents, that was clear.

This expedition was not cheap . . . and what about the next step? Next they would have to dig. Sinking a shaft to the salt dome they had located, three thousand meters down, would cost in the millions —

Except, he discovered, that it would not, because they too had some of that illegal Heechee technology Wan had told Dolly about.

The first thing human beings had learned about the long-gone Heechee was that they liked to dig tunnels, because examples of their work lay all about under the surface of the planet Venus. And what they had dug the tunnels with was a technological miracle, a field projector that loosened the crystalline structure of rock, converted it to a sort of slurry; that pumped the slurry away and lined the shaft with that dense, hard, blue-gleaming Heechee metal. Such projectors still existed, but not in private hands.

They did, however, seem to be available to the hands of Mr. Luqman's party . . . which implied not only money behind them, but influence . . . which implied somebody with muscle in the right places; and from casual remarks dropped in the brief intervals of rest and meals Walthers suspected that somebody was a man named Robinette Broadhead.

The salt dome was definite, the drilling sites were chosen, the main work of the expedition was done. All that remained was checking out a few other possibilities and completing the cross checks. Even Luqman began to relax, and the talk in the evenings turned to home. Home for all four of them turned out not to be Libya or even Paris. It was Texas, where they averaged 1.75 wives each and about half a dozen children in all. Not very evenly distributed, as far as Walthers could tell; but they were,

probably purposely, unclear about details. To try to encourage openness Walthers found himself talking about Dolly. More than he meant to. About her extreme youth. Her career as an entertainer. Her hand puppets. He told them how clever Dolly was, making all the puppets herself — a duck, a puppy, a chimp, a clown. Best of all, a Heechee. Dolly's Heechee had a receding forehead, a beaked nose, a jutting chin and eyes that tapered back to the ears like an Egyptian wall painting. In profile the face was almost a single line slanting down — all imaginary, of course, since no one had ever seen a Heechee then.

The youngest Libyan, Fawzi, nodded judiciously. "Yes, it is good that a woman should earn money," he declared.

"It isn't just the money. It helps keep her active, you know? Even so, I'm afraid she gets pretty bored in Port Hegramet. She really has no one to talk to."

The one named Shameem also nodded. "Programs," he advised sagely. "When I had but one wife I bought her several fine programs for company. She particularly liked the 'Dear Abby' and the 'Friends of Fatima,' I remember."

"I wish I could, but there's not much like that on Peggys yet. It's very difficult for her. So I really can't blame her if sometimes when I'm, you know, feeling amorous and she isn't —" Walthers broke off, because the Libyans were laughing.

"It is written in the Second Sura," guffawed young Fawzi, "that woman is our field and we may go into our field to plow it when we will. So says Al-Baqara, the Cow."

Walthers, suppressing resentment, essayed a joke: "Unfortunately my wife is not a cow."

"Unfortunately your wife is not a wife," the Arab scolded. "Back home in Houston we have for such as you a term: Pussy-whipped. It is a shameful state for a man."

"Now, listen," Walthers began, reddening; and then clamped down again on his anger. He forced a reassuring smile. "We shall never agree," he said, "so let's be friends anyway." He sought to change the subject. "I've been wondering," he said, "why you decided to look for oil right here on the equator."

"Walthers," growled Luqman, "I would punish your prying if it was important, but it is not. You want to know why we look here, one hundred seventy kilometers from where the launch loop will be built? Then look above you!" He thrust a theatrical arm to the darkened sky and then lurched away, laughing. Over his shoulder he tossed, "It does not matter any more anyway!"

Walthers stared after him, then glanced up into the night sky.

A bright blue bead was sliding across the unfamiliar constellations. The transport! The interstellar vessel *S. Ya. Broadhead* had entered high

orbit. He could read its course, jockeying to low orbit and parking there, an immense, potato-shaped, blue-gleaming lesser moon in the cloudless sky of Peggys Planet. In nineteen hours it would be parked. Before then he had to be in his shuttle to meet it, to participate in the frantic space-to-surface flights for the fragile fractions of the cargo and for the favored passengers, or nudging the free-fall de-orbiters out of their paths to bring the terrified immigrants down to their new home.

Walthers could afford no sleep that night. While the four Arabs slept he was breaking down tents and stowing equipment, packing his aircraft and talking with the base at Port Hegramet to make sure he had a shuttle assignment. He had. If he was there by noon the following day they would give him a berth, and a chance to cash in on the frantic round trips that would empty the vast transport and free it for its return trip. At first light he had the Arabs up, cursing and stumbling around. In half an hour they were aboard his plane and on the way home.

He reached the airport in plenty of time, although something inside him was whispering monotonously, *Too late. Too late. . . .*

Too late for what? And then he found out. When he tried to pay for his fuel, the banking monitor flashed a red zero. There was nothing in the account he shared with Dolly.

Impossible! — or not really impossible, he thought, looking across the field to where Wan's lander had been ten days earlier, and was no more. And when he took time to race over to the apartment he was not really surprised by what he found. Their bank account was gone. Dolly's clothes were gone, the hand-puppets were gone and most gone of all was Dolly herself.

I was not thinking at all of Audee Walthers at that time. If I had been, I would surely have wept for him — or for myself. I would have thought that it was at least a good excuse for weeping. The tragedy of the dear, sweet lover gone away was one I knew well, my own lost love having locked herself inside a black hole years and years before.

But the truth is I never gave him a thought. I was concerned with self-affairs. What occupied me most notably was the stabbings in my gut, but also I spent a lot of time thinking about the nastiness of terrorists threatening me and everything around me.

Of course, that was not the only nastiness around. I thought about my worn-out intestines because they forced me to. But meanwhile my store-bought arteries were slowly hardening, and every day six thousand cells were dying in my irreplaceable brain; and meanwhile a billion protons a second winked into extinction and the universe dragged itself toward its ultimate entropic death, and meanwhile — Meanwhile everything, if you stopped to think of it, was skidding downhill. And I never gave any of it a thought.

But that's the way we do it, isn't it? We keep going because we have schooled ourselves not to think of any of those "meanwhiles" — until, like my gut, they force themselves on us.



A
bomb
in
Kyoto

that incinerated a thousand thousand-year-old carved wooden Buddhas, a crewless ship that homed on the Gateway asteroid and released a cloud of anthrax spores when it was opened, a shooting in Los Angeles, and plutonium dust in the Staines reservoir for London — those were the things that were forcing themselves on all of us. Terrorism. Acts of senseless violence. "There's a queerness in the world," said I to my dear wife Essie. "Individuals act sober and sensible, but in groups they are brawling adolescents — such childishness people exhibit when they form groups!"

"Yes," said Essie, nodding, "that is true, but tell me, Robin. How is your gut?"

"As well as can be expected," I said lightly, adding as a joke, "You can't get good parts any more." For those guts were, of course, a transplant, like a sizeable fraction of the accessories my body requires to keep itself moving along — such are the benefits of Full Medical. "But I am not talking about my own sickness. I'm talking about the sickness of the world."

"And is right that you should do so," Essie agreed, "although is my opinion that if you got your gut relined you would talk about such things less often." She came up behind me and rested her palm on my forehead, gazing abstractedly out at the Tappan Sea. Essie understands instrumentation as few people do and has prizes to prove it, but when she wants to know if I have a fever she checks it the way her nurse did to her when she was a toddler in Leningrad. "Is not very hot," she said reluctantly, "but what does Albert say?"

"Albert says," I said, "that you should go peddle your hamburgers." I pressed her hand with mine. "Honestly. I'm all right."

"Will ask Albert to be sure?" she bargained — actually, she was deeply involved in setting up a whole new string of her franchises and I knew it.

"Will," I promised, and patted her still splendid bottom as she turned away to her own workroom. As soon as she was gone I called, "Albert? You heard?"

In the holoframe over my desk the image of my data-retrieval program swirled into visibility, scratching his nose with the stem of his pipe. "Yes, Robin," said Albert Einstein, "of course I heard. As you know, my receptors are always functioning except when you specifically ask me to turn them off, or when the situation is clearly private."

"Uh-huh," I said, studying him. He is not any sort of pinup, my Albert, with his untidy sweatshirt gathered in folds around his neck and his socks down around his ankles. Essie would straighten him up for me in a second if I asked her to, but I liked him the way he was. "And how can you tell the situation is private if you don't peek?"

He moved the stem of his pipe from his nose to his cheekbone, still scratching, still gently smiling; it was a familiar question and did not require an answer.

Albert is really more of a friend than a computer program. He knows enough not to answer when I ask a rhetorical question. Long ago I had about a dozen different information-retrieval and decision-making programs. I had a business-manager program to tell me how my investments were doing; and a doctor program to tell me when my organs were due for replacement (among other things — I think he also conspired with my chef program at home to slip the odd pharmaceutical into my food); and a lawyer program to tell me how to get out of trouble; and, when I got into too much of it, my old psychiatrist program who told me why I was screwing up. Or tried to; I didn't always believe him. But more and more I got used to one single program. And so the program I spent most of my time with was my general science advisor and home handyman, Albert Einstein. "Robin," he said, gently reproving, "you didn't call me just to find out if I was a Peeping Tom, did you?"

"You know perfectly well why I called you," I told him, and indeed he did. He nodded and pointed to the far wall of my office over Tappan Sea, where my intercom screen was — Albert controls that as well as about everything else I own. On it a sort of X-ray picture appeared.

"While we were talking," he said, "I was taking the liberty of scanning you with pulsed sound, Robin. See here. This is your latest intestinal transplant, and if you will look closely — wait, I'll enlarge the image — I think you'll be able to see this whole area of inflammation. I'm afraid you're rejecting, all right."

"I didn't need you to tell me that," I snapped. "How long?"

He sighed, "I can give you a minimum and maximum estimate. Catastrophic failure is not likely in less than one day, and almost certain in

sixty days.”

I relaxed. It was not as bad as it might have been. “So I have some time before it gets serious.”

“No, Robin,” he said earnestly, “it is already serious. The discomfort you now feel will increase. You should start medication at once in any case, but even with the medication the prognosis is for quite severe pain rather soon.” He paused, studying me. “I think from the expression on your face,” he said, “that for some idiosyncratic reason you want to put it off as long as you possibly can.”

“I want to stop the terrorists!”

“Ah, yes,” he agreed, “I know you do. And indeed that is a valid thing to do, if I may offer a value judgment. For that reason you wish to go to Brasilia to intercede with the Gateway commission” — I did; the worst thing the terrorists were doing was done from a spaceship no one had been able to catch — “and try to get them to share data so that they can move against the terrorists. What you want from me, then, is assurance that the delay won’t kill you.”

“Exactly, my dear Albert,” I smiled.

“I can give you that assurance,” he said gravely, “or at least I can continue to monitor you until your condition becomes acute. At that time, however, you must at once begin new surgery.”

“Agreed, my dear Albert,” I smiled, but he didn’t smile back.

“However,” he went on, “it does not seem to me that that is your only reason for putting off the replacement. I think there is something else on your mind.”

“Oh, Albert,” I sighed, “you’re pretty tedious when you act like Sigfrid von Shrink. Turn yourself off like a good fellow.”

And he did, looking thoughtful; and he had every reason to look thoughtful, because he was right.

You see, somewhere inside me, in that unlocatable space where I keep the solid core of guilt Sigfrid von Shrink did not quite purge away, I carried the conviction that the terrorists were right. I don’t mean right in murdering and blowing up and driving people crazy. That’s never right. I mean right in believing that they had a grievance, a wickedly unjust grievance against the rest of the human race, and therefore they were right in demanding attention be paid to it. I didn’t just want to stop the terrorists. I wanted to make them well.

Or, at least, I wanted not to make them any sicker than they were, and that was where we got into the morality of it all. How much do you have to steal from another person before the act makes you a thief?

The reason I felt guilt about the terrorists was that they were poor and I was rich. There was a great grand Galaxy out there for them, but we didn’t have any good way of getting them to it, not fast enough, anyway, and they were screaming. Starving. Seeing on the PV screen how glorious

life could be for some of us, and then looking around their own huts or hogans or tenements and seeing how despairing it was for them, and how little chance there was that the great good things could become theirs before they died. It is called the revolution of rising expectations, Albert says. There should have been a cure for it — but I couldn't find it. And the question on my mind was, did I have the right to make it worse? Did I have the right to buy somebody else's organs and integument and arteries when my own wore out?

I didn't know the answer and I don't know it now. But the pain in my gut was not as bad for me as the pain of contemplating what it meant for me to steal somebody else's life, just because I could pay for it and he could not.

And while I was sitting there, pressing my hand against my belly and wondering what I was going to be when I grew up, the whole huge universe was going on about its business.

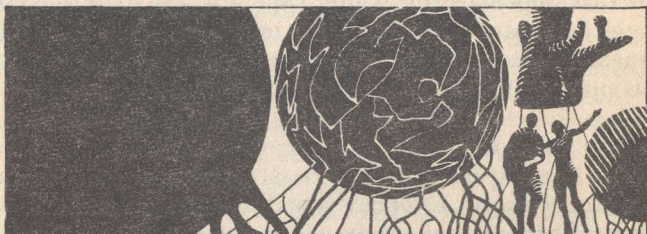
And most of its business was worrisome. There was that Mach's-Principle thing that Albert had tried and tried to explain to me that suggested somebody, maybe the Heechee, was trying to crush the universe into a ball so as to rewrite the physical laws. Incredible. Also incredibly scary, when you let yourself think about it . . . but millions or billions of years in the future, too, so I wouldn't call it a really pressing worry.

The "Mach's-Principle thing" Robin talks about was at that time still only a speculation, though, as Robin says, a very scary one. It is a complicated subject. For now, let me just say that there were indications the expansion of the universe had been arrested and a contraction had begun — and even a suggestion, from old Heechee fragmentary records, that the process was not natural.

The terrorists and the growing armies were nearer at hand. The terrorists had hijacked a loop capsule heading for the High Pentagon. New recruits for their ranks were being generated in the Sahel, where crops had failed one more time. Meanwhile Audee Walthers was trying to start a new life for himself without his errant wife; and meanwhile the wife was erring with that nasty creature, Wan; and meanwhile, near the core, the Heechee Captain was beginning to think erotic thoughts about his second in command, whose friendly-name was Twice; and meanwhile my wife, troubled about my belly, was nevertheless happily completing a deal for extending her fast-food franchise chain to Papua New Guinea and the Andaman Islands; and meanwhile — oh, meanwhile! What a lot was going on meanwhile!

And always is, though usually we don't know about it.

1908
light-years
from
Earth



my friend — former friend — about to be friend again, Audee Walthers, was remembering my name again, and not too favorably. He was coming up against a rule I had made.

I mentioned that I owned a lot of things. One of the things I owned was a share in the biggest space vehicle known to mankind. It was one of the bits and pieces of gadgetry the Heechee had left behind, floating out beyond the Oort comet cloud until it got discovered. Discovered by human beings, I mean — Heechee and australopithecines don't count. We called it Heechee Heaven, but when it occurred to me that it would make a marvelous good transport for getting some of those poor people away from the Earth, which couldn't support them, to some hospitable other planet which could, I persuaded the other shareholders to rename it. After my wife: the *S. Ya. Broadhead* it was called. So I put up the money to refit it for colonist-carrying, and we started it off on round trips to the best and nearest of those places, Peggys Planet.

This put me into another of those situations where conscience and common sense came into conflict, because what I really wanted was to get everybody to a place where they could be happy, but in order to get it done I had to be able to show a profit. Thus Broadhead's Rules. They were pretty much the same rules as for the Gateway asteroid, years ago. You had to pay your way there, but you could do it on credit if you were lucky enough to have your name come up in the draw. Getting back to Earth, however, was strictly cash. If you were a land-grant colonist, you

could reassign your sixty hectares to the Company and they would give you a return ticket. If you didn't have the land any more because you'd sold it, or traded it, or lost it shooting craps, you had two choices. You could pay for a return ticket in cash. Or you could stay where you were.

Or, if you happened to be a fully qualified pilot, and if one of the ship's officers had made up his mind to stay on Peggys, you could work your way back. That was Walthers's way. What he would do when he got back to Earth he didn't know. What he knew for sure was that he could not stay in that empty apartment after Dolly left, and so he sold off their furnishings for whatever he could get, in the minutes between shuttle flights, made his deal with the *S. Ya.*'s captain and was on his way. It struck him as queer and unpleasant that the thing that had seemed so impossible when Dolly asked for it suddenly became the only thing he could do when she left him. But life, he had discovered, was often queer and unpleasant.

So he came aboard the *S. Ya.* at the last minute, shaking with fatigue. He had ten hours before his first duty shift, and he slept it all. Even so, he was still groggy, and maybe a little numbed with trauma, when a fifteen-year-old failed colonist came to bring him coffee and escort him to the control room of the interstellar transport *S. Ya. Broadhead*, née "Heechee Heaven."

How huge the damn thing was! From outside you couldn't really tell, but those long passages, those chambers with ten-tiered bunk beds, now empty, those guarded galleries and halls with unfamiliar machines or the stubs of places where the machines had been taken away — such vastness was no part of Walthers's previous experience of spacecraft. Even the control room was immense; and even the controls themselves were duplicated. Walthers had flown Heechee vessels — that was how he'd got to Peggys Planet in the first place, piloting a converted Five. The controls here were almost the same, but there were two sets of them and the transport could not be flown unless both sets were manned. "Welcome aboard, Seventh," smiled the tiny Oriental-looking woman in the left-hand seat. "I'm Janie Yee-xing, Third Officer, and you're my relief. Captain Amheiro will be here in a minute." She didn't offer her hand, or even lift either of them from the controls before her. That much Walthers had expected. Two pilots on duty at all times meant two pilots hands-on the controls; otherwise the bird did not fly. It wouldn't crash, of course, because there was nothing for it to crash into; but it wouldn't maintain course and acceleration, either.

Ludolfo Amheiro came in, a plump little man with gray sideburns with nine blue bangles on his left forearm — not many people wore them any more, but Walthers knew that each one represented a Heechee-vessel flight in the days when you never knew where your ship was taking you; so here was a man with experience! "Glad to have you aboard, Walthers,"

he said perfunctorily. "Do you know how to relieve the watch? There's nothing to it, really. If you'll just put your hands on the wheel over Yee-xing's —" Walthers nodded and did as he was ordered. Her hands felt warm and soft as she slipped them carefully out from under his, then slid her pretty bottom off the pilot's seat to allow Walthers to occupy it. "That's all there is, Walthers," said the captain, satisfied. "First Officer Madjhour will actually fly the vessel" — nodding to the dark, smiling man who had just moved into the right-hand seat — "and he'll tell you what's necessary for you. You get a pee break of ten minutes each hour . . . and that's about it. Join me for dinner tonight, will you?"

And the invitation was reinforced by a smile from Third Officer Janie Yee-xing; and it was astonishing to Walthers, as he turned to listen to his instructions from Ghazi Madjhour, to realize that it had been all of ten minutes since he had thought of gone-away Dolly.

It was not quite as easy as that. Piloting was piloting. You didn't forget it. But navigation was something else. Especially as a lot of the old Heechee navigation charts had been unraveled, or at least partly unraveled, while Walthers was flying shepherds and prospectors around Peggys.

Unravelling the Heechee maps was extremely difficult, especially as they showed clear indications that they were intended to be difficult to unravel. There were not many of them to go on. Two or three fragments found in vessels like the so-called Heechee Heaven or **S. Ya.**, and a nearly complete one found in an artifact circling a frozen planet around a star in Boötes. It was my personal opinion, though not supported by the official reports of the cartographical study commissions, that many of the haloes, check marks and flickering indicia were meant as warning signs. Robin didn't believe me then. He said I was a cowardly pudding of spun photons. By the time he came to agree with me, what he called me no longer mattered.

The star charts on the *S. Ya.* were far more complicated than the ones Audee had used on the trip out. They came in two varieties. The most interesting one was Heechee. It had queer gold and gray-green markings that were only imperfectly understood, but it showed *everything*. The other, far less detailed but a lot more useful to human beings, was human-charted and English-labeled. Then there was the ship's log to check, as it automatically recorded everything the ship did or saw. There was the whole internal system display — not the pilot's concern, of

course, except that if something went wrong the pilot needed to know about it. And all of this was new to him.

The good part of that was that learning the new skills kept Walthers busy. Janie Yee-xing was there to teach him, and that was good, too, because she kept his thoughts busy in a different way . . . except in those bad times just before he fell asleep.

Since the *S. Ya.* was on a return trip, it was almost empty. More than thirty-eight hundred colonists had gone out to Peggys Planet. Coming back, there were hardly any. The three dozen human beings in the ship's crew; the military detachments maintained by the four governing nations of the Gateway Corp.; and about sixty failed immigrants. They were the steerage. They had impoverished themselves to go out. Now they glumly bankrupted themselves to get back to whatever desert or slum they had fled because, when push came to shove, they couldn't quite hack pioneering a new world. "Poor bastards," said Walthers, circling to pass a work party of them cleaning air filters at a slave's torpid pace; but Yee-xing would have none of that.

"Don't waste your pity on them, Walthers. They had it made and they chickened out." She snarled something in Cantonese at the work party, who resentfully moved minutely faster for a moment.

"You can't blame people for being homesick," Walthers objected.

"Home! God, Walthers, you talk as if there was a 'home' left — you've been out in the boonies too long."

She paused at the junction of two corridors, one glowing blue with tracings of Heechee metal, the other gold. She waved at the party of armed guards in the uniforms of China, Brazil, the United States, and the Soviet Union. "Do you see them fraternizing?" she demanded. "Used to be they didn't take this seriously. They'd pal around with the crew, they never carried weapons, it was just an all-expense-paid cruise in space for them. But *now*." She shook her head, and reached out abruptly to grab Walthers's arm as he started to get closer to the guards. "Why don't you listen to me?" she demanded. "They'll give you Hell if you try to go in there."

"What's in there?"

She shrugged. "The Heechee stuff they didn't take out of the ship when they converted it. That's one of the things they're guarding — although," she added, her voice lower, "if they knew the ship better they'd do a better job. But come on, we go this way."

Walthers followed willingly enough, grateful for the sightseeing tour as much as for their destination. The *S. Ya.* was far the biggest ship he, or any other human being, had ever seen, Heechee-built, very old — and still, in some ways, very puzzling. They were halfway home, and Walthers had not yet explored a quarter of its mazy, glowing corridors. The part he had especially not explored was Yee-xing's private cabin, and he was

looking forward to that with the interest of any ten-day virgin. But there were distractions. "What's that?" he asked, pausing at a pyramidal construction of green-glowing metal in an alcove. A heavy steel grating had been welded in front of it to keep prying hands off.

"Beats me," said Yee-xing. "Nobody else knows, either — that's why they've left it here. Some of the stuff can be cut out and moved easily, some gets wrecked — now and then if you try to remove something, it blows up in your face. Here, right down this little alley. This is where I live."

Neat narrow bed, pictures of an old Oriental couple on the wall — Janie's parents? — sprays of flowers on the wall chest; Yee-xing had made the place her own. "On return trips, that is," she explained. "On the way out this is the Captain's cabin, and the rest of us sleep on cots in the pilot room." She tugged at the cover on the bed, which was already quite straight. "There's not much chance to fool around on outgoing trips," she said meditatively. "Would you like a glass of wine?"

"I certainly would," said Walthers. And so he sat down and had the wine with pretty Janie Yee-xing, and by and by had the other refreshments the tiny cabin had to offer, which were excellent in quality and satisfying to his soul, and if he thought at all of lost Dolly in the next half hour or so it was not at all with jealousy and rage, but almost with compassion.

There was plenty of room to fool around on return trips, it turned out, even in a cabin no bigger than the one Horatio Hornblower had occupied centuries before. And the wine was Peggys Planet's best; but when they had finished emptying the bottle, and themselves, the cabin began to seem a lot smaller and there was still an hour or more before their shifts began. "I'm hungry," Yee-xing announced. "I've got some rice and stuff here, but maybe —"

It was not a time to push his luck, although a home-cooked meal sounded good. Even rice and stuff. "Let's go to the galley," said Walthers and, in no particular hurry, they wandered hand in hand back to the working part of the ship. They paused at a junction of corridors, where the long-gone Heechee had, for reasons of their own, planted little clusters of shrubs and bushes — not, no doubt, the same ones that were still growing there. Yee-xing paused to pick a bright blue berry.

"Look at that," she said. "They're all ripe, and the deadbeats don't even pick them."

"You mean the returning colonists? But they pay their way —"

"Oh, sure," she said bitterly. "No pay, no fly. But when they get back they'll go right on welfare, because what else is there for them?"

Walthers sampled one of the juicy, thin-skinned fruits. "You don't like the returnees very much," he offered, and Yee-xing grinned.

"I don't keep that a secret very well, do I?" But the grin faded. "In the first place," she said, "there's nothing for them to go home to — if they had a decent life they wouldn't have left it. In the second place, things have got a lot worse since they left. More terrorist trouble. More international friction — why, there are countries that are building up their armies again! And in the third place, they're not only going to suffer from all that, they're part of the cause of it. Half the goons you see here will be in some terror group in a month — or supporting one, anyway."

They strolled onward, and Walthers said humbly, "It's true I've been away a long time, but I did hear that things are getting nasty — bombings and shootings."

"Bombings! If that's all there was! They've got a TPT now! You go back to the Earth system now, and you never know when you're going to be right off your rocker without warning!"

"TPT? What's a TPT?"

"Oh, my God, Walthers," she said earnestly, "you *have* been away a long time. What they used to call the Craziiness, don't you remember? It's a Telempathic Psychokinetic Transceiver, one of those old Heechee things. There are about a dozen of them around, and the terrorists have one of them!"

"The Craziiness," Walthers repeated, scowling, as a memory tried to work its way up out of his subconscious.

Yee-xing looked at him in puzzlement, then waved at the guards ahead of them. "That's what they're protecting mostly," she said, "because there's still one on the *S. Ya*. Too damn many of them around! And they thought of protecting them a little too late, because now there's a bunch of terrorists that have a Heechee Five, and they've got a TPT in it, and somebody who's really crazy. Lunatic, I mean! When he gets on that thing and you feel him in your head it's so creepy and awful — Walthers, is something the matter?"

He stopped at the entrance to the gold-lit corridor, the four guards looking at him with curiosity. "The Craziiness," he said. "Wan! This used to be his ship!"

"Well, sure it was," the girl said, frowning. "Listen, we were going to get something to eat. We'd better do it." She was getting worried. Walthers's jaw was set, the muscles around his face contracted. As much as anything, he looked like somebody who was expecting to be punched in the face, and the guards were getting curious. "Come on, Audee," she said pleadingly.

Walthers stirred and looked at her. "You go ahead," he said. "I'm not hungry any more."

Wan's ship! How strange, Walthers thought, that he had not made the connection before. But of course it was so.

Wan had been born in this very vessel, long before it was renamed the

S. Ya. Broadhead, long before the human race even knew it existed . . . unless you considered a few dozen remote descendants of *Australopithecus afarensis* human. Wan had been born to a pregnant female Gateway prospector. Her husband was lost on one mission, herself stranded on another. She hung onto life for his first few years and then left him orphaned. Walthers could not easily imagine what Wan's infancy was like — tiny child in this vast, almost empty vessel, no company but savages and the computer-stored analogues of dead space prospectors. One of whom, no doubt, had been his mother. It called for pity. . . .

Walthers had no pity to give. Not to Wan who had borrowed his wife. Not, for that matter, to the same Wan who had found the machine they called the TPT — short for “telepathic psychokinetic transceiver,” as the thick tongue of the bureaucracy had relabeled it. Wan himself had only called it a “dream couch,” and the rest of the human race had called it The Madness, the terrible, cloudy obsessions that had infected every human alive when silly young Wan, discovering a couch, had found that it gave him some sort of contact with some sort of living beings. He did not know that the same process gave them some sort of contact with him, and so his teen-aged dreams and fears and sexual fantasies invaded ten billion human brains. . . . Perhaps Dolly should have made the connection, but she had been a small child when it happened. Walthers had not. He remembered, and it gave him a fresh reason to hate Wan.

He could no longer remember that recurrent worldwide madness very clearly, could hardly imagine how devastating its effects had been. He did not even try to imagine Wan's idle, lonely childhood here; but present Wan, cruising around the stars on his mysterious quest, his only company Walthers's fugitive wife — that, all of that, Walthers could imagine all too clearly.

In fact, he spent nearly all of the hour available to him, before his shift began, in imagining it, before it occurred to him that he was wallowing in self-pity and volunteered humiliation and that was really, after all, no way for a grown human being to behave.

He showed up on time. Yee-xing, there in the pilot room before him, said nothing but looked faintly surprised. He grinned at her in the changeover and set in to work.

Although the actual piloting of the ship amounted to not much more than holding onto the controls and letting the vessel fly itself, Walthers kept himself busy. His mood had changed. The vastness of the vessel he had under his fingertips was a challenge. He watched Janie Yee-xing as, with knees and toe-tips and elbows, she worked the auxiliary controls that displayed course and position and ship's state and all the other data that a pilot didn't really need to know to fly the beast, but ought to go to the trouble of finding out if he wanted to call himself a *pilot*. And he did the

same. He summoned up the course display and checked the position of the *S. Ya.*, a tiny glowing gold dot along a thin blue line nineteen hundred light-years long; he verified that the position was right by calculating angles to the red-glowing marker stars along the route; he frowned at the handful of **Stay Away!** markings, where black holes and gas clouds posed a threat — none of them anywhere near their course, it appeared — and he even called up the great Heechee sky chart that displayed the entire Galaxy, with other members of the Local Group hanging on its fringes. Several hundred very bright human beings and thousands of hours of machine-intelligence time had gone into unraveling the Heechee chart code. There were parts that were not understood yet, and Walthers studied, frowning, the handful of points in all that area where the blinking, multicolored halos that meant “Here there be danger” were doubled and tripled. What could be so dangerous that the Heechee charts fairly screamed with panic?

The Heechee charting and navigation systems were not easy to decipher. For navigation, the system looks up two points, the start and finish of the trip. It then looks up all intervening obstacles such as dust or gas clouds, perturbing radiation, gravitational fields and so on, and selects points of safe passage around or between them, after which it constructs a spline to fit the points and directs the vessel along it.

Many objects and points on the charts were tagged with attention marks — flickering auras, check marks and so on. We realized early that these were often warnings. The difficulty was that we didn’t know which signs were warnings, or what they warned against.

There was still a lot to learn! And, Walthers thought to himself, no better place to learn it than on this ship. His job was strictly temporary, of course. But if he did good work . . . if he showed willingness and talent . . . if he ingratiated himself with the captain . . . why then, he thought, when they reached Earth, and the captain had to face the job of hiring a new Seventh Officer, what better candidate than Audee Walthers?

When the shift was over, Yee-xing came across the ten-meter space separating the two pilot positions and said, “As a pilot, you’re looking pretty good, Walthers. I was a little worried about you.”

He took her hand and they headed for the door. “I guess I was in a bad mood,” he apologized, and Yee-xing shrugged.

“First girl-friend always catches all the crap after a divorce,” she

observed. "What did you do, plug in one of our head-shrinker programs?"

"I didn't have to. I just —" Walthers hesitated, trying to remember just what he had done. "I guess I just talked to myself a little. The thing about having your wife walk out on you," he explained, "is that it makes you feel *ashamed*. I mean, besides jealous, and angry, and all that other stuff. But after I stewed around for a while it occurred to me that I hadn't done anything much to be ashamed of. The feeling didn't belong to me, you see?"

"And that helped?" she demanded.

"Well, after a while it did." And, of course, the sovereign antidote for woman-induced pain was another woman, but he didn't want to say that to the antidote.

"I'll have to remember that, next time I get dumped. Well, I guess it's about bedtime. . . ."

He shook his head. "It's early yet, and I'm all charged up. What about that old Heechee stuff? You said you knew a way past the guards."

She stopped in the middle of the passage to study him. "You sure have your ups and downs, Audee," she said. "But why not?"

The *S. Ya.* was double-hulled. The space between the hulls was narrow and dark, but it could be entered. So Yee-xing led Walthers through narrow passages close to the skin of the great spacecraft, through a maze of empty colonists' bunks, past the crude, huge kitchen that fed them, into a space that smelled of stale garbage and ancient rot — into a vast, ill-lit chamber. "Here they are," she said. Her voice was lowered although she had promised him they were too far from the guards to be overheard. "Put your head close to that sort of silvery basket — you see where I'm pointing? — but you don't *touch* it. That's important!"

"Why is it important?" Walthers stared around at what looked like the Heechee equivalent of an attic. There were at least forty devices in the chamber, large and small, all of them firmly linked to the structure of the ship itself. There were big ones and little ones, spherical ones with splayed mountings joining the deck, squarish ones that glowed in the blue and green colors of the metal. Of the woven metal shroud Janie Yee-xing was indicating, there were three, all exactly alike.

"It's important because I don't want my ass kicked off this ship, Audee. So pay attention!"

"I am paying attention. Why are there three of them?"

"Why did the Heechee do anything? Maybe all these things were spares. Now here's the part you have to listen to. Put your head *close* to the metal part, but not *too* close. As soon as you start feeling things that don't come out of you, that's close enough. You'll know when. But don't get any closer; and above all don't touch, because this is a two-way thing. As

long as you're just satisfied with sort of general feelings nobody will notice. Probably. But if they do notice, the captain will have us both walking the plank, you understand?"

"Of course I understand," said Walthers, a little annoyed, and moved his head within a dozen centimeters of the silvery mesh. He twisted around to look at Yee-xing. "Nothing," he said.

"Try a *little* closer."

It was not very easy to move your head a centimeter at a time when it was bent at a strange angle and you didn't have anything to hold onto, but Walthers tried to do as instructed —

"That's it!" Yee-xing cried, watching his face. "No closer, now!"

He didn't answer. His mind was filled with the barest suspicion of sensations — a confused mumble of sensations. There were dreams and daydreams, and someone's desperate shortness of breath; there was someone's laughter, and someone, or actually what seemed to be three couples of someones, engaged in sexual activity. He twisted to grin at Janie, started to speak —

And then, suddenly, there was something else there.

Walthers froze. From Yee-xing's description he had expected a sort of sense of *company*. The presence of other people. Their fears and joys and hungers and pleasures — but the "they" were always human.

This new thing was not.

Walthers moved convulsively. His head touched the mesh. All the sensations became a thousandfold clearer, like the focusing of a lens, and he felt the new and distant presence — or presences? — in a different and immediate way. It was a distant, slippery, chilling sensation, and it did not emanate from anything human. If the sources had depressions or fantasies, Walthers could not comprehend them. All he could feel was that they were *there*. They **existed**. They did not *respond*. They did not *change*.

If you could get inside the mind of a corpse, he thought in panic and revulsion, this was how it might feel —

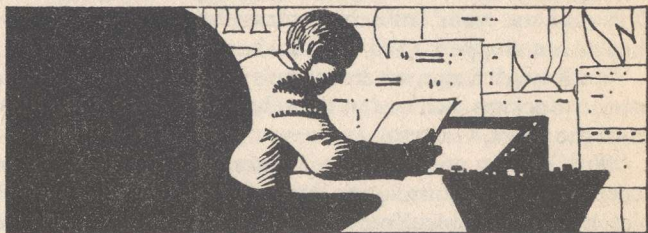
— All this in a moment, and then he was aware that Yee-xing was tugging at his arm, shouting in his ear: "Oh, damn you, Walthers! I felt that! So did the captain and everybody on this God-damned ship. Now we're in trouble!"

As soon as his head came away from the silvery mesh the sensation was gone. The gleaming walls and shadowy machines were real again, with Janie Yee-xing's furious face thrust into his. In trouble? Walthers found himself laughing. After the chill, slow hell he had just glimpsed, nothing human could seem like trouble. Even when the four-power guard came boiling in, weapons drawn, shouting at them in four languages, Walthers almost welcomed them.

For they were human, and alive.

The question that was digging at his mind was the one that anybody would have asked himself: Had he tuned in somehow on the cryptic, hidden Heechee?

If so, he told himself, shuddering, Heaven help the human race.



Dreading
the
Heechee

was a popular sport in more places than the *S. Ya*. I even did a fair amount of it myself. Everybody did. We did it a lot when I was a kid, though then the Heechee were nothing more than strange vanished creatures that had amused themselves digging tunnels on the planet Venus hundreds of thousands of years before. We did it when I was a Gateway prospector — oh, yes, my God how we did it then! Trusting ourselves to old Heechee ships and scooting around the universe to places no human had ever seen, and always wondering if the owners of the ships would turn up at the end of a trip — and what they would do about it! And we brooded about them even more when we untangled enough of their old sky atlases to discover where they had gone to hide, deep in the core of our own Galaxy.

It did not occur to us, then, to wonder what they were hiding from.

That certainly was not all I did, to be sure. I had plenty of other things to fill my days. There was my steadfast preoccupation with my crotchety health, which forced itself upon my attention whenever it wanted to, and wanted to more often all the time. But that was only the beginning. I was about as busy, with about as many myriad diverse things, as it was possible for a human being to be.

If you looked at any average day in the life of Robin Broadhead, aging tycoon, visiting him at his luxurious country home looking over the broad Tappan Sea just north of New York City, you would find him doing such things as strolling along the riverfront with his lovely wife, Essie . . . venturing culinary experiments in the cuisines of Malaya, Iceland and Ghana in his lavishly equipped kitchen . . . chatting with his wise

data-retrieval system, Albert Einstein . . . hitting his mail:

"To that youth center in Grenada, let's see, yeah. Here is the check for three hundred thousand dollars as promised, but please don't name the center after me. Name it after my wife if you want to, and we will both certainly try to get down there for the opening.

"To Pedro Lammartine, Secretary General, United Nations: Dear Pete. I'm working on the Americans to share data with the Brazilians on finding that terrorist ship, but somebody has to get after the Brazilians. Will you use your influence, please? It's in everybody's interest. If they're not stopped, God knows where we'll all wind up.

"To Ray McLean, wherever he's living now: Dear Ray. By all means use our docking facilities in the search for your wife. I wish you all luck from the heart, etc., etc.

"To Gorman and Ketchin, General Contractors: Dear sirs. I won't accept your new completion date of October 1st for my ship. It's completely unreasonable. You've had one extension already, and that's all you get. I remind you of the heavy penalty charges in the contract if there is any further delay.

"To the President of the United States: Dear Ben. If the terrorist ship is not located and neutralized at once the whole peace of the Earth is threatened. Not to mention property damage, loss of lives and everything else that's at risk. It is an open secret that the Brazilians have developed a direction-finder for signals from a ship in FTL flight, and that our own military people have a procedure for FTL navigating that will let them approach it. Can't they get together? As Commander in Chief, all you have to do is order the High Pentagon to cooperate. There's lots of pressure on the Brazilians to do their share, but they're waiting for a sign from us.

"To what's-his-name, Luqman: Dear Luqman, thanks for the good news. I think we should move to develop that oil field immediately, so when you come to see me bring along your plan for production and shipment with cost estimates and a cash-flow capital plan. Every time the *S. Ya.* comes back empty we're losing money. . . ."

And on and on — I kept busy! Had a lot to keep busy with, and that's not even counting keeping track of my investments and riding herd on my managers. Not that I spent a lot of time on business. I always say that, after he's made his first hundred million or so, anybody who does anything just for the money is insane. You need money, because if you don't have money you don't have freedom to do the things that are worth doing. But after you have that freedom, what's the use of more money? So I left most of the business to my financial programs and the people I hired — except for the ones that I was in not so much for the money as because they were doing something I wanted done.

And yet, if the name "Heechee" does not appear anywhere in the list of

my daily concerns, it was always there. It all came back to the Heechee in the long run. My ship abuilding out in the construction orbits was human-designed and human-built, but most of the construction, and all of the drive and communications systems, were adapted from Heechee designs. The *S. Ya.*, that I was planning to fill with oil on the nearly empty return trips from Peggys Planet, was a Heechee artifact; for that matter, Peggys was a gift from the Heechee, since they had provided the navigation to find it and the ships to get there in. Essie's fast-food chain came from the Heechee machines to manufacture CHON-food out of the carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, and nitrogen in the frozen gases of comets. We'd built some of the food factories on Earth — there was one right now off the shore of Sri Lanka, getting its nitrogen and oxygen from the air, its hydrogen from water out of the Indian Ocean and its carbon from whatever unfortunate plants, animals or carbonates slipped through its intake valves. And, now that the Gateway Corporation had so much money to invest that it didn't know what to do with it all, it was able to invest some wisely — in chartering systematic exploration trips — and as a big shareholder in Gateway I encouraged them to keep on doing that. Even the terrorists were using a stolen Heechee ship and a stolen Heechee telepathic psychokinetic transceiver to inflict their worst wounds on the world — all Heechee!

It was no wonder that there were fringe religious cults all over the Earth worshipping the Heechee, for they surely met all the objective tests of divinity. They were capricious, powerful — and invisible. There were times when I myself felt very nearly tempted, in those long nights when my gut was hurting and things didn't seem to be going right, to sneak a little prayer to Our Father Who Wert in the Core. It couldn't hurt anything, could it?

Well, yes it could. It could hurt my self-respect. And for all of us human beings, in this tantalizing, abundant Galaxy the Heechee had given us — but only a dab at a time — self-respect was getting harder and harder to keep.

Of course, I had not then actually met a real, live Heechee.

I had not yet met any, but one who was going to be a big part of my later life (I *won't* quibble over the terminology any more!), namely Captain, was halfway to the breakout point where normal space began; and meanwhile on the *S. Ya.*, Audee Walthers was getting his ass royally reamed and beginning to think that he should not plan for much of a future working on that ship; and meanwhile —

Well, as always, there were a lot of meanwhiles, but the one that would have interested Audee the most was that, meanwhile, his erring wife was beginning to wish she hadn't erred.

Eloping
with
a
lunatic



was not, on balance, very much better than being bored out of her mind in Port Hegramet. It was different, oh, heavens, yes, it was different! But parts of it were equally boring, and parts of it simply scared her to death. Since the ship was a Five there was plenty of room for just the two of them — or should have been. Since Wan was young, and rich, and almost in a way handsome, if you looked at him the right way, the trip should have been lively enough. Neither of those was true.

And besides, there were the scary parts.

If there was one thing every human being knew about space, it was that black holes were meant to be stayed away from. Not by Wan. He sought them out. And then he did worse than that.

What the gadgets and gadgets were that Wan played with Dolly did not know. When she asked, he wouldn't answer. When, wheedling, she put one of her puppets on her hand and asked through their mouths, he scowled and frowned and said, "If you are going to do your act do something funny and dirty, not asking questions that are none of your business." When she tried to find out why they were none of her business she was more successful. She didn't get a straight answer. But from the bluster and confusion with which Wan responded it was easy to figure out they were stolen.

And they had something to do with black holes. And, although Dolly was almost positive that she had heard, once, that there was no way in or out of a black hole, she was almost positive that what Wan was trying to do was to find some certain black hole, and then to go into it. That was the scary part.

And when she wasn't scared half out of her young mind, she was bone-crackingly lonesome, for Captain Juan Henriquette Santos-Schmitz, the dashing and eccentric young multi-millionaire whose exploits had pleased the readers of gossip services for years, was rotten company. After

three weeks in his presence, Dolly could hardly stand the sight of him.

Although she admitted to herself, trembling, that the sight of him was a lot less worrisome than the sight she was actually looking at.

What Dolly was looking at was a black hole. Or not really at the hole itself, for you could look at that all day and not see anything; black holes were black because they could not be seen at all. She was actually seeing a spiraling aurora of bluish, violetish light, unpleasant for the eyes even through the viewing plate over the control panel. It would have been far more unpleasant to be exposed to. That light was only the iceberg tip of a flood of lethal radiation. Their ship was armored against such things, and so far the armor had easily held. But Wan was not within the armor. He was down in the lander, where he had tools and technologies which she did not understand, and which he refused to explain. And she knew that at some time, in some such situation, she would be sitting in the main ship and would feel the little lurch that meant the lander had disengaged. And then he would be venturing even closer to one of those terrible objects! And what would happen to him then? Or to her? Not that she would go with him, certainly! But if he died, and left her alone, a hundred light-years from anything she knew — what then?

She heard an angry mumble and knew that, at least, that time was not now. The hatch opened and Wan crawled out of the lander, wrathful. "Another empty one!" he snarled at her, as though he were holding her accountable for it.

And, of course, he was. She tried to look sympathetic rather than scared. "Aw, honey, what a pity. That makes three of them."

"Three! Huh! Three with you along, you mean. More than that in all, indeed!" His tone was scornful, but she didn't mind the scorn. It was drowned in the relief when he slipped past her. Dolly moved inconspicuously as far away from the control board as she could — not far, in a Heechee ship that would have fit readily into a good-sized living room. As he sat down and consulted his electronic oracles she kept silent.

When Wan talked to his Dead Men he did not invite Dolly to take part. If he conducted his end of the conversation in words she could at least hear that half of it. If he tapped out instructions on his keyboard she did not have even that much. But this time she could figure it out easily enough. He punched out his questions, scowled at what one of the Dead Men said in his earphones, punched out a correction and then set up a course on the Heechee board. Then he took the headphones off, scowled, stretched and turned to Dolly. "All right," he said, "come, you can pay another installment on your passage."

"Why, sure, honey," she said obligingly, though it would have been so very much nicer if he didn't always have to put it like that. But her spirits were a little higher. She felt the tiny suggestion of a lurch that meant that the spacecraft was starting off on another trip; and indeed, the great blue

and violet horror on the screen was already dwindling away. That made up for a lot!

Of course, it only meant they were on their way to the next one.

"Do the Heechee," commanded Wan, "and, let me see, yes. With Robinette Broadhead."

"Sure, Wan," said Dolly, retrieving her puppets from where Wan had kicked them and slipping them over her hands. The Heechee did not, of course, look like a real Heechee; and as a matter of fact the Robinette Broadhead was pretty libelous, too. But they amused Wan. That was what mattered to Dolly, since he was paying the bills. The first day out of Port Hegramet he had boastfully shown Dolly his bankbook. Six million dollars automatically socked into it every month! The numbers staggered Dolly. They made up for a lot. Out of all that cataract of cash there had to be a way, sooner or later, of squeezing out a few drops for herself. To Dolly there was nothing immoral in such thought. Perhaps in an earlier day Americans would have called her a "gold-digger." But most of the human race, through most of its history, would only have called her "poor."

So she fed him and bedded him. When he was in a bad mood she tried to look invisible, and when he wanted entertainment she tried to entertain:

"Hallo thar, Mr. Heechee," said the Broadhead hand, Dolly's fingers twisting to give it a simpering grin, Dolly's voice thick and cornpone-bumpkin (part of the libel!). "I'm moughty pleased to make your acquaintance."

The Heechee hand, Dolly's voice a serpentine whine: "Greetings, rash Earthman. You are just in time for dinner."

"Aw, gosh," cried the Broadhead hand, grin widening, "I'm hungry, too. What's fer dinner?"

"Aargh!" shrieked the Heechee hand, fingers a claw, mouth open—"you are!" And the right-hand fingers closed on the left-hand puppet.

"Ho! Ho! Ho!" laughed Wan, "that is very good! Though that is not what a Heechee looks like. You do not know what a Heechee is."

"Do you?" asked Dolly in her own voice.

"Nearly! More nearly than you!" And Dolly, grinning, raised the Heechee hand:

"Oh, but you're wrong, Mr. Wan," came the silky, snaky Heechee voice. "This *is* what I look like, and I'm waiting to meet you in the next black hole!"

Crash went the chair Wan was sitting on as he sprang up. "That is not funny!" he shouted, and Dolly was astonished to see he was trembling. "Make me food!" he demanded, and stomped off to his private lander, muttering.

It was not wise to joke with him. So Dolly made him his dinner, and served him with a smile she did not feel. She gained nothing from the smile. His mood was fouler than ever. He screeched: "Stupid woman! Have you eaten all the good food when I was not looking? Is there nothing left fit to be eaten?"

Dolly was near tears. "But you like steak," she protested.

"Steak! Of course I like steak, but look at what you serve for dessert!" He pushed the steak and broccoli out of the way to seize the plate of chocolate-chip cookies and shake it under her nose. Cookies sailed away in all directions and Dolly tried to retrieve them. "I know it's not what you'd like, honey, but there isn't any more ice cream."

He glared at her. "Huh! No more ice cream! Oh, very well, then. A chocolate souffle — or a flan —"

"Wan, they're almost all gone, too. You ate them."

"Stupid woman! That is not possible!"

"Well, they're gone. Anyway all that sweet stuff isn't good for you."

"You have not been appointed my nurse! If I rot my teeth I will buy new ones." He struck at the dish in her hand, and the cookies went flying indeed. "Jettison this trash; I do not wish to eat at all now," he snapped, raging bitterly.

It was just another typical meal on the frontiers of the Galaxy. It finished typically, too, with Dolly clearing away the mess, and weeping. He was such a terrible person! And he didn't even seem to know it.

But, as a matter of fact, Wan did know that he was mean, antisocial, exploitive — a whole long list of things that had been explained to him by the psychoanalysis programs. More than three hundred sessions of them. Six days a week, for almost a year. And at the end he had terminated the analysis with a joke. "I have a question," he told the holographic analyst, displayed for him as a good-looking woman, old enough to be his mother, young enough to be attractive, "and the question is this: How many psychoanalysts does it take to change a light bulb?"

The analyst said, sighing, "Oh, Wan, you're resisting again. All right. How many?"

"Only one," he told her, laughing, "but the light bulb has to really want to change. Haw-haw! And you see, I don't."

She looked directly at him for a silent moment. The way she was displayed, she was sitting on a sort of beanbag chair, with her legs tucked under her, a note pad in her hand, a pencil in the other. She used it to push up the glasses that were sliding down her nose as she looked at him. As with everything else in her programming, the gesture was meant to have a purpose, the reassuring indication that she was, after all, only another human being like himself, not an austere goddess. Of course, human she was not. But she sounded human enough as she said, "That's really a very

old joke, Wan. What's a 'light bulb'?"

He shrugged irritably. "It is a round thing that gives off light," he guessed, "but you are missing the point. I do not wish to be changed any more. It is not fun for me. It was not my desire to begin this in the first place, and now I have decided to end it."

The computer program said peacefully, "That's your right, of course, Wan. What will you do?"

"I will go looking for my — I will go out of here and enjoy myself," he said savagely. "That is also one of my rights!"

"Yes, it is," she agreed. "Wan? Would you like to tell me what it was you started to say, before you changed your mind?"

"No," he said, getting up, "I would not like to tell you what it is I will do, instead I will do it. Good-by."

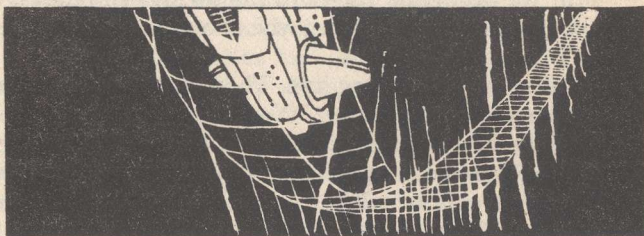
"You're going to look for your father, aren't you?" the psychoanalytic program called after him, but he didn't answer. The only indication he gave that he heard was that, instead of merely closing the door, he slammed it.

A normal human being — in fact, almost any human being at all, really — would have told his analyst that she was right. Would have at some time in three long weeks have told his ship-companion and bed-companion the same thing, if only to have someone to share in his outside-chance hope and his very real fear. Wan had never learned to share his feelings, because he had never learned to share anything at all. Brought up in Heechee Heaven, without any sort of warm-blooded human companion for the most crucial decade of his childhood, he had become the archetype of a sociopath. That terrible yearning for love was what drove him to seek his lost father through all the terrors of space. Its total lack of fulfillment made it impossible for him to accept love, or sharing, now. His closest companions for those terrified ten years had been the computer programs of stored, dead intelligences called the "Dead Men." He had copied them and taken them with him when he rented a Heechee starship, and he talked to them, as he would not to flesh and blood Dolly, because he knew they were only machines. They didn't mind being treated that way. To Wan, flesh and blood human beings were also machines — vending machines, you might call them. He had the coin to make them yield what he wanted. Sex. Or conversation. Or the preparation of his food, or cleaning up after his piggish habits.

The Heechee early discovered how to store the intelligence and even an approximation of the personality of a dead or dying person in mechanical systems — as human beings learned when they first encountered the so-called "Heechee Heaven" where the boy Wan grew up. Robin considered that a tremendously

valuable invention. I don't see it that way. Of course, I may be considered prejudiced in the matter — a person like me, being mechanical storage in the first place, doesn't need it; and the Heechee, having discovered that, did not bother to invent persons like me.

It did not occur to him to consider a vending machine's feelings. Not even when the vending machine was actually a nineteen-year-old female human being who would have been grateful for the chance of being allowed to think she loved him.



In
the
Lofstrom
Loop

in Lagos, Nigeria, Audee

Walthers debated the measure of his responsibility toward Janie Yee-xing as the magnetic ribbon caught their descending pod, and slowed it, and dropped it off at the Customs and Immigration terminal. For playing with the forbidden toys he had lost the hope of a job, but for helping him do it Yee-xing had lost a whole career. "I have an idea," he whispered to her as they lined up in the anteroom. "I'll tell you about it outside."

He did indeed have an idea, and it was a pretty good one, at that. The idea was me.

Before Walthers could tell her about his idea, he had to tell her about what he had felt in that terrifying moment at the TPT. So they checked into a transit lodge near the base of the landing loop. A bare room, and a hot one; there was one medium-sized bed, a washstand in the corner, a PV set to stare at while the traveler waited for his launch capsule, windows that opened on the hot, muggy, African coastal air. The windows were open, though the screens were tight against the myriad African bugs, but Walthers hugged himself against the chill as he told her about that cold, slow being whose mind he had felt on the *S. Ya*.

And Janie Yee-xing shivered too. "But you never said anything,

Audee!" she said, her voice a little shrill because her throat was tight. He shook his head. "No. But why didn't you? Isn't there —" She paused. "Yes, I'm sure there's a Gateway bonus you could get for that!"

"We could get, Janie!" he said strongly, and she looked at him, then accepted the partnership with a nod. "There sure is, and it's a million dollars. I checked it out on the ship's standing orders, same time I copied the ship's log." And he reached into his scanty luggage and pulled out a data fan to show her.

She didn't take it from him. She just said, "Why?"

"Well, figure it out," he said. "A million dollars. There's two of us, so cut it in half. Then — I got it on the *S. Ya.*, with the *S. Ya.*'s equipment, so the ship and its owners and the whole damn crew might get a share — we'd be lucky if it was only half. More likely three-quarters. Then — well, we broke the rules, you know. Maybe they'd overlook that, considering everything. But maybe they wouldn't, and we'd get nothing at all."

Yee-xing nodded, taking it in. There was a lot to take in. She reached out and touched the data fan. "You copied the ship's log?"

"No problem," he said, and indeed it hadn't been. During one of his tours at the controls, frosty silence from the First Officer at the other seat, Walthers had simply called up the data for the moment he had made contact from the automatic flight recorder, recorded the information as though it were part of his normal duty, and pocketed the copy.

"All right," she said, accepting what he had told her. "Now what?"

So he told her about this known eccentric zillionaire (who happened to be me), notorious for his willingness to spend largely for Heechee data, and as Walthers knew him personally —

She looked at him with a different kind of interest. "You know Robinette Broadhead?"

"He owes me a favor," he said simply. "All I have to do is find him."

For the first time since they had entered the little room Yee-xing smiled. She gestured toward the P-phone on the wall. "Go to it, tiger," she said.

So Walthers invested some of his not very impressive remaining bank-roll in long-distance calls, while Yee-xing gazed thoughtfully out at the bright tracery of lights around the Lofstrom Loop, like a kilometers-long roller coaster, its magnetic cables singing and the capsules landing on it *choofing* while the ones taking off were *chuffing* as they respectively gave up and took on escape velocity. She wasn't thinking about their customer. She was thinking about the goods they had to sell, and when Walthers hung up the phone, his face dour, she hardly listened to what he had to say. Which was:

"The bastard's not home," he said. "I guess I got the butler at Tappan

Sea. All he'd tell me was that Mr. Broadhead was on his way to Rotterdam. Rotterdam, for God's sake! But I checked it out. We can get a cheap flight to Paris and then a slow-jet the rest of the way — we've got enough money for that —"

"I want to see the log," said Yee-xing.

"The log?" he repeated.

"You heard me," she said impatiently. "It'll play on the PV. And I want to see."

He licked his lips, thought for a moment, shrugged and slipped it into the PV scanner.

Because the ship's instruments were holographic, recording every photon of energy that struck them, all the data concerning the source of the chill emanations were on the fan. But the PV showed only a tiny and featureless white blob, along with the location coordinates.

It was not very interesting to look at in itself — which was, no doubt, why the ship's sensors themselves had paid no attention to it. High magnification would perhaps show details, but that was beyond the capacities of the cheap hotel-room set.

But even so —

As Walthers looked at it, he felt a crawling sensation. From the bed Yee-xing whispered, "You never said, Audee. Are they Heechee?"

He didn't take his eyes off the still white blur. "I wish I knew —" But it was not likely, was it? unless the Heechee were far unlike anything anyone had suspected. Heechee were intelligent. Had to be. They had conquered interstellar space half a million years ago. And the minds that Walthers had perceived were — were — What would you call it? "Petrified," maybe. Present. But not active.

"Turn it off," said Yee-xing. "It gives me the creeps." She swatted one of the bugs that had penetrated the screen and added gloomily, "I hate this place."

"Well, we'll be off to Rotterdam in the morning."

"Not *this* place. I hate being on the Earth," she said. She waved at the sky past the lights of the landing loop. "You know what's up there? There's the High Pentagon and Orbit-Tyuratam and about a million zappers and nukes floating around, and they're all crazy here, Audee, you never know when the damn things are going to go off."

Whether she intended a rebuke or not was unclear, but Walthers felt it anyway. He pulled the fan out of the PV scanner resentfully. It wasn't *his* fault that the world was crazy! But it was his fault, no doubt of that, that Yee-xing was condemned to be on it. So she had every right to reproach him —

He started to hand her the data fan, his motives not certain, perhaps to demonstrate trust, perhaps to reinforce her status as his accomplice.

But in mid-reach he discovered just how crazy the world was. The

gesture converted itself into a blow, aimed wickedly at her unsmiling, desolate face.

For the half of a breath it was not Janie there, it was Dolly, faithless, runaway Dolly, with the grinning, contemptuous shadow of Wan behind her — or neither of them, in fact not a person at all, but a symbol. A target. An evil and threatening thing that had no identity but only a description. It was THE ENEMY, and the most certainly sure thing about it was that it needed to be destroyed. Violently. By him.

For otherwise Walthers himself would be destroyed, wrecked, disintegrated, by the maddest, most hating, most pervertedly destructive emotions he had ever felt, forced into his mind in an act of sickening, violent, devastating rape.

What Audee Walthers felt at that moment I knew very well because I felt it too — as did Janie — as did my own wife Essie — as did every human being within a dozen A.U. of a point a couple of hundred million kilometers from the Earth in the direction of the constellation Auriga. It was most lucky for me that I was not indulging my habit of piloting myself. I don't know if I would have crashed. The touch from space only lasted half a minute, and I might not have had time to kill myself, but I surely would have tried. Rage, sick hatred, an obsessive need to wreck and ravish — that was the gift from the sky that the terrorists offered us all. But for once I had the computer doing the piloting, so that I could spend my time on the P-phone, and computer programs were not infected by the terrorists' TPT.

It wasn't the first time. Not even the first time lately, for in the previous eighteen months the terrorists had dodged into solar space in their stolen Heechee ship and broadcast their pet lunatic's most horrid fantasies to the world. It was more than the world could stand. It was in fact why I was on my way to Rotterdam; but this particular episode, in fact, was the reason I turned around in mid-flight on the way there. I tried at once to call Essie, as soon as it was over, to make sure she was all right. No luck. Everybody in the world was trying to call everybody else, for the same reasons, and the relay points were jammed.

I regret, or almost regret, that I know nothing about this "instant madness" from first-hand experience. I regretted it most when it first happened, a decade earlier. No one knew anything about a "telepathic psychokinetic transceiver" at that time. What it looked like, and was, was periodic, world-wide epidemics of insanity. A lot of the world's best minds, including mine, had spent their best efforts trying to find a virus, a toxic chemical, a variation in the Sun's radiation — anything — anything that

would account for the shared madness that swept the human race every year or so. However, some of the world's best minds — like mine — were handicapped. Computer programs like myself simply did not feel the maddening impulses. If we had, I dare say, the problem would have been solved much earlier.

There was also the fact that my gut felt as though armadillos were engaging in sexual intercourse in it and, everything considered, I wanted Essie with me instead of taking a later commercial flight as planned. So I ordered the pilot to reverse course; and so when Walthers got to Rotterdam I wasn't there. He could easily have caught me at Tappan Sea if he had taken a straight-through New York flight, and so he was wrong about that.

He was also wrong — quite wrong — forgivably wrong, for he had no way of knowing — about just what sort of mind he had tuned in on on the *S. Ya*.

And he had made one other error, quite serious. He had forgotten that the TPT worked both ways.

So the secret he had kept at one end of that fleeting mind-touch was no secret at all at the other.



A
lavender
squid

— well, not really a squid, but looking about as squidlike as anything else in human experience — was in the middle of an exhausting, long-term project when Audee Walthers had his little accident with the TPT. Because the TPT goes in both directions it makes a great weapon but a lousy surveillance tool. It is sort of like calling up the person you're spying on and saying, "Hey, look, I've got my eye on you." So when Walthers bumped his head the sting was felt elsewhere. A where that was, in fact, very else. It was nearly a

thousand light-years from the Earth, not far from the geodesic flight-line from Peggys Planet home — which was, of course, the reason Walthers was close enough for the touch to register.

Happens I know quite a lot about this particular lavender squid — or almost squid; you could have said that he looked like a wriggly, fat orchid, and been almost as close. I hadn't met him at the time, of course; but now I know him well enough to know his name, and where he came from, and why he was there, and — most complicated of all — what he was doing. The best way to think of what he was doing was to say that he was painting a landscape. The reason that is complicated is that there was no one to see it for light-years in every direction, least of all my squid friend. He did not have the proper kind of eyes to perceive it with.

My friend Robin has several faults, and one of them is a kind of cutesy coyness that is not as amusing as he thinks it is. The way he knew about the sailship folk, like the way he knew about most of the other things he was not present to see, can be simply explained. He just doesn't want to explain it. The explanation is that I told him. That simplifies things a lot, but it's almost true.

Is it possible that cutesy coyness is contagious?

Still, he had his reasons. It was a sort of religious observance. It went back to the oldest traditions of his race, which was old indeed, and it had to do with that theologically crucial moment in their history when they, living among the clathrates and frozen gases of their home environment, with visibility minute in any direction, for the first time became aware that "seeing" could become the receiving end of a significant art form.

It mattered very much to him that the painting should be perfect. And so, when he felt himself suddenly being observed by a stranger, and the startling shock caused him to spray some of the finely divided powders he painted with in the wrong place, and in the wrong mixture of colors, he was deeply upset. Now a whole quarter-hectare was spoiled! An Earthly priest would have understood his feelings, if not his reasons for them; it was quite as though in the observance of a mass the Host had been dropped and crushed underfoot.

The creature's name was LaDzhaRi. The canvas he was working on was an elliptical sail of monomolecular film nearly thirty thousand kilometers long. The work was less than a quarter completed, and it had taken him fifteen years to get that far. LaDzhaRi did not care how long it took. He had plenty of time. His spacecraft would not arrive at its destination for another eight hundred years.

Or at least he thought he had plenty of time . . . until he felt the stranger staring at him.

Then he felt the need to hurry. He stayed in normal eigenmode while he swiftly collected his painting materials — by then it was August 21st — lashed them secure — August 22nd — pushed himself away from the butterfly-wing sail and floated free until he was well clear. By the first of September he was far enough away to switch on his jet thrust and, in high eigenmode, return to the little cylindrical tin can that rode at the center of the cluster of butterfly wings. Although it was a terribly expensive drain on him, he remained in high mode as he plunged through the entering caves and into the salty slush that was his home environment. He was shouting to his companions at the top of his voice.

By human standards that voice was extraordinarily loud. Terrestrial great whales have such loud voices that their songs can be recognized and responded to by other whales an ocean away. So had LaDzhaRi's people, and in the tiny confines of the spacecraft his roaring shook the walls. Instruments quivered. Furniture rocked. The females fled in panic, fearing that they were about to be eaten or impregnated.

It was almost as bad for the other seven males, and as fast as he could one of them struggled up to high eigenmode to shout back at LaDzhaRi. They knew what had happened! They too had felt the touch of the interloper, and of course they had done what was necessary. The whole crew had switched into high, transmitted the signal they owed their ancestors, and returned to normal mode . . . and would LaDzhaRi please do the same at once, and stop frightening the females?

So LaDzhaRi slowed himself down and allowed himself to "catch his breath" — although that was not an expression in use among his people. It did not do to thrash around in the slush in high for very long. He had already caused several troublesome cavitation pockets, and the whole slurpy environment they lived in was troubled. Apologetically he worked with the others until everything was lashed firm again, and the females had been coaxed out of their hiding places, one of them serving for dinner, and the whole crew settled down to discuss the lunatic touch, madly rapid and quite terrifying, that had invaded all their minds. That took all of September and the first part of October.

By then the ship had settled back into some sort of normal existence and LaDzhaRi returned to his painting. He neutralized the charges on the spoiled section of the great photon-trap wing. He laboriously collected the pigmented dust that had floated away, for one could not waste so much mass!

He was a thrifty soul, was LaDzhaRi. I have to admit that I found him rather admirable. He was loyal to the traditions of his people, under circumstances which human beings might have thought a little too menacing to be tolerated. For, although LaDzhaRi was not a Heechee, he

knew where the Heechee could be reached, and he knew that sooner or later the message his shipmates had sent would have an answer.

So then, just as he was beginning to repaint the blanked-out section of his work, he felt another touch, and this time an expected one. Closer. Stronger. Far more insistent, and much, much more frightening.



All
the
fragments

of life-stories of these friends — or almost friends, or in some cases non-friends — of mine were beginning to fall together. Not very rapidly. Not much faster, in fact, than the fragments of the universe were beginning to fall together in that great crunch back toward the cyclic primordial-atom state which (Albert kept telling me) was about to happen for reasons I never quite understood at the time. (But I didn't feel badly about that, because at the time neither did Albert.) There were the sailship people, uneasily accepting the consequences of doing their duty. There were Dolly and Wan on their way to yet one more black hole, Dolly sobbing in her sleep, Wan scowling furiously in his. And there were Audee Walthers and Janie Yee-xing sitting disconsolate in their very much too expensive Rotterdam hotel room, because they had just found out I wasn't there yet. Janie squatted on the huge anisokinetic bed while Audee harangued my secretary. Janie had a bruise on her cheek, souvenir of that moment's madness in Lagos, but Audee had his arm in a cast — sprained wrist. He had not known until that moment that Janie was a black-belt in karate.

Since Robin keeps talking about the "missing mass" question, I should explain what it is. In the latter 20th century cosmologists had an insoluble contradiction to face. They could see that the universe was expanding, and this was certainly so because of the red shift. They could also see, however, that it contained too

much mass for the expansion to be possible. That was proven by such facts as that the outer fringes of galaxies revolved too fast, clusters of galaxies held each other too tightly; even our own Galaxy with its companions was plunging toward a group of star-clouds in Virgo much faster than it should have been. Obviously, much mass was missing from observations. Where was it?

There was one intuitively obvious explanation. Namely, that the universe had formerly been expanding, but Something had decided to reverse its growth and cause it to contract. No one believed that for a minute — in the late 20th century.

Wincing, Walthers broke the connection and rested his wrist in his lap. "She says he'll be here tomorrow," he grumbled. "I wonder if she'll give him the message?"

"Of course she will. She wasn't human, you know."

"Really? You mean she was a computer program?" That had not occurred to him, for such things were not common on Peggys Planet. "Anyway," he said, taking consolation, "I guess in that case at least she won't forget." He poured them each a short drink out of the bottle of Belgian apple brandy they had picked up on the way to the hotel. He set down the bottle, wincing as he rubbed his right wrist, and took a sip before saying, "Janie? How much money have we got left?"

She leaned forward and tapped out their code on the PV. "About enough for four more nights in this hotel," she reported. "Of course, we could move to a cheaper one —"

He shook his head. "This is where Broadhead's going to stay, and I want to be here."

"That's a good reason," Yee-xing commented blandly, meaning that she understood his real reason: if Broadhead wasn't anxious to see Walthers, it would be harder to duck him in person than on the P-phone. "So why did you ask about the money?"

"Let's spend one night's rent on some information," he proposed. "I'd kind of like to know just how rich Broadhead is."

"You mean buy a financial report? Are you trying to find out if he can afford to pay us a million dollars?"

Walthers shook his head. "What I want to find out," he said, "is how much more than a million we can take him for."

Now, those were not charitable sentiments, and if I had known about them at the right time I would have been a lot harder-nosed with Audee Walthers, my old friend. Or maybe not. When you've got a lot of money you get used to people seeing you as a tappable resource instead of a

human being, even though you never get to like it.

Still, I had no objection to his finding out what I owned, or anyway as much about what I owned as I had allowed the financial-report services to know. There was plenty there. A sizeable interest in the charter operation of the *S. Ya.* Some food-mine and fish-farm shares. A great many enterprises back on Peggys Planet, including (to Walthers's surprise) the company he leased his plane from. The very computer-data service that was selling them the information. Several holding companies and import-export or freight-forwarding firms. Two banks; fourteen real-estate agencies, based everywhere from New York to New South Wales, with a couple on Venus and Peggys Planet; and any number of unrecognizable little corporations including an airline, a fast-food chain, something called Here After Inc. — and something called PegTex Petroventures. "My God," said Audee Walthers, "that's Mr. Luqman's company! So I was working for the son of a bitch all along!"

"And I," said Janie Yee-xing, looking at the part that mentioned the *S. Ya.* "Really! Does Broadhead own *everything*?"

Well, I did not. I owned a lot, but if they had looked at my holdings more sympathetically they might have been able to see a pattern. The banks loaned money for explorations. The real-estate companies helped settle colonists, or took over their shacks and hogans for cash so they could leave. The *S. Ya.* ferried colonists to Peggys; and, as for Luqman, why, that was the crowning jewel in the empire, if they had only known it! Not that I had ever met Luqman, or would have known what he looked like if I saw him. But he had his orders, and the orders came down the chain of command from me: Find a good oilfield somewhere near the Equator of Peggys Planet. Why the Equator? So the Lofstrom Loop we would build there could take advantage of the planet's rotational velocity. Why a launch loop? It was the cheapest and best way of getting things in and out of orbit. The oil we pumped would power-up the loop. The excess crude oil would go onto the loop and into orbit, in shipping capsules; the capsules would go back to Earth on the *S. Ya.*'s return flights to be sold there — which meant there would be a profitable cargo of oil to carry on the half of each round trip that was now nearly dead loss — which meant that we could cut the prices for colonists on the way out!

Robin takes a lot of pride in the launch loop, because it reassured him that human beings could invent things the Heechee had not. Well, he's right — at least if you don't look at the details. The loop was invented on Earth by a man named Keith Lofstrom in the late twentieth century, though nobody built one until there was enough traffic to justify it. What Robin didn't know

was that, although the Heechee never invented the loop, the sailship people did — they had no other way to get out of their dense, opaque atmosphere.

I do not apologize for the fact that almost all of my ventures showed a profit every year. That's how I kept them all going and expanding, but the profit was only incidental. See, I have a philosophy about earning money, and that is that anybody who knocks himself out to accumulate it after the first hundred million or so is sick, and —

Oh, but I've said all that already, haven't I?

I'm afraid I wander. What with all the things going on in my mind I get a little confused about what has happened, and what hasn't happened yet, and what never happens at all except in that mind.

The point I'm making is that all my money-making ventures were also solidly useful projects that contributed to both the conquest of the Galaxy and the alleviation of the needs of human beings, and that's a fact. And that's why all these fragments of biography do ultimately fall together. They don't look as though they're going to. But they do. All of them. Even the stories of my semi-friend, Captain, the Heechee whom I ultimately came to know quite well, and of his lover and second in command, the female Heechee named Twice, whom, as you will discover, I did at the end come to know quite a lot better than that.



When
the
Heechee
hid

inside their Schwarzschild shell at the core of the Galaxy they knew there could be no easy communication between their scared selves and the immense universe outside. Yet they dared not be without news.

So they set up a web of starlets outside the black hole itself. They were far enough away so that the roaring radiation of infall into the Hole did

not swamp their circuitry, and there were enough of them so that if one were to fail or be destroyed — even if a hundred were — the ones that were left would be able to receive and record the data from their early-warning spy stations all round the Galaxy. The Heechee had run away to hide, but they had left eyes and ears behind.

So from time to time some brave souls sneaked out of the core to find out what the eyes had seen and the ears had heard. When Captain and his crew were sent out to check space for the errant star, checking the monitors was an added duty. There were five of them aboard his ship — five living ones, anyway. By all odds the one that interested Captain the most was the slim, sallow, shiny-skinned female named Twice. By Captain's standards she was a raving beauty! And sexy, too — every year without fail — and the time, he judged, was getting near again!

But not, he prayed, just yet. And so prayed Twice, for getting through the Schwarzschild perimeter was a brute of a job. Even when the ship had been purpose-built to manage it. There were other can-openers around — Wan had stolen one — but those managed the job only in limited ways. Wan's ship could not enter the event horizon and survive. It could only extend a part of itself there.

Captain's ship was bigger and stronger. Even so the shaking, tossing, racking strains of passing through the event horizon threw Captain and Twice and all the other four members of the crew violently and hurtlingly against their retaining harnesses; the diamond-bright corkscrew coruscated with great fat silent sparks of radiance showering all around the cabin; the light hurt their eyes; the violent motion bruised their bodies, and it went on and on — for an hour or more by the crew's own subjective time, which was a queer, shifting blend of the normal pace of the universe at large and the slowed-down tempo inside the black hole.

But at last they were through into unstressed space. The terrible lurching stopped. The blinding lights faded. The Galaxy glowed before them, a velvet dome of cream splattered with bright, bold stars, for they were too far inside the center to see more than the occasional patch of blackness.

"Massed minds be thanked," said the Captain, grinning as he crawled out of his harness — he looked like a med-school skull when he grinned — "I think we've made it!" And the crew followed his example, unstrapping themselves, chattering cheerfully back and forth. As they rose to begin the data-collection process, Captain's bony hand reached out to hold Twice's. It was an occasion for rejoicing — as the captains of Nantucket whalers rejoiced when they passed Cape Horn, as the covered-wagon pioneers began to breathe again as they came down the slopes into the promised land of Oregon or California. The violence and peril were not over. They would have to go through it all again on the way back inside. But now, for at least a week or more, they could relax and collect

data; and this was the pleasure part of the expedition.

Or it should have been.

It should have been but was not, for as the Captain secured the ship and the officer named Shoe opened the communication channels every sensor on the board flared violet. The thousand automatic orbiting stations were reporting big news! Important news — *bad* news, and all the datastores clamored to announce their evil tidings at once.

There was a shocked silence among the Heechee in the cabin. Then their training overcame their astonished terror, and the cabin of the Heechee ship became a whirlwind of activity. Receive and collate, analyze and compare. The messages mounted. The picture took shape.

The last record-tapping expedition had been only a few weeks before, by the slow creep of time inside the great central black hole — sixty years or so as time was measured in the galloping universe outside. But even so, not much time! Not in the scale of stars!

And yet the whole world was different.

Question: What is worse than a prediction that doesn't come true?

Answer: A prediction that comes true sooner than you expect.

It had been the Heechee conviction that intelligent and technological life would arise in the Galaxy. They had identified more than a dozen inhabited worlds — and not merely inhabited, but bearing the promise of intelligence. They had made a plan for each of them.

Some of the plans had failed. There was a species of furry quadrupeds on a damp, cool planet so near the Orion nebula that its aurora filled the sky, small quick creatures with paws as nimble as a raccoon's and lemur eyes. They would discover tools one day, the Heechee thought; and fire; and farming; and cities; and technology and space travel. And so they had, and used them all to poison their planet and decimate their race. There was another race, six-limbed, segmented ammonia-breathers, very promising, sadly too near a star that went supernova. End of the ammonia-breathers. There were the chill, slow, sludgy creatures who occupied a special place in Heechee history. They had carried the terrible news that drove the Heechee into hiding, and that was enough to make them unique. More, they were not merely promising but actually intelligent already; not merely intelligent but civilized! Technology was already within their grasp. But they were a longshot entry in the galactic sweepstakes anyway, for their sludgy metabolism was simply too slow to compete with warmer, quicker races.

But one race, some day, would reach into space and survive. Or so the Heechee hoped.

And so the Heechee feared, too, for they knew even as they planned their retreat that a race that could catch up with them could also surpass them. But how could that possibility loom near so quickly? It had been

only sixty terrestrial years since the last checkup!

Then the distant monitors orbiting the planet Venus had shown the *sapiens* bipeds there, digging out the abandoned Heechee tunnels, exploring their little solar system in spacecraft that moved on jets of chemical flame. Pitiably crude, of course. But promising. In a century or two — four or five centuries at most, the Heechee thought — they would likely enough find the Gateway asteroid. And in a century or two after that they might begin to understand the technology —

But events had moved so swiftly! The human beings had found the Gateway ships, the Food Factory, the immense distant habitat the Heechee had used to pen specimens of Earth's then most promising race, the australopithecines. All had fallen to the humans, and that was not the end of it.

Captain's crew was well trained. When the data had been accepted, and filtered through the massed minds, and tabulated, and summarized, the specialists prepared their reports. White-Noise was the navigator. It was his responsibility to take position fixes on all reported sources and update the ship locator file. Shoe was the communications officer, busiest of all — except perhaps for Mongrel, the integrator, who flew from board to board, whispering to the massed minds and suggesting cross-checks and correlations. Neither Burst, the black-hole-piercer specialist, nor Twice herself, whose skill was in remote handling of slaved equipment, were needed for their specialties at this time, so they backed up the others, as did Captain, the ribbed muscles of his face twisting like serpents as he waited for the consolidated reports.

Mongrel was fond of her Captain, too, and so she gave him the least threatening ones first.

First, there was the fact that Gateway ships had been found and used. Well, there was nothing wrong with that! It was part of the plan, although it was disconcerting to have it happen so soon.

Second, there was the fact that the Food Factory had been found, and the artifact humans called Heechee Heaven. These were old messages, now decades old. Also not serious. Also disconcerting — quite disconcerting, because Heechee Heaven had been designed to trap any ships that docked there, and for two-way contact to have been established meant a quite unexpected sophistication among these upstart bipeds.

Third, there was a message from the sailship people, and that made the tendons in Captain's face writhe faster. Finding a ship in a solar system was one thing — locating one in interstellar space was distressingly impressive.

And fourth —

Fourth was White-Noise's plot of the present whereabouts of all known Heechee vessels now operated by human beings, and when Captain saw that he squeaked with rage and shock. "Plot it against banned

spaces!" he commanded. And as soon as the datafans were in place and the combined images appeared the tendons in his cheeks trembled like plucked harpstrings. "They are exploring black holes," he said, his voice thin.

White-Noise nodded. "There is more," he said. "Some of the vessels carry order-disruptors. They can penetrate." And Mongrel the integrator added:

"And it does not seem that they understand the danger signs."

Having given their reports, the rest of the crew waited politely. It was the Captain's problem now. They hoped very much that he was going to be able to handle it.

The female named Twice was not exactly in love with the Captain, because it wasn't time for that yet; but she knew she would be. Quite soon. Within the next few days, most likely. So in addition to her concern for this astonishing and frightening news, there was also her concern for the Captain. He was the one who had his upper lip in the pincer. Although it was not yet time, she reached out and placed her lean hand over his. So deep in thought was the Captain that he didn't even notice, but patted it absently.

Shoe made the sniffing sound that was the Heechee equivalent of clearing his throat before asking, "Do you want to establish contact with the massed minds?"

"Not now," hissed the Captain, rubbing his rib-cage with his free fist. It made a grating noise, loud in the stillness of the cabin. What the Captain really wanted to do was to go back into his black hole in the core of the Galaxy and pull the stars up over his head. That was not possible. Next best would be to flee back to that same safe, friendly core and report to higher authority. Higher authority could then make the decisions. They could be the ones to deal with the massed minds of the ancestors, who would be eager to interfere. They could decide what to do about it — if possible, with some other Heechee captain and crew actually dispatched to this terrible swift space to carry out their orders. That was a possible option, but Captain was too well trained to allow himself so easy a way out. He was the one on the scene. Therefore he was the one who should make the first swift responses. If they were wrong — well, pity poor Captain! There would be consequences. Shunning, at least, though that was only for minor offenses. For graver ones there was the equivalent of being kicked upstairs — and Captain was not anxious to join that mighty mass of stored minds that were all of his ancestors.

He hissed worriedly and made his decisions. "Inform the massed minds," he ordered.

"Just inform? Not request recommendations?" asked Shoe.

Firmly, "Just inform. Prepare a penetrating drone and send it back to

base with a duplicate of all data." This was to Twice, who released his hand and began the task of activating and programming a small message vessel. And finally, to White-Noise, "Set course for the sailship interception point."

It was not the Heechee custom to salute on receiving an order. It was also not the Heechee custom to argue about it, and it was a measure of the confusion in the ship that White-Noise asked, "Are you sure that's what we should do?"

"Do it," said Captain, shrugging irritably.

Actually, it was not a shrug but a quick, violent contraction of his hard, globular abdomen. Twice found herself staring admiringly at that fetching little bulge, and at the way the tough, long strings of tendon from shoulder to wrist stood out from the arm itself. Why, your fingers would almost meet as you clung to it!

With a start she realized that her time of loving was closer than she had thought. What an inconvenience! Captain would be as annoyed as she, since they had had plans for a very special day and a half. Twice opened her mouth to tell him, then closed it again. It was no time to trouble him with that; he was completing the thought processes that ridged his cheek muscles and made him scowl, and beginning to give orders.

Captain had plenty of resources to draw on. There were more than a thousand cleverly cached Heechee artifacts scattered around the Galaxy. Not the ones that were meant to be found sooner or later, like Gateway; these were concealed under the exterior appearance of unpromising asteroids in inaccessible orbits, or between stars, or among clusters of other objects in dust swarms and gas clouds. "Twice," he ordered without looking at her, "activate a command ship. We will rendezvous with it at the sailship point."

She was upset, he observed. He was sorry but not surprised — come down to that, he was upset himself! He returned to the command seat and lowered the bones of his pelvis onto the projecting Y-flanges, his life-support pouch fitting neatly into the angle they enclosed.

And became aware that his communications officer was standing over him. "What is it, Shoe?"

Shoe's biceps-tendons flexed deferentially. "They are conversing, Captain."

"Conversing? You mean transmitting messages? Who are you talking about — massed minds!" Captain shouted, leaping out of the seat again. "You mean the aborigines? They are sending messages at galactic distances?"

Shoe hung his head. "I am afraid so, Captain. Of course, I do not yet know what they are saying — but there is a great volume of communication."

Captain shook his wrists feebly to signal that he wanted to hear no

more. Sending messages! Across the Galaxy! Where anyone might hear! — where, especially, the certain parties the Heechee hoped would not be disturbed at all might well hear. And react to. “Establish translation matrices with the minds,” he ordered, and dismally returned to his seat.

The mission was jinxed. Captain no longer had hopes of an idle pleasure cruise, or even of the satisfaction of a minor task well accomplished. The big question in his mind was whether he could get through the next few days.

Still, soon they would transship into the shark-shaped command vessel, fastest of the Heechee fleet, filled with technology. Then his options would increase. Not only was it larger and faster, it carried a number of devices not present on his little penetrator-ship. A TPT. Hole cutters like the ones his ancestors had used to scoop out the Gateway asteroid and the warrens under the surface of Venus. A device like the one in the ship Wan had stolen, for reaching into black holes to see what could be plucked out — he shuddered. Please the massed minds of the ancestors, *that* one they would not have to use! But he would have it. And he would have a thousand other useful bits of equipment —

The Heechee learned fairly early in their technological phase to store the intelligences of dead or dying Heechee in inorganic systems. That was how the Dead Men came to be stored to provide company for the boy Wan, and it was an application of that technology that produced Robin's Here After company. For the Heechee (if I may venture a possibly not-unbiased opinion) it may have been a mistake. Since they were able to use the dead minds of Heechee ancestors to store and process data, they never went far with the development of true artificial-intelligence systems capable of far greater power and flexibility. Like — well — like me.

Assuming, that was, that the ship was still functioning and would meet them at the rendezvous.

The artifacts the Heechee had left behind were powerful, strong, and long-lasting. Bar accidents, they were built to last for at least ten million years.

But you could not bar all accidents. A nearby supernova, a malfunctioning part, even a chance collision with some other object — you could harden the artifacts against almost all hazards, but in infinite astronomical time “almost all” is little better than “none.”

And if the command ship happened to have failed? And if there were

no other that Twice could locate and bring to the rendezvous?

Captain allowed himself to let the depression sink into his mind. There were too many ifs. And the consequences of each of them too unpleasant to face.

It was not unusual for Captain, or any other Heechee, to be depressed. They had earned it fairly.

When Napoleon's Grand Army crawled back from Moscow their enemies were small harassing cavalry bands, the Russian winter — and despair.

When Hitler's Wehrmacht repeated the same trek thirteen decades later, the main threats were the Soviet tanks and artillery, the Russian winter — and, again, despair. They retreated in better order and with more destruction to their foes. But not with more despair, or less.

Every retreat is a kind of funeral cortege, and the thing that has died is confidence. The Heechee had confidently expected to win a galaxy. When they found they must lose, and began their immense, star-spanning retreat to the core, the magnitude of their defeat was huger than any that humans had ever known, and the despair seeped into all of their souls.

The Heechee were playing a most complicated game. One could call it a team sport, except that few of the players were allowed to be aware that they were on a team at all. The strategies were limited, but the final goal of the game was certain. If they managed to survive as a race they would win.

But so many pieces moved on that board! And the Heechee had so little control. They could start the game. After that, if they interfered directly they exposed themselves. That was when the game became perilous.


It was now Captain's turn to play, and he knew the risks he ran. He could be the player who lost the game for the Heechee once and for all.

His first task was to preserve the Heechee hiding place as long as possible, which meant doing something about the sailship people.

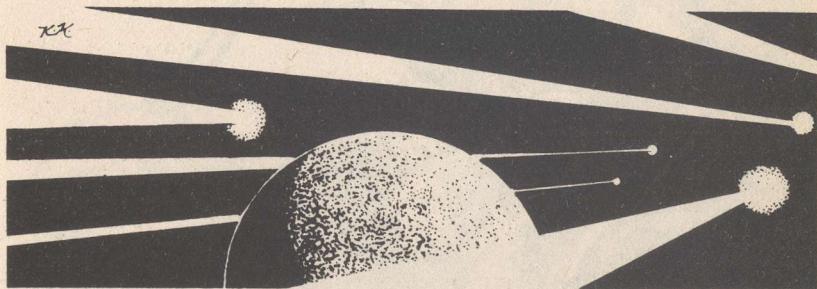
That was the least of his worries, for the second task was the one that counted. The stolen ship carried equipment that could penetrate even the skin around the Heechee hidey-hole. It could not enter. But it could peer within, and that was bad. Worse, the same equipment could penetrate almost any event discontinuity, even the one that the Heechee themselves dared not enter. The one that they prayed would never be breached, since within it rested the thing they most terribly feared.

So Captain sat there at the controls of his ship, while the glowing silicate cloud that surrounded the core dwindled behind them. Meanwhile Twice was beginning to show signs of the strain that would shortly press her to her limits; and meanwhile the cold, sludgy sailship people crept through their long, slow lives; and meanwhile the one human-manned craft in the universe that could do anything about it approached

yet another black hole. . . .

And meanwhile those other players on the great board, Audee Walthers and Janie Yee-xing, watched their stack of chips slowly disappearing as they waited to make their own private gamble. 

(To be continued next issue. The complete novel, under the title Heechee Rendezvous, will be published in May 1984 by Del Rey Books.)

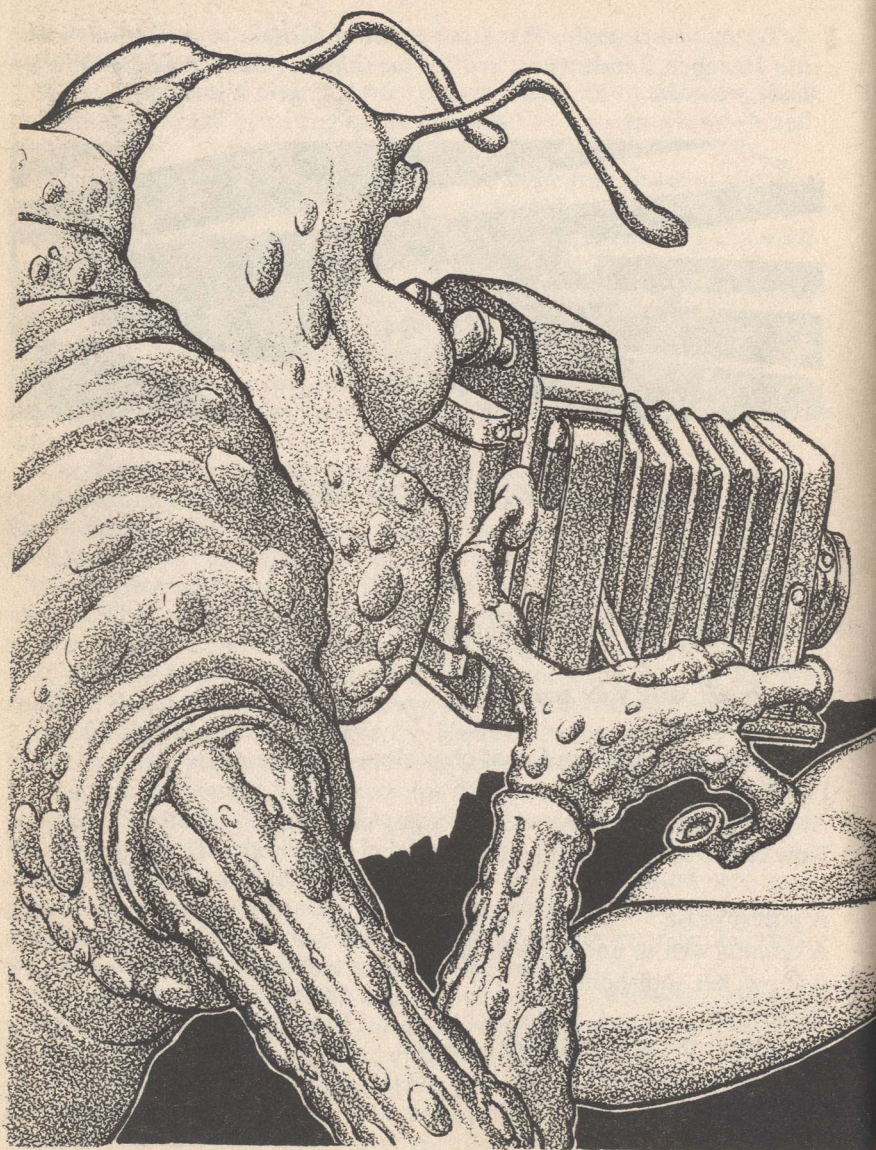


A RE-UNION OF SELVES

Our vectors lock
Shiverstroke
Is all blue: uterine bliss: weightless
Stretching
Each, wider with your touch
Yes — between
Wild pleasure, in this pulse, of choiceless
Possibility; wild talent here
At this hot bud of clustered light; is joy unclosing
Now clonic messages come (clear)

A purest pulse
A brianna writ in unbreakable code
As now, her soul-hollow
Radio sign
Is hung on the walls of infalling flame

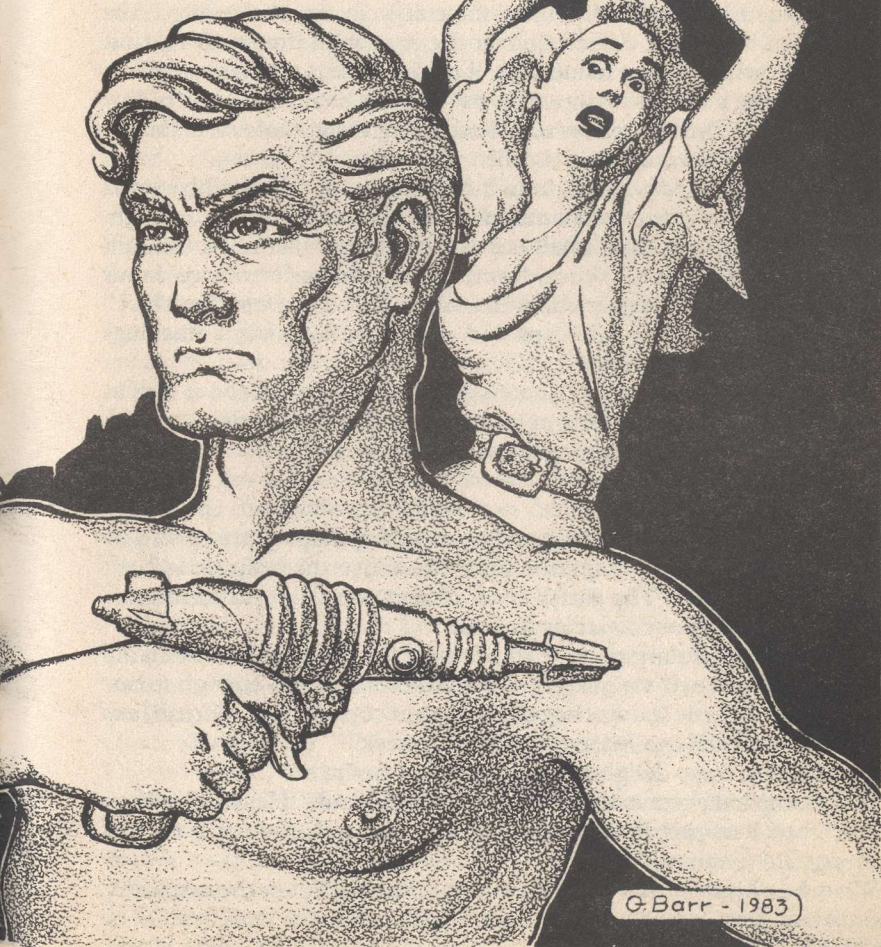
— Robert Frazier &
Andrew Joron



FANTASTIC
ADVENTURES
WITH AMAZING

by Robert Bloch

art: George Barr



I have just invented a time machine.

It's called memory.

With it I can journey into the distant past, moving from year to year and from place to place at will. Best of all, there's plenty of room for traveling companions in this machine of mine.

If you don't believe it, I'll give you a demonstration. Just hop in, fasten your seat-belt, and let me take you back to a Golden Age.

First stop — a frosty morning, early in 1928.

Whoosh!

And here we are, on a street before a newsstand in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Take a good look around. Notice the traffic in the background; the horse-drawn ice wagon clattering over the icy cobblestones, the quaint automobiles with strange names like Reo, La Salle, and Pierce-Arrow, skittering along hellbent at twenty miles per hour behind that spiffy new Model A Ford. The big yellow vehicle clanging along those steel rails in the center of the thoroughfare is called a streetcar.

All this may be a peculiar sight to modern eyes, but the grubby small boy standing before the outdoor magazine racks finds it ordinary enough.

Come to think of it, that small boy is a pretty peculiar sight himself. He's ten years old, but his skinny frame is draped in garments we'd now associate with much younger children — a middy blouse and "knickers" buckling just below the kneecaps and above the long wool stockings supported by elastic garters.

Yes, this kid looks odd, but there's something familiar about him as well. Where have I seen that rumpled brown hair before, with its cowlick tumbling down over those myopic hazel eyes?

In the mirror, that's where.

The kid is me.

And my hazel eyes are staring at the newsstand display, transfixed by the sight of an oversize magazine towering above the pulp periodicals ranged on either side. The garish cover illustration claims my attention, and so does the title — *Amazing Stories*.

I gulp, reach into my pocket, and fumble for the biggest coin in my monthly allowance. It's a quarter — a real silver quarter, enough to buy admission to a movie show, a bag of popcorn, a cup of Orange Crush, and enough penny candy to make me sick for a week.

Considering these delightful alternatives, I hesitate.

I don't know the name of the philosopher who said, "He who hesitates is lost," but I suspect he came up with the idea while eyeing a copy of *Amazing Stories* himself.

What I do know is that I laid down my coin, picked up the magazine, and got lost. Lost in its pages, reading "The Revolt of the Pedestrians" by David H. Keller, M.D.

Look now — we're traveling again — and here I am at home that evening, sprawled across my bed as I devour this mind-boggling tale of a future world in which automotive travel has replaced walking so completely that most human legs have shrivelled and atrophied. Only a few pedestrians remain footloose, and their ambulatory efforts to regain control of society provide the plot of Dr. Keller's story.

Let's leave the kid on the last leg of his reading and **whoosh** our way to — July Fourth weekend, 1948.

The place — Toronto, Canada. The occasion — the Sixth World Science Fiction Convention. Almost three hundred people have gathered in a place called the Rai Purdy Studio, listening to a speech by the Guest of Honor, a tall, gangling, bespectacled man. He is twenty-eight years old, but some of his jokes are even older.

Well, whaddya know — it's me again!

That's right, here I am: sporting long trousers and an even longer cigarette-holder. I'm now a writer of science fiction myself; I've appeared in the pages of *Amazing Stories*, and I am about to meet the man responsible for it all — David H. Keller, M.D., in person!

By this time I know quite a bit about the man whom fans call "the Good Doctor" — yes, that's what they called him, for in those days Isaac Asimov was still just an intern.

I've followed Dr. Keller's career in the pages of science-fiction and fantasy magazines, read many of his stories, and admired his unique concepts. I am now prepared to admire him in the flesh.

But not quite as much as he admires himself.

Don't misunderstand me; I'm not putting him down. Even in 1948 we science-fiction writers were aware that some of our peer group sported oversize egos and we accepted the fact. But I must confess in all candor that I was disappointed rather than dazzled by Dr. Keller's immense self-esteem, and seeing him in action was quite a revelation. I haven't been so shocked since, except for the time I discovered that Bob Silverberg wears curlers in his beard.

Now let's take a look at Dr. Keller as he speaks on a variety of topics. On, and on, and on. Let's watch him at the improvised convention banquet when wife Celia Keller jumps up, impromptu, and suggests that perhaps the Doctor can be prevailed upon to tell his famous anecdote about Shakespeare. "Perhaps?" You better believe he can — and does. On and on and on.

Mrs. Keller, a lovely lady, is obviously in awe of her spouse's fiery brilliance, and she loses no opportunity to add fuel to the flames. Whenever a program is in progress she is apt to arrive and interrupt the proceedings with gladsome tidings — "the Doctor is coming now!"

Keller, God love him, has every reason to be proud of his achievements. Here in Toronto I admire them still, but it's pretty difficult to play

the role of passenger on that long ego-trip he's conducting. I must continually remind myself that I owe this man a vote of thanks; if it were not for *Amazing Stories* and his revolting pedestrians, I wouldn't be here myself.

Just how did I arrive?

Back to the time machine now, and another journey — this time to a dark and lonely street on a spring evening in 1935.

And here I appear, descending from the exit of one of those streetcars. They've changed color — they're orange now — and I've changed, too, in the seven years since 1928. My brown hair is neatly combed, my eyes are framed by glasses, and my trousers are as long as my legs. The grubby kid is now a grubby author.

Since graduating from high school at seventeen last June I've acquired a secondhand typewriter and a secondhand cardtable to set it on. While learning the rudiments of typing and writing simultaneously, I have churned out seven stories which were sold to *Weird Tales*, a magazine I began reading only a few months before my first encounter with *Amazing Stories*. This output — some twenty-seven thousand words — has earned me the princely sum of \$270, plus a local newspaper writeup which appeared a week ago on the day following my eighteenth birthday.

The fruits of my sudden wealth and fame came in the form of a telephone call inviting me to attend a meeting of a professional writers' group, the Milwaukee Fictioneers. I was instructed to take a streetcar ride the following Thursday evening, get off at a certain stop, and meet with a member who would personally conduct me to the gathering.

So here I am, climbing down from the trolley and crossing to the curb of a darkened street in a strange part of town, my head in a whirl and my heart in my mouth. I've corresponded with authors — it was H.P. Lovecraft whose letters first encouraged me to try my own hand at fiction — but I've never actually met a real live writer face to face in all my life. Now I'm going to encounter a dozen or more at once: full-grown men, not youngsters like myself. What will they be like? And what have I let myself in for, standing here in the dark?

The answer emerges from the shadows of the street-corner. A diminutive figure approaches me, face obscured by a broad-billed cap, humped back covered by a blue coat.

"Robert Bloch?"

"That's right."

"Pleased to meet you." A hand reaches up to grasp mine in a grip of surprising strength. "I'm Ray Palmer."

Another surprise. The name of Raymond A. Palmer is known to me; he is indeed a professional writer of science fiction. But it's a shock to associate him with this odd little man.

The greatest surprise comes gradually; as we move down the street

together I listen to him speak, and find myself forgetting the dwarfed stature and the hunched back. By the time we arrive at his sister's home where the meeting is to be held tonight, I've almost completely ignored his physical attributes. During the next quarter-century of our association I would come to accept them as quite natural, and so does everyone else who meets him, because Ray himself rejects every hint of infirmity; he faces life with courage, stamina, gallantry and wit.

Right now, as he escorts me, he's describing the *modus operandi* of the Milwaukee Fictioneers. The group meets regularly on every other Thursday, each member playing host in turn. No liquor is served, but there's a light snack ending the sessions; usually it consists of cold-cuts, coffee and dessert. The meetings are strictly informal. There's no reading of the minutes of the last meeting — and no reading of stories, either. Instead, members describe a yarn they're working on and ask for help with a plotting-problem they have gotten hung up on. Sometimes they enlist the aid of others in fleshing out the bare bones of an idea. On occasion they may find themselves with nothing to go on and ask for an idea itself. Everyone is free to pitch in with suggestions, criticisms, market tips, and useful information. This being the height of the Great Depression of the Thirties, most of the all-male membership writes part-time while holding down regular jobs. Ray himself is a roofer and tinsmith, but the group includes a newspaper reporter, a parking-lot attendant, and several college professors. What it is really can only be described as a writers' workshop before the term was even invented.

Whoosh!

The Fictioneers are in session now, and I'm being introduced to other members. I'm the only fantasy writer present; the others turn out westerns, detective stories, adventure sagas, even so-called "true confession" or mildly risqué items known as "iceman-under-the-bed" fiction. But there are also two writers of science fiction in the group, besides Palmer, and I'm immediately attracted to them.

Stanley G. Weinbaum, aged thirty-two, is a blazing new star in the SF constellation, a novice nova whose brilliant work has illuminated the field for scarcely a year. Little do I realize that before this year ends he will meet with a tragic death from cancer — or that thirty years from now I'll be penning a memoir of our all-too-brief friendship in a collection titled *The Best of Stanley Weinbaum*. Tonight he dazzles us all with the concept for his latest story.

Equally impressive is Roger Sherman Hoar, whose pseudonym, Ralph Milne Farley, has long been known to science-fiction readers of his "Radio Man" series and other works.

Roger has an illustrious background. He's a descendant of Roger Sherman, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, and he himself is a former state senator from Massachusetts. He is credited in

botanical circles as the discoverer of the blue dandelion; he's the author of the only book extant on the subject of constitutional law. Before embarking fulltime on a legal career, he served as a Secret Service agent in World War I; it was then that he met his wife-to-be, who was also an intelligence agent. Now he is the corporation attorney for Bucyrus-Erie, a South Milwaukee industrial firm manufacturing tractors and earth-moving equipment. One of Roger's duties is to repossess machinery from delinquent purchasers all over the country; he travels the railroads in deluxe accommodations and during such journeys he dictates his science-fiction stories to a company secretary. Roger is the only Fictioneer who can be described as wealthy — his luxurious home even boasts its own stable for riding-horses. But he's totally unassuming and has a keen sense of humor. In time to come I'll collaborate with him, rewriting his story, "The Bottomless Pool", for publication.

Another member, also destined to a career in science fiction, is Arthur Tofte. At present he's struggling quite unsuccessfully to write what is then known as a "picaresque" novel. Fated to become advertising manager of the huge Allis-Chalmers Corporation, he won't turn to SF until his retirement more than thirty years in the future.

Listening to these men, my adolescent reaction is one of awe and admiration. I honestly can't recall what I may have said or done that evening, but apparently an informal vote was taken at the following meeting and I was invited to become a fullfledged, permanent member of the Fictioneers. So it was that I rejoiced in the friendship of Farley, Tofte and — all too briefly — Stanley G. Weinbaum. But while I frequently helped plot their stories, I had no inclination to tackle science fiction on my own. It wasn't until three years later that I entered the field in — of all places — *Amazing Stories*.

How did that happen?

Whoosh with me . . .

It's spring again: springtime of 1938. *Amazing Stories*, the brainchild of editor-publisher Hugo Gernsback, has long since become an orphan after financial reverses cost him his control. Now it has been adopted by the Ziff-Davis Publishing Company, proprietors of such successful magazines as *Popular Photography*. With the acquisition of the new addition to their stable they also take on a problem — *Amazing Stories* is going downhill and will require a firm hand to turn it around.

Messrs. Ziff and Davis summon Ralph Milne Farley to their Chicago office and offer him a job as editor. Graciously, he informs them that he's not about to leave his highly-paid position in South Milwaukee for a risky venture with a moribund pulp magazine. However, he does have a suggestion — why don't they hire that well-known science-fiction writer, Raymond A. Palmer?

Well known he may be, but not to Ziff or Davis. Nor do they know he's

been doing more writing than selling these past few years, and isn't getting rich repairing roofs. All they have to go on is Farley's recommendation, and their own desperate need for an editor who can take over immediately.

And so it is that Ray Palmer climbs down from the rooftops, moves to Chicago, and installs himself in a cubbyhole office on South Dearborn Street.

Three albatrosses hang around his neck and start pecking on him.

Albatross Number One — some joker in the company, probably an art director associated with *Popular Photography*, has come up with what he thinks is a brilliant idea. In order to distinguish *Amazing Stories* from its competitors, he's commissioned several new covers for forthcoming issues: not drawings, mind you, but actual photographs! Trouble is, the photo covers don't look very science-fictional, nor do they illustrate any particular story. But the new editor is stuck with them.

Albatross Number Two is a slogan coined by some other resident genius which, he thinks, will attract readers — "Every Story Scientifically Accurate." As this particular albatross pecks away, the new editor detects, in the touch of its beak, the kiss of death. Again, he's stuck with the slogan.

Albatross Number Three perches atop the pile of manuscripts accepted for publication by his predecessor. The stories scheduled to appear in the next issues don't match the cover illustrations, they are not "scientifically accurate" — they are merely dreadful. Dreadful, imperfect examples of the sort of yarn that has put *Amazing Stories* on its collision course with disaster.

Ray Palmer may have had no previous experience as a professional magazine editor, but he knows an albatross when he sees one, and these stories are for the birds. He can't change the covers, he can't rid himself of the slogan, but given a little time he can find better material to print.

Only there is no time. No time, no opportunity to send out letters soliciting submissions from established science-fiction authors, most of whom live in and around New York and sell to the other science-fiction pulps published there. Nor can his rate of payment — 1¢ per word — lure them into overnight action.

What to do?

Ray sends an SOS to his friends back in Milwaukee, the Fictioneers.

And that's why the August 1938 issue of *Amazing Stories* appears with a heading, "Every Story Scientifically Accurate" emblazoned at the top of a cover featuring the photo of a muscular male, nude to the waist, threatening a frightened girl with a suspiciously phallic raygun as she stands screaming, bound to the wall by what appear to be a couple of bicycle-chains. The table of contents includes a story by Arthur R. Tofte, and the cover itself promises work by Ralph Milne Farley, a newcomer

named Alfred R. Steber (actually Ray Palmer himself), and something called "Secret Of The Observatory" by Robert Bloch.

Opening the magazine, we get a hint of the sort of accuracy it contains by reading the headline of the ad on the inside of the cover — "Sensational Scientific Tests Prove Listerine Cures Dandruff."

Turn the first page to *The Observatory* editorial and read the second paragraph:

"Robert Bloch, author of this month's feature story, and the subject of our second direct-color cover photo, has written a story that clicks in more ways than one. The story is about future photography and possibilities in future espionage and intrigue. And if we aren't bad guessers, he'll be breaking into our pages again in the near future. He's done a fine job on his first attempt."

Sure he has. And Listerine cures dandruff, too.

Every writer lives in fear of those literary ghouls who burrow in the pages of mouldering magazines to exhume and devour the pitiful remains of stories long dead and buried there. And despite editor Palmer's plug, my first science-fiction story is neither scientific nor accurate. Up to that time my only knowledge of science had been derived from magazines like *Amazing Stories*. I never did find a market for the two articles I'd written — one, on hysterectomies, titled "To Womb It May Concern", and the other, a word of warning, "Death May Be Injurious To Your Health". But both were literary masterpieces in comparison to the piece I wrote in response to Ray Palmer's frantic appeal. I shudder to think of what grave-robbing critics might do if they ever unearthed it.

But I was now a science-fiction writer, for better or worse, and I decided to atone for my initial mistake by writing something halfway decent. Taking my time, I produced "The Strange Flight of Richard Clayton," which, while primitive by today's standards, was a decided improvement. This one the ghouls still dig up from time to time; I noted its appearance as recently as last year in an anthology published in Israel, of all places. But it made its debut in *Amazing Stories* in the March 1939 issue, where it was voted the most popular offering — exactly one month before editor Palmer instituted a policy of awarding a handsome \$50.00 bonus for the yarn most liked by readers in each issue. Stimulated by the notion of getting my hot little hands on an extra fifty bucks, I promptly sent him "The Man Who Walked Through Mirrors," and it, too, met with favor in the August 1939 issue — one month after the \$50.00 bonus offer had been cancelled.

So much for my timing.

Broken by the immensity of my misfortune, I abandoned *Amazing Stories* for *Weird Tales* and sold my rejections to a new market, *Strange Stories*, which only paid ½¢ a word, but would sometimes run two or three of my efforts at a time under various pseudonyms.

Ray Palmer managed to survive the loss of my services, and so did his magazine. By then he'd gotten rid of the photo covers, the silly slogan, and the need to depend on the Fictioneers. Freed of these albatrosses at last, he sent the circulation soaring with a policy of action-adventure space opera suited to the times and the taste of readers already restless amidst the realities of impending war. Escape fiction proved so popular that Ziff-Davis launched a companion magazine called *Fantastic Adventures*. It began life as an oversize bi-monthly, and again Ray found himself facing deadlines until he could amass sufficient material. I'd sworn off science fiction, accurate or no, but borderline fantasy was another matter — and when he called, I answered. "Queen of the Metal Men" graced, or disgraced, the April 1940 issue, and I can hear those literary ghouls cackling now.

Somehow the magazine survived this onslaught, and went into monthly publication. By 1942, when I again began writing, both for *Amazing Stories* and *Fantastic Adventures*, the nation was at war and Raymond A. Palmer was firmly established as an editor catering to teen-age tastes. Associate editor Louis H. Sampliner was a great help until he joined the armed forces.

Time to **whoosh** again.

Let's hopscotch through the years. We can avoid the "And then I wrote" trap merely by saying that I became a more-or-less regular contributor to both of Palmer's publications; by the time I ended my association, I'd sold seventeen yarns to *Amazing Stories* and did a guest editorial as late as 1962. *Fantastic Adventures* printed a staggering total of forty-nine tales under my own name and pseudonyms, including the infamous Lefty Feep series. Totalling the contributions to both magazines, I find my output rivalling the number of stories written for *Weird Tales*.

If our time machine touches down at intervals during the Forties, it will frequently find me taking a train from Milwaukee to Chicago for a weekend poker session at Palmer's home. New faces appear — Howard Browne, Ray's associate and later editor-in-chief of the Ziff-Davis pulps — William Hamling, who eventually leaves to found his own *Imagination* and *Imaginative Tales*, as well as *Rogue* — Paul Fairman, who will graduate from assistant to an editorial role.

One evening we're joined by the office-boy of the firm, a kid named Frank M. Robinson. Young Frankie bemoans his staggering losses at penny-ante poker. He doesn't know that one day he'll be in a position to buy and sell us all, thanks to his participation in a co-authored book which will form part of the story-line for a film, *The Towering Inferno*.

Other writers fade in and out of the game. A youthful William P. McGivern is now a penny-a-worder; he will go on to greater glory as a

screenwriter for the likes of Frank Sinatra, and his work will be represented in the lineup of the Book of the Month Club. He will be taken from our ranks in the late fall of 1982. His buddy, David Wright O'Brien, will meet a tragic death in WWII. Leroy Xerxa and Rog Phillips will also be taken from us before their time, but right now they're laughing it up at those all-night poker sessions. Mr. Ziff and Mr. Davis aren't present; I never even set eyes on either of them through all my years of association with *Amazing Stories*.

Whoosh along into the Fifties.

Ray Palmer is gone, no doubt using his poker winnings to help establish his own magazines. In time he'll move to West Amherst, Wisconsin, just as I will move to nearby Weyauwega. One day he'll show up at the house with a companion — none other than Richard S. Shaver, whose fantastic revelations of secret powers dominating the Earth have been published during the final years of Palmer's editorship. The so-called "Shaver Mystery" articles, presented as fact, boosted circulation, but destroyed any claim of credibility. I find Shaver in person to be less of a flake than one might expect, but his presence indicates the direction in which Ray Palmer's interest lies. He will venture into the fringes of the occult during the latter years of his life and profit from publication and mail-order sales as a result; his role in science fiction has ended.

Amazing Stories is now a digest-size magazine and its companion has been retitled *Fantastic*. During the science fiction boom of the Fifties it proceeds under the editorship of Howard Browne until he departs for a new career as a television and screenplay writer in Hollywood. I'll be meeting him out there again in the Sixties.

After his departure, Paul Fairman takes over, with Cele Goldsmith as Managing Editor at Ziff-Davis headquarters, now located in New York. Although I'm more active in other fields — mystery fiction and psychological-suspense novels — they still hustle me for stories, sending photostats of forthcoming cover illustrations and invitations to write yarns which will fit them. But a penny a word is no longer the inducement it was in the Thirties, and the time has come for me to follow my predecessors and take refuge in the Hollywood Hills.

Here I sit today, watching *Amazing Stories* as it undergoes a renaissance; miraculously, both the magazine and I have managed to survive over all these years. Perhaps the time has come to say goodbye, but I can't take my leave without climbing back into my time machine for one last **whoosh**.

Here we go — back to Chicago.

It's Labor Day weekend, 1952. I'm in the Morrison Hotel, surrounded by a milling mob of science-fiction conventioners. Only four years have elapsed since a few hundred of us listened to the Good Doctor's Kellerful conversation in Toronto, but now this annual affair has attracted more

than a thousand attendees.

And just look who's here — a teen-age Harlan Ellison and a beardless Richard Matheson, both attending a con for the first time in their lives — a youthful Philip Jose Farmer, the eminent E.E. Smith, Ph.D., guitar-playing Theodore Sturgeon, authoress Judy Merrill, writers Lester del Rey, Frederik Pohl, George O. Smith, Sam Moskowitz, Fritz Leiber and a score more, including the inevitable Forrest J (no period) Ackerman. Here's Bob Tucker and Lee Hoffman, and Irish fan Walter Willis, rubbing elbows with such luminaries as Willy Ley, August Derleth, Anthony Boucher, and John W. Campbell. Science fiction is burgeoning into its own; in a way, this convention represents the peak of the Golden Years.

I've done my little stint on the program — some nonsense involving a white toilet-seat which I attempt to pass off as a dinosaur bone found on the moon — and am now prepared to attend the gala banquet, under the toastmastership of renowned writer Murray Leinster.

But on the evening before the banquet is scheduled, disaster strikes. Murray Leinster sends word that he can't attend.

Before I can fully digest the news, convention heads Julian May and Ted Dikty come banging on my door. They have a question for me. Will I please take over as toastmaster tomorrow night?

I have questions for them, too.

Why me? I've never been a toastmaster before in all my life. How can I possibly prepare for their elaborate program in the little time remaining? How am I going to stand up in front of an audience of over a thousand people and manage to have my voice heard over the knocking of my knees? And where are you, David H. Keller, M.D., when we need you?

My queries fall on deaf ears.

And I fall on my bed, hastily scribbling notes for tomorrow's festivities.

A flick of the switch on our trusty time machine and we're now up on the podium at the head banquet table, gazing out over the crowd.

Somehow I've survived the ordeal. I've pointed out a few comely female editors as the ones I'd most like to submit to. And when Willy Ley speaks, telling the audience he's never seen a flying saucer, I pick one up from the table and let it fly at him.

It's all improvised, impromptu, immature — and immaterial. The important thing is that I'm up here at the table. And seated beside me is the Guest of Honor, none other than Hugo Gernsback.

Yes, Hugo Gernsback, the man who started it all. The man who founded *Amazing Stories*, the man who edited that very same issue which started my own interest in science fiction, way back in 1928. Here he is, alive and in the flesh, my dinner-companion for three hours. Three hours of face-to-face conversation about the glories of the past and the promise

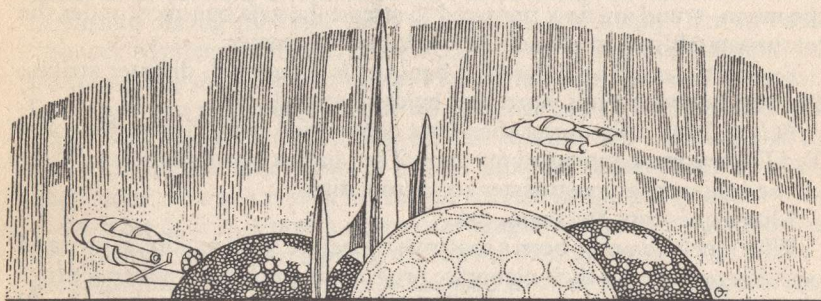
of the future. Somehow I've come full-circle in time, back to my own beginnings.

And then, to cap the climax, Hugo Gernsback calls Raymond A. Palmer to the platform, conferring upon him a new title — "the Son of Science Fiction."

Let's turn the machine off now.

Hugo Gernsback has gone and Ray has vanished too, but their memory lives on in the magazine that miraculously remains to flourish anew after fifty-seven years.

It's amazing . . .



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YAWN

by Wayne Wightman

art: Keith Minnion



Mr. Wightman, who tells us that his nickname is “Doc,” has been teaching college-level short-story and novel writing for 10 years. He started practicing what he preaches (in a scientifictional way, that is) in the December 1979 issue of Amazing. When he’s not writing and teaching writing, he’s running and learning to cook (is there a connection that we’re missing?). He also tells us that he is a lyrical nihilist — but adamantly refuses to explain what that means.

Repeatedly, Malcolm Golber asked himself why an alien would want to live at 1762 Ark Avenue, right next door. He could never give himself a satisfactory answer. Nevertheless, he was now positive. There was no longer reason for speculation, no longer grounds for doubt. His next door neighbor, a frizzy-haired 35-year old divorcee who worked as a bowling coach and part-time lipstick model, was secretly harboring an alien. One actually from outer space.

When had the thing arrived next door? Probably about a month ago — at any rate, not long after the UFO sighting just north of town. The *Post City Times* had busied its front page for days with interviews and blurry photos of the night sky that looked like cake icing smeared across a blackboard.

What did this alien look like? Malcolm had never seen it — but he had found traces of it, had uncovered clues; and among other things, he knew the thing had a damned peculiar diet.

Malcolm Golber had had enough of this sleuthing around. This was the day and the moment — he was going next door, he was going to knock, and he was going to lay eyes on the thing, he was actually going to look at the creepy little bugger and ask it a few pointed questions, providing, of course, that it could speak English.

If he were going to encounter an alien, he realized, he should at least wear a clean shirt. Having been preoccupied the last few days, Malcolm had neglected his laundry and could only find one semi-clean shirt, a red and blue Hawaiian print that smelled faintly of suntan oil. He put it on and checked himself in the bathroom mirror.

Cologne? Should he splash some on? He decided against it. He had read enough science fiction to know that a heavy scent might make the alien think he was in heat.

He spent a minute redistributing his remaining strands of paper-bag-brown hair across his head. Even though he was only 25, there wasn't much of it left. He sighed and his shoulders slumped. Probably his baldness was caused by his nearly extinct sex life and the high levels of testosterone coursing through his blood.

He straightened himself briskly, gave the mirror a strong-jawed look, and headed for the front door. This was going to be it, the showdown.

As he walked along his porch, the smell of morning-damp ivy filled his nose. *A good day, he thought, for meeting an alien.*

Now Malcolm Golber was not one to decide one pleasant day that he should go to his neighbor's house and rap crisply thrice and expect the Slime King of D̄xw̄-iū to come to the door and make bizarre gestures suggestive of friendship — that is, he wouldn't do it without some reasons. Malcolm had his quirks, but having hallucinations was not one of them. His reasons existed in objective hardcore reality.

True, he secretly read science fiction, preferring stories that dealt with

humans meeting extraterrestrials. That was his most time-consuming quirk. He also made it a point to see all the movies of pornographic film star Grushenka Hun — that was his most secret quirk. And he massaged royal jelly into his scalp every morning and night. But did any of this make him *odd*? He thought not.

He was friendly with his neighbors, and they were friendly with him. Ms. Polly Colica, the bowling coach, lipstick model, and harbinger of alien life, was especially friendly. Or *had* been anyway. In fact, Malcolm had seriously thought of making serious moves . . . some flowers, a bottle of grey Riesling. . . .

But then there had been that sighting north of town; and a day later, Ms. Colica had begun giving him the cold shoulder. “No,” to a movie invitation; “No,” to an after-work drink; “No,” to this; “No,” to that. Disheartening.

And she had drawn her curtains — *all of them* — right after the sighting and hadn’t opened them since. That was the first clue.

The second clue was that the curtains moved occasionally during the day while Ms. Colica was at work modelling lipstick. Something seemed to pick at them from the inside.

At first, Malcolm thought she might be concealing a boyfriend. Or a girlfriend. Ms. Colica was a little on the muscular side. She did wear her heavy brown hair pulled back in a tight bun. And Malcolm had heard “certain things” about bowling alleys. But then, perhaps she merely had a parakeet loose in the house and it was responsible for the moving curtains. Or mice. Maybe it was mice.

Except then Malcolm found something in her garbage can that indicated that it probably wasn’t a boyfriend or girlfriend or a parakeet.

Malcolm wasn’t the type of person who would dig through the garbage of attractive women in search of items relating to personal hygiene — although he had a cousin who did this. No, clue number three was right on top of her wet coffee grounds and slick Campbell’s Soup cans, just under the previous week’s newspapers and five or six aged eggplants. All wadded up were 6 five-pound bags of Kitty Green — “The kitty-litter odor-eater.”

And Ms. Colica didn’t have a cat. She hated cats. “When they purr,” she once told him, “I just want to strangle the evil little things.”

Malcolm checked the fine print on the bags. Kitty Green was actually compressed alfalfa pellets. “May also be used as feed for hamsters, guinea pigs, mice, and rats.” So maybe she was using it as feed.

But thirty pounds a week? That would mean a fairly husky rat.

Six days later, while Ms. Colica was at work, Malcolm thought he heard television voices singing inside her house. That night, he stole her garbage.

The first thing he noted was that she had had broccoli several nights in

a row. Buttered broccoli. It smelled like the Slime King of Ďxw-iü had relieved himself and then died. And then he found the fourth clue. The clincher. The big one. He picked the little bottles out and lined them up on the kitchen counter. It was incredible.

Malcolm Golber couldn't sleep for two days. He read voluminously, trying to tire his eyes and fuddle his brain to weariness. In two days, he read about the rise and fall of a dozen galactic empires. About aliens that invaded Earth and stole its uranium, or its women, or the heat from its core. He read about friendly aliens, beastly aliens, sexy aliens. Nasty crap-dwelling aliens. Conscious globes of light. Aliens that looked like doberman pinschers. Human aliens. But reading didn't help. Nothing could blot out the image of all those little bottles lined up on the kitchen counter:

Twenty-four bottles of selenium tablets — 12,000 selenium pills!

Seventeen bottles of chromium tablets — 17,000 of those. Maybe the thing looked like a lot of auto-body trim all hooked together.

Eleven bottles of ferrous sulfate — the equivalent of three and a half pounds of the stuff.

And another thirty pounds of Kitty Green.

The conclusion was inescapable.

So the next morning, Malcolm Golber did what he did; and as he turned into her yard, he could feel his heart beating in his ears and his hands were both sweaty and cold.

Ms. Polly Colica had lined her walkway with pedestal-mounted bowling balls that had turned gray with weathering — now, however, they were shiny black and gleaming. Was this another clue? Malcolm took a deep breath and pressed the crooked little doorbell. He had watched Ms. Colica go to work that morning, so whoever answered the door would be . . . *it*! The bell rang spastically somewhere toward the back of the house.

No answer.

He pressed it again.

The curtains on the porch window were not merely closed, he noted; they were pinned shut. Ms. Colica was serious about not letting anyone see inside.

While Malcolm had been plastering his hair across the top of his head, he had decided that if no one answered, he would go in anyway. Ms. Colica, in one of her friendlier moments, had shown him where she kept a spare key hidden, in case there was some kind of emergency and she wasn't around.

Malcolm lifted up the pot of Martha Washington pelargoniums and found the key and brushed the dirt out of its grooves. It slid easily into the lock and the door popped open an inch. Had something on the other side pulled on it?

He was sweating nicely now, inside his Hawaiian shirt.

The house was cool and dim. Dearly Malcolm wished he was home, sitting in his reading chair with *Panzers From Space* clutched in his hands — but this had to be done.

“Hello?” he whispered.

From the tile entryway he stepped down onto the lavender shag rug. The crushed-velvet furniture in the livingroom was as freshly pink as the day it was delivered. Apparently the alien was not one of the filthier types. Dark plaster angels hung in midflight on the walls. Only the sound of a distant sputtering lawnmower broke the utter silence.

Malcolm moved carefully through the livingroom, feeling the carpet and pad gently compress under his feet. Around the corner, in the kitchen, a small light burned — perhaps the oven light.

Something clinked — Malcolm froze. Another clink, like a dish being put in the sink. A dim shadow crossed the far wall.

He tried to make his throat work. “Hello?” he whispered.

The shadow lurched across the wall. Strange feet moved over the linoleum. And then it was standing in front of him.

“Hello,” it said.

Malcolm started to ask the alien if it really was an alien — but there was no question about it. Among other things, it was nude, and that resolved several questions rather quickly: It belonged to none of the sexes Malcolm had ever seen in the films of Grushenka Hun, and although it had all its arms and legs and eyes in the right places, it wouldn’t have got half a block down the street before children would have gathered to throw rocks and sick their dogs on it.

A few coarse yellow hairs bristled out of the top of its head, and its grayish-yellow skin was pulled tightly over its long and oddly proportioned arms. The teeth looked like little pieces of white cardboard glued to its gums. Worse, it was covered with scars, like someone had attacked it with an Osterizer.

“Hello,” Malcolm croaked, his mouth tasting like old suet.

The thing did something with its face that looked like a smile. Those teeth were awful. “Ms. Colica said if anyone saw me, I would make that person nervous. Perhaps you would like to come into the livingroom and sit down. Humans are less nervous when they sit down.”

Malcolm followed the thing to the pink velvet sofa and sat.

“My name is Clint,” the alien said.

“Clint?” Malcolm repeated in an unexpected falsetto.

“A name picked off your television broadcasts. I’m not even male.” It casually spread its peculiar legs apart and showed Malcolm an empty albeit lumpy crotch. “I wasn’t supposed to be dropped here, but there was an accident and I got left behind. I was just along for a training ride,” Clint said chattily. “This was supposed to be Si!uni’s planet. I’m only

halfway through my surgical modifications. That's why I have all these scars. They'll be smoothed out before I start my tour of duty here." Clint passed one bony grayish-yellow hand over the top of its head. The wiry yellow hairs popped back up. It was like hog's hair. "You know," it said, "my last surgery, the doctors said, would be the easiest of all, but I knew the minute I went under that something would go wrong. Something *told* me it wouldn't turn out the way it was supposed to."

"Where are you from?" Malcolm asked.

"Where'm I from? Earth is what we call it. So I came out of it, and sure enough, they were all standing around my bed, and they told me, 'Clint, you may have a little problem.' A little problem? Did I have a little problem? It depends on how important you think walking is." The alien's wispy hand whipped back and forth in front of its face. "I couldn't even *stand up*! And the pain in my back! They had put in two of the *vertebrae* in reverse order."

"Are there many of you on Earth?" Malcolm said quickly.

"Last census was 625 million. Or do you mean on *this* Earth?"

"Yes, this one."

"I don't really know. You would think, as much of that kind of work as they do, they could get the *vertebrae* in the right order!"

"What is —"

"See this scar here?" Clint said, pointing to its neck. "I didn't need this operation at all, but they said I had to have it if I wanted to drink milk when I got here. Well, who wants to just do things half way? So I *told* them . . ." And on and on and on.

The fourth time Malcolm tried to break in, he failed, just like the previous three attempts. So he shut up and listened patiently. As the morning wore into the afternoon, he learned of the many painful operations Clint had endured. He learned all about Clint's second mate and how this mate had abandoned him and illegally taken their "zomi." Clint didn't know the English word for zomi and Malcolm couldn't figure out what they had used it for. For a while it sounded like it might have been a wheelbarrow, and then for a while it sounded like some kind of sexual apparatus. Malcolm learned all about how lots of Clint's neighbors tried to get the mate to bring the zomi back and use it on him again.

Time passed very slowly. Malcolm shifted his weight from one side of his butt to the other, but the relief of fresh circulation was short-lived. His mind wandered to what he would have for lunch.

"... in the arm and it hurt so much! With surgery like I had, you just can't have people coming up to you and poking you like that. Well, my friend told me that if I went down to the feeding station late at night and ordered b'zlicki, something like piroshki with a chopped retina filling, that my mate would see how much it hurt me to swallow something like that and . . ."

Malcolm looked at his wristwatch. 2:35. Ms. Colica would be home soon. He stood up, ready with an excuse for leaving.

"... but *my zomi* had four handles arranged to fit me and the track —"


"I have a rump roast in the oven," Malcolm blurted.

"— was set so my feet would reach right into the foot rests and . . ." Clint yammered, following Malcolm to the door.

Ten minutes later, Malcolm got away from the house. His head hurt. As he walked between the two rows of decoratively mounted bowling balls, he wondered if Clint would tell Ms. Colica that he had discovered their secret.

He didn't care. He certainly wasn't going to break his neck calling the newspaper or telling his neighbors that there was an alien living next door. If it came up in conversation, he might say something. Otherwise . . .

Malcolm Golber fixed himself a lunchmeat sandwich and stood chewing in front of his bookcase. *The Gyascutus of Bellatrix* — that sounded promising. "A mountainous world of savage women!" the jacket said. Or maybe *Weird Star* — "Aliens of unspeakable obscurantism!" Then he found it: *Metamind* — "Was the alien the beautiful and sexy Isha, or was it the world-destroying Madman who pursued him across half a dozen exotic worlds?" That sounded pretty good.

He began reading and didn't finish until long after dark. The extraterrestrial in the book was eccentric, exciting, and exuberantly complicated. Malcolm went to his bathroom, made sure the curtains were pulled, and rubbed a teaspoon of royal jelly into his scalp. After a quick look at an actual autographed 8 × 10 of Grushenka Hun, he slipped into bed and turned off the light and had lovely dreams of himself and Polly Colica floating like thistle-down from world to world to world. 

MOVING?

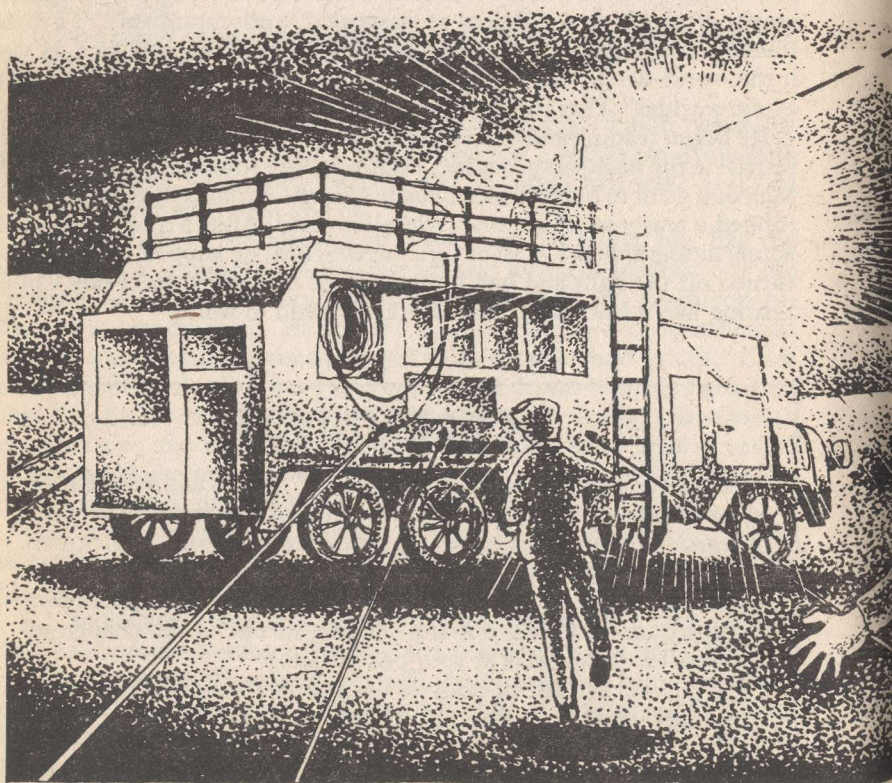
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KITEMASTER

by Keith Roberts

art: Keith Roberts





Keith Roberts was born in the East Midlands of England and studied art at Northampton, where he received training as a book illustrator. However, his first job was at a studio specializing in TV animation. His first novel was The Furies, in the classic British "disaster" mode. His second, Pavane, is now a recognized classic. Others include Molly Zero, The Boat of Fate, and The Inner Wheel. Many of his best stories can be found in the collection The Grain Kings and Machines and Men.

In the late 1960s he was associated with the British SF magazine Science Fantasy (later SF Impulse) for which he did both editorial work and illustration.

"Kitemaster" is his first appearance in Amazing.

The ground crew had all but finished their litany. They stood in line, heads bowed, silhouetted against the last dull flaring from the west; below me the launch vehicle seethed gently to itself, water sizzling round a rusted boiler rivet. A gust of warmth blew up toward the gantry, bringing scents of steam and oil to mingle with the ever-present smell of dope. At my side the Kitecaptain snorted, it seemed impatiently; shuffled his feet, sank his bull head even further between his shoulders.

I glanced round the darkening hangar, taking in the remembered scene: the spools of cable, head-high on their trolleys, bright blades of the anchor rigs, fathom on fathom of the complex lifting train. In the centre of the place, above the wickerwork Observer's basket, the mellow light of oil lamps grew to stealthy prominence; it showed the spidery crisscrossings of girders, the faces of the windspeed telltales, each hanging from its jumble of struts. The black needles vibrated, edging erratically up and down the scales; beyond, scarcely visible in the gloom, was the complex bulk of the manlifter itself, its dark, spread wings jutting to either side.

The young priest turned a page of his book, half glanced toward the gantry. He wore the full purple of a Base Chaplain; but his worried face looked very young. I guessed him to be not long from his novitiate; the presence of a Kitemaster was a heavy weight to bear. His voice reached up to me, a thread of sound mixed with the blustering of the wind outside. *"Therefore we beseech Thee, Lord, to add Thy vigilance to ours throughout the coming night; that the Land may be preserved, according to Thy covenant. . . ."* The final response was muttered; and he stepped back, closing the breviary with evident relief.

I descended the metal-latticed steps to the hangar floor, paced unhurriedly to the wicker basket. As yet there was no sign of Canwen, the Observer; but that was to be expected. A flyer of his seniority knows, as

the Church herself knows, the value of the proper form of things. He would present himself upon his cue; but not before. I sprinkled oil and earth as the ritual dictates, murmured my blessing, clamped the Great Seal of the Church Variant to the basket rim and stepped away. I said, "Let the Watching begin."

At once the hangar became a scene of ordered confusion. Tungsten arcs came to buzzing life, casting their harsher and less sympathetic glare; orders were shouted, and Cadets ran to the high end doors, began to roll them back. The wind roared in at once, causing the canvas sides of the structure to boom and crack; the arc globes swung, sending shadows leaping on the curving walls. The valve gear of the truck set up its fussing; I climbed back to the gantry as the heavy vehicle nosed into the open air. I restored the sacred vessels to their valise, clicked the lock and straightened.

The Kitecaptain glanced at me sidelong, and back to the telltales. "Windspeed's too high, by eight or ten knots," he growled. "And mark that gusting. It's no night for flying."

I inclined my head. "The Observer will decide," I said.

He snorted. "Canwen will fly," he said. "Canwen will always fly . . ." He turned. "Come into the office," he said. "You'll observe as well from there. In any case, there's little to see as yet." I took a last glance through the line of rain-spattered windows, and followed him.

The room in which I found myself was small, and as spartan as the rest of the establishment. An oil lamp burned in a niche; a shelf held manuals and dogeared textbooks, another was piled with bulky box files. A wall radiator provided the semblance at least of comfort; there was a square steel strongbox, beside it a battered metal desk. On it stood a silver-mounted photograph; a line of youths stood stiffly before a massive, old-pattern launch vehicle.

The Captain glanced at it and laughed, without particular humour. "Graduation day," he said. "I don't know why I keep it. All the rest have been dead and gone for years. I'm the last; but I was the lucky one of course." He limped to a corner cabinet, opened it and took down glasses and a bottle. He poured, looked over his shoulder. He said, "It's been a long time, Helman."

I considered. Kitecaptains, by tradition, are a strangely-tempered breed of men. Spending the best part of their lives on the frontier as they do, they come to have scant regard for the social niceties most of us would take for granted; yet the safety of the Realm depends on their vigilance, and that they know full well. It gives them, if not a real, at least a moral superiority; and he seemed determined to use, or abuse, his position to the hilt. However if he chose to ignore our relative status, there was little I could do. In public, I might rebuke him; in private, I would merely risk a further loss of face. I accordingly remained impassive, and took the glass he proffered. "Yes," I agreed calmly. "It has, as you say, been a very long

time."

He was still watching me narrowly. "Well at least," he said, "one of us did all right for himself. I've little enough to show for twenty years' service; save one leg two inches shorter than the other." He nodded at my robes. "They reckon," he said, "you'll be in line for the Grand Mastership one day. Oh yes, we hear the chat; even stuck out in a rotting hole like this."

"All things," I said, "are within the will of God." I sipped cautiously. Outback liquor has never been renowned for subtlety, and this was no exception; raw spirit as near as I could judge, probably brewed in one of the tumbledown villages through which I had lately passed.

He gave his short, barking laugh once more. "Plus a little help from Variant politics," he said. "But you always had a smooth tongue when it suited. And knew how to make the proper friends."

"We are not all Called," I said sharply. There are limits in all things; and he was pushing me perilously close to mine. It came to me that he was already more than a little drunk. I walked forward to the window, peered; but nothing was visible. The glass gave me back an image of a bright Cap of Maintenance, the great clasp at my throat, my own sombre and preoccupied face.

I sensed him shrug. "We aren't all touched in the head," he said bitterly. "You won't believe it, I find it hard myself; but I once had a chance at the Scarlet as well. And I turned it down. Do you know, there was actually a time when I believed in all of this?" He paused. "What I'd give, for my life back just once more," he said. "I wouldn't make the same mistakes again. A palace on the Middlemarch, that's what I'd have; servants around me, and decent wine to drink. Not the rotgut we get here . . ."

I frowned. Rough though his manner was, he had a way with him that tugged at memory; laughter and scents of other years, touches of hands. We all have our sacrifices to make; it's the Lord's way to demand them. There was a summer palace certainly, with flowering trees around it in the spring; but it was a palace that was empty.

I turned back. "What do you mean?" I said. "Believed in all of what?"

He waved a hand. "The Corps," he said. "The sort of crap you teach. I thought the Kingdom really needed us. It seems crazy now. Even to me." He drained the glass at a swallow, and refilled it. "You're not drinking," he said.

I set my cup aside. "I think," I said, "I'd best watch from the outer gallery."

"No need," he said. "No need, I'll shade the lamp." He swung down before the light a species of burlap screen; then arcs flared on the apron down below, and all was once more clear as day. Anchors, I saw, had been run out in a half circle from the rear of the launch vehicle. "We've never

needed them yet," said the Kitecaptain at my elbow, "but on a night like this, who can tell?"

A ball of bright fire sailed into the air, arced swiftly to the east. At the signal cadets surged forward, bearing the first of the kites shoulder-high. They flung it from them; and the line tightened and strummed. The thing hung trembling, a few feet above their heads; then insensibly began to rise. Steerable arc lamps followed it; within seconds it was lost in the scudding overcast. The shafts of light showed nothing but sparkling drifts of rain.

"The pilot," said the Captain curtly; then glanced sidelong once more. "But I needn't tell a Kitemaster a thing like that," he said.

I clasped my hands behind me. I said, "Refresh my memory."

He considered for a while; then it seemed he came to a decision. "Flying a Cody rig isn't an easy business," he snapped. "Those bloody fools back home think it's like an afternoon in the Middle Park." He rubbed his face, the iron-grey stubble of beard. "The pilot takes up five hundred foot of line," he said. "Less, if we can find stable air. The lifter kites come next. Three on a good day, four; though at a need we can mount more. The lifters' job is to carry the main cable; the cables' job is to steady the lifters. It's all to do with balance. Everything's to do with balance." He glanced sidelong once more; but if he expected a comment on his truism, he was disappointed.

Steam jetted from the launch vehicle, to be instantly whirled away. The Ground Controller squatted atop the big, hunched shape, one hand to the straining thread of cable, the other gesturing swiftly to the winchman; paying out, drawing in, as the pilot clawed for altitude. Others of the team stood ready to clamp the bronze cones to the main trace. The cone diameters decrease progressively, allowing the lifters to ride each to its proper station; and therein lies the skill. All must be judged beforehand; there is no room for error, no time for second thoughts.

An extra-heavy buffet shook the hangar's sides, set the Kitecaptain once more to scowling. Mixed with the hollow boom I thought I heard a growl of thunder. The main trace paid out steadily though, checked for the addition of the first of the vital cones. A second followed, and a third; and the Kitecaptain unconsciously gripped my arm. "They's bringing the lifters," he said, and pointed.

How they controlled the monstrous, flapping things at all was a mystery to me; but control them they did, hauling at the boxlike structures that seemed at any moment about to fling the men themselves into the air. The tail ring of the first was clipped about the line; orders echoed across the field, the kite sailed up smoothly into the murk. Its sisters followed it without a hitch; and the Captain visibly relaxed. "Good," he said. "That was neatly done. You'll find no better team this side of the Salient." Arms and legs enough have been broken at that game," he said. "Aye, and

necks; in gentler blows than this."

I restrained a smile. Despite his sourness, the quality of the man showed clear in the remark; the pride he still felt, justifiably, in a job well done. The rigs might look well enough in high summer, the lines of them floating lazy against the blue, as far as the eye could reach; or at the Air Fairs of the Middle Lands, flying, beribboned, for the delectation of the Master and his aides. It was here though, in the blustering dark, that the mettle of the Captains and their crews was truly tested.

All now depended on the Controller atop the launcher. I saw him turn, straining his eyes up into the night, stretch a gauntleted hand to the heavy trace. Five hundred feet or more above, the pilot flew invisible; below, the lifters spread out in their line, straining at their bridles of steel rope. The rig was aloft; but the slightest failure, the parting of a shackle, the slipping of an ill-secured clamp, could still spell disaster. All was well however; the Ground Controller pulled at the trace again, gauging the angle and tension of the cable, and the final signal was given. I craned forward, intrigued despite myself, brushed with a glove at the cloudy glass.

Quite suddenly, or so it seemed, the Observer was on the apron. A white-robed acolyte, his fair hair streaming, took from his shoulders his brilliant cloak of office. Beneath it he was dressed from head to foot in stout black leather; kneeboots, tunic and trews, closefitting helmet. He turned once to stare up at the hangar front. I made out the pale blur of his face, the hard, high cheekbones; his eyes though were invisible, protected by massive goggles. He saluted, formally yet it seemed with an indefinable air of derision, turned on his heel and stode toward the launch vehicle. I doubt though that he could have made out either the Kitecaptain or myself.

The ground crew scurried again. Moving with practised, almost military precision, they wheeled the basket forward; the Observer climbed aboard, and the rest was a matter of skilled, split-second timing. The manlifter, shielded at first by the hangar from the full force of the wind, swayed wildly, wrenching at its restraining ropes. Men ran back across the grass; the steam winch clattered and the whole equipage was rising into the night, the Observer already working at the tail-down tackle that would give him extra height. The winch settled to a steady, gentle clanking, and the Captain wiped his face. I turned to him. "Congratulations," I said. "A splendid launch."

Somewhere, distantly, a bell began to clang.

"They're all launched," he said thickly. "Right up to G6 in the northwest Salient; and south, down through the Marches. The whole Sector's flying; for what good it'll serve." He glowered at me. "You understand, of course, the principles involved?" he said sarcastically.

"Assuredly," I replied. "Air flows above the manlifter's surfaces faster than beneath them, thus becoming rarified. The good Lord abhors a

vacuum; so any wing may be induced to rise.”

He seemed determined not to be mollified. “Excellent,” he said. “I see you’ve swallowed a textbook or two. There’s a bit more to it than that though. If you’d ever flown yourself, you wouldn’t be so glib.”

I lowered my eyes. I knew, well enough, the dip and surge of a Cody basket; but it was no part of my intention to engage him in a game of apologetics. Instead I said, “Tell me about Canwen.”

He stared at me, then nodded to the valise. He said, “You’ve got his file.”

“Files don’t say everything,” I said. “I asked you, Kitecaptain.”

He turned away, stood hands on hips and stared down at the launcher. “He’s a flyer,” he said at length. “The finest we’ve got left. What else is there to say?”

I persisted. “You’ve known him long?”

“Since I first joined the Corps,” he said. “We were cadets together.” He swung back, suddenly. “Where’s all this leading, Helman?”

“Who knows?” I said. “Perhaps to understanding.”

He brought his palm down flat upon the desk. “Understanding?” he shouted. “Who in all the Hells needs understanding? It’s explanations we’re after, man . . .”

“Me too,” I said pointedly. “That’s why I’m here.”

He flung an arm out. “Up to K7,” he said, “an Observer slipped his own trace one fine night, floated off into the Badlands. I knew him too; and they don’t come any better. Another sawed his wrists apart, up there on his own; and he’d been flying thirty years. Last week we lost three more; while you and all the rest sit trying to understand . . .”

A tapping sounded at the door. It opened to his shout; a nervous looking Cadet stood framed, his eyes on the floor. “The Quartermaster sends his compliments,” he stammered, “and begs to know if the Kitemaster — I mean My Lord — wishes some refreshment. . . .”

I shook my head; but the Captain picked the bottle up, tossed it across the room. “Yes,” he said, “get me some more of this muck. Break it out of stores, if you have to; I’ll sign the chitty later.” The lad scurried away on his errand; the other stood silent and brooding till he returned. Below, on the apron, the ratchet of the winch clattered suddenly; a pause, and the smooth upward flight was continued. The Captain stared out moodily, screwed the cap from the fresh bottle and drank. “You’ll be telling me next,” he said, “they’ve fallen foul of demons.”

I turned, sharply. For a moment I wondered if he had taken leave of his senses; he seemed however fully in command of himself. “Yes,” he said, “you heard me right first time.” He filled the glass again. “How long has it really been,” he said, “since the Corps was formed? Since the very first kite flew?”

“The Corps has always been,” I said, “and always will be. It is the

Way . . . ”

He waved a hand dismissively. “Save it for those who need it,” he said brutally. “Don’t start preaching your sermons in here.” He leaned on the desk. “Tell me,” he said, “what was the real idea? Who dreamed it up?”

I could I suppose have remained silent, or quit his company; but it seemed that beneath the bluster there lay something else. A questioning, almost a species of appeal. It was as if something in him yet needed confirmation of his heresy; the confirmation, perhaps, of argument. Certainly I understood his dilemma, in part at least; it was a predicament that in truth was by no means new to me. “The Corps was formed,” I said, “to guard the Western Realm, and keep its borders safe.”

“From demons,” he said bitterly. “From demons and night walkers, all spirits that bring harm . . .” He quoted, savagely, from the Litany. “*Some plunge, invisible, from highest realms of air; some have the shapes of fishes, flying; some, and these be the hardest to descry, cling close upon the hills and very treetops . . .*” I raised a hand, but he rushed on regardless. “*These last be deadliest of all,*” he snarled. “*For to these the Evil One hath given semblance of a Will, to seek out and destroy their prey . . .*” “Crap!” He pounded the desk again. “All crap,” he said, “every last syllable. The Corps fell for it though, every man jack of us. You crook your little fingers, and we run; we float up there like fools, with pistol in one hand and a prayerbook in the other, waiting to shoot down bogles, while you live off the fat of the land . . .”

I turned away from the window and sat down. “Enough,” I said tiredly. “Enough,” I pray you . . .”

“We’re not the only ones of course,” he said. He struck an attitude. “*Some burst from the salt ocean,*” he mocked, “*clad overall in living flame . . .*” So the Seaguard ride out there by night and day, with magic potions ready to stop the storms . . .” He choked, and steadied himself. “Now I’ll tell you, Helman,” he said, breathing hard. “I’ll tell you, and you’ll listen. There are no demons; not in the sky, not on the land, not in the sea . . .”

I looked away. “I envy,” I said slowly, “the sureness of your knowledge.”

He walked up to me. “Is that all you’ve got to say?” he shouted. “You hypocritical bastard . . .” He leaned forward. “Good men have died in plenty,” he said, “to keep the folk in fear, and you in your proper state. Twenty years I flew, till I got this; and I’ll say it again, as loud and clear as you like. *There are no demons . . .*” He swung away. “There’s something for your report,” he said. “There’s a titbit for you. . . .”

I am not readily moved to anger. Enraged, we lose awareness; and awareness is our only gift from God. His last remark, though, irritated me beyond measure. He’d already said more than enough to be relieved of his command; enough, indeed, to warrant a court martial in Middlemarch

itself. And a conviction, were I to place the information before the proper authorities. The sneer reduced me to the level of a Variant spy, peeping at keyholes, prying into ledgers. "You fool," I said slowly. "You arrogant, unreasoning fool . . ."

He stared, fists clenched. "Arrogant?" he said. "You call me arrogant. You . . .?"

I stood up, paced back to the window. "Aye, arrogant," I said. "Beyond all measure, and beyond all sense." I swung back. "Will you be chastised," I said bitterly, "like a first year Chaplain, stumbling in the Litany? If that's the height of your desire, it can readily be accomplished. . . ."

He sat back at the desk, spread his hands on its dull-painted top. "What do you want of me?" he said.

"The courtesy with which you're being used," I said. "For the sake of Heaven, man, act your age. . . ."

He drained the glass slowly, and set it down. He stretched his hand toward the bottle, changed his mind. Finally he looked up, under lowering brows.

"You take a lot on yourself, Helman," he said. "If any other spoke to me like that, I'd kill him."

"Another easy option," I said shortly. "You're fuller of them than a beggar's dog of fleas." I shook my head. "You alone, of all the Lord's creation," I said. "You alone, beg leave to doubt your Faith. And claim it as a novel sentiment . . ."

He frowned again. "If you'd ever flown —"

"I've flown," I said.

He looked up. "You've seen the Badlands?" he asked sharply.

I nodded. "Yes," I said. "I have."

He took the bottle anyway, poured another drink.

"It changes you," he said. "For all time." He picked the glass up, toyed with it. "Folk reckon nothing lives out there," he said grimly. "Only demons. I could wish they were right." He paused. "Sometimes on a clear day, flying low, you see . . . more than a man should see. But they're not demons. I think once, they were folk as well. Like us . . ."

I folded my arms. I too was seeing the Badlands, in my mind; the shining vista of them spread by night, as far as the eye could reach. The hills and valleys twinkling, like a bed of coals; but all a ghastly blue.

It seemed he read my thoughts. "Yes," he said, "it's something to look at all right. . . ." He drank, suddenly, as if to erase the memory. "It's strange," he said, "but over the years, I wonder if a flyer doesn't get to see with more than his normal eyes." He rubbed his face. "Sometimes," he said, "I'd see them stretching out farther and farther, all round the world; and nothing left at all, except the Kingdom. One little corner of a little land. That wasn't demons either though. I think men did it, to each

other.” He laughed. “But I’m forgetting, aren’t I?” he said bitterly. “While the Watching goes on, it can never happen here. . . .”

I touched my lip. I wasn’t going to be drawn back into an area of barren cant. “I sometimes wonder,” I said carefully, “if it’s not all merely a form of words. Does it matter, finally, how we describe an agent of Hell? Does it make it any more real? Or less?”

“Why, there you go,” he cried, with a return to something of his former manner. “Can’t beat a good Church training, that’s what I always say. A little bit here, a little bit there, clawing back the ground you’ve lost; nothing ever alters for you, does it? Face you with reality though; that’s when you start to wriggle . . .”

“And why not?” I said calmly. “It’s all that’s left to do. Reality is the strangest thing any of us will ever encounter; the one thing, certainly, that we’ll never understand. Wriggle though we may.”

He waved his glass. “I tell you what I’ll do,” he said. “I’ll propose a small experiment. You say the Watching keeps us from all harm . . .”

I shook my head. “I say the Realm is healthy, and that its fields are green.”

He narrowed his eyes for a moment. “Well then,” he said. “For months, we’ll ground the Cody rigs. And call in all the Seaguard. That would prove it, wouldn’t it? One way or the other . . .”

“Perhaps,” I said. “You might pay dearly for the knowledge though.”

He slammed the glass down. “And what,” he said, “if your precious fields stayed green? Would you concede the point?”

“I would concede,” I said gently, “that Hell had been inactive for a span.”

He flung his head back and guffawed. The laughter was not altogether of a pleasant kind. “Helman,” he said, “you’re bloody priceless.” He uncapped the bottle, poured. “I’ll tell you a little story,” he said. “We were well off, when I was a youngster. Big place out in the Westmarch; you’d better believe it. Only we lost the lot. My father went off his head. Not in a nasty way, you understand; he never hurt a fly, right through his life. But every hour on the hour, for the last ten years, he waved a kerchief from the tower window, to scare off little green men. And you know what? We never saw a sign of one, not all the time he lived.” He sat back. “What do you say to that?”

I smiled. “I’d say, that he had rediscovered Innocence. And taught you all a lesson; though at the time, maybe you didn’t see.”

He swore, with some violence. “Lesson?” he cried. “What lesson lies in that?”

“That logic may have circular propensities,” I said. “Or approach the condition of a sphere; the ultimate, incompressible form.”

He pushed the bottle away, staring; and I burst out laughing at the expression on his face. “Man,” I said, “you can’t put Faith into a test

tube, prove it with a piece of litmus paper . . .”

A flash of brilliance burst in through the windows. It was followed by a long and velvet growl. A bell began to sound, closer than before. I glanced across the Kitecaptain; but he shook his head. He said harshly, “Observation altitude . . .”

I lifted the valise onto the desk edge, unlocked it once more. I assembled the receiver, set up the shallow repeater cone with its delicate central reed. The other stared, eyes widening. “What’re you doing?” he croaked.

“My function is to listen,” I said curtly. “And so I told you, maybe to understand. I’ve heard you, now we’ll see what Canwen has to say.” I advanced the probe to the crystal; the cone vibrated instantly, filling the room with the rushing of the wind, the high, musical thrumming of the Cody rig.

The Captain sprang away, face working. “Necromancy,” he said hoarsely. “I’ll not have it; not on my Base —”

“Be quiet,” I snapped. “You impress me not at all; you have more wit than that.” I touched a control; and the Observer roared with laughter. “The tail-down rig of course,” he said. “New since your day . . .”

The other stared at the receiver; then through the window at the launch vehicle, the thread of cable stretching into the dark. “Who’s he talking to?” he whispered.

I glanced up. “His father was a flyer, was he not?”

The Kitecaptain moistened his lips. “His father died over the Salient.” he said. “Twenty years ago.”

I nodded. “Yes,” I said. “I know.” Rain spattered sudden against the panes; I adjusted the control and the wind shrilled again, louder than before. Mixed as it was with the singing of the cables, there was an eerie quality to the sound; almost it was as if a voice called, thin and distant at first, then circling closer. Canwen’s answer was a great shout of joy. “Quickly, Pater, help me,” he cried urgently. “Don’t let her go again . . .” Gasps sounded; the basketwork creaked in protest and there was a close thump, as if some person, or some thing, had indeed been hauled aboard. The Observer began to laugh. “Melissa,” he said. “Melissa, oh my love . . .”

“His wife,” I supplied. “A most beautiful and gracious lady. Died of childbed fever, ten years ago in Middlemarch . . .”

“What?” cried Canwen. “What?” Then, “Yes, I see it . . .” A snapping sounded, as he tore the Great Seal from the basket; and he began to laugh again. “They honour us, beloved,” he cried. “The Church employs thaumaturgy against us . . .”

The Kitecaptain gave a wild shout. “No,” he cried, “I’ll hear no more of it . . .” I wrestled with him, but I was too late. He snatched the receiver, held it on high and dashed it to the floor. The delicate components

shattered; and the room fell silent, but for the close sound of the wind.

The pause was of brief duration. Lightning flared again; then instantly the storm was all around us. Crash succeeded crash, shaking the very floor on which I stood; the purple flickering became continuous.

The Captain started convulsively; then it seemed he collected himself. "Down Rig," he shouted hoarsely. "We must fetch him down. . . ."

"No," I cried, "no . . ." I barred his way; for a moment my upflung arm, the sudden glitter of the Master's Staff, served to check him, then he had barged me aside. I tripped and fell, heavily. His feet clattered on the gantry steps; by the time I had regained my feet his thick voice was already echoing through the hangar. "*Down Rig . . . Down Rig*, for your lives . . ."

I followed a little dazedly, ran across the cluttered floor of the place. The great end doors had been closed; I groped for the wicket, and the wind snatched it from my hand. My robes flogged round me; I pressed my back to the high metal, offered up a brief and fervent prayer. Before me the main winch of the launcher already screamed, the great drum spun; smoke or steam arose from where the wildly-driven cable snaked through its fairleads. Men ran to the threatened points with water buckets, white robed Medics scurried; Cadets, hair streaming, stood by with hatchets in their hands, to cut the lifter's rigging at a need. I stared up, shielding my face against the glaring arcs; and a cry of "*View-ho*" arose. Although I could not myself descry it, sharper eyes than mine had made out the descending basket. I started forward; next instant the field was lit by an immense white flash.

For a moment, it was as if Time itself was slowed. I saw a man, his arms flung out, hurled headlong from the launcher; fragments of superstructure, blown outward by the force of the concussion, arced into the air; the vehicle's cab, its wheels, the tautened anchor cables, each seemed lit with individual fire. The lightning bolt sped upward, haloing the main trace with its vivid glare; then it was as if the breath had been snatched from my lungs. I crashed to the ground again half stunned, saw through floating spots of colour how a young Cadet, blood on his face, ran forward to the winch gear. He flung his weight against the tallest of the levers, and the screaming stopped. The manlifter, arrested within its last few feet of travel, crashed sideways, spilling the Observer unceremoniously onto the grass. A shackle parted somewhere, dimly heard through the ringing in my ears; the axes flashed, a cable end lashed viciously above my head. The lifter train whirled off into the dark, and was gone.

I got to my feet, staggered toward Canwen. By the time I reached him, the Medics were already busy. They raised him onto the stretcher they wheeled forward; his head lolled, but at sight of me he rallied. He raised an arm, eyes blazing, made as if to speak; then he collapsed, lying still as death, and was borne rapidly away.

The eastern sky was lightening as I packed the valise for the final time. I closed the lock hasp, clicked it shut; and the door was tapped. A fairhaired Cadet entered, bearing steaming mugs on a tray. I smiled at him. A fresh white bandage circled his brow, and he was a little pale; but he looked uncommon proud.

I turned to the Base Medic, a square-set, ruddy-faced man. I said, "So you think Canwen will live?"

"Good God, yes," he said cheerfully. "Be up and about in a day or two at the latest. He's survived half a dozen calls like that already; I think this gives him the record . . ." The door closed behind him.

I sipped. The brew was dark and bitter; but at least it was hot. "Well," I said, "I must be on my way. Thank you for your hospitality, Kitecaptain; and my compliments to all concerned for their handling of last night's emergency."

He rubbed his face uncertainly. "Will you not stay," he said, "and break your fast with us properly?"

I shook my head. "Out of the question, I'm afraid," I said. "I'm due at G15 by 0900 hours. But I thank you all the same." I hefted the valise, and smiled again. "Its Captain, I've no doubt, will have had too much to drink," I said. "I shall probably hear some very interesting heresy."

He preceded me through the now-silent hangar. To one side a group of men was engaged in laying out long wire traces; but there were few other signs of activity. Outside, the air struck chill and sweet after the storm; by the main gate my transport waited, in charge of a smartly uniformed chauffeur/acolyte. I began to walk toward it; the Captain paced beside me, his chin sunk on his chest, still it seemed deep in thought. "What's your conclusion?" he asked abruptly.

"About the recent loss rate?" I said. I shook my head. "An all round lessening of morale, leading to a certain slackness; all except here of course," I added as his mouth began to open. It's a lonely and thankless life for all the Cody teams; nobody is more aware of it than I.

He stopped, and turned toward me. "What's to do about it then?" he said.

"Do?" I shrugged. "Send Canwen to have a chat with them. He'll tell them he's seen the Face of God. If he doesn't, go yourself. . . ."

He frowned. "About the thaumaturgy. The things we heard . . ."

I began to walk again. "I've heard them often enough before," I said. "I don't place all that much importance on them. It's a strange world in the sky; we must all come to terms with it as best we may." Which is true enough; sometimes, to preserve one's sanity, it's best to become just a little mad.

He frowned again. "Then the report. . . ?"

"Has already been made," I said. "You gave it yourself, last night. I don't think I really have very much to add." I glanced across to him.

"You'd have been best advised," I said, "to leave him flying, not draw him down through the eye of the storm. But you'd have seen that for yourself, had you not been under a certain strain at the time."

"You mean if I hadn't been drunk," he said bluntly. "And all the time I thought . . ." He squared his shoulders. "It won't happen again, Kite-master; I'll guarantee you that."

"No," I said softly, "I don't suppose it will."

He shook his head. "I thought for a moment," he said, "it was a judgement on me. I'd certainly been asking for it. . . ."

This time I hid the smile behind my hand. That's the whole trouble, of course, with your amateur theologians. Always expecting God to peer down from the height, His fingers to His nose, for their especial benefit.

We had reached the vehicle. The acolyte saluted briskly, opened the rear door with its brightly blazoned crest. I stooped inside, and turned to button down the window. "Goodbye, Kitecaptain," I said.

He stuck his hand out. "God go with you," he said gruffly. He hesitated. "Someday," he said, "I'll come and visit you. At that bloody Summer palace . . ."

"Do," I said. "You'll be honourably received; as is your due. And Captain . . ."

He leaned close.

"Do something for me in the meantime," I said. "Keep the Codys flying; till something better comes along . . ."

He stepped back, saluting stiffly; then put his hands on his hips, stared after the vehicle. He was still staring when a bend of the green, rutted track took him from sight.

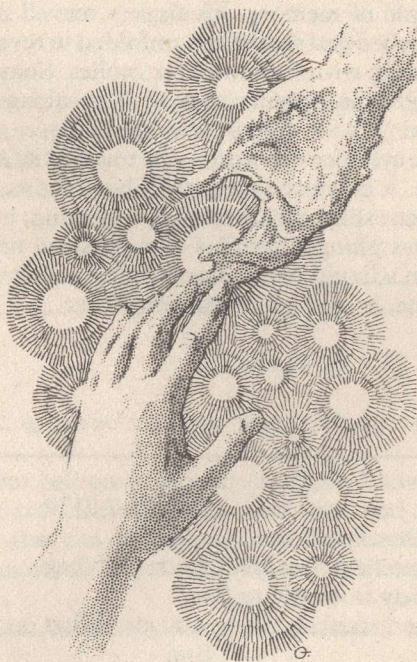
I leaned back against the cushioning, squeezed the bridge of my nose and closed my eyes. I felt oddly cheered. On the morrow, my tour of duty would be ended. They would crown a new May Queen, in Middlemarch; children would run to see me, their hair bedecked with flowers, and I would touch their hands.

I sat up, opened the file on Kitebase G15. A mile or so farther on, though, I tapped the glass screen in front of me and the chauffeur drew obediently to a halt. I watched back to where, above the shoulders of the hills, a Cody rig rose slowly, etched against the flaring yellow dawn. 🌅

WITH GL-OON'SHA, DREAMS COME

by Sharon Webb

art: George Barr



*The author lives in the hills of north Georgia with her husband Bryan. She has published *RN*, a book about her experiences in nursing school, and *Earthchild*, a science fiction novel. She is also renowned for some of the more outrageous puns imaginable — but this story shows an entirely serious side of her writing.*

When in the course of human events it becomes necessary to clean out a closet, it is best for the pack rat to have supervision. Otherwise, the project suffers as the pack rat, in this case Jimi Jurdin, paws absently through stacks of papers, books, recordings and other memorabilia with sundry glazed expressions on his face, reliving bits and pieces of himself and throwing none away.

It was in this state that he came across a smooth black box that he had not seen in fifteen years. At first, he couldn't remember how it opened. Then, with a ripple of memory, his fingers moved over the polished surface. When touched just so, the box unfolded to reveal a thick stack of old letters alternating with Communifax replies. Something else lay in the box — a small holo cylinder tucked down along the edges of the letters.

The lever on the cylinder was worn — he touched it. The light came on; the image formed. A creature swam in a silver sea, its flower-petal gills pulsing in iridescent shimmers, budding, blooming, budding again. As he watched, he was plunged into his own personal time machine. The creature swirled in a liquid ballet, haunting him — *Denefya*.

After a long time, he picked up the first letter:

January 7 2179

~~Deet Daet~~ Dere Denefya,

I got you're name from our forth grade grab bag.

I dont no anybody from Altare For.

I like hotdogs and starfruit the best to eat. What do you like?

Jimi

P.S. I hate math. Do you?

P.S. I have a dog. He is a smart dog. He etes grass sometimes.

Gl'ss 9 4--S

Dear One Jimi,

Been I read you letter. Like I it.

Am asking I you dear one what be a dog? What be a grass?

Like I to eat K-Kl-oooh, but like I not Kl-oo-kl. Not have eat I math or hotdogs.

Llkana,
Denefya

January 18 2179

Deer Denefya,

Grass is what grows in a park and is green. Dogs ar animuls with fur and for legs and thay bark. Dogs are pets.

Is Kl-oo-kl like spinach?

Jimi

Gl'ss 9 7--S

Dear One Jimi,

Having a pet be I, too. Be having I Fl'oo'tl. Grooming be Fl'oo'tl to my Fl-na-la-s, through which flows liquid. Singing be Fl'oo'tl to my hearing in gl-oon'sha.

What be a spinach?

Llkana,
Denefya

Luniary 20 2182

Dear Denefya,

I've been writing to you for three years!! That must be a ~~wotld~~ galactic record!!

I'm on the rotor ball team. The coach thinks I have World Cup potential!! I also was elected to the school tech. and devel. team! I invented a servo that can do homework so I'm sort of a hero here!!!

Do you like rotor ball or can you play it in the ocean?

Jimi

Kl'ss 2 9--S

Dear One Jimi,

Been I liking very much to receive your communications. Wonder I what rotor ball be? Be rotor ball like Fl-kl-lii? Wanted I to be chosen for Fl-kl-lii Quad-form, but passed by be I.

Llkana,
Denefya

October 10 2183

Dear Denefya,

I am thirteen today. Maybe it's because I'm the age I am (Uncle

Adolph says so--and he's a psychologist) but I find that communication with one's peers is easier than with those who are aging.

And sometimes one's peers can be stupid too. It is a strange thing, Denefya, but I feel closer to you than I do to my brother, Toby, or my sister (who thinks she is So Grown Up).

Do your sisters make you sick?

Jimi

Fl'ss 6 7--S

Dear One Jimi,

Been I wanting to meet you for much time. Been I sending you my picture. Been I waiting for a reply and wishing wishing.

Sisters not making sick me. Sisters see I never.

Llkana,
Denefya

March 12, 2184

Dear Denefya,

Please forgive the long gap between my replies. I *have* been busy, but never too busy to look at your picture and to wish you were here--or I were there.

I have given up rotor ball and am devoting my full time now to biology. I am going to be a doctor.

Jimi

P.S. Do you know what pimples are?

Gl'ss 12 3--S

Dear One Jimi,

Looking up I "pimples" and seeing them as "pustular eruptions of dermis in human adolescents."

Pimples then too be I having. All Altairians have them to show in estrus they soon will be.

Always do I wish for your communications. Sometimes when the light dims to gl-oon'sha and dreams come, your face see I.

Llkana,
Denefya

November 2, 2184

Dear Denefya,

Guess what! I was watching the holos last night and I saw a program about Altair IV.

One of the Altair females looked like you, Denefya.

This may sound silly to you, but it was as if we were together. With just a little imagination, I could feel myself in silver seas swimming with you in a fluid ritual. And once it was as if we touched!

I have decided to become a poet, Denefya, because in me there are images swelling against their wrappings, bursting to come out.

Warmly,

Jimi

P.S. My pimples are much improved.

Fl'ss 9 7--S

Dear One Jimi,

Have I too felt the stirrings in me of poetry. Were these stirrings not brought by images of swimming we the Lk'fehna ceremony together? Our many Fl-na-la-s flow about us in the currents of L'ss.

Yes. Within are many stirrings, many thoughts.

Llkana Lk'fehna,

Denefya

January 9, 2185

Dearest Denefya,

I punched my brother's face today. I hate him. He started in again on me until I couldn't take it anymore. He said, "Old weird Jimi's in love with an alie. He doesn't like girls; he likes alies." Then he said something really crude about you, Denefya, and I hit him. He went off sniveling and told our parents.

I locked the door to my room and I didn't let my father in for a long time. When I finally did, I expected him to be mad, but he wasn't. He just looked kind of gray and kind of sad and he shook his head and talked about the impossibilities of things.

Denefya, I think I hate him too. He just doesn't understand. When I told him I'd go to you one day, he started talking about the differences between you and me. God, does he think I'm a moron? I know all about the differences. But I know, too, that there are more important things than physical relationships. Our minds touch,

Denefya. Our *minds* touch.

Then he said there would be a war between us and the peoples of Altair. He'll never understand us, Denefya, never.

I love you.

Jimi

Fl'ss 9 9--S

Dearest One Jimi,

My people tell me it is time to choose a mate. Try I to ignore their mandate. Tell them not I, that chosen have I already.

The currents of L'ss sadden me. Never thought I it would be so.

Llkana Lk'fehna,

Denefya

February 2, 2185

Dearest Denefya,

I have written a poem for you:

Silver thoughts

Invade my dreams each night.

Nymphs swim

through them

Shining flowers--

Petals opening

To liquid light--

They look

Like you.

By day, I remember what keeps us apart, but at night there's a time just before sleep when differences fade and hostile seas say "welcome."

With love,

Jimi

Fl'ss 10 2--S

Dearest One Jimi,

Worlds draw near at sleeping time. Then too, hear I the sound of glafala and see I the image of you.

Worlds draw near in other ways too, Dearest One Jimi. Leaders Altairian cast out ripples of war, and gather currents of strife in return from the leaders of Sol.

Why, ask I, can love not leap what war spans with such ease?

Llkana Lk'fehna

Denefya

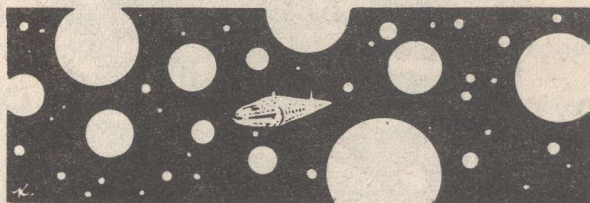
It had been fifteen years since the war. Once again, he fingered the little lever of the view cylinder, and watched the iridescent creature swimming.

The sound of a door opening, of a voice calling, broke into his reverie. The woman who called him husband, the boy who called him father, came into the room.

Sighing, she looked at the mess of boxes and books. "I knew I should have stayed to help."

Smiling, he tucked the view cylinder away with the letters, closing the box, closing a part of his life they could never share.

That night he dreamed of silver seas.



OSCAR SVENSON

2121 — 2173

I worked twenty years
terraforming New Wisconsin
to look

as its namesake once had
and found

I was formed
to look

as Wisconsin does now

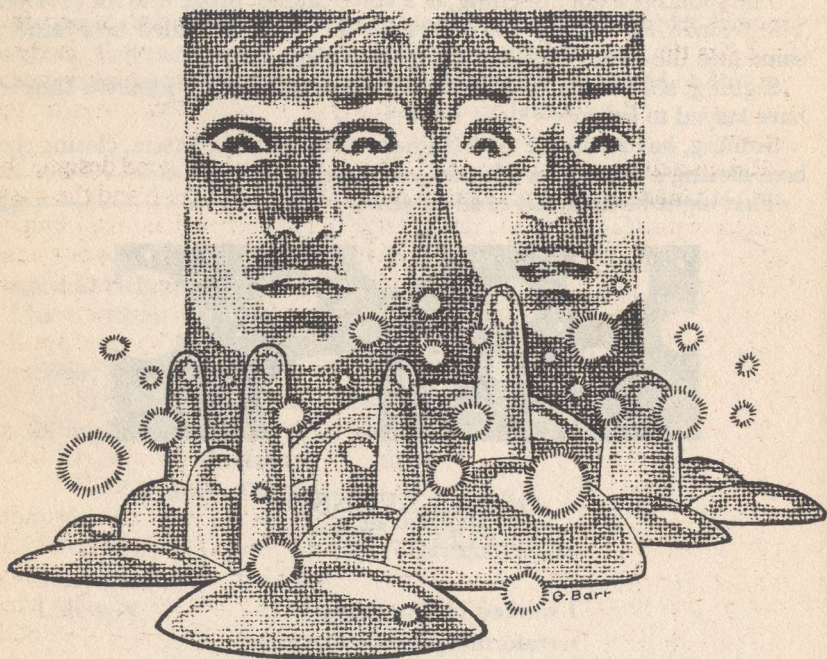
old

and covered by tombstones

— Roger Dutcher

ICE AGE

by Michael Swanwick
art: George Barr



Michael Swanwick lives in Philadelphia with his wife, Marianne Porter. He made his mark with his very first published stories, "Ginungagap" and "The Feast of Saint Janis," which were Nebula Award finalists in 1980, as was "Mummer Kiss" in 1981. He is at work on a first novel, tentatively titled The Drift. We wonder at these frigid titles — another is "Snow Job" — but the title is the only glacial thing about the present story.

It was early afternoon when Rob carried the last carton into their new apartment and was — finally, officially — moved in. He was setting it down atop a stack of crated books to be unpacked later when Gail said something from the kitchen. “What’s that?” he shouted.

She poked her head into the hallway. “I said — Hey, the landlord left the old refrigerator in.”

Rob sauntered to the kitchen. The counters were cluttered with half-unpacked cooking utensils. “Probably too much trouble to remove it.”

The refrigerator, yellowed to a grimy antique ivory, was welded immovably into the corner of the kitchen by decades’ worth of petrified crud. Its top, the motor housing, rose like an art-deco pagoda, in three tiers of streamlined vents. This made the refrigerator look vaguely futuristic — the future of the nineteen-thirties, though, not of the present.

Rob patted the motor housing. “This is actually very good design,” he said. “In modern refrigerators the motor is set underneath and the waste heat from it rises up into the refrigerator. Then the heat has to be pumped out by the same motor that produced it, generating yet more waste heat. It’s a vicious cycle. But with the modern machines they’re after consumer gloss, so the motor is set down there anyway.”

Gail pulled a bottle of zinfandel out of a cardboard box and set the now-empty box under the kitchen sink. “Trash goes there,” she said. “You want some wine?”

The refrigerator hummed lightly, a friendly, reassuring sound. “Sure. The landlord left the refrigerator on; there’s probably even some ice left.”

“That’s what I like about you. You ain’t got no couth at all.”

Rob shrugged. “I’m a barbarian.” He opened the freezer compartment and found it almost overgrown with old ice. It had already swallowed up two icecube trays and an ancient package of frozen peas. One tray, though, was almost free, and by hammering on it with the heel of his hand he could get it loose. He cracked the tray and carried a handful of ice back to the table.

“Plenty extra,” he offered. Gail curled a lip. But she set out a goblet for him anyway, and poured wine in it.

Rob leaned back and swirled his drink, listening to the ice clink. He took a sip.

And stopped. Was that a *bug* in the one icecube? He fished it out with two fingers and held it up to the light.

The cube was heavily frosted across one surface where condensation from the freezer had formed, though that was already beginning to melt from the wine. Within the cube were swirls of tiny bubbles, too small to notice if you didn’t look closely. And beyond them, deep in the center, was a large black speck, a creature the size of a horsefly trapped in the ice’s pellucid depths. He peered closer.

There was a wooly mammoth in his icecube.

It was dark and shaggy, with a head that tapered down to a long, filament-sized trunk. Two all but invisible tusks twisted from its mouth. Its legs were folded in against the body. Its fur was a deep auburn red. A small and perfect wooly mammoth, no larger than a breadcrumb.

Rob didn't move. The ice was cold and stung his hand, but he didn't shift it. All he could think of were the Saturday afternoon movies that began with someone finding an ancient animal frozen in ice. Though usually those ended with the animal eating Tokyo, he reminded himself.

"Hey," Gail said. "What're you staring at so intently?"

Rob opened his mouth, shut it again. Gently he lowered the icecube to the tabletop. Drops of water appeared on its side, oozed down to the formica and began to form a micropuddle.

"Gail," he said carefully, "I want you to look inside this icecube and tell me what you see."

Following his example, Gail placed her hands flat on the table and leaned forward. "Wow," she whispered. "That's — Rob, that's *beautiful*."

The creature was fractionally easier to see now. Its tusks, long for its size — was that an indicator of age? — were yellowed and one was broken at its tip. Its eyes, frozen open and almost too small to be seen, were blue. The fur was badly matted, and there were a couple of tiny bare patches.

Gail jumped up and began running water in the sink. She returned with a bowl that steamed gently. "Here," she said, "let's thaw it out." With infinite care she eased the icecube into the water.

After a while Rob said, "Ice melts slowly, doesn't it?" And then, reluctantly, "Maybe we should call the Smithsonian or something."

"If you could convince them to look at this," Gail pointed out, "which I doubt, they'd only take it away from us."

"There is that," Rob agreed, relieved that Gail too felt no obligation to give up the mammoth anyway.

At last the ice melted. Rob fished out the wee mammoth with a spoon. It was still and tiny in his hand. Suddenly, he felt very close to tears. Against all logic, he had hoped it would thaw out alive. "Here," he said, and let the beast fall from his hand to Gail's.

By dumping every carton in the house onto the floor, Gail had managed to find a magnifying glass. Now she squinted through it. "That's a wooly mammoth all right," she said. "Would you look at those eyes! And — guess what — the toe leathers are pink!" Her voice fell to a mutter then rose again: "Hey, are those *spear points* in its side?"

Rob's momentary *tristesse* melted rapidly in the heat of Gail's excitement. He leaned over her shoulder, trying to see. "I wonder how you'd go about getting something like this preserved in lucite," Gail mused. Then, suddenly, she straightened up and turned to face him. "Maybe there's *more* of these in the freezer!"

Gail took the lead. She opened the refrigerator and peered into the freezer. Nudging the icecube tray with a finger, she squinted at the ice around it. Then, gingerly, she pulled out the tray, and after examining it briefly, stared through the small space that was not yet swallowed up by the slow, devouring ice. She whistled softly.

"What?" Rob said.

She shook her head slowly, still staring into the freezer.

"What? Tell me."

Slowly she turned, and stared at him significantly. "I think you'd better look for yourself."

Rob put an arm around her waist and laid his head beside hers so they could both peer within. The light inside was dim but serviceable, the land beyond the ice half-lit by some unseen source. He stared past the rime into a tiny, mountainous country. Off to one side, a small glacier was partially visible. To the foreground, a trickle of water — a river in miniature — meandered through a dark, nordic pine forest.

Huddled by the river was a town, stone and wood buildings all in a jumble and surrounded by high stone walls.

"My God!" Rob breathed. "*There's a lost civilization in my refrigerator.*"

They stared at each other for a moment, eyes wide, then returned, wonderingly, to the freezer.

It was dark in the back of the freezer. Silently cursing the gloom, Rob strained to see. The town was laid out on a semicircular plan against the water, though the streets were a hopeless maze. Clearly they had been built haphazardly, at random.

Atop a hill near the center of town stood a cathedral, squat and heavy, but still recognizable as such. It dominated the town. By the river's edge stood a castle. All the other buildings radiated from these two loci. The town walls were clearly anachronistic remnants, though, for slum buildings — hovels, actually — had been built up against them. In places the walls were actually breached, the stones carted away for building materials. Several roads ran from the town through the pine forest, and one — a major one — ran along the river.

Finally Gail stepped back and said, "You know, this doesn't make any sense at all."

"That so?" Rob did not look up from the freezer.

"I mean, this is clearly an early medieval city. Woolly mammoths died out sometime in the Neolithic."

Rob looked at her. Cold air seeped from the refrigerator. Placing a hand on his arm, Gail tugged him away from the freezer and softly closed the door. "Let's have some coffee," she suggested.

Rob brewed the coffee while Gail dumped the already-poured wine

down the sink. They brooded over mugs of Kenyan in silence. Gail touched the tiny mammoth with the tip of her fingernail. It was not in good shape; putrefaction was setting in, as if time were catching up with the long days it had lain frozen in the ice. She crooked an eyebrow at Rob, and he nodded agreement.

While Rob unhooked the spider plant from its new position over the kitchen window, Gail wrapped the mammoth in a corner of white tissue paper. They dug a small hole in the soil under the plant with an old fork, and buried the creature with full military honors.

Rob solemnly placed the plant back on its hook.

Without saying a word, they both turned to the refrigerator.

They opened the freezer compartment together. Rob took one look, and his mouth fell open.

The town was still there. But it had changed and grown while they were away. It had evolved. The stone walls were down, and the cathedral had been rebuilt in the soaring, Gothic style. It no longer dominated the town, though; now it was one large building among many. The streets were wider, too, and the town had expanded out of sight behind the left-hand ice. It was a city now.

The details were even harder to make out than before, though, for it seemed that the industrial revolution was in full swing. Bristling forests of smokestacks belched thick, vaporous smoke into the wintry sky. The riverside was choked with hundreds of tiny docks, the castle torn down to make room for them, and impossibly thin railroad tracks crawled through the depleted pine forests, past the glacier's edge and over the snow-capped mountains to some unseen destination.

The town had evolved into a city in a matter of minutes. Even as they watched, buildings appeared and disappeared. Roads shifted position instantaneously. Entire sections of the city were rebuilt in the twinkling of an eye. "The time-rate in there must be *fantastic*," Rob said. "I'll bet that years — decades — are going by as we stand here."

The city pulsed with movement. Its people were invisible, as were their vehicles and beasts of burden, for they all moved too quickly to be seen, but traffic patterns were shimmering gray uncertainties in the streets, dark where traffic was heavy, and pale where light.

The buildings were growing larger and taller. They exploded into the air as steel-beam construction was discovered. The sky to the far side of the city began flickering darkly, and it took an instant to realize that they were seeing the airplanes from an exurban airport hidden behind the ice.

"I think they've reached the present," Gail said.

Rob leaned forward to get a better look, and was caught in the wash of the first thermonuclear blast.

There was an instantaneous *flash* and pure white light flooded his skull.

Needles of pain lanced through his eyes, and he staggered backwards from the freezer, a hand over his face.

"Rob!" Gail cried in a panicky voice, and from her tone he could tell that she had blinked or glanced away at the crucial instant. She was okay then, and knowing that gave him the presence of mind to *slam* the refrigerator door shut as he fell over backwards.

Afterimages burned in his mind: A quadrant of the city disappearing into sudden crater, a transcendently bright mushroom cloud that was gone before it was there, subliminal traces of fire and smoke, and blast zones where all traffic and life abruptly ceased. The pictures jumbled one on top of another.

"Rob, are you *okay*? Say something!"

He was lying on his back, his head in Gail's lap. "I'm . . . I'm okay," he managed to say. And even as he said it, it began to come true. Through the bright wash of nothingness, the kitchen started to seep through. The details were vague and tentative at first, then stronger. It was like being blinded by a flashbulb, except that the afterimage was a small mushroom cloud.

"Gail," he croaked. "They're fighting a nuclear war in there."

"There now, don't get excited," she said soothingly.

He struggled to sit up. "They're using tac-nukes in my refrigerator and you're telling me to *calm down*!"

"It's good advice anyway," she insisted. Then she giggled. "Boy, you should see your face."

"Why, what's the matter with it?" But she simply shook her head, too full of laughter to respond. He stalked off to the bathroom and numbly stared into the mirror. His face was bright red from the primary radiation. "Oboy," he said. "That's going to be a bad sunburn in the morning."

Back in the kitchen, he eyed the refrigerator with trepidation. "Let me," Gail said. Gingerly, being careful to keep her head averted, she opened the door the tiniest possible crack.

A dozen flashes of light flickered in and out of existence, like a badly out-of-synch strobe. The reflected brilliance off of the walls dazzled both Gail and Rob; clearly there had been an escalation in megatonnage. Gail slammed the door shut.

Rob sighed. "Well, I guess it was too much to expect them to outgrow war over the course of two minutes." He looked helplessly at Gail. "But what do we do *now*?"

"Send out for a pizza?" she suggested.

The sun had set, leaving only a faint golden smear in the sky by the time they had finished the pizza. Rob ate the last, nearly cold piece, and Gail dumped box and crusts in the cardboard box under the sink.

"It's been over two hours," Rob said. "They must've had time to

rebuild by now."

Gail touched his arm, squeezed tenderly. "They may have killed themselves off, Rob. We have to face up to that possibility."

"Yeah." Rob pushed back his chair and stood. Feeling like John Wayne, he advanced on the refrigerator. "Let's go for it," he said, and jerked the door open a sliver. Nothing happened. He opened it all the way.

The freezer was still intact. There was a black smear across one corner of the ice, but that was all. Cautiously, they stared in.

The city was still there, between glacier and icy river. It had not been destroyed in the nuclear spasm wars of late afternoon. But it had — changed.

The skyscrapers had continued to grow and to evolve. They had become tall, delicate fronds that gleamed soft gold and green. Skywalks appeared between the fairy towers. "Look." Rob pointed to threadlike structures that wove intricate patterns through the city. "Monorails!"

Flickermotes appeared in the air between the towers. Were they flying cars, Rob wondered, or possibly personal jetpacks? There was no way of knowing. And what were those shimmering domes that sprang up like mushrooms after a rain on the outskirts of town?

"It looks like the Emerald City of Oz," Gail said. "Only not just green." Rob nodded agreement. Some new technology was invented then, and the city changed again. Now the buildings seemed to be made of curdled light, or possibly crystals of glowing fog. Whatever they were, they weren't entirely solid. They flickered.

"I think the time-rate in there is accelerating," Gail said in a small voice.

The city pulsed and danced to some unearthly syncopation. It sent out blossoms and shoots, and exploded into the sky in firework-structures of color and essence, and joyful, whimsical light. It was a strangely *playful* city.

There was some kind of leakage from the freezer, too. Some kind of broadcast. Rob and Gail picked up flashes of color and quick, incomprehensible messages, broadcast directly to their brains, maybe, or their nerve webs or possibly even to each individual cell of their bodies. They could understand none of it. Then there was another shift of technology, and the impressions cut off.

But the city was still changing, and the rate of change still accelerating. Now the unsubstantial towers swayed like fronds of seaweed lashed by a hurricane. Faster. Now the radius of the city exploded outward and imploded inward again. Again it happened and again, like circles of light pulsing outward. Giant machines throbbed in the air and were gone. Highways of light moved out and up into the night. Too quick to be seen, leaving behind only an impression of incredible bulk, *something* stooped

over the city.

The changes were coming still faster now — as if the city were searching for something, trying out and rejecting alternate configurations in pursuit of some specific goal. The buildings became piles of orange diamonds, matrixes of multicolored spheres, a vast tangle of organic vines. The city was a honeycomb, a featureless monolith, a surrealistic birthday cake.

This search lasted a full five minutes. Then, for an instant, the city reached a kind of crystalline perfection, and all change, all motion ceased. It stood poised on the luminous edge between instant and infinity. For that brief, eternal second, nothing happened.

Then the city exploded.

Beams and lattices of light, like playful twisted lasers, shot into the air, between the masses of ice and out into the kitchen. Massively ornate constructs of color and nothing else flickered into existence over the sink and oven. They phased out of being, then halfway in again, and then were gone. The city rose into the air, and separated out into component planes and solids. Very briefly, it *sang*. Very briefly, it existed both in the refrigerator and in the kitchen, as if its presence was too large for any one location.

And then it went away. It did not move in any direction they could comprehend; it just went . . . *away*.

They stood blinking. After the lights and bright colors of the city, the freezer compartment seemed dark and still. Gail shook her head wonderingly. Rob gently touched the ice. Where the city had stood was nothing but a few dead walls, a handful of ancient ruins half-buried in drifting snow.

Even as they watched, these last traces of civilization crumbled into dust, destroyed by the relentless onslaught of time.

"I wonder where they've gone to." Rob closed the refrigerator door. "Some other dimension?"

Gail did not respond immediately. Then she said, "I doubt that *we* could understand." She was wide-eyed and solemn.

Nevertheless, she didn't object when Rob went around to the back of the refrigerator and pulled the plug. They stood looking at it in silence for a while.

"We'll clean it out with ammonia before we turn it on again," Rob said. Gail took his hand. "C'mon, kid. Let's go to bed."

Rob woke up first the next morning, sleepy-eyed and sunburnt. He stumbled to the kitchen and, after brewing coffee, automatically pulled open the refrigerator to get some milk.

The inside of the refrigerator smelled rich and moist, with the acrid

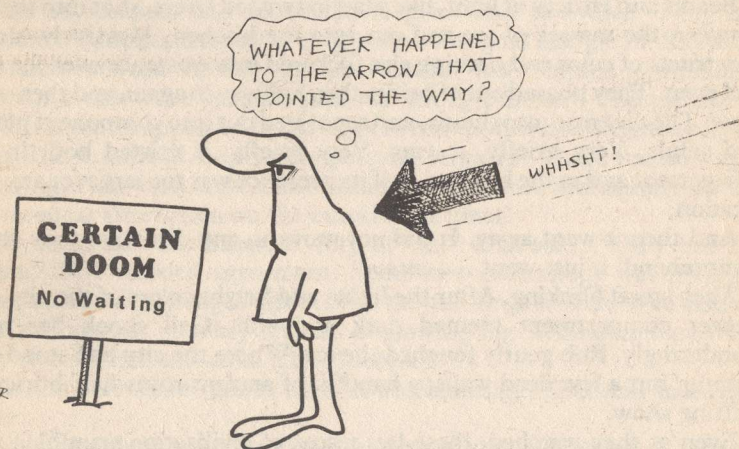
tang of food starting to rot. Rob wrinkled his nose and started to close the door. But on impulse — just to be safe — he peered into the freezer compartment.

The interior of the freezer was green and steamy. A brontosaurus no longer than his thumb raised its head ponderously above the jungle growth and blinked.



CARTOON

CARTOON



William Rotsler

Alexis Gilliland

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A Critique of RETURN OF THE JEDI

by Alan Dean Foster

We care that the right thing should happen to our friends Luke and Leia and the rest. It matters. Such was the power of Star Wars, its authentic Force. Alan Dean Foster has also had professional reasons for caring that things come out right: his novel Splinter of the Mind's Eye is a sequel to the first film. Herewith, his reflections on Return of the Jedi.

Is this a delightful film?

Yes.

Is it worth seeing?

Definitely.

Is it filled with action, wonders, and excitement?

You betcha.

Is it the best *STAR WARS* film so far?

No.

No? That's right, no.

Of course it all depends on what criteria you use to judge a film, but if you include in your standards more than technological advances: things like acting, direction, and story, then *The Empire Strikes Back* holds together as a better film than *Return of the Jedi*. Truly sorry I am, as Yoda would say.

Jedi has all the advantages of a concluding chapter going for it: relationships to be finalized, plot lines to be resolved, an epic coda. By and large the execution does not live up to the promise. The parts are greater here than the whole.

From a technical standpoint the film is a marvel of engineering and logistics. *Jedi* promised to give us more of everything, and on that level it delivers. The space battles are far more complex than anything in the first *Star Wars* or *Empire*. In addition we are presented with a host of aliens

to admire. But the art of creating believable aliens still has mountains to climb.

The Sfx (special effects) folks have realized that the key to making a believable alien lies in the eyes, and great care has been taken to give the Jedi creatures working eyes for us to focus on. Without his great blinking golden orbs, Jabba the Hutt would be seen for what he is: a mountain of latex. The next step up will be to somehow banish the stiffness of face and skin that alien-builders have to get away from.

Still, audience goodwill and a desire to suspend disbelief is enough for the aliens of *Jedi* to get by with, particularly in Jabba's case. This interstellar gangster looks like the *Alice in Wonderland* caterpillar's dream of The Who's Uncle Ernie. Seeing him hold Princess Leia on a tether while Carrie Fisher lolls on his throne brought back nostalgic memories of the old *Planet Stories* covers. Pulp fans should be proud.

We also have the charming and cute Ewoks of the forest moon of Endor (named by a space scout yclept Guy). Presumably the legal department at Lucasfilm is already prepared to deal with the heirs of H. Beam Piper.

I confess to watching transfixed the

monster that Luke confronts in Jabba's dungeon. The advances wrought by the stop-motion animation team of Industrial Light & Magic are wondrous to behold. This hideous beastie is fluid and massive, two considerable accomplishments for a lifeless statuette. Equally effective are the two-legged Imperial walkers, the war machines the Ewoks must cope with during the climactic battle sequence on Endor. Real sense-of-wonder stuff.

It's also interesting to note Lucas's response to outside social comment. After complaints about the lack of black actors in *Star Wars* surfaced, we quietly found Billy Dee Williams in a major role in *Empire*. After *Empire* we heard much about the absence of any women except Carrie Fisher in speaking parts, so in *Jedi* we have a woman as one of the leaders of the rebel fleet. Nice.

So wherein the source of discontent? In little things, in hints of laziness and lack of hard sense, in a tendency to resort to fantasy as a means of escaping responsibility.

As an example of the first, we are asked to believe that Princess Leia is capable of strangling Jabba the Hutt with a length of heavy chain. Through the first part of the film Jabba has yanked Leia around on a leash as if she were a toy, which is exactly what she is to him. He does this easily. With one hand.

Suddenly an aroused Leia, during a fight on Jabba's sand barge, wraps the chain around Jabba's nearly non-existent neck and proceeds to strangle this rhino despite all his efforts to escape. Ah, c'mon, guys. Proof of the scene's ineffectuality is provided by the audience. Eager to cheer, it sits shuffling in uncomfortable silence, uneasy at the lapse in logic. Much

better to have had Jabba tease Leia's pitiful efforts only to see her wrap her end of the chain around some kind of mechanism like a winch, something capable of breaking the ugly bastard's neck. Then I'd believe it.

We are asked to believe that Leia, identified now as Luke's sister, has remained active in the rebellion but undetected as his sibling until now. As Vader tells Luke, "he (Ben Kenobi) was wise to hide her from me."

But in *Star Wars*, Vader personally interrogates Leia. We are asked to accept that he can sense the presence of his son across empty space but cannot recognize his own daughter (Luke's "twin," no less) when she's lying next to him weakened by drugs. This strains more than credulity.

We are asked to believe that Vader, as he declares in *Empire*, really is Luke's father. Well, okay, but if Vader's purpose all along has been to try and recruit Luke to the dark side of the force, he didn't act much like a recruiter while pursuing his son over the surface of the Death Star. I had the distinct feeling when Vader said, "I have you now," that he was trying his darndest to kill him and that only Han Solo's last-second heroics saved Luke to fight again another day.

That's the trouble with sequels, especially more than one. A writer has to be constantly on guard not to contradict what has gone before.

We do get an explanation from Kenobi to counter his line in *Star Wars* about Vader killing Luke's father. The story goes that when he gave himself over to the dark side of the force, Anakin Skywalker "died." Even old Ben sounds like he's forcing this one a bit. Here Lucas is the victim of his own ability to create archetypes. The two previous films

have built up Darth Vader as such a font of evil that it's too much of a shock to accept him at *Jedi*'s conclusion as just a tired, kindly old gentleman who took a wrong turn somewhere.

But what really bothers me is that Vader, after all his slaughtering and torturing, after destroying, for crying out loud, an entire *world* full of innocent people, after a career of terror and destruction, helps his son one time and gets off. That's like asking us to accept that Hitler repented on his deathbed and got boosted straight to Heaven. Vader makes Adolph, Tamerlane, and Vlad the Impaler look like pikers in the business of mass murder, yet all he has to do is boot the Emperor in the ass one time and **ga-zoning!**, off he goes straight to Jedi Valhalla to stand smiling alongside the spirits of Yoda and Kenobi.

Hell, no wonder he's smiling.

Some example for the kids in the audience! You can blow up the school, cut up the little girl next door, poison the water supply — but say you're sorry and all is forgiven, even by those who've fought against you.

I'm sorry, but I can't buy it. Despite the manipulation, even after watching Vader toss his old buddy the Emperor, even after watching him save Luke, I *still* wanted Vader, or Anakin Skywalker if you prefer, to boil for a few thousand years in some suitable, metaphysical vat of molten lead. The murdering creep. Lucas made him too vicious for us to turn around at the end and accept him as a good guy.

There are other little quibbles that, if you lock on, prevent you from enjoying the story at all. Like the fact that it's hard to accept the Imperial Stormtroopers as a real threat

anymore because in *Jedi* they display such extraordinary ineffectiveness, if not downright stupidity. Any bunch of armored, heavily armed soliders who can't defeat a tribe of furry midgets equipped with rocks and bows and arrows isn't worth taking seriously.

Sure, I was rooting for the Ewoks while I watched. Such is the power of the big screen image. But in the back of my mind I was simultaneously going **tch-tch**. These aren't the same efficient stormtroopers who wiped out the rebel base on Hoth in *Empire*. These guys couldn't fight their way out of a videogame. In *Jedi* it's time for Keystone Cops in space.

Not that examples don't exist of primitive people defeating the more technologically advanced. The Zulus enjoyed some success against the British in South Africa, for example, and so did the Indians of North America. But these primitives were tough, savage, and relentless. Cute and furry doesn't go with tough, savage, and relentless.

Want more? Throughout the picture Luke is able to draw weapons to his hand by thinking at them. Yet when he's up a tree in an Ewok net he has to ask Han Solo to see if he can reach his light saber for him. R2-D2 cuts the net and they all go plop. This is called sacrificing story sense for a gag.

More? We are asked to believe that the mercenary Han Solo would accept a commission as a general (how's that for rapid promotion without any military experience?) in the rebel army. The casualty is Solo's admirable and intriguing independence. In *Jedi* we don't even get any of the interesting can-a-bum-and-a-princess-make-a-go-of-it development. Solo and Leia's relationship is

suddenly perfect, a foregone conclusion. I always tried to see Solo as a spiritual relative of Abu, the little Thief of Bagdad, who ran away at the end of the picture in search of fun and adventure rather than be Grand Vizier. That's the Han Solo who intrigues us in *Star Wars* and in *Empire*, not this suddenly compliant rebel conscript.

None of the principals are served well by the direction. *Jedi* badly needed a Lucas or Kershner at the helm. Marquand handles the action-sequences well enough, but he's lost during the quiet moments. We get stiff ciphers instead of desperate people caught up in the maelstrom of great events. The characters in *Jedi* don't interact, they make speeches to each other. Mark Hamill comes off best because he's a much better actor than most critics give him credit for (a problem he no longer has since *Amadeus*. How many of you have seen *Amadeus*?)

But Carrie Fisher and Harrison Ford are helpless, adrift on a sea of long stares and enforced solemnity without a solid anchor behind the camera. They struggle, and it shows. Even when Luke informs Leia she's his sister, her reaction is downright deadpan.

In *Jedi* the aliens have all the lines.

But the major problem lies in the development and resolution of the story. The actual battle to destroy the new Death Star (Why another Death Star? Why another robotic pratfall by R2-D2?) is sideshow, carnival time, Sfx triumphant. All exciting and thrilling and gosh-wow. I'm as big an Sfx fan as anyone, but the story *must* strive to provide a reason for all the action.

Once we learn from a dying Yoda in the first half of the film that

Vader is Luke's father, all suspense vanishes. We know now, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Luke is going to win because his father will not kill him. That's unAmerican. Thus there's none of the suspense during the final fight of the lightsaber duel in *Empire* between Luke and Vader. We also know that Luke isn't going to kill his own father (this isn't an Italian film). It's all shadow play. Better to have the Emperor kill Vader, thus redoubling our desire to see him get his just deserts.

Better yet, how about this? Vader is not Luke's father after all. Not only does this add new interest to the story, it eliminates the need for Kenobi to try and rationalize away what he said in *Star Wars*. Then who might Vader be? Obviously he has to be clever enough to fool Luke into considering the possibility that he might be his father. There has to be some kind of family tie to make it believable.

Suppose Luke had an older brother? An evil side of himself, jealous and mean-spirited enough to kill Anakin Skywalker. Suddenly *he's* the Darth Vader we've come to know and hate, the epitome of evil. In addition to everything else we know he's done, now we learn that he's guilty of patricide. We can readily believe he'd chop Luke up into little pieces at the Emperor's behest. How much more shocking when Luke removes the helmet at the film's end to see, not a pleasant, rather vapid middle-aged gentleman in heavy makeup but instead a distorted, twisted older version of Luke himself? Hamill in a momentary double-role, seeing Luke as he might have been, replaying the dream sequence on Dagobah in *Empire* when he encounters the Vader shade in the cave. How much greater

the message and the impact on the audience.

Here's one more. Luke and Leia have been around one another for some time now, yet it takes Yoda to inform Luke that they're brother and sister. Funny that they don't sense this until *Jedi*. But suppose that the "other" Yoda refers to in *Empire* as having the power of the Force isn't Leia, a fairly obvious candidate? Suppose it's someone totally unexpected?

Now let's see. Who kind of floats around performing workmanlike heroics? Who's offscreen just long enough for us to forget him? Whose origins are shrouded in mystery? Who even duplicates Luke's daring feat at the end of *Star Wars* and would likely require use of the Force to do so?

Suppose there's a third Skywalker brother, gang? One who hasn't been exposed to contact with Vader the way Luke and Leia have? One who's *really* been kept apart and in reserve by Yoda and Ben Kenobi?

Suppose Lando Calrissian and Luke were brothers?

Hey, nonny-nonny, wouldn't *that* revelation cause an audience to sit up and take notice? Might even leave a departing audience with something to think about.

Ah well. It's not my universe and these aren't my characters, so such speculation in hindsight is nothing more than the usual post-theater what-iffing. Go see *Jedi*. Expect to watch brilliant special effects, see matte work at its finest, marvel at the finest stop-motion work yet seen on screen.

Do not expect to leave the theater in a thoughtful mood. Do not expect the unexpected, because *Return of the Jedi* is as predictable in its course as

one half of a pair of black socks.

Do consider this.

A number of years ago I did a book called *Splinter of the Mind's Eye*, a follow-up or sequel to a film then still in production called *Star Wars*. In the course of my writing I had several occasions to chat with the director of that film, a soft-spoken, regular guy named George Lucas who liked making movies and who was wondering if his then-current project could possibly match the success of his previous *American Graffiti*.

George Lucas, when I met him, was worn out, as one can only be worn out by the round-the-clock concerns of trying to ride herd on a big-budget motion picture filled with special effects. I asked him what he wanted to do if this *Star Wars* thing turned out to be a hit. He replied, "I'd like to get a couple of guys and go make small, experimental 16mm films."

Alas, heavy lie the responsibilities of the myth-makers. I now read that Lucas plans to take at least a two year vacation from film-making, once the latest Indiana Jones adventure is safely in the can. That vacation, by his own words to me in 1976, is seven years overdue. George Lucas is a brilliant, inventive film-maker who has given more pleasure to more theater-goers over the last seven years than anyone except perhaps his contemporary Steven Spielberg, but even the most powerful battery cannot run forever without recharging.

I will be very surprised if there are no more films from George Lucas of California. I will not be at all surprised if there are no more *STAR WARS* films from him or anyone else. You cannot license icons, and all artists must move on.



The Demon Queen

by Phyllis Eisenstein

art: Jack Gaughan





Phyllis Eisenstein was born in Chicago in 1946, and except for two years in Germany and one winter in Upper Michigan as an Air Force wife, she has spent her life there. She has had the traditional melange of occupations before becoming a full-time writer. Her fourth novel, In the Hands Of Glory, was published by Timescape Books late in 1981. Recently she returned to college to acquire a B.A. in Anthropology. As Madame Klein, she sometimes reads Tarot cards at science-fiction conventions, astounding the skeptical with her results.

The plain surrounding the castle was alive with campfires, like so many stars fallen to earth. The Duke could see too many of them from his slit of a window, more than he cared to count. His room high in the keep was dim, the window deep-set, yet he wondered if some night, when he looked out like this, some lucky archer might not find his head a decent target. And then, for him, it would be over, and never again would he wake in a cold sweat from dreams of his loyal followers begging him for bread.

Besieged for months. Through the winter, colder than most, but not cold enough to drive the enemy away. Through the glorious spring when the crops should have been planted, when they *were* planted, but not by friendly hands. Through the bright, hot summer. And now the seasons had come full circle, as if warm weather had never been, and still he was locked in his own castle, and his former allies laughed and feasted with the enemy.

His Councillors had been with him most of the evening — well-seasoned warriors, some older than he was who remembered fighting for his grandfather. Most were still full of anger and hurt pride, refusing to give up, offering all kinds of fanciful plans for breaking the siege — plans for midnight sorties, false surrenders. Only Gera said nothing during the meeting. She, the architect of his greatest victories, the eye that always saw the flaw, she said nothing. Perhaps the others spoke all the more earnestly because she remained aloof.

Finally, he dismissed them. Sleep on your ideas, he told them; perhaps tomorrow something better will present itself. Tomorrow.

The others trooped out of his tapestry-lined bedchamber, but Gera stayed, leaning over the map she had made of the castle and its surrounding terrain. When the Duke wearied at last of looking out his window, he turned to her.

“Will it change if you stare at it long enough?” he said.

She shook her head and straightened up. She was a tall, pale woman with a white-blond braid that fell almost to her knees. Like the rest of

them, she had become thinner since the siege began, and her high cheekbones stood out in sharp relief. "We've lost, my lord," she said quietly. "You and I both know that."

Wearily, he sank into his chair. She had never said that before, though he thought he had seen it in her eyes. The words themselves, coming from her mouth, were a heavy burden for him.

"You and I," he murmured. He closed his eyes and covered his face with his hands as if, when he took them away, the world would be bright and new. "The others still hope." His voice was the merest whisper. "They think that Eberhard or Berengar or Conrad will appear on the horizon one of these mornings, leading a host of thousands. Or else that my lady wife's sorceries will succeed at last." He dropped his hands and opened his eyes, and everything was the same. "I suppose I still hope a little myself. That this winter will be different, somehow. The troops will grumble at being out in the open again. They might even . . . rebel." He sighed. "One hope is as foolish as another." He felt all the lives in the castle weighing down his shoulders, smothering him. "Do they hate me, Gera? Do my own people hate me for bringing them to this?"

She looked down at the map again. "They still love you, my lord. And they have great faith in you. If you asked, there'd be no lack of volunteers for one of Arnulf's midnight suicide sorties."

He sighed again. "A quick death there measured against a slow one inside the walls. I'd be tempted to choose it myself . . . except that it surely wouldn't be quick for me." He slumped, his head hanging. "There are no good choices, Gera. No victory, no mercy, only death one way or another." He crossed his arms over his chest and clutched at the fabric of his shirt. "Only death."

"There might be something else," said Gera.

Slowly, he looked up at her, at the pale-eyed woman whose counsel he had depended upon for almost twenty years. It seemed to him now that he could scarcely remember a time when she was not at his right hand, her cool wisdom blunting the passion that so often moved his other Councilors. "Something?" he wondered.

She turned her steady gaze on him. "The storms will be with us soon, my lord. Cloaked by a heavy snowfall, a few people might be able to leave the castle and slip through the enemy camp."

"A few?"

"Two. Three."

"And what would they do after that?"

She shrugged. "Live. Raise a fresh army to attack the enemy from the rear. Whatever you wished, my lord."

He sagged again. "Raise a fresh army? From where?" He shook his head. "There are no armies left for me out there. No friends, no followers . . . No, I can't leave. My time is here."

"My lord, you are still young."

He ran one hand through his hair, which was lightly marked by gray.

"I'm a hundred battles old, Gera. And tired." He glanced toward the window. "They're laughing out there. They've taken in the harvest we should have sown, and they're grinding the grain. Can you hear the mills?"

"No, my lord, and you can't either."

"I hear them in my dreams. Every night." He looked back to her. "You could go," he said. "I wouldn't stop you. You weren't born among us, after all; you don't owe us anything by blood."

She stood very straight, very still. "There is another allegiance as strong as blood, my lord."

He tried to smile at her, failed, his lips twisting in a grimace of pain instead. "And those I have inspired that in . . ." He covered his face with his hands once more. "Look where I have led them."

He heard her soft step approaching him, felt the hesitant touch of her fingers, light as gossamer, on his shoulder, but he could not raise his eyes to hers.

"You led them well, my lord," she said. "There was no finer leader than you. I know. I searched long for one I could serve with my whole heart."

"No finer leader," he echoed. "Yet here we are." He let his hands drop limply to his lap, and he stared down at them, but all he saw were campfires, campfires.

Gera knelt at his feet and bowed her head. "You took my advice, my Duke; therefore I share the guilt. You are not alone with it."

"No, no," he whispered. "Your plans were always good. The fault lay with my ambition." He nodded slowly. "You should have been born to power instead of me, Gera. Your decisions would have been more conservative, I know. You would have consolidated your position better; you wouldn't have been so eager for victories. Your people would have been secure." He took a deep breath and leaned back in the chair. "And I have decided to leave mine in your care."

She looked up at him. "My lord?"

"However we see the outcome of this time," he said, "my death is there. But the rest of you needn't come along. If I am dead, and if you throw them my body and parley as hard as you can, there is a chance they'll let you go. You'll have to say you rose against me, of course . . ."

She turned her face aside, and very softly she said, "No."

He let a long moment pass before he asked, "Don't you want to live, Gera?"

"Ask one of the others, my lord. Not me."

"I ask you because I trust you most. I know that if anyone can manage it, you can."

"No," she whispered. "You don't know me at all."

"Come," he said. "You won't have to kill me yourself. I'll do that. And then a few smooth lies for the greater good . . ."

"My lord, please — I don't want to see you dead."

"You'll see it one way or another, Gera. Would you rather see me dead as I am now, or a starved skeleton?" He leaned forward suddenly and gripped her shoulders. "It's over. You and I — we know it. It's over, and I don't think I can bear to watch much more. Or dream much more." His voice broke as she turned her face toward him and he saw that her eyes were brimming with tears. He had never known her to weep, not in all the years she had served him. He felt as though his heart would crack at the sight, as though it were final evidence of the end of everything.

"I never thought it would come to this, my lord," she whispered.

He could not speak.

She reached up to touch his cheek with one hand. "I never thought . . . that I could care for any mortal man as I care for you, my Duke. These years at your side have been the gold of my life." Her voice trembled. "To see you dead would kill some part of me."

He looked into her eyes as the tears made glittering tracks upon the ivory of her skin. Then he slipped off the chair to kneel beside her, to put his arms around her, to set his lips against her pale hair. He had never done that before, but it felt right, now, at this bleak hour. They did not speak of death again. They hardly spoke of anything. And he thought, as they lay together in his velvet-hung bed, that nothing mattered any more but these few moments, not victory or defeat, not faith or betrayal, not life, not death.

The Duchess could see no campfires from her apartments; windows would have distracted her from the task at hand, from the books and the spells and the hearthfire she fed with mistletoe and herbs. As the smoke rose in the chimney, she chanted occasionally, in a language long dead. She suspected that she mispronounced the words sometimes, and that was why her sorceries were not always successful. But there had been some successes, she was sure of that, or the Duke would never have gained so many victories. She had chanted on the eve of each and the Duke's forces had prevailed. Cause and effect, she thought. Cause and effect.

She had not been so successful lately. The Powers, she thought, must be tiring of her. As her lord had tired of her.

There had been a time when he and she had dined together, laughed together by the fire afterward, warmed his bed together. In stone-walled castle or in campaign tent, she had been at his side. But lately, especially this last year of siege, he had withdrawn from her, preferring the company of his Council, and of his chief adviser, Gera. Late into the night

they always talked, late. And that was not so terrible after all, for it gave the Duchess more time with her books and her flames. From the bundle of herbs in her hand, she drew another pinch, tossed it into the fire, spoke a word, and yearned for this to be the night some guard would bring her word that the campfires of the enemy were dying beneath a supernatural pall.

Instead, a rustle of skirts warned her that one of her maids was approaching. The woman curtsied quickly as the Duchess turned toward her.

"News?" said the Duchess.

The woman was breathing hard from running down the stairs, but even so she hesitated too long, as if, having rushed in with the news, she was now afraid to deliver it.

"Shall I guess?" said the Duchess. "What else could it be to make you hurry so?"

The woman nodded. "They are abed together, my lady."

"So," said the Duchess. Her fingers closed tight on the dried herbs, and they crumbled under that pressure and sifted out of her fist to the bare stone floor. She opened her hand after a time and dusted it slowly against the bodice of her gown.

He had been faithful since their marriage. She knew that from her spies. But from the day she met him, from the day she first saw his Council standing at his right hand and his left, first saw the tall pale woman with the white-blonde braid, she had suspected this might happen. Over the years, she had watched them together, and though Gera had never done anything improper, though the Duke had always treated her as a comrade-in-arms rather than a woman, still the Duchess had always suspected . . .

She bowed her head, and the cold fury welled up within her. Was she not young and beautiful enough for him? Was she not as great a helpmate with her sorceries as that white bitch and her advice? What did it matter that she had given her lord no living children yet?

"Though she was with him before me, she will *not* have my place," whispered the Duchess. And she rose from before the fire and swept to her books, rattling their pages furiously as she sought the proper spell. "She shall not have more than this one night, I swear it!" She read swiftly, she gathered powders from their jars, she flung both words and spices at the hearth, and the flames roared suddenly, licking up the chimney walls in rhythm with her speech.

"The Powers shall strike her down," the Duchess said to her maid, who cowered in a corner of the wildly-lit room. "They shall strike her as they struck my lord's enemies." And the light reflected in her eyes was red as blood.

Out on the crenelated walls of the castle, the wind began to rise, sharp and bitter, and with it a mist. The mist swirled violently, biting, stinging. It tore at men's faces, numbed their hands, made their armor frost over and draw the heat from their flesh. And then it coalesced into monstrous shapes, translucent in the moonlight, near-human and near-animal but grotesque, shifting, pulsing; and from these shapes came hollow laughter. Strong men cringed before them, backed against the weathered stone walls and held their pikes and shields up for protection.

Down inside the walls flowed the shapes, like water plunging over a precipice, pooling at the bottom and moving outward in ever-widening rings. They raced through the courtyard, entering at doors and windows, squeezing through the cracks of shutters. Though it was deep night, the castle roused with no yawning, terror driving sleep away. People woke and screamed at the apparitions. Some fought with sword and pike, but the weapons slashed and stabbed without effect. Some hid under their beds or ran wildly into the yard, crying out for help. By the time scattered knots of people had gathered in the open, though, the mist had collected at the base of the keep, like a mob of hooded old women, but giant, bloated. Up the keep walls it flowed then, a terrible fountain, and where it found windows, pieces broke off the mass and seeped inside until, at the roof, the remainder plunged into the chimney and was gone.

The Duke woke with a start. Someone was shaking his shoulder: Arnulf, the eldest Councillor.

"My lord," the man was saying, "we have been invaded!"

The Duke sat up abruptly, clutching at Arnulf's elbow. "What? What do you say?"

"Sorcery, my lord!" said Arnulf. "An army of demons has entered the castle."

The Duke rose naked from his bed, ignoring the way Arnulf's eyes widened when he noticed Gera's head on the other pillow. The Duke grasped his sword, which stood with his armor beside the bed. "Where are they?" he said.

"Everywhere, my lord." Arnulf glanced toward the window. Even as he spoke, mist was pouring over the sill. He clutched at the bedpost. "The sword is useless, my lord," he whispered. "They have no flesh to cut, no blood to spill."

Still, the Duke stood with his sword ready, and picked up the shield, too, and held it before his nakedness. "How many dead, Arnulf?"

The older man swallowed visibly as he looked first one way and then another, his head moving in short, sharp jerks, like a bird's. Behind him, at the closed bedchamber door, mist was filtering through on the hinge side and under the stout panel; at the hearth, like white smoke, it drifted in above the banked coals. "No dead, my lord," he whispered.

The Duke let his glance flicker to Arnulf, just for an instant. "None?" "Not yet."

The Duke took a deep breath. "Then it is me they want." He stood very still as the room filled with mist, and the mist eddied and spun and condensed into a score of vaguely humanlike forms, featureless, misshapen, translucent. They crowded toward him.

"I am not afraid of you," he said.

"Nor we of you," replied a voice from among them, deep and resonant as if it came from the bottom of a well. Then laughter, laughter, filling the room till the Duke wanted to cover his ears against the noise.

"Let him who sent you face me in single combat!" he shouted. "This is a coward's way of fighting!"

The laughter redoubled, and the room began to respond to it, tapestries breaking loose from their moorings, goblets and decanters rattling till they tilted, spilled their contents, smashed on the floor. The Duke's armor clattered like so many pots and pans, then tumbled from its stand.

"Stop!" shouted Gera, and her high, clear voice rose above the demons' laughter. And stilled it.

She came forward to stand beside him, her pale nakedness almost as white as the mist. "They haven't come for you, my lord," she said quietly. "They've come for me." And to the mist-creatures, she said, "How did you find me?"

The voice among them spoke; it could have been any of them, or none, for they had no throats, no mouths, to utter words. "There is a woman in this place whose pitiful sorceries have amused us in the past. Her spells are always like puffs of ash; if ever they strike a target, they fall away, harmless. This night she cast a death spell at you. You probably felt nothing, it was such an insignificant thing, but it echoed from you. We heard the echo; there was no mistaking it. And now you must return with us. The demon wars go badly, and we need you."

"The demon wars can wait," she said. "A year or a hundred years will make no difference to them. I will stay here."

"We have searched the worlds for you," said the voice, "and we will not return without you."

"Go!" she shouted. "I shall not leave!"

"Nor shall we," said the voice, and it transformed into a deep rumble that gradually climbed in pitch till it was a wild howl, like a thousand wolves baying at the moon. The mist-creatures lost their form and began to swirl, to race about the room, a maddening, icy gale. One arm of mist whipped toward the Duke, struck his face and snapped his head back; he staggered. Sword and shield were ripped out of his hands and tossed aside as the storm embraced him.

"No!" screamed Gera, throwing her arms about him. "Leave him alone!"

Abruptly, the mist withdrew, the howling faltered, and the whole white mass rushed to the chimney and fled upward. In a moment, though, beyond the window, they heard the howling commence anew, like terrible, discordant singing, and they could hear the screams, too, in the courtyard.

The Duke clung to Gera while his head cleared. His jaw throbbed as if struck by a mailed fist. "What's happening?" he said. "What are they doing out there?" He let go of her and groped for his clothes; she helped him dress at first, then a shaking Arnulf took over and gave her a chance to throw on her own garments. The Duke left sword and shield behind when he raced up the stone staircase that led to the roof of the keep; equally weaponless, Gera and Arnulf followed.

From that highest point of the castle, most of the courtyard was visible. Below, the ground was half-obsured by swirling mist. Amid the mist were people, some running madly, aimlessly, flailing their arms, some cringing and trying to hide their faces, a few still blustering with pikes. And mingled with their frightened cries and the wild howling of the demons was that unearthly laughter, as if the terror of human beings were the greatest joke in the world.

"I don't understand," said the Duke, looking down on chaos. His hands gripped the cold stones of the parapet and worked helplessly against them. He looked to Gera. "Tell me."

In the moonlit darkness, her face was pale and ethereal. She gazed not down but outward, to the plain as strewn with campfires as the sky with stars. "They have been searching for me for forty-five years."

He shook his head slowly. "Forty-five years is your whole life."

"No," she said. "No. Forty-five years ago I was tired and unhappy and . . . restless. I needed something — some sort of change. So I decided to try out a mortal life. There was a woman in a small village. She had borne a number of children, so I entered her womb and she bore me. I grew up as her youngest. It was . . . a pleasant experience. Then she and her husband died, and my brothers and sisters wanted me to marry and settle down as a farm wife, but I wanted to see the world, this world, through a traveler's eyes. And so I did. Eventually, I came to you. The rest you know, my lord."

He stared at her, at the skin he had touched, the lips he had kissed, and a shudder went through him. "Who are you?" he whispered.

She pointed down, to the courtyard swarming with ghostly shapes. "One of them," she said. Then she turned toward him slowly, and she smiled a very sad smile. "I knew they'd find me someday. But the longer I was with you, my Duke, the farther off I hoped that day would lie." She reached out to him with one hand, as if to touch his shoulder, but she stopped short and let her arm fall limp at her side. "The look on your face, my lord," she said. "It betrays you."

He could not tear his gaze from her. "Are you really like them?" he wondered.

"I could discard this body and become as intangible as mist, yes." She glanced down at herself. "It suits me, though, this form. I should be . . . sorry to let it go." She raised her eyes to his. "But I think that you'll never see me again as you did a few hours ago. I haven't changed, my lord. Truly, I haven't."

He looked back down to the courtyard at last. It had almost cleared of human beings, though not of cavorting demons, and not of howling laughter. Every door to the yard was shut, every window. A few pikes lay scattered across the ground, a few shields. "What do they want of us?" he asked. "Why are they doing this?"

"They think that if they spoil my mortal life sufficiently, I'll give in and go back to them," Gera replied. "They're a bit like some mortal children that way — the kind that scream and cry and drive their parents mad until the parents give them what they want just to stop the commotion." A pair of demons chose that moment to swoop up to the top of the keep and shriek past the three watchers there. Arnulf cringed, but the Duke stood straight and stared at them in thin-lipped silence. Gera bowed her head when they had dived back to the yard. "They'll dog my steps now that they've found me. I'll never have a moment's peace." She sighed.

"What are you to them," wondered the Duke, "that they want you so much?"

"Their leader," she said. She sighed again. "I wasn't quite as faithful to my people as you are to yours. I left them. Of course, I was their Queen for almost a thousand years. It makes a difference. Don't you think?"

"A thousand years . . ." he murmured.

"After a thousand years, I deserved a rest." And she chuckled, a tiny, humorless chuckle. "And what did I do? I came here and did very nearly what I had been doing for those thousand years. I planned battle after battle. The only difference was that I didn't give the orders." She shook her head. "You were tired and old, my lord, after only a hundred battles. Think of me, then, after a thousand. War is the demons' way of life."

"Then . . . why did you offer to serve me? Why didn't you just stay a traveler and wander the world?"

She shrugged. "We are what we are, I suppose. The talents that I saw in you made me want to help. And after a time . . . Ah, my Duke, I was a thousand years alone. I doubt a mortal could conceive of it. A thousand years of empty life." She looked down at the weathered parapet before her, ran her hands lightly across the rough surface. "Oh, I had a consort, poor wretch. He's back there now, commanding in my absence, and doing a sad job of it, I'm sure. They wouldn't want me so much if he were having any real success. But he was chosen for me; I wouldn't have chosen him myself. He never touched my heart." She glanced sidelong at

the Duke. "Yes, demons do have hearts, misty, shapeless hearts though they are. Mine tells me that I love you, and that's the ultimate reason why I've served you these twenty years. Did you think that just because I was a demon I lied about that?"

Their eyes met. "No," he said. "I didn't think you lied." Then he swept his gaze across the whole castle, across the yard and the walls that surrounded the keep, and nowhere could he see another human form: only Gera, and Arnulf who crouched so silent almost at their feet. Everywhere, guards who had served faithfully in the bloodiest of battles had deserted their posts. Still, the demons ran riot, and they made the castle seem to be inhabited by ghosts, as if the night were a year hence, when the people had all starved to death and the siege was long over.

"You could have left this castle at any time," said the Duke. "Yesterday. Last month. You could have turned into one of these and flown away."

"I could have."

"But you chose to stay . . . and perhaps die?"

She leaned back against the parapet, clasped her hands and stared down at them. "I wouldn't have died. Sword or pike or hunger won't kill a demon. I would only have had to give up this mortal flesh." Her interlaced fingers flexed stiffly. "It was my hiding place, you see. As long as I submerged my demon self in a human body, they couldn't find me. I didn't take the Duchess's sorceries into account. I thought I could stay safely hidden until . . . until whatever was going to happen here finally happened." There was a catch in her voice, and she took a deep breath to clear it before going on. "There was another choice. There had always been another choice. To use my demon powers to help you, to scatter the enemy with terror." Slowly, she raised her eyes to his. "But they would have found me then. They would have taken me back just as surely as they will take me back now. And I valued my hours with you too much. I wanted them to last . . . But I suppose that doesn't matter any more. I'll never be Gera for you again, will I?" She closed her eyes then, and the silvery tears leaked out from beneath her pale lashes.

With one hesitant hand, he reached out to her and stilled the nervous flexing of her fingers. "You will always be Gera to me," he whispered, and he pulled her into the circle of his arms and laid his cheek against hers. "Always." He kissed her temple, and though he felt a shiver pass through him, he pushed it aside and held her tighter yet. "We won't let twenty years of friendship lose its meaning. If you must be a demon, then I have a demon for a friend and lover."

She wept softly against his shoulder. "If only time would stop. If only we could stay like this forever."

Her arms were strong about him, and her flesh gave off the same heat as any mortal woman's. His mind's eye refused to see her as a formless mist.

Yet when he looked out, past the pale wisps of her hair, he could see that other mist spinning and swooping like a flock of unearthly birds. "Not like this," he whispered. "Not while they're here. You must stop them."

She halted her tears with a convulsive swallow. "I'm sorry, my lord," she said, "that I brought such fright to your people. I . . . I'll take the demons away." Her hands against his chest, she tried to push herself from him, but he held her fast.

"Send them to the enemy," he said. "Tell them to play their demon games out there."

She looked long into his face, sadness spreading outward from her eyes, and her skin seemed paler than ever, almost translucent in the moonlight.

"Then I must go, my lord," she whispered. "I must lead them."

"No, send them!" he said. "You're their Queen; send them!"

"You don't understand, do you?" She slid her hands upward and touched his cheeks. "I'm, not just their tactician, my Duke. I'm their leader. They will follow wherever I go. Wherever."

"They went away when you commanded them to leave me alone."

"Did they?" She glanced toward the mist below. "Oh, they responded to my anger, to my physically taking you under my protection. They couldn't very well tear you out of my arms. I do have *some* means of punishing those who offend me. But . . . I can't punish them all. There is only one way I can stop *this*."

"But those are *your* enemies out there. Tell your demons that!"

"They'd laugh at that, my lord. The mortal world has no meaning for them beyond amusement. None of them has ever thought of spending forty-five years as a mortal. They think me mad, I know, but that doesn't matter because they need me. I'd be betraying your trust, my Duke, if I didn't advise you to let me go to them."

"Gera . . ."

"No choices left, my lord. None. Will you kiss me once more before I leave?"

Her lips were salty with tears, and after a moment they seemed cool; her whole body, tight against his, seemed cool. And then her pale flesh began to burn his hands, his mouth, as winter-chilled metal burns the unprotected skin. But he clung to her, and abruptly she turned to icy mist as pale as her hair, and insubstantial. His arms, his hands, closed suddenly on nothing, and the glittering particles of ice that had been Gera whirled about him, snatching his breath away for an instant. Then she was off, cascading down the side of the keep like a waterfall of snow, joining the mist in the courtyard, sweeping it up like a snowball rolling across a snow-covered hillside. And where she went, the howling stopped, and the wild laughter; and the quiet of a crisp winter night settled on the castle. From the cracks in shuttered windows, from beneath doors, from the slits of the keep itself, mist rushed, gathered like a silent

cyclone in mid-air and fountained upward toward the cold moon. Then, like a windblown cloud, it swept across the clear sky toward the nearest campfires of the enemy.

Within moments, the howling commenced again, accompanied by human screams; but this time both were faint with distance.

The Duke waited. He could hear chaos but see little — the fires flickered as they would in a fierce storm, or as if people were running madly about them. The moon sank low and finally set. The first traces of dawn lit the eastern sky. Some of the campfires faded, as if they had been allowed to go out, as if those who depended upon them no longer cared about light or warm hands or a hot breakfast.

With the sun, he could at last see the plain that surrounded the castle. Fires there were, faint smoke drifting from them, but precious few troops huddled about them. The greater part of the enemy host was gone, leaving behind a litter of arms and armor, of deserted tents and aimlessly wandering horses. A few scattered soldiers were left, moving erratically as ants; patches of mist would occasionally arise from the ground to bedevil them, and they would run with arms thrown over their heads.

The Duke scanned the horizon. He saw clouds, but did not know which, if any, might be hers.

Arnulf crept up beside him, faithful Arnulf who had stayed on the keep roof with him all night. The old Councillor looked all around and then clutched the Duke's arm. "Victory, my lord!" he said.

"Yes," said the Duke, and he turned wearily to the staircase and descended. His chamber was dark and cold; the fire had gone out. Arnulf called for a servant to kindle a fresh blaze, but when none came, he did it himself. Then he rehung the Duke's armor on its stand and propped the Duke's sword in its usual place by the bed. The Duke sat in his chair and looked at nothing.

Some time later, a maid came in and, after glancing about the room, and particularly at the bed, announced the Duchess.

"Is it true?" cried the Duchess, rushing up to the Duke's chair. "Is it true what they say, my lord?"

He looked at her with tired eyes. "What do they say, my lady?"

"That demons came last night and chased the enemy away!"

He raised a languid hand from the chair arm and gestured toward her. "You must know that better than I, my lady. You summoned them."

"I?" She gazed at him with an uncertain frown. "How do you know that?"

"They told me."

"You *spoke* with them?"

"Yes. Arnulf was with me at the time. Weren't you, Arnulf?"

The old Councillor, who was sitting by the fire, stammered his agreement.

"You are a powerful sorceress, my lady," said the Duke, "and everyone in the castle will be grateful to you for saving them. Even if the demons frightened them a bit at first."

"Well," said the Duchess, "demons *are* frightening."

He dropped his eyes. "What a shame you were not able to summon them sooner."

She drew herself up. "It was not an easy task, my lord. I worked all night."

"No doubt," he said. "And the demons never bothered you."

"I did not notice them, my lord. I was too busy."

"Ah."

She turned to Arnulf, frowned again, then shot one furtive glance at the bed. "I have not seen Councillor Gera this morning," she said, the words aimed at neither man, or both.

"Nor will you see her again," the Duke said stiffly. "The demons carried her off. She was . . . their price."

"Oh," said the Duchess. "How terrible."

The Duke gave her an icy stare. "That was what you wanted, wasn't it? That was what you worked for all night, wasn't it, sorceress? Do you think I don't know?"

She raised a hand to her lips and took one step backward before he stood and caught her wrist in a grip that was too hard, too cold.

"You have what you want now, my lady wife," he said, and his eyes burned with winter. "You have a faithful husband once more. And I have what I want — a sorceress whose fame will spread across the world, until no one will dare oppose me for fear of my deathless demon army. We shall not let your fame die, my lady; it shall serve me for the rest of our lives." He drew her closer, till their breaths mingled, and his was pale vapor, as if the room were crisp and snowy plain instead of hearth-warmed bed-chamber. And he saw himself mirrored in her frightened eyes, saw the paleness of his face and the lines in his cheeks and the gray hairs at his temples. "And we shall be happy with what we have, shall we not?" he murmured. "Because we sacrificed so much to get it."

She licked her lips. "The courtyard is full of people," she said hoarsely. "We should talk to them. Reassure them. Tell them our plans."

"Yes," he said. "We should tell them how proud we are that we have saved their lives. That they can follow us again, to greater victories. Yes." And he pulled her along with him, to the steps that led down to the courtyard.

"Greater victories," echoed Arnulf, and he hurried to follow his lord and lady.

Shortly, they left the castle. It was a place of ill omen, he said, in addition to being a poor defensive position. It was a place, he said, that would always remind him of that year of siege that seemed so much like a

single long winter. He wanted to think that now he was embarking on the summer of his reign.

Victories — there were many victories, and many new-found allies to share them, to laugh and feast beside him. And there were sons at last, sons of the sorceress, to assure strong leadership when the day came that the Duke would lay it down. But that day was long, long in coming — fortunately, said his people. They loved him, and his lady wife.

And every night of that long life, every night, he dreamed that she came to him, the demon queen, and kissed his lips to keep the winter in his heart.



I, THE GOD/SHE, THE MAIDEN

I hiss the great water.

She slithers over me in a cool, quiet
embrace. Chill, soothing, feathery scales.

I smirk into her swirling
depths, sink down to the swanky pit
of her stomach. Her myriad children tickle
my glowing ears. Bubbles form,
steal upon my heated body, burst like
firecrackers in a July sky. Flowers, they
blossom at my touch and float out
of reach. They mock me with gargoyle
eyes of people I once knew. The sea is my
lover. Her flowing arms gather about
me as I sink, still. Her arms tighten
around the god of poetry for all time.

— John Gregory Betancourt

THROUGH TIME & SPACE WITH FERDINAND FEGHOOT β

by Grendel Briarton

art: Tim Kirk



"Ferdinand Feghoot," said Henry VIII, when Feghoot answered his summons early in 1543, "all this sweet spring I have courted Catherine Parr, Lord Latimer's widow. I adore her and would make her my Queen, but she'll have none of me. She says I'm a grim fellow with whom she fears she can never be merry or lie at ease — and all because I had to have two of my wives put to death. I cannot persuade her that this was not the real *me*, bluff King Hal, but their own infidelity. Go you to her. Because all know you always speak truth, she will believe you when you tell her what a fine cheery monarch I am, and what a jolly husband I'll make her."

Feghoot bowed, took horse, and set off on his mission, and on his return it was Henry himself who greeted him at the gates of the palace.

"Feghoot!" he cried out. "Did'st thou score?"

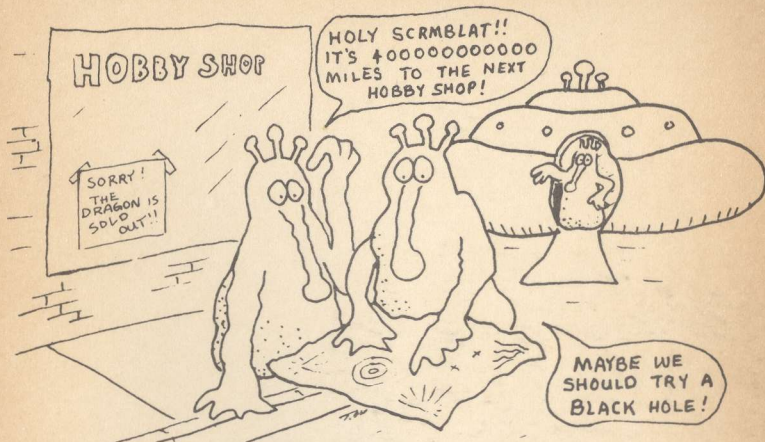
"Aye, won over Parr!" came the answer.

"God bless you!" The delighted Henry at once stripped a jeweled golden chain from his shoulders and placed it on Feghoot's. "What did you tell her?"

"The simple truth, Your Majesty," said Ferdinand Feghoot. "I said you were a veritable Bluebeard of happiness."



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BIO OF A SPACE TYRANT

**HE HAS ONE BURNING DESIRE—
TO AVENGE THE ATROCIOUS SLAUGHTER
HE CAN NEVER FORGET.**



VOLUME I: REFUGEE

When Hope Hubris dares to defend his sister against the violent lust of a wealthy scion, he and his family must flee their home on Callisto and begin a dangerous journey through the terrors of high space. It is a journey that will take all of Hope's ingenuity to survive. Repeated attacks by barbarous pirates — men who rape, rob and murder for sport — will turn an innocent waif into a killer. A king. An interstellar terror.

BY PIERS ANTHONY

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