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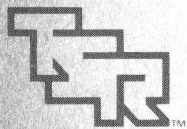
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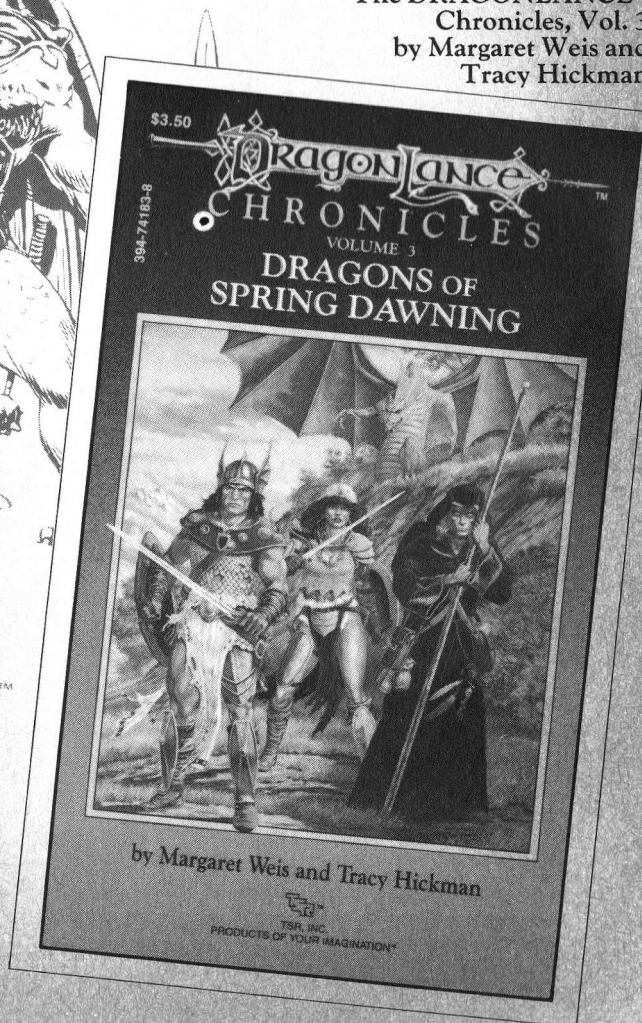
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SCIENCE FICTION STORIES
NOVEMBER 1985

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The Observatory

by George H. Scithers

At last! — we are a TV series . . .

Now, strictly speaking, what we have done is to lease our title to Universal City Studios for use with the fantasy and science-fiction series, **AMAZING STORIES™**, which will appear from 8:00 P.M. to 8:30 P.M. (and, we assume, 7:00 P.M. to 7:30 P.M. in the Central Time Zone) on the N.B.C. Television Network, on Sundays, beginning with the Fall 1985 television season.

Naturally, we're excited: suddenly, our title will be seen by *millions* of televiewers — more, perhaps, than have ever noticed a copy of the magazine itself over the past 60 years. More important, and more important to more people, is that N.B.C. and Universal Television and the series' executive producer, Steven Spielberg, are doing fantasy and science fiction on television — and doing it *right*!

At the beginning of June, as we write these pages, many of the Fall 1985 TV series are just getting under way in a wild scramble for actors, directors, production crews, sound-stage and location commitments, and above all *scripts*; the haste shows in the final product, *especially* in those all-important scripts. **AMAZING STORIES™** received its go-ahead for a two-year run back in July of 1984; the production company has an eleven-month head start on most other new series — and a year more than that for the 1986/7 season. As a result, there has been enough *time*; time to work on scripts, time to get the very best direc-

tors and crews and facilities, time to get the shooting and editing and all the rest *right*, and above all time to think, to have ideas, to throw away the ones that don't work and develop the ones that do — even time to save money by *not* being in a mad, desperate rush to meet impossible deadlines . . .

(The TV industry isn't the only one beset by ridiculously and expensively delayed decisions. In the Defense Department . . . but we digress. Back to **AMAZING STORIES™**.)

As a result of this brilliant innovation — giving the producers of a TV series enough time to do it *right* — the first year (22 episodes) is completely written as of June, 1985, and the second year (another 22 episodes) is well under way. Most of the stories are original, that is, not based on previously-published fantasy or science fiction; and most of those original stories are based on story treatments by Steven Spielberg himself. (Alas for would-be contributors to **AMAZING STORIES™**, the production company is *not* looking for outside submissions at this time. In *any* case, neither Universal Television nor the production company for this series will look at anything that even *might* be a manuscript unless submitted by a literary agent already known to them and trusted by them.)

A second reason to expect that **AMAZING STORIES™** is being done right (and by the time you read this, *has* been done right) is that Spielberg assembled an extraordinary group of

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directors — partly because he has had time to get them, partly because his own reputation for excellence attracts excellence, partly by calling in his obs (SF shorthand, based on Eric Frank Russell's "... and Then There Were None," a society in which the only currency was the "ob," an obligation someone owed you for doing him a favor in the past — which is how we got enough material for the first few issues of *Amazing® Science Fiction Stories* after we took over as editor — but we digress again . . .), and partly because of the kind of terms he could offer those directors.

Spielberg himself has directed two episodes. Martin Scorsese (who directed *Taxi Driver*) directed one. Peter Hyams (who directed *2010* and *Outland*) directed one. As these pages are being written, Clint Eastwood is directing a script that was written by Spielberg. Paul Bartel (who directed *Eating Raoul*) directed an episode from his own script. And Irvin Kershner (who directed *The Empire Strikes Back!*) has directed an episode.

This is not to say that all the directors are this famous; but those that aren't — yet — must perform up to the standards of those we've listed. Note that these directors are primarily noted for their movie work: for some, *AMAZING STORIES™* is their first TV assignment; Spielberg, on the other hand, began his career by directing the pilot episode of *NIGHT GALLERY*.

As a result of all this, the individual episodes of *AMAZING STORIES™* have the look and the feel of 25-minute feature movies, rather than those of TV situation comedies. The action is recorded on film, rather than on videotape. There is the time to take pains. The budget is ample — but not extravagant. Serious thought is being given to packaging three episodes into a

feature film for release overseas.

Why so much fantasy and so little science fiction? Basically, because *good* special effects are so expensive, and because the available budget won't stretch *that* far. A clash between fleets of interstellar warships or a roomful of intelligent, alien lobsters must be done *right* or not at all. In written science fiction, anything goes; on the screen, whether television or movie, if you can't build it, you can't show it.

And the actors? Some familiar faces — Sid Caesar, for example — where a familiar face will advance the story. Other episodes will use good but less familiar actors, again because those are what fit the particular story best. Throughout this series, the emphasis is on the directors and — above all — on the stories.

And the individual story plots? Each — for now — is a very well-kept secret, not only to build suspense about the series as a whole, but also so that each story, when it appears on the air, will be a surprise to its viewers. Some generalities are available now, however. Mick Garriss, the story editor for the series, characterizes the series — overall — as bright, generally upbeat fantasy. Watching an episode should be — usually — a fun, invigorating experience. Essentially, these are real-life stories, built up from believable characters and believable settings, but each with twist that makes it fantasy or, occasionally, science fiction. Some are comedy; some have a kind of psychological edge to them; some are frankly horrific. All, therefore, have a substantial element of surprise: you don't know how each will turn out till it's over.

This is a very real advantage with anthology series, that is, those with neither continuing characters nor connected plot line. In a TV series —

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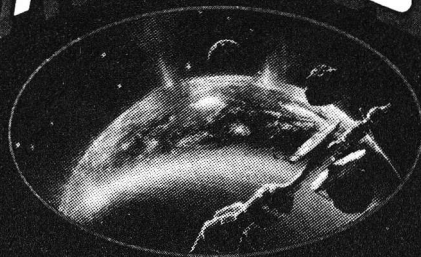
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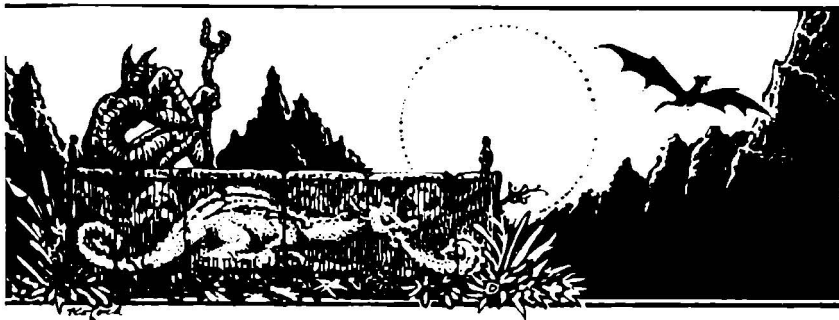
"Star Trek," say, or "Hill Street Blues" — the new faces are the ones that get killed off; the regular characters survive every time. In an anthology series, there's no need to tidy up the set for the next act; *anything* can happen — and in AMAZING STORIES™, just about everything *will*.

In the past, some anthology series have had a regular host, who gives the series continuity by introducing each episode, as did Rod Serling and as did

Alfred Hitchcock, whose revived and re-made series will air on N.B.C. in the half-hour immediately following AMAZING STORIES™ each Sunday night. A disadvantage of the series host, however, is that he cannot help but draw some attention from the story itself. As of this writing, AMAZING STORIES™ will not use such a host; for this series, the *story* is the important thing.



As editors of this magazine, we will continue to read unsolicited, unagented literary material. However, we are not agents of, nor will we forward unpublished literary material to, nor will we even discuss unpublished literary material with Universal City Studios or with any production company associated with those studios or with the television series, Amazing™ Stories.



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Book Reviews

by Robert Coulson

The Book of Kells

by R. A. MacAvoy
Bantam, \$3.50 (paperback)

MacAvoy has produced another brilliant novel. I'm thoroughly fed up with Irish mythology, but I loved this one, anyway. For one thing, the mythology plays a small — but important — part. St. Bridget appears a few times, and is presumably the cause of a couple of miracles, including the one which pitches the tenth-century Irish girl Ailesh into artist John Thornburn's twentieth-century residence, and allows John and his lover/mentor Derval O'Keane to follow her back into her own world. Once there, they promptly have problems with Norse reavers, the King of Dublin, various Irishmen, and John's inability to understand the Irish language of the period. The bulk of the book is historical, as it shows the way of life in Ireland in the tenth century, and it's fascinating. Even the things I already knew about the era are intriguing as described by MacAvoy. Certainly a culture in which poets receive more respect than do warriors should appeal to every fantasy and science-fiction fan. The cast includes John, the accidental hero; Derval, the woman of the world, or of two worlds in this case; Ailesh, the innocent maiden; Labres MacCullen, the master poet of Leinster; and Holvar Hjør, the dedicated follower of Odin. The book is a graphic depiction of the troubles caused by honest men dedicated fully to their gods, and of the clash of reli-

gions; problems still besetting Eire today, and the rest of the world as well. The Book of Kells — the original one — isn't really worked into the plot, but it's a nice symbol. This one is a must.

A Coming of Age

by Timothy Zahn
Bluejay, \$14.95 (hardcover)

Zahn describes an intriguing society; one in which children have psi powers but lose them at puberty. Adults have managed to retain their dominance by restricting education to adults, and impressing on the older and more responsible children that it's their duty to look after the younger ones; the psi powers of the young children are harnessed for physical labor. (How babies are controlled isn't specified.) The ancient and dishonorable profession of "fagin" has taken a new lease on life, as children can become psi-powered criminals. In the course of the book, a fake prophet is using children for his own benefit, a pre-teen girl is being subversive by learning to read ahead of schedule, a researcher is experimenting with a method of keeping psi powers into adulthood, and a detective is trying to track down the researcher and the child he's kidnapped for his research. The plot is a bit mechanical; you can figure out what's coming next, usually. But the characters and society are interesting enough to keep one reading. Tirrell the detective is the most impressive, but the others are interesting enough.

The title describes it; the book concerns a coming of age in a society where the accompanying stress and uncertainty are magnified. Even though I can't recall any particular stress and uncertainty surrounding my own puberty, I liked the book; readers who had more problems of their own (or who have better memories) should like it even more.

Cobra

by Timothy Zahn

Baen Books, \$2.95 (paperback)

This is a set of connected short stories, bridged by "interludes," about the life of a future warrior. The Cobras have their weaponry built in, their bones strengthened, their reflexes enhanced, and so on. It's not a new idea, but Zahn gives the reader a good idea of what it might really be like. The book takes Jonny Moreau from a volunteer at the outset of an intersellar war to the position of planetary governor trying to stop the next war. It covers all the points in between, the starry-eyed volunteer, the active soldier, the discharged veteran, the recalled soldier on peacetime duty, the budding politician, and the political power. It's a good novel about maturity — it could have been called "A Coming of Age" if that title hadn't already been used by someone. I suppose the parallels with our world are strongest in the section titled "Veteran"; in a time still strongly influenced by the myths of Viet Nam, it's nice to consider that at least the Viet Nam vets didn't bring built-in weaponry home with them.

Medea: Harlan's World

edited by Harlan Ellison

Bantam, \$10.95 (trade paperback)

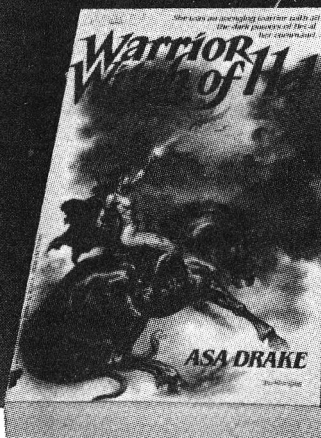
This was originated for a college lecture series in 1975 and has been ten

years in the making. Harlan's idea was to get together assorted experts to create a world and then to write stories about it. It was a gimmick, of course; very few real science-fiction stories are composed that way, though possibly more of them should be. Or possibly not. Authors do, however, get the help of their friends, and their friends' friends, in getting authentic-sounding background material for their stories, so this does vaguely resemble the normal process of creation. The book includes the planetary and xenobiological specifications as they were argued out by several authors, a condensed account of the seminar where the idea was presented, including the interaction with the audience, the additions and revisions suggested later by the authors who participated, and in the final two-thirds of the book, the stories. There are eleven stories: by Jack Williamson, Larry Niven, Ellison, Fred Pohl, Hal Clement, Thomas M. Disch, Frank Herbert, Poul Anderson, Kate Wilhelm, Theodore Sturgeon, and Robert Silverberg. Not all of these authors participated in the construction of the planet, but most of them did. The stories have all appeared in the magazines during the long wait for the book, but they're more effective when the reader can compare them to the planetary data which theoretically govern them, and with each other. Authors tended to use the details of background that they had supplied and to ignore other people's material, of course. That's the way authors work.

Does all of this provide any insight into the workings of writers' minds and/or the construction of science-fiction stories? Not much. Is it a good book? Yes, definitely. There are no really classic stories here, but there are no bad ones, either. Interestingly, while the stories are highly individual

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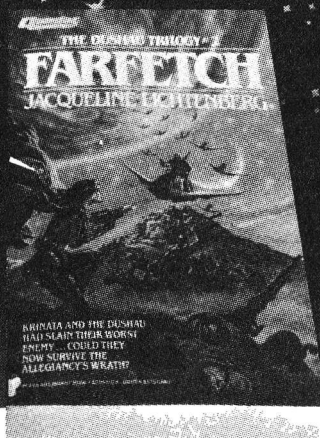
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in nature — especially so for stories with a supposedly common background — they're quite similar in readability and entertainment value, which is unusual. Almost any anthology includes a few stinkers, but this one doesn't.

Beyond Sanctuary

by Janet Morris

Baen Books, \$15.95 (hardcover)

The first novel about Thieves' World. Parts of it have appeared as stories in the Thieves' World series; parts of it appear to be new. Most of the authors of the series have their own favorite characters; one of Morris's is the immortal but bedevilled warrior Tempus. His exploits have appeared in the series; the novel takes those episodes and other material and welds them into a more or less complete story. While Morris has made some effort at providing a novel that will stand by itself, it's much more easily understood if you've already read at least some of the books in the series; some of the explanations and descriptions are a bit skimpy for the first-time reader. Still, even standing by itself it's a perfectly competent swords-and-sorcery novel with a very interesting protagonist.

L. Ron Hubbard Presents Writers of the Future

edited by Algis Budrys

Bridge Publications, \$3.95 (paperback)

This is a fairly thick paperback anthology. The "Writers of the Future" contest produces three winners each quarter; this volume includes the winners of the first three quarterly contests, plus other contest entries, for a total of fifteen stories. There are also articles by contest judges Budrys, Robert Silverberg, Theodore Sturgeon, Jack Williamson,

and Roger Zelazny, and by contest sponsor L. Ron Hubbard. The contests continue, and future winners are supposed to appear in future volumes of this series.

The book isn't necessarily worth getting for the magnificence of the fiction. The stories emphasize emotion and character at the expense of plot, and the characterization isn't really good enough in most of them to carry off that sort of writing; most of the authors could profitably spend time studying R. A. MacAvoy's way with words. Other comments on the book that I've encountered seem to run from the mildly negative to one refusal to buy the book because the profits go to Scientology, which seems a bit harsh to me. At any rate, there are some interesting ideas here; my own favorites are Jor Jennings's "Tiger Hunt," in which a zookeeper in the undernourished future tries to keep her charges alive, and "Without Wings" by L. E. Carroll, which is based on the lovely idea that, in these degenerate days, the devil doesn't need to bargain for souls; it's God who needs to offer inducements. (No two critics or judges think alike; "Tiger Hunt" was a first-place winner, and "Without Wings" didn't place.)

In contrast to this rather lukewarm appraisal of the stories, I think the contest is a great idea. It's a new market for the unpublished but hopeful writers, and so far the competition doesn't look too tough, though I suppose it will get tougher now that the contest is getting publicity.

The Dreaming Jewels

by Theodore Sturgeon

The Golden Helix

by Theodore Sturgeon

Rogue Queen

by L. Sprague de Camp

Bluejay, \$7.95 each (trade paperbacks)

Bluejay's classic reprint series continues to turn up winners. *The Dreaming Jewels* is a novel which first appeared in the lightly regarded *Fantastic Adventures* magazine in 1950 and has been reprinted regularly ever since. Rowena Morrill does the cover and interiors; her cover is reprinted from the 1980 Dell edition, and is probably the best cover the story has had. The novel is a classic of the maturing of a superman, one of the few in fiction whose abilities have produced some rather dismaying side effects while he's still growing. The story is unique, and was well ahead of its time when it was published.

Helix is a collection of short stories, with a cover by Morrill that includes a good portrait of Sturgeon; many of Bluejay's covers include the author's face. None of the stories is new; copyrights run from 1941 to 1973. The stories are still fascinating. Years ago, before some of you were born, I read an article about Ray Bradbury which called him "The Poet of the Pulp." I always thought that the title — minus the condescension — belonged to Sturgeon instead. He was doing some of the same things, and doing them better.

Rogue Queen is my wife Juanita's favorite science-fiction novel, and Iroedh her favorite character. The humanoid society here is organized like that of bees, and for the same reasons. Iroedh meets some Earth-humans, is induced to change her diet, and changes from a worker to a queen. Juanita, as a grown-up tomboy, identified completely with her. There are assorted personal and political problems to be solved in the book, but primarily it's Iroedh's story. (I'm quite partial to the book, too; if I don't quite agree that it's the best stf novel ever

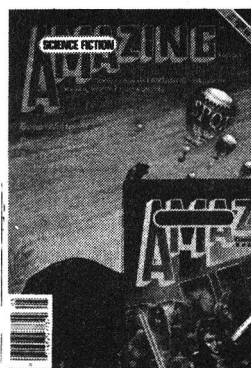
written, it's certainly somewhere in the top dozen or so.) All three of these books are highly recommended.

Skinner

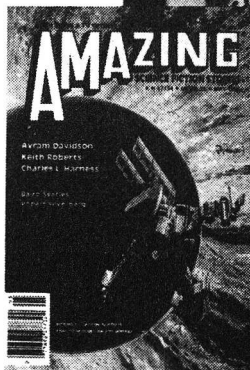
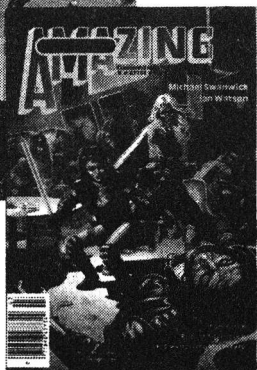
by Richard McEnroe
Bantam, \$2.95 (paperback)

A relatively new author; this is his third novel. It's strictly adventure, coupled with a plot of corporate intrigue; it's one of the better examples in stf of the way in which high-level intrigue affects the lives of the bottom level of employees. Santer Holdings is based on the harvesting of dragon hides from an inhospitable planet, and Chavez Blackstone is dragooned (yes, that was deliberate) into becoming dragon-hide harvester, or "skinner." Meanwhile, there are maneuverings by agents of a rival firm, the problems of various spaceship commanders with the legal system of the planet, and assorted double-crosses in both areas. A good, lively bit of entertainment without any pretensions to literary quality, and I enjoyed it thoroughly.

There are several books that need to be mentioned, and I haven't room for full reviews or the inclination to do them; some of these may need to be hunted down in secondhand book stores by the time this is published. So I'll give a quick run-through. *Kindred Spirits*, by Alan Brennert (Tor, \$3.50), is a different sort of fantasy; a couple of unsuccessful suicides meet in their astral bodies and provide support for one another. It reads a bit like the stories in the 1940s slick magazines, but I enjoyed it anyway. *Fire Watch*, by Connie Willis, (Bluejay, \$14.95), is a collection of a dozen of her highly-regarded short stories; she's one of the few authors who can emphasize human problems and still include interesting ideas. *The Fall of Winter*,



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by Jack C. Haldeman II, (Baen Books, \$2.95), is another adventure novel, the protagonist being an expert who is sent to find out what's going wrong with a terraforming project.

Enjoyable. *The Other Time*, by Mack Reynolds and Dean Ing (Baen Books, \$2.95), is a marvelous time-travel and alternate-world adventure; I loved it while disbelieving it.

by Frank Catalano

To many of the uninitiated the idea of book reviewing seems like the idea of manna from heaven: free books! And to get paid for reading them!

Well, it is like that, to a point. The books are free, and I can thank many a publisher for helping me stock my library. And the pay is good; George is no cheapskate when it comes to anteing up for reviewers. It's also a rather exclusive club: there are roughly no more than 6 SF book review columnists. So we get a good amount of attention from the publishers.

But here's the catch: you **HAVE** to read those books. Not all of them, mind you, but a representative sampling. A sampling I hope that you, the reader, may find worthwhile skimming, for if one book isn't your style, another in the column may be. In addition, I've always tried to be fair in my reviews, balancing my own criteria (memorable characters, realistic background, and entertaining-but-maybe-meaty plots) against what the writer tried to accomplish, and see how it did on both counts. And, on top of it all, I've tried to determine the right amount of plot description to include without giving plot twists away, and without boring the reader familiar with the author's universe. The ideal is to offer an analysis of why or why not the book works on the abovementioned counts.

It's work.

And after a while, you run the risk of losing your perspective. For every

couple of books that made it into the column, at least one other was so horrid or out of place you didn't dare include it (and no, I'm not going to provide a list). You start agonizing over such minor points as whether to describe a book as "well-done" or "nicely done." There are only so many adjectives in the English language, and I'm running out.

Imagine the last time you had to write a school book report. It may be fun the first few times, but did you ever think you would've enjoyed the book more if you weren't forced to read it for a report?

So, it is with heavy heart, a little burn-out, and a lot of clichés I leave the realm of reviewers. Not forever, probably — George and I have talked about an occasional guest review. It's been a worthwhile experience for me, because I did get a chance to read and bring to your attention a lot of damn fine books that I hoped you read and enjoyed. Not necessarily all of them — can't expect that much agreement — but some.

Starting with this issue, John Betancourt, one of *Amazing*'s assistant editors, joins Buck Coulson as regular review columnist. And I'll get on with a few other projects I've had on hold while I've been reviewing for the past three years: three novels, and a bunch of short stories. Not to mention a full-time radio news job, a wife, dog, cat, house, and computer.

So, if you'll excuse me, I need to get

back to that computer to write. With any luck, it'll be something somebody

someday will be writing about in someone else's review column.

by John Gregory Betancourt

Psst! You. Yeah, you — c'mere for a minute. I got this book I wanna talk to you about. . . .

But I'll get to that in a minute, now that I've got your attention. *Amazing*®'s old reviewer, Frank Catalano, has decided to give up his column so he can write more fiction. But he'll be back, from time to time, with guest reviews — and watch for his stories! We wish him success.

Now for my first column, wherein I let you, the reader, know what's expected of you, the terms of my reviewing, and what you'll get in my columns. To start, a quote from Algis Budrys:

"Some of you have expressed a certain bewilderment at the tone I take; the occasional bursts of disrespect, the sometimes sly and illucid asides. 'What is he trying to say?' they ask, thus betraying the fact we never speak of — that a review column these days must first of all be a vehicle for a philosophy of literature, and only secondarily a guide to my ideas on how your book money should be spent."

It still is, and here it's my philosophy of literature, which I'll try to define next column.

That quote, by the way, is from Budrys's February 1966 book review column in the now-defunct *Galaxy* magazine. It's newly reprinted in a collection of all Budrys's columns from *Galaxy*, and I'll review it in a minute.

Now let's turn an old question on its head and ask: What is *your* role as reader of this review column?

Think about it. Reading is both a passive and non-passive activity — non-passive because you make the choice of what to read; passive because, once you start, you have no conscious control over the content (except to shut it out).

As I see it, you're supposed to sit back, read my opinion on a specific book, and use the information to shape your own opinions and desires — in only a small sense on whether or not to buy a book. More important is whether these new works are significant to the field — and *why*; whether an author has succeeded in what he attempted — and *why*; and what's right (and wrong) with his latest book — and *why*. Intelligent criticism will (ideally) sharpen insights, raise expectations, and ultimately, force publishers to raise standards.

Now to the reviews you've been chafing at the bit for. Sit back, raise your feet, get comfortable, and *listen*:

Trumps of Doom

by Roger Zelazny
Arbor House, \$14.95 (hardcover)

Okay: an established writer takes up an old series. This has happened more often than I'd like to think about — even with Isaac Asimov and his Foundation/Robot novels. Returning to an old series is usually a ploy to breathe new life into a writer's career — if the fans liked it once, they'll like it warmed over again and again, right? (Tubb's *DUMAREST OF TERRA* series leaps to mind; I stopped reading it when I found I couldn't tell the plots apart.) Yet Asimov did a good

job, and so did Arthur C. Clarke with *2010*. But did Zelazny need to return to Amber? Or was the money just too good to pass up?

Trumps of Doom is the first entry in a new trilogy set in Zelazny's popular "Amber" universe. (The first "Amber" series has five books.) Although *Trumps* has the same head-on momentum and action as the earlier books, is written in exactly the same style, and features the son of the original hero as protagonist — and although I enjoyed the book immensely — I'm still not going to recommend it. (Be warned: I'm going to reveal the ending. Skip down to the next review, if you wish to avoid it.)

The ending . . . isn't there. The book leaves off in the middle of things, with the hero captured; it's one-third of a novel. There's nothing so annoying as non-resolution in a book, as far as I'm concerned. I wish I'd waited till all three new "Amber" books were available, then read them all at once. There will undoubtedly be a book club omnibus, and definitely paperbacks. Is a new "Amber" book — in three parts — worth \$45.00? Somehow, I doubt it.

Slippery and Other Stories

by R. A. Lafferty

Drumm Booklet #19, \$2.00 ppd.

A friend tells this story: He met a fellow (we'll call him X) of, oh, about 19 years of age in a comic-book store. Now X used to read science fiction, but gave it up (in favor of comic books, among other things) because he thought SF had all become commercial trash. Where, X moaned, were R. A. Lafferty and J. G. Ballard? X thought they'd died long, long ago. (Ballard and Lafferty were active and highly visible in SF during the New Wave, remember. To a 19-year-old, that's ancient history.)

Fortunately, both Lafferty and Ballard are both alive and producing new work — Ballard with mainstream best-sellers in the U.K., and Lafferty with the occasional collection or short story in magazines like *Amazing*®. Lafferty also has several specialty publishers doing limited editions of his works. One of those publishers is Chris Drumm.

Right now I want you to stand up (carrying this magazine with you), walk over to your typewriter, and send Chris Drumm a request for his catalog, which lists his other "Drumm Booklets" (unpublished Lafferty, James Gunn, Sladek, others). Write to: Chris Drumm, P.O. Box 445, Polk City, IA 50226.

I'll wait till you're done. La-ta-da. Hmmm. All done? Okay.

Slippery and Other Stories contains four previously-unpublished Lafferty tales, "Slippery," "All Hollow Though You Be," "Ewe Lamb," and "John Salt." Don't be fooled by the booklet's 39 pages; the type's small. In a mass-market paperback these stories would take up about 80 pages.

"Slippery" is about a super-genius *australopithecus* named Austro who invents a super-glycerine mist that makes things frictionless . . . slippery, in other words. The story has some problems — mostly due to author-intrusions — but it also has a wild pace and some truly chaotic funny moments.

"All Hollow Though You Be" is a satire about hollow-Earth theories. Austro (from "Slippery") makes a brief appearance, adding to the bizarre atmosphere.

"Ewe Lamb" is a mystery story. It has a strange, slightly off-the-wall feel, but there are plot problems, especially the (rather arbitrary) resolution.

"John Salt" is a first-rate fantasy

about a fake miracle-worker whose tricks start going awry. It should have been published professionally.

If you haven't encountered Lafferty before, this probably isn't the place to start. But if you're hooked (like I am), this collection is worth your time.

Magic in Ithkar

edited by Andre Norton
and Robert Adams

Tor Books, \$6.95 (trade paperback)

To tell the truth, I had some trepidations about reviewing this book. I sold the editors a short story to be used in a future volume. What if the book were awful? What if I hated it? I'd decided, before I even began reading for this column, that I *would* do certain things: I *will* pan a book by a friend, if it's bad. I will read Joe X. Wizerakle's first novel with the same criteria in mind that I'll use with the next Heinlein opus. I can put up with hate-mail as much as any reviewer, and I'm such a nice guy (modest, too) that I figure my friends'll probably forgive me. Eventually.

Luckily, I like *Magic in Ithkar* for the most part, although it is a flawed series anthology. I'll get to why it's flawed in a moment.

This first volume contains stories by Lin Carter, C. J. Cherryh, Jo Clayton, Morgan Llywelyn, Patricia Mathews, Ardath Mayhar, Andre Norton, Judith Sampson, Roger C. Schlobin, J. W. Schutz, Susan M. Schwartz, Nancy Springer, and Elisabeth Waters. There are three first-class stories: those by Cherryh (best in book), Llywelyn, and Springer. There are a number of tales I couldn't finish: Clayton's (stylistically annoying; characters didn't hold my interest), Sampson's (cutesy to annoyance), and Schlobin's (very murky and somewhat awkwardly written). Lin Carter's piece is, essen-

tially, a study in futility — though well-written and engagingly told. The remainder range from fair to good.

Far be it from me to tell editors how to assemble an anthology, but putting the stories in alphabetical order by author (as Norton and Adams did) is simply Not Right. As a result, the book starts with futility and ends with a cute minor tale. The two best stories are bunched at the beginning and all the ones toward the end have the same tone. I've heard that the best story in an anthology should go last, the second-best first, and the third-best in the middle. It would've helped this book to have a strong opening and close.

But my main problem with *Ithkar* is this: the stories, although set in the same universe, have conflicting details, as if the writers didn't have enough background information to work from. (One example: In "Dragon's Horn," by J. W. Schutz, 25 silvers is a small fortune; in the next story, "Homecoming," by Susan Schwartz, a half-silver will buy a haircut. There's something wrong here — and I don't think it's inflation!) There is no real sense of unity between the stories, and for a series anthology this is a major problem. Some writers tackled *Ithkar* from a science-fiction viewpoint; others used high fantasy, and still others sword & sorcery. Which is right?

But, inconsistencies aside, it's an entertaining book, and worth your time in its mass-market paperback edition, if you want to wait that long.

Beastmarks

by A. A. Attanasio
Mark V. Ziesing (P.O. Box 806,
Willimantic, CT 06226), \$13.95
(hardcover)

Cold Print

by Ramsey Campbell

Scream/Press (P.O. Box 8531, Santa Cruz, CA 95061), \$15.00 (hardcover)

Both *Beastmarks* and *Cold Print* are collections of stories from small-press publishers. Both are handsomely made; both are beautifully illustrated — the first by Rick DeMarco (cover) and Rich Shindler (interior); the second by J. K. Potter (cover, endpapers, interior).

Beastmarks is a collection of odds and ends — vignettes, experimental short stories, surrealism — by a writer whose first novel, *Radix*, received a lot of promotion. None of these seven “stories” has been published before. There are reasons why: most are overwritten (“Over the Rainbow” worst of all); several are hard to follow. Coming from a publisher who’s done original work by Philip K. Dick and three books by Gene Wolfe, I expected more from this collection. I can’t recommend *Beastmarks*; it’s just not very good.

Cold Print is a collection of very early and more recent work by Ramsey Campbell, a British horror writer. The stories are almost-but-not-quite arranged in order of publication, with the earlier stories first. If nothing else, they show how far Campbell has come as a writer, moving away from plodding Lovecraft imitations to fairly good work of his own (with Lovecraftian touches). The English background of most of the stories is used to good effect — I’ve always found England, with its rolling hills and druidic ruins, far more sinister than Massachusetts. All 15 stories are horrifying to some degree, and if you like a good scare, you’ll find it here.

Benchmarks: Galaxy Bookshelf

by Algis Budrys

Introduction by Frederik Pohl; Evaluation by Catherine L. McClenahan
Southern Illinois University Press

(P.O. Box 3697, Carbondale, IL 62901), \$19.95

I had planned to start with a review of McClenahan’s review of books reviewed by Budrys, but reviews of reviews somehow didn’t seem like quite the way to start a review. (Maybe I just need a little more distance, like a review of my own review of McClenahan’s review of books reviewed by Budrys? Nah. . . .)

These *Benchmarks: Galaxy Bookshelf* reviews (most of which are essays in disguise) are the ones that made Budrys’s reputation as a reviewer. In those days writers feared his analysis. Publishers dreaded his words. And these essays show *why*, exactly. He has a sharp critical eye — easily James Blish’s or Damon Knight’s equal — and he knows how to entertain, putting just the right amount of himself in every column. He even reviewed his own work a couple of times — pointing out its flaws! (“ . . . if I’d say it, who wouldn’t?”)

There’s also a good deal of humor in the book. Budrys takes apart Ellison’s anthology *Dangerous Visions* and doesn’t find a lot to like. And (in a foreword to a column) he explains that Pohl edited the word “——” out of one of his columns. Fortunately, in these liberated days Budrys would have nothing to worry about . . . would he, George?

[No; the missing word is “pisser” — GHS]

Unfortunately, toward the end of the book (Budrys’s columns ran from 1965-1971) the energy seems to run down a bit. The columns get shorter. The reviews take longer to say what should be said concisely, and generally say it in a less acerbic manner — though there are still more than a few glimmers of those old, sharp literary fangs.

I’d say get Damon Knight’s *In*

Search of Wonder first, then if you like it and want more, think about this one. The price seems a bit steep, at twenty bucks — but it is a reference work (with index and all), and might prove of value if you research SF of that period.

Monthly Terrors

compiled by Frank R. Parnell with Mike Ashley
Greenwood Press (88 Post Road West, Box 5007, Westport, CT 06881), \$65.00

Monthly Terrors is an index to the weird fantasy magazines published in the United States and Great Britain between 1919 and 1983 — and an exhaustive one, with 602 pages of two-column print in small type. This is now the authoritative reference work on weird fantasy magazines in the period. It contains author, title, and issue listings for all the usual magazines (*Weird Tales*, et al.), plus dozens of small-press magazines I never would've thought to include. If you need such a book, this is the one to get.

In Short:

At the end of each column I'll point out a few things I didn't find time to fully review that deserve your attention. The first is *Two-Fisted Detective*, by Robert E. Howard — three previously-uncollected detective stories and a synopsis. None are very good, by today's standards, but this 500-copy, 71-page booklet will be of interest to Howard collectors. Price is \$4.50 from Robert M. Price/Cryptic Publications, 35 Elmbrook Pl., Bloomfield, NJ 07003 — and ask about his pulp-derived *Shudder Stories*, *Risque Stories*, and *Crypt of Cthulhu*. . . . Arkham House is busy re-issuing H. P. Lovecraft in revised editions, with thousands of errors (mostly punctuation) removed. The first book is *The Dunwich Horror and Others*, edited by S. T. Joshi and with an introduction by Robert Bloch. I've been told that, to the casual reader, the changes aren't noticeable. Price is \$15.95 from Arkham House, P.O. Box 546, Sauk City, WI 53583.



Well, yes; we are looking for stories, and from people who have never sold a story before as well as from long-time professionals. But no; we do not want to see you make the same mistakes, over and over again. So; we wrote and printed an 11,000-word booklet, *Constructing Scientifiction & Fantasy*, to assist you with manuscript format, cover letters, return envelopes, and other details of story submission, along with some ideas on Plot, Background, Characterization, and Invention. These cost us two dollars each, with mailing and handling; we'd appreciate receiving this amount (check or money order, please; it's never wise to send cash through the mail). If you want two copies, send us \$2.50; three copies, \$3.00; and so on: in other words, 50¢ for each additional copy after the first one, which is \$2.00. If you subscribe to AMAZING® Science Fiction Stories today, we'll send you a copy of the booklet free.

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Discussions

by the Readers

All right, here's the drill: subscription money (for which we will be deeply grateful) and that only goes to P.O. Box 72089, Chicago IL 60690. All others matters to P.O. Box 110, Lake Geneva WI 53147; letters of comment sent there can be read by the staff of Dragon Publishing before being sent on to us. But matters calling for action by the editor (such as, first of all, manuscript submissions) can go to P.O. Box 8243, Philadelphia PA 19101; only make sure that you are getting this information from a current issue; it should not appear anywhere else.

We have been grateful to hear at times from writers who have not taken umbrage but have felt enlightened by our criticism of their work. If you feel umbrage setting in, remember that we are criticizing only a particular set of pages, not the writer of them; and though our words have connotations and are expressive of feeling, they are chosen for their applicability. Even "balderdash" can precisely denote a quality and degree of error — as when we found "the fourth planet in the fifth galaxy" in the fourth line of a story. A summary verdict followed!

— George H. Scithers

Dear Mr. Scithers,

One story ago I was a first time writer so now I am a second time writer. While I was a brash first time writer I used brown manuscript paper you described as "el cheapo." You will

notice I am now using the favoured expensive white kind. I apologize for my indiscretion and attribute it to a mental block common to Canadians. In our country we get so much white falling out of the sky in the form of snow that the chance to use any other colour is hard to resist. I won't let it happen again, even in December.

Thank you for the helpful advice you sent back with the first story. I have taken out a subscription to *Amazing*® (liked James Turpin's "The Perfect Day" in the March issue) and sent off for "Constructing Scientification and Fantasy."

In closing I would like to say how appreciated it is, as a foreign writer, to have somewhere to send your work and to have that work acknowledged. No, I am not trying to flatter my way into your pages. I really mean this. Tnx. for your consideration on this one.

Yours,
Glenn Bertie
Victoria, B.C.

Dear Mr. Scithers:

I have always been a terrible speller. Everytime I try to put a spell on a word it comes out backwards. I've done what I can to eradicate these miss-takes. Sometimes it seems I spend half my life in the dictionary, which helps, but there are a million pitfalls waiting out there, and I'm forever finding new ways to stumble into them.

As for pivoting on the heel. Well,

now that you mention it, it is a tricky feat. Whenever I try it I wind up falling flat on my face. For some crazy reason that never stops me. I never thought falling flat on my face was enough reason to prevent a person from trying again. And if I permit my characters to accomplish things which I can only attempt, well, isn't that what a science-fiction story is: a place where characters can do things which we can only dream about?

Yours truly,
Billy McCarthy
Bayside NY

Touché!

— George H. Scithers

Now what I say is that it can be done — but it works better when you're not thinking about it. Keeping both feet flat on the ground first of all, briskly turn the upper half of your body, then place all your weight on the heel on the side toward which you are turning and let momentum carry you through. It's as easy as wiggling your ears or curling your tongue into a tube — as I could demonstrate.

But in science fiction to express it as "turning on" one's heel leads to a double-take because in SF all kinds of gadgets appear which are turned on or off now and then.

— Dainis Bisenieks

Dear Mr. Scithers,

The March issue of *Amazing*® was the first one I ever read. I'm a new-comer to the world of science fiction and all I can say is, what took me so long?! I've gotten the May issue, but I've haven't read much of it yet. I had meant to write earlier to tell you how much I loved the March issue, but you know how it is . . . with going to class, trying to write, and losing my mind, I

just lose track of time.

Anyway, I loved everything about the March issue, but I especially loved "On the Dream Channel Panel." And I do so hope Ian Watson had meant to be funny, because I laughed (out loud in the library!) thru the whole thing. I also enjoyed the poetry of F. Gwyn-plaine MacIntyre. I think perhaps "What Happened on Cranberry Road" would make a better movie than it did a story — very visual.

Moving right along; I was reading Baird Searles's screen reviews. What does he mean by saying the only good thing on television is a British commercial?! He obviously doesn't watch public television, cause if he did, he'd find "Doctor Who," another creation of the blessed British. But I am sorry; I'm a devout Whovian and I guess I got a little hot seeing the good Doctor ignored like that.

Well, I guess I've had my say. I've included the SASE because I would really like a copy of your manuscript requirements etc. Take care and stay hoopy.

Happy times and places,
Dian Annunziata

Dear *Amazing*®.

Reading Robert Silverberg's idea that humanism and science are at odds, my first reaction was: how did this happen? Even seventy years ago, H. G. Wells could advocate "scientific socialism." Each was considered a kind of progress. My second reaction: fear alone isn't responsible for the split.

To start with, let's admit that scientists and technicians (who are the same in the public view) have not always acted forthrightly. The last forty years have seen dangerous drugs that were not properly tested, the use of soldiers as atomic guinea pigs, and altogether too many cases of prevarication and

conflicts of interest. For most people, technology means factory recalls and planned obsolescence, and science means miracle diets and pop psychology. Small wonder if the public grows distrustful, and sees scientists as only another interest group.

Just as importantly, few people have any clear idea of what science is or what it is doing. This is probably due to the tenure system, which at many universities favours research. The result is a contempt of teaching in any form. The literate scientific paper is a rarity. How often do you hear that something is "too complex for laymen to understand"? All too often, teaching and textbook writing is left to the mediocre, whose competence usually declines with the age of their audience. The average BSc graduates with knowledge that is about five years behind current work in the field, while the knowledge of most high school graduates can be as much as twenty years behind the times. Moreover, this knowledge is frequently misleading, or half-understood. How many people, I wonder, believe that natural selection applies to individuals, or that an atom is literally a solar system in miniature? Certainly most people do not know enough to explain why Creationism is unscientific, or psi powers unlikely.

Also, it is important to realize that many of the people in the anti-science movements feel that science has failed them. For most people under about 35, the idea of science as salvation is as hard to understand as the concepts of gallantry and chivalry were to the survivors of World War I. It is the ideal of another generation. We grew up expecting a high-tech paradise. Instead, we found pollution, the Energy Crisis, and a Depression that seems to be permanent. All Yuppie jokes aside, fewer of my generation can

expect to own a house or two cars than their parents could. Naturally, this is not the fault of science. Mostly, it seems an inevitable result of the growth of Third World power. North America is in the position that Britain was at the end of World War II. It is starting to lose its cheap resources and labor; and since this continent has always consumed more than its share, a decline in the standard of living seems unavoidable. But because the good life has always been associated with technology for consumers, science makes a handy scapegoat.

At any rate, the split is probably not permanent. In the end, the lunatic fringe will probably disappear, and engineers and scientists will learn to take more responsibility for their work. This will hardly be disastrous. Confidentiality has always been an ethic of psychology, and archaeology and anthropology have not suffered because it is now considered courteous to ask the people involved for permission before studying them. What is wasted in time is gained in goodwill. Science can only gain esteem if the idea that it is neutral, or worse, always good, is abandoned.

Incidentally, I should also mention that to call someone who is against technology a "Luddite" is poor strategy. In the short term, the Luddites were right. For them, technology did mean loss of jobs or increasing monotony at work. Industrialists added to miseries that took decades to correct; there are passages in Mayhew's study of the London poor that make Stephen King read like light comedy. Interestingly enough, the problems were alleviated only through a legislation of morality — Child Labor Laws, minimum wages, and the like. Taking the dispassionate view is easy enough if you are removed from the situation.



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But it is one thing to push for nuclear industry, and another to see a plant in your neighborhood and not be able to take a loss on your property when you move.

Perhaps this lack of faith in science explains another of Silverberg's observations: the lack of new ideas in science fiction today. Look at the new Ace Specials, or most of the *Writers of the Future* collection. Almost all these works are a delight to the literate. Even their failures are interesting. Most of the innovation, though, is stylistic rather than conceptual. The panache usually associated with science fiction is missing, and the best of them, like Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Wild Shore* or William Gibson's *Neuromancer* are pessimistic about the future that technology will bring. I wonder if it is a coincidence that the most original books I've seen recently are Philip José Farmer's *Dayworld* and Norman Spinrad's *Void Captain's Tale*? Both Farmer and Spinrad are from earlier generations that could retain at least some belief in science. The only newer writers I can think of who show any optimism about science are Gregory Benford and David Brin, both of whom are practicing scientists.

Finally, a quibble about Baird Searles's review of *Iceman*. Our ancestor is Neandertal, the spelling of German having changed in the century since the name was coined. "Th" is kept only in the Latin name. And Neandertal is *Homo sapiens* — in fact, the odds are that we carry Neandertal genes. What Searles meant, I think, is that the *Iceman* was obviously *Homo sapiens sapiens*, which, if he was born twenty thousand years ago, is perfectly true. *Homo sapiens neanderthalis* faded about ten to twenty thousand years before that.

Sincerely,

Bruce Byfield
Burnaby, B.C.

Henry Mayhew's mid-19th century London Labour and the London Poor is fascinating and lively reading: most of it is in his informants' own words, and he had a genius for getting them to open up and then for noting down their speech in all its vigor. A Studs Terkel of that time and place. Dover has reprinted the whole thing, all four volumes; selections have been published by Spring Books and are fairly easily found.

— Dainis Bisenieks

Greetings:

Mr. Silverberg's May 1985 opinion article started off in fine style only to fall apart (in my opinion of course) when he started mixing some assumptions about historical activities with current concerns. For instance, the Luddites who smashed machinery in the 1800s knew their jobs were in trouble not because of the introduction of new machinery; but, because the management who owned the machinery would use the new machines as the justification for a reduced work force. If you doubt this point of view, consider what is going on in today's production field. Automatic machinery is coming on-line and through a decision of management, the introduction of that machinery is replacing workers.

Early opposition to nuclear reactors to produce electricity was based to some extent on some unfounded fear and ignorance. The opposition was also based on two major areas of concern that have yet to be answered satisfactorily: 1) what do we do with the waste products and by-products of the activity, and 2) how do we insure that those in charge manage the operation in a way that does not endanger

the general public?

Many opponents were not against the use of nuclear energy, they were concerned about who would be responsible for the operations and would the public pay both monetarily and in risk exposure so that a company would make a profit and everyone would have access to "low cost" electric power.

I doubt if that many people view the scientist as a Dr. Moreau: as a dupe who closes both eyes to the possible effects of the work being accomplished once it leaves the laboratory, maybe, but not a Dr. Moreau. There could be, however, a justified fear of the activities of "management" in the use of the potentials of genetic research findings and "the public be damned," to quote one capitalist of what some think of as a by-gone era.

If many opponents of genetic research and nuclear power had their way, the managers of the programs put into production would live on the site at all times (with their families) so that if something went wrong, the managers would definitely be the first to know.

I think Mr. Silverberg has some legitimate concerns about the future of genetic research; but I do believe that the worst opponents of the activity are those who fund the research and who

insist on something "sellable" to recover the development cost. This mind set is recognized by your average citizen and is rightly feared since it is the average citizen who picks up the tab (or lays down his life) when things go wrong.

Sincerely,
C. Henry Depew
Tallahassee FL

Dear George:

Steve Fabian's illo for "The Werebear and the Rainbow" on page 39 of the May issue is, I think, one of the most beautiful pieces of art you've published. It has so much of the sense of wonder that got me started reading SF in the first place. That quality doesn't show up too often anymore.

That's not to imply I don't like the rest of the art you publish. Fabian just has a special magic. He's tapped into whatever it was that inspired Finlay, Freas, Magarian, Bok, and the others whose art forced me to buy magazines so long ago. I couldn't begin to pinpoint what it is that makes the difference between an illo that makes me say, "That's nice," and one that elicits a "WOW!" If I could, I'd turn out nothing but WOW art myself.

Best,
George Barr
San Jose CA

✂





A CASE OF IMMUNITY

by: Barry B. Longyear,

S. A. Cochran, Jr.,

& Warren M. Salomon

art: Hank Jankus

Mr. Longyear lives in Maine; his best-known work is probably "Enemy Mine," which will soon appear as a movie. Mr. Cochran practices law in Tyler, TX, where he specializes in oil properties. Mr. Salomon is the author of several SF stories; he practices law in Miami, FL, mostly working with business law in its various aspects.



Way back when, along about the time the System decided to go into mining on the planet Maagva in a big way, the powers that be made an agreement with the Maagvars. The agreement the Maagvars made was to abide by System law for ninety-nine of their years, at the end of which time they could either renew the agreement or kick the System off the planet if the law was something they couldn't stomach. I don't think any of the old hands on the planet ever expected them to renew. Human law, after all, is something only a mother could love, and the human court system is the only place I've ever seen crammed to the rafters with those mothers.

See, a Maagvar'd sooner blow his nose in his little black prayer hanky than go back on an oath. So they never needed lawyers and didn't have them. Then when the System dropped a cloud of lawyers on Maagva to establish its administration and court facilities on the planet, the inhabitants even had to invent a word to describe the occupation. *Cahgh-imak've* is the word they came up with, and it means something like one-who-plays-with-rules. Judge Thayer always thought that was funny. A very bitter kind of funny. The Maagvars just never seemed to be able to understand what the human court system was all about, and I guess Thayer took advantage of that. Maybe it was the other way around. Come to think on it, I don't know anyone who got sucked in any more than I did.

Thayer was a peculiar old bird. I guess it had to take a peculiar old bird to change my mind about lawyers. I mean, before I met Thayer I had lawyers, judges and such listed with vultures, hyenas, maggots and other corpus gourmets. When I met the judge late last *haagkra* season it was smack in the middle of a situation that wasn't exactly designed to improve my opinion of the rule-dickers. On top of the situation was the weather.

Haagkra is Maagvar for storm. A very intense kind of storm. See, in the storm zone on Maagva it doesn't do anything but storm. But a *haagkra* is a primo kind of blowout that makes the regular run of roof raiser look pretty tame. They came up with *haagkra* because the Maagvar critters needed a word to distinguish between the kind of storm that will suck rivets out of a ship's hull and the kind of storm that'll only loosen them up some. That's the storm zone for you.

Above 30° north latitude on Maagva nothing flies. It's not a law; just a fact of storm-zone life. If you want to get from here to there across water, you go by submersible ship or you plain don't go. The *Julia B.* did the ore run from the mining complex at Vinzilac on the biggest of the storm-zone mining-island cities on down to the port city of Dikow in the clear belt. We had a crew of five humans and twelve Maagvars. Maagvars look like a cross between a Doberman and a Grizzly; short black fur, a face that could freeze Hell, claws that can puncture centimeter-thick plate, and enough muscle to back it up. They looked just about as natural upright as on all fours. Now that I think about it, the humans in that crew didn't look much better. And the humans weren't so picky about keeping oaths or following rules.

We were in Vinzilac's main grotto at the System's tippie, unloading copper-nickel matte destined for the government's electrolytic unit in Dikow. When in port it was standard practice to post guards, but I had the entire crew armed and on deck. It was only about ten days after the System Guard had captured the hijackers of the *Merchant Queen*. As part of our cargo we would be hauling to Dikow the gonzos that took the *Queen*. Twenty-eight Maagvars and nine humans had died on that ship, and while we were in port I didn't want any surprises from the Maagvars in the tunnels or from any of the hijackers' gonzo buddies that might be in the area. I had enough to worry about with my crew. We had all lost mates on the *Queen*.

I was supervising the unloading when my first mate, Corrigan, came on the bridge. "Here come the little darlin's now, Captain."

I looked away from the unloading scale, glanced at Corrigan, and turned my head up at the main security screen. The harsh loading lights in the grotto gave me a good look at the six chained humans being led on deck by their Maagvar guards. The terrorists were all young, shaved hairless, and laughing. Corrigan shook his head and muttered through his whiskers. "They don't exactly look like they was goin' to a hangin', do they, Captain?"

"The System'll give them a slap on the wrist and a kiss on the cheek, Corrigan. The gonzos run things nowadays, and they know it." I held out my hand. "Give me the passenger manifest." Corrigan discharged the chip from his board and dropped it into my palm. In a moment I had the chip loaded in my reader. In addition to the names and pictures of the six gonzos, there were a couple of extras. "I was told six. Who're these?"

The first mate reached out and tapped the reader screen with his finger. "This one — Ansel Kuhn — he's the gonzos' lawyer. The law in Vinzilac says we have to let him talk to the varmints any time he wants. And no surveillance when he wants to talk with them."

I snorted. "Wouldn't want to violate their rights, now, would we?" I tapped the remaining name and picture on the screen. Daniel Thayer.

Corrigan straightened up, his hands pressed against the small of his back. "He's the System Court judge here in tunneltown — or was. The guy who arranged passage for Thayer said the judge is getting retired when he reaches Earthside." Corrigan's bushy eyebrows went up. "The dirt I picked up in the tunnels says the old boy doesn't quite have both oars in the water." The first mate tapped the side of his head.

"It figures." I looked back at the surveillance screen. The Maagvar guard commander was getting his receipt for the gonzos from Hite, the third mate. Hite looked awfully vulnerable next to the Maagvar. "I don't feel too good about our crew guarding the gonzos."

"Don't worry, Captain. Our Maagvars will follow orders. Maagvars stick with the rules."

"You depend on that, eh, Corrigan?"

"Don't you?"

I leaned back and glanced at the security screen. Those hairy black monsters on deck, some of whom I had grown to respect, were sworn to follow System law until their cubs were old and gray. The agreement was only thirty years old. Still, it was only an agreement; not something locked in by instinct. "Get on down there and make sure our guests are buttoned up tight. I want to get out of port as soon as possible." I turned from the screen. "Any change in the weather?"

Corrigan shook his head. "Still the same: rain, eighty-knot winds, waves running at around eight meters. We'll be doin' this trip on the underside." The first mate touched the visor of his cap, turned, and left the bridge. The scales showed the onloading near completion. The main surveillance screen showed the third mate pointing directions for the two remaining passengers. The first man was tall, wearing a glossy gray fur cape, with matching boots and cap. He walked across the deck like he owned it. Ansel Kuhn, attorney-at-law, he-who-fools-with-rules.

The second man walked with a hesitant step — almost a stumble. He wore a simple brown cloth cape and no hat to cover what looked like an afterthought of white hair. His face was blank. Stacked up against my years of looking at tough storm-zone sailors and hulking Maagvar miners, the man looked small, fragile. I had forgotten that humans came that puny. Judge Daniel Thayer, he-who-is-no-longer-in-the-rule-game.

I shut down the screen and glanced around at the empty stations on the bridge. There was a bad feeling I couldn't identify, and I searched for it. I had limited my universe to the *Julia B.*, the sea, and occasional glimpses of Vinzilac, Dikow, and a few other ports. It was a predictable, honest universe. In its way, it was safe. All of the dangers were knowns. My feeling was fear. The terrorists and their legal baggage had brought the nightmare of the large universe — their brutal unknowns — on my ship.

"Lock 'em up and forget 'em." I stood up and aimed my feet for below deck.

By that evening the *Julia B.* was under way and out of sight of Vinzilac's storm-tortured hills. The view forward from the bridge dimly showed the decks awash beneath a rapidly blackening sky. The vibrations of the engines, combined with the slow motion of the deck coming through the soles of my shoes, made me feel easier. I was in my part of the universe. I looked around the bridge to see that all was in order. Maagvars, their furry black hulks garbed in shipside work blues, were manning all of the stations. Nikad was at the helm, Jubyalas on commo, and Sibot on navigation. I turned back to the helm. "Nikad?"

The Maagvar grinned, displaying a mouthful of gleaming, sharp teeth. "Yes, my captain?"

"Hit the running strobes."

"Aye, aye, my captain."

I looked forward and watched the almost hypnotic flashes of ghostly white, green, and red lights. The intense flashes were quarter-unit time-spaced, making the graceful motion of the storm-driven waves jerky. White-capped ghosts that would loom over the ship for one instant, then be swallowed by the darkness. No gonzos would try and pull off any kind of rescue stunt through that stuff. I called to the navigation station. "Sibot, what's the road ahead look like?"

"The long eyes see nothing but Ogun in her anger, my captain."

Ogun. The Maagvar's name for the sea. Sibot's black prayer rag was spread out above his screen, making clear his feelings about the trip's weather, whatever the ship's instrumentation had to say on the subject. I turned further around to see the first mate entering the bridge from the aft hatch. He touched his cap. "I'm here to relieve you, Captain."

"You're about three hours early, Corrigan."

He grinned. "Ah, Captain darlin', I see that you've forgotten your guests."

I raised an eyebrow as the first mate turned around and motioned toward the hatch. The opening soon filled with the ship's Maagvar steward, Alo. Alo was holding my white dress blouse. I pushed back my cap and rubbed my eyes.

"When we have passengers, my captain, you must —"

"I know, I know." I began unbuttoning my dark blue uniform coat. The main trouble working with a bunch of critters that follow the rules is that they want you to follow the rules too. I shucked the blue, tossed it at Alo, and yanked the dress blouse from the Maagvar's hands. As I headed for the hatch, I glared at Alo and gave him a rough pat on his furry head. "Thanks, Fido. What would I ever do without you?"

Alo bowed deeply. "I am man's best friend."

I pulled on the dinner blouse. "You are a flea-bitten pain in the piles, Alo."

The Maagvar stood and grinned. "Woof."

At the table, Thayer sat silently on my right, his gaze never seeming to leave his plate. After some preliminary picking at his food, the judge leaned back in his chair. He looked numb — detached from this reality.

On the other hand, across the table from the judge seated on my left, Ansel Kuhn was packing away the chow and holding court at the same time. The second and third mates, Pindar and Hite, seemed captivated by the smooth-talking lawyer. I concentrated on my chow. Kuhn waved his hands around too much for me.

Pindar, seated next to the judge, leaned his elbows on the table and spoke to Kuhn. "Sir, you must've met and represented most of the choicer rascals

on Maagva.”

Kuhn nodded as he skewered a piece of eel. “I got most of them off, too, Mr. Pindar.”

Third mate Hite held up his hand, almost like a schoolkid. “Mr. Kuhn, what does that make you feel like?”

“What does what make me feel like, Mr. Hite?”

“Getting all those terrorists off. I mean, turning the guilty loose.”

Kuhn grinned. “I do not turn them loose, Mr. Hite. The courts are the only ones that can do that.”

Pindar drummed his fingers on the table for a moment. “Then some of them are guilty? You *know* they are guilty, yet you help them get loose?”

“Mr. Pindar, as I am certain the esteemed justice seated across from me will be happy to confirm, it is not *my* job to pass judgement on anyone. My job is to give my client — whosoever that may be — the best defense I can: ‘Get him off,’ as Mr. Hite put it.”

Pindar leaned back in his chair, thought for a moment, then shook his head. “I don’t know, Mr. Kuhn. Those gonzos that butchered the sixty-two children in Hadnmis; I don’t think I could have defended them. What were they? The Whatthehell Liberation Front?”

“The Ramasaat Legion,” Kuhn corrected. “They are working toward official System recognition of their nation.”

“I can never keep all these groups straight in my head,” Pindar shrugged. “Whatever. Hell, remember the pictures of that one that was wearing the necklace made out of the teeth of those kids? And that other one? With the sack of fingers?”

Kuhn held up a hand. “Please, Mr. Pindar. *We are eating.*” He lowered his hand, picked up his speared eel, and gestured with it. “And although my clients exhibited remarkably bad taste, they were entitled to the best possible defense I could give them.”

Hite grinned. “And they got that.”

The lawyer nodded modestly. “They certainly did.” Kuhn turned toward me. “Don’t you agree, Captain?”

I forced myself to swallow the rubbery mouthful of eel I had been exercising my jaws on. “Agree about what?”

“That they were entitled to the best possible defense?”

“If it isn’t on my ship, Mr. Kuhn, I don’t worry about it.” I leaned forward. “But if I was the big gun on the System Guard unit that caught those baby-roasters, I think I might just have done everyone a big favor and . . .”

“And what?” Kuhn prompted.

I sat back in my chair and folded my arms. Keep your mouth shut, Owens. What you think won’t change a damned thing. “I try to keep things simple, Mr. Kuhn. I only have two problems in my life: getting from Vinzilac to Dikow and getting from Dikow to Vinzilac. My opinion on anything else doesn’t matter. Just keep your current bunch of killers away from me.”

"Killers? Captain, they are soldiers in a political army warring against injustice."

"What injustice were those . . . politicians in number seven hold fighting when they wiped out the crew and passengers of the *Merchant Queen*?"

"My clients are members of the Nu Me'ting."

The slimy side of every rock seemed to hide one kind of terrorist group or another. I couldn't tell one from the other. "What's the Nu Me'ting?"

"The Nu Me'ting is the freedom front against the Poshan government of Eedoe."

I thought for a moment and shook my head. "Never heard of it."

"It's not on Maagva. Eedoe is one of the nations of Planet Oaxirima."

"Oax — Hell, Kuhn, that isn't even a System planet!"

Kuhn nodded. "Very true. But by its efforts on Maagva, and elsewhere within System jurisdiction, the Nu Me'ting hopes to bring System pressure against the Poshan government. They'll do it, too." Kuhn popped the piece of eel into his mouth and talked around it as he continued. "Terrorism is a form of political expression, Captain. And they — and I — are in a war against injustice. People get hurt in wars. Even innocent ones." Kuhn faced Thayer and grinned. "And the law guarantees the Nu Me'ting the same legal protections that it guarantees everyone else, as I'm certain Judge Thayer will agree."

At the mention of his name, Thayer looked up from the table and let his gaze settle on Kuhn's eyes. He remained motionless for a moment, then pushed back his chair and stood. "Please excuse me, Captain. I am not feeling well." He looked back at Kuhn, his eyes narrowing, his voice quiet. "You are in no war against injustice, Mr. Kuhn. Your war is against justice, and your weapon is the law." He looked down and with his hand he tapped twice against the back of his chair. "And . . . you are winning." The judge slowly turned and walked from the table.

Kuhn leaned toward me. "You must excuse the judge's behavior. His breakdown, you know."

I pushed back my own chair and stood up. "I'm feeling a little broken down myself right about now. Good evening." I walked rapidly from the compartment seeking some clean air. Right then I would have given my fur-lined shorts for an honest dockside knife fight.

After hitting my quarters and exchanging my dress blouse for my blue, I headed for the wardroom. My stomach needed some coffee to help keep down the eel, and Corrigan would holler if I was needed on the bridge. When I entered the wardroom, I saw Judge Thayer staring through the porthole at the strobe-lit waves.

"Got your sea legs yet, Judge?" I picked up a cup and went to the beverage dispenser as the judge turned toward me.

"How do you like your work, Captain?"

I finished filling my cup with Maagva's version of coffee, took a sip, and shrugged as I faced Thayer. "I like it. It's not anything like being a judge, but it serves a purpose."

Thayer turned away and resumed looking through the porthole at the storm. "No . . . it's not anything like being a judge."

I pulled out a chair and sat down at the large table that almost filled the compartment. "Care to sit down?"

He shook his head.

I sipped at the bitter brew and lowered my cup to the table. "Kuhn got my hair up, too, Judge. Don't let him get to you."

Thayer forced a brief smile, shook his head again and turned toward me. "It is not entirely Mr. Kuhn, Captain. Mr. Kuhn is only a small part of a rather discouraging whole."

He turned his face toward the porthole. "There are only two times in a person's life when ideals are looked at honestly: when those ideals first appear and at the end of one's life when one no longer has the time remaining to do anything but reflect on how short performance measured up to naïve expectation."

He seemed to think for a moment, and then he pulled out the chair across from me and lowered himself into it. His hands on his lap, the Judge asked, "What does the word 'justice' mean to you?"

"Justice?" I sipped again at my brew, and shook my head. "I guess I don't use the word, Judge. Right and wrong are written down for me in System Sea Regs." I grinned. "I guess beyond that things are just a little too complicated for me. What does it mean to you?"

Thayer leaned his forearms on the edge of the table, clasped his hands, and closed his eyes. "It means nothing to me."

I didn't know what to say. I just sat there, embarrassed, watching Thayer wallow in his private Hell. When he finally moved, he positioned his hands as though they were holding something. "But this . . ." His eyes studied the space between his hands. "'The System Bar Association of Planet Maagva, in recognition of thirty years' accomplished service to the Second District Court, bestows upon Justice Daniel A. Thayer its distinguished achievement award. With esteem and appreciation . . .'"

Thayer studied the imaginary plaque for a moment, then his eyes closed. "That's what it adds up to, then: ideals dribbled away into nothingness, a nervous breakdown, a cheap hunk of sheet metal, and forced retirement on a government pension." He opened his hands as though to let the imaginary award fall from his grasp.

I reached across the table and shook his arm. "Judge. Judge. Snap out of it. Look, there's a medic on the ship. Maybe she can give you something."

He shook his head, pushed back his chair, and stood. "I apologize, Captain. Perhaps I should go to my cabin and try to read or get some sleep. It has been a long time since I slept."

"What about the medic?"

"Medic? No, thank you. All I need is some rest." Thayer turned and walked from the wardroom. I leaned back in my chair and took another sip of my coffee. If that's success on the outside, I thought, give me the *Julia B*.

"Oh Captain, my captain." It was Jubyalas's voice coming through the ship's intercom. I reached to my right and hit the touchplate.

"You've been reading again, Jube."

"Most true, most true, my captain."

"What do you want?"

"There is a message, my captain. Most urgent."

"Well? Run it down."

Heavy silence, then Corrigan's voice came from the touchplate. "Sam, get up here. We just landed in it up to our eyeballs."

I sat up straight. "Is it something with the ship?"

"Just get on up here, Captain."

"I'm on my way."

I could feel the deck beneath my feet rocking as I stood behind Jubyalas looking at the commo screen. The storm outside was worsening. The face on the left half of the screen belonged to the Dikow port director. She looked like she had aged ten years in the two months since I had seen her last. The screen was split for the patch to the Joint Attorney-General's Office in Laduima, Maagva's capital. The right half of the screen filled with a face that even I knew. It was the commander of System Forces on Maagva, General Caspinas.

A voice off screen said something to the General. Caspinas nodded once and spoke. "Captain Owens?"

"Yes sir. This is Captain Owens."

"Owens, we don't have much time, so listen with care. We have a situation here. Terrorists — members of that Nu Me'ting group — have hijacked a nuclear waste dump ship — the orbital shuttle *Asner*. Do you understand?"

"Yes sir. The gonzos on my ship; isn't the Nu Me'ting —"

"The same. The ones on the dump ship have the thing in a holding pattern above Laduima City. They claim that they'll blow the thing unless we follow their instructions to the letter. If they blow that ship, Owens, the fallout will cause a minimum of eight hundred thousand to one million deaths. Given a little of our usual luck, that figure could go as high as three million. Understand so far?"

My lips felt like two freeze-dried sausages. I moistened them and nodded. "Yes sir. What does this have to do with the *Julia B*?"

"In a second, Owens." The General frowned, pursed his lips, and continued. "The stakes in this game are terribly high. We can't afford any kind of foulup on your part. No heroics; no creative interpretation of orders; *noth-*

ing. Understand?"

"Yes sir. I know how to follow orders."

Caspinas turned and looked off screen, nodded once, then looked back. "Maagva's prosecutor-general, Rina Avetti, is going on, now. She'll tell you what to do." Caspinas hesitated as if debating the need for another warning about the urgency of the situation. But he simply grimaced. "Very well, Owens. Pay attention."

The General's face left the screen and was replaced by the roundish, double-chinned face of the Prosecutor-General. "Captain Owens?"

"This is Owens."

She looked down, I heard some papers rattle, and she looked up again. "First you are to bring one of your passengers, Ansel Kuhn, to the screen."

I tapped Corrigan on his arm. "Go."

Corrigan walked rapidly from the bridge and I looked back at the screen. Avetti looked at me for a moment, then her face softened. "We have to wait for Mr. Kuhn before we can continue, Captain. How are you holding up?"

"I'm doing fine, Madam Prosecutor-General. Yourself?"

She nodded. I glanced at the helm to see Nikad looking back at me. I pointed forward. "Ogun is *that* way, Nikad!"

Nikad's head snapped to the front. "Yes, my captain."

The commo station's automatic printer hissed out a few lines. Jubyalas, seated in front of me, held up a hairy hand. The clawed fingers held a slip of message paper. "The most recent weather report, my captain."

I took the paper and quickly scanned the printout. What all of the weatherese boiled down to was that we were running into a full-blown *haagkra*. We'd have to go under, and soon. "When it rains it pours."

Jubyalas frowned at me. "That seems fairly obvious —"

"Pay attention to your station!"

"Yes, my captain."

I shouted at the navigation station. "Sibot! What's it look like out there?"

"Very wet, my captain. Truly it pours when it rains."

I walked over to the nav station and looked down at the Maagvar. "You're kind of touchy tonight, dogmeat." I pointed at Sibot's screen. "You want to show me the storm center?"

"A privilege, my captain." Sibot touched a control, and the angry spiral of the storm's eye appeared on the screen. The Maagvar pointed a claw at the screen. "We will be crossing into the force-eight zone in a few moments."

I rubbed the back of my neck. It was time to go under the surface, except that going down would effectively chop off our communications link to Dikow unless we were within range of a sonic relay. I went back to the commo station. "Jube, are any subsurface communication relays within range?"

Jubyalas moved his fistful of claws to another panel and punched for a search. "Nothing, my captain. It will take us another half a day to get within

range.”

Corrigan came on the bridge followed by Kuhn. When they came over to the commo station I pulled the first mate aside. “We’re crossing into a big one. Take us down to twenty-four meters. As soon as we don’t need communication, I’ll give the word for you to take in the gear, pull the plug and take us down to fifty meters.”

“Aye aye, Captain.”

Corrigan moved off, and soon the automatic covers began whining in place over the ports. I looked at Kuhn, but couldn’t read his face. “There’s a call for you. From Laduima.”

Kuhn flashed a brief smile. “Yes.” He turned to the screen. “Do I simply talk at it?”

“Yes.”

“Madam Prosecutor-General. I am Ansel Kuhn.”

The face on the screen remained impassive. “Mr. Kuhn, the government has studied your demands and is prepared to give you everything that you asked for.”

Kuhn nodded. “I understand.”

The Prosecutor-General’s image turned toward me. “Captain Owens, the terrorists on the dump ship are holding a city hostage. In exchange for the release of the city they want the release of the prisoners being held on your ship, as well as legal immunity for all of them.”

“Immunity?”

The image on the screen waved an impatient hand. “A legal technicality, Captain. I’ll be guiding you in what you have to do over the next few hours.”

I shook my head. “Madam Prosecutor-General, in the next few *minutes* I’m going to have to take this ship under to get out of the storm. That means no communications for at least half a day. Whatever you’ve got to say, you’d better get on with it.”

The face on the screen looked at Kuhn, back at me, and stopped upon Kuhn. “I am at a loss as to what to do next, Mr. Kuhn.” She held up some papers. “According to your plan, I must conduct a step-by-step advisory to assure the immunity you desire. The System didn’t order up this storm, but you haven’t provided us with any alternatives. I don’t believe that Captain Owens is sufficiently acquainted with obscure legal procedures to continue by himself.”

Kuhn smiled again. “We have someone on board who can conduct the ceremonies. Judge Daniel A. Thayer. He can advise Owens on what he must do to represent the System.”

I grabbed Kuhn’s shoulder. “You bastard. You know the judge isn’t up to being part of your —”

Kuhn pulled away and faced me, his smile evaporating as his eyes narrowed. “It will be Thayer, Captain. I insist. Even if the storm abates, I insist

on Thayer.”

Kuhn faced the screen. “Madam Prosecutor-General, once Thayer has dealt with the technicalities, I’m certain that Captain Owens can find some way to have me communicate the proper signal to those on the *Asner*. And now, if you will excuse me.” Kuhn turned and walked confidently from the station.

“Captain Owens?”

I faced the screen. “What?”

“Can you surface during a storm to communicate the signal?”

“No, but I suppose we can float an antenna for a short time. Those things don’t last long. But that’s not what’s bothering me.”

The face on the screen grew hard. “Captain, I regret allowing Kuhn to use Judge Thayer as much as you do. However, with a million or more lives at stake, Thayer is expendable. Kuhn has the gun, and for just as long as he has possession of that gun, he gets exactly what he wants. Do you understand?”

I nodded. “Yeah. Do you need the judge up here?”

“Yes.”

I tapped Jube on the shoulder. “Get the judge, bowel-breath.”

The Maagvar’s massive head turned to look up at me. “My captain, this is not right.”

“What?”

“This thing that the System is having you do, my captain. It is not right.”

“You have your orders.”

The Maagvar stared at me for an instant. He stood, turned and shambled from his station. I looked at the screen to see the Prosecutor-General looking as though her shorts were crawling with mud-spiders. “Captain Owens, are you certain you can trust your crew to follow orders?”

I thought for a moment. Maagvars follow orders. But then I never had to give a Maagvar an order that took right and wrong and turned them inside out. I shook my head. “Not certain. I’m not all that sure that I can trust myself. Should the judge have a hard copy of that document you have?”

She looked at the papers she was still holding aloft, and nodded as she lowered them. I began setting up the commo station’s printer while we both waited for the judge.

As the screen garbled, then went dark, Judge Thayer’s eyes kept studying the dark rectangle. Jubyalas stood to Thayer’s left, looking down at the small human sitting in his chair. Jube’s face was as unreadable as Thayer’s.

Corrigan called from diving command. “Fifty meters and level, Captain.”

I nodded. “Get a floating antenna ready to go and a backup. We might not have much time left when one’s needed.” I turned to Thayer. “Well, Judge, what’s next?”

I’ll never forget the look in his eyes — a mix of horror, anger, and pain.

Then he seemed to relax, his face becoming calm. He nodded once and looked back at the blank screen. "Our first task is to set up a court of proper jurisdiction. The only way the System can grant immunity from prosecution is in exchange for testimony. Hence, we must hold an exercise in which such testimony can be given. Then, after the exercise has run its course, Kuhn and his clients will be legally untouchable." He glanced at me. "It's a game, Captain. A game in which the rules we set up to protect society from violence are being used to put murderers above the law."

Jube lifted a hairy hand. "This is not right."

Thayer smiled. "Maagvar, only children believe in eternal right and wrong. Justice is a creature-created thing. It is a creature of the moment defined by the objectives of those holding power. At this moment, in this corner of reality, Ansel Kuhn and the Nu Me'ting hold the power. And the definition of justice is theirs." Judge Thayer stood up and faced Jubyalas. "No, my friend. It is not right."

He looked at me. "We need a place. As the captain of this ship you will have to represent the System, but we will also need a person to act as court reporter. A few others. Who should I talk to?"

"Corrigan and the other officers have all they can handle because of the storm —"

"Captain, I just need players — bodies to fill the roles in Kuhn's script."

I looked up at Jubyalas. "Can you scare up some furballs for the Judge?"

"Yes, my captain."

As soon as Jube's relief came, he and the judge left the bridge, already deep in conversation.

It was a game. Depending on what rule you pull out of your hat, extortion is no longer extortion, and murder is no longer murder. Wave around a few pieces of paper and turn black to white. I would have loved to have taken Thayer, Kuhn, and his clients, and blown them all out of the garbage-discharge port. What was going on in hold number seven would leave a permanent stink.

The prisoners, still in chains, were seated in a row. In front of them, seated at a small utility table, was Kuhn. His arms were folded, and every now and then he would engage in conversation with his clients. They laughed frequently at their joke.

I was seated at another utility table located on the other side of the hold. In front of both of us, at a third table, sat Thayer. Jubyalas sat to Thayer's left, setting up his recording equipment. Sibot stood next to the hatch. The Maagvar's gaze didn't wander for a second from Kuhn and his clients. Sibot's brother had been on the *Queen*. Seven other Maagvars stood at the back of the hold.

The judge seemed to be studying the bleak interior of the compartment; the harsh lighting panels that glared from between the cross supports, the

coils of cargo line that hung from all four bulkheads. He looked down, checked his watch, then rapped his knuckles on the table.

I checked my own watch. There was little more than an hour left before the clowns on the *Asner* would kill a city.

"We shall begin." Thayer looked at Jubyalas. The Maagvar pointed at his equipment.

"We are recording."

Thayer looked at the space between Kuhn and myself. "Under the System statutes authorizing special boards of inquiry, this board is hereby convened . . ." The date, the time, the subject of discussion, and a satchel full of legal mouthwash. Among other things, that Kuhn and his gonzos were to testify, and that I represented the System. And that I was the one who would actually be granting the immunity.

Thayer turned toward Kuhn. "Is everything satisfactory, Mr. Kuhn?"

"Yes." Kuhn checked his own watch. "And the time is getting short." He pulled out some papers, stood, and spoke to Thayer as he handed the papers to Sibot. "Have Captain Owens sign them, then I shall hand over our testimony for the record and signal the men on the *Asner*."

A low growl issued from Sibot's throat as the Maagvar walked away from Kuhn and placed the papers upon Thayer's table. The judge didn't seem to notice. He tapped a finger on the papers. "Now, Mr. Kuhn, do I understand correctly that you and your clients are associated in some manner with those fellows who hijacked the dump ship?"

Kuhn cocked his head to one side. "Of course. That's what this exercise is about. The immunity covers as well those members of the Nu Me'ting now in control of the *Asner*." Kuhn glanced at his watch, at me, and back at Thayer. The judge was bent over as though studying the papers on his table, but his eyes seemed fixed on one point.

"Mr. Kuhn, are you familiar with the case of *Everet v. Williams*?" He looked up at the lawyer.

Kuhn frowned for a moment, then shook his head. "No."

"An interesting case. Very interesting."

"I think you'd best get on with the paperwork." Kuhn grinned at Thayer. "Time is running out."

Thayer nodded. "That it is." The judge looked around the hold, his gaze coming to rest on Kuhn and his clients. "Everet and Williams were highwaymen, roadside robbers, in eighteenth-century England. That's a country on Earth. Their agreement was to rob citizens upon the public highway, each partner contributing an equal amount toward the costs of the enterprise, the proceeds to be divided equally between them —"

Kuhn shot to his feet. "What do you think you are doing?"

Thayer's eyebrows went up. "I beg your pardon?"

"I do remember the case." Kuhn shook his head and laughed nervously. "We don't have time for this kind of foolishness —"

The judge held up his hand for silence. "Everyone in the court might not be as familiar with the case as you are, Mr. Kuhn." Thayer smiled at me, at the Maagvars in the hold, and at Kuhn's clients.

"Judge Thayer —" Kuhn began.

"Please, Mr. Kuhn. I am the judge. You must let me have my moment."

I rubbed my eyes and checked my own watch. Leave it to a couple of lawyers to pick nits in the middle of a mass murder. I was about to add my vote to Kuhn's to get things rolling, but Thayer resumed his talk before I could go into action.

"As I was saying, the highwaymen had agreed to split the swag equally. However, according to Mr. Everet, Mr. Williams would not come up with a fair accounting of the proceeds. Hence, Everet sought relief by bringing Williams to court." Thayer leaned forward, clasped his hands, and grinned evilly at Kuhn. "The decision of the court was to ignore the action brought before it and to hang both the highwaymen partly because of their criminal activities but mostly because of their impertinence. And here you all are, accomplices in hijacking two ships, blackmail, murder and horror on the grand scale. In the shadow of this . . . piracy you expect this court to wave a pen, conduct a courtroom charade, and excuse you all for your crimes — piracy in progress as we speak! I refuse —"

I quickly motioned for Sibot. The judge had flipped his wig, and it was high time for new instructions. While Kuhn got to his feet and issued a combination laughing and screaming fit, the Maagvar leaned over my table. "Yes, my captain?"

"Sibot, run your haunches up to the bridge, tell Corrigan to launch an antenna and get the prosecutor-general —"

Sibot shook his shaggy head as he replied through a mouthful of gleaming white fangs. "I cannot, my captain. I am under the orders of the court."

I grabbed a fistful of the Maagvar's chest hair. "Listen hard, you bucket of dog drool. This court, as you call it, is about to kill off a couple of million humans and Maagvars because some old bentbean dropped a gear."

Sibot shook his head, still grinning. "I wasn't being judgemental, my captain. I simply stated that I am sworn to follow the orders of this court. As you know," his grin grew wider, "Maagvars are sworn to follow your laws."

I was about to rip a patch out of Sibot's pelt when Thayer rapped his knuckles on the table. "Would the System counsel please maintain the decorum of the court? Please don't make it necessary for me to remind you a second time."

I released Sibot and looked at Kuhn. Kuhn was looking back at me, his face almost blistering with anger. He turned his head until he faced Thayer. "Your honor." It was hard to believe that such a quantity of sarcasm could be packed into two tiny words. "May we approach the bench?"

The judge nodded and Kuhn stood, walked around his table and came to a halt in front of Thayer. The judge nodded at me. "Your presence is

requested, Mr. Prosecutor.”

As I came up on the two lawyers, Thayer instructed Jubyalas to stop the recording and looked up at Kuhn, his eyebrows raised. “Yes?” Jubyalas listened with perked-up ears.

Kuhn glanced at me, then leaned over the judge’s table. “Look, you crazy old sonofabitch, I don’t know what in Hell you think you’re doing but time is running out. I can’t let Owens know what the signal is for the *Asner* until we get what we want. And if they don’t get that signal fairly soon, a city dies. It is time to stop playing games.”

Thayer grinned. “Mr. Kuhn, in a moment I am going to sentence you and your clients to death by immediate hanging —”

Kuhn burst out with a single sharp laugh. The judge held up his hand and continued.

“That is the penalty for piracy, as this court understands it. However, if you should happen to aid Captain Owens in sending the proper signal to the *Asner*, the court might be willing to take your cooperation into account.”

Kuhn faced me. “Well?”

“Well what?”

“He’s obviously insane, Owens. What are you going to do about it?”

I looked around the compartment. At the Maagvars. The critters don’t play with rules. If Sibot was willing to disobey me because he considered himself sworn to follow Thayer’s court order, the others would do the same. But there was something else. Maybe the judge wasn’t crazy. If he could scare the code out of Kuhn, the city would be safe and no immunity would exist. I looked back at Kuhn and decided to put General Caspinas’s caution against creative interpretation of orders on hold.

“I guess what I’m going to do is string up you scumbags as soon as the judge gives the order.”

The lawyer’s eyes narrowed. “You won’t do it. You’re not that stupid, Owens. Whatever game you’re playing, you have to know everyone involved would be charged with murder.”

It wouldn’t work unless Kuhn believed that I would do it. I looked at Thayer. The judge smiled back at me. “Mr. Kuhn knows very well, Captain, that as a duly appointed officer carrying out the orders of a legally constituted court, you are immune from any kind of liability for following the orders of such a court.”

Kuhn glared at Thayer. “But you wouldn’t be immune! You’d go up for murder.”

Thayer nodded. “Perhaps. But consider this. My career — my life — is already over. I don’t have a lot to lose.”

“Your pension, your reputation are a couple of things I can think of that you have to lose.”

The judge leaned back in his chair and withdrew one of the tiny black Maagvar prayer rags from his coat pocket. “Thanks to my breakdown, per-

haps my reputation is already beyond repair, Mr. Kuhn.” Thayer lowered his voice to a whisper. “But because of my breakdown, as well as other evidence of my unstable condition, such as the events taking place before your very eyes, I think a smart attorney — one such as yourself — could mount a credible diminished-capacity defense. Insanity. You yourself said to Captain Owens that I am insane.” Thayer’s eyes rolled crazily in his head, then he laughed hysterically followed by a sober calm. “What do you think, Mr. Kuhn? Could you get me off?”

The lawyer studied Thayer for a moment. “Laduima City, Thayer. You’re forgetting all those lives. If I don’t give the proper signal, they die.”

“True.” Thayer nodded. “But you will be dead.”

“Me?” Kuhn looked surprised. “How did your twisted little mind fantasize a justification for my execution? I haven’t committed any crime.”

“Mr. Kuhn, if you can come up with a better explanation than your complicity in piracy for why your plans fit in so well with the hijacking of the *Asner*, I am willing to listen.” The little man chuckled. “I know your clients are willing to die for the cause, Mr. Kuhn. Are you?” Thayer looked from Kuhn to me and then at Jubyalas. “We are just delaying things. Resume the record.” Jubyalas was grinning as he nodded and turned the equipment back on.

Thayer placed the black prayer rag on top of his head, one of the corners hanging over his forehead. His voice was very solemn. “It is the decision of the court, Ansel Kuhn, that you —”

Kuhn, halfway to his table, turned abruptly and shouted at the judge. “You don’t frighten me, Thayer!”

A pause. A grin. “Perhaps, Mr. Kuhn, you should check your briefs.” The sentencing resumed.

On the bridge things were very quiet. After the sentencing Thayer suggested that I have one of the antennas rigged just in case. Corrigan was seeing to it, and I was watching over Jube’s shoulder at what was going on in hold number seven. On the monitor the judge’s tiny figure was moving along the line of terrorists adjusting and positioning knots, instructing the seven Maagvars on the ropes. I muttered beneath my breath, “Talk about your hanging judges.”

Jube looked up at me. “My captain?”

I shook my head and looked over the sailors manning the bridge stations, my guts turning to water. It wasn’t working. Kuhn wasn’t taking it seriously at all. And Laduima City could begin counting the minutes. I didn’t know what to do. I looked back at the screen and the judge was gone. The terrorists and their attorney stood in a line, hands tied behind them, ropes around their necks. The ropes went up and over one of the compartment’s cross braces, and at the other end of each rope stood a waiting Maagvar. Sibot sat in front of the seven. He had been appointed warden. The terrorists were

shooting words at Kuhn, who argued back. As Corrigan signaled me that the antenna was ready to launch, Thayer came on the bridge. He stopped next to me and looked at the screen.

"Are you prepared to communicate, Captain?"

I nodded. "Judge, this isn't working."

Thayer acted as though he hadn't heard my comment. "Execute sentence, Captain."

"Judge, if I tell those Maagvars to yank on those ropes, that's just what they'll do."

"I count on it."

I studied him again. Was he insane? For real? Fodder for the fantasy forest? "As soon as they yank on those ropes, Kuhn and his boys will be dead — out of it. We won't have any cards left to play."

Thayer smiled. "I gave my hanging crew some special instructions. They'll just tug gently and lift Kuhn and company off their heels. I suspect that after a little dingle-dangle toe dancing we'll get some results."

"What if Kuhn doesn't crack?"

Thayer shrugged. "Then he will have successfully called my bluff." He glanced at me and spoke in a voice that sent an icicle up my spine. "At the price of his life."

I made a mental note, should the occasion ever arise in the future, never to play poker with one Daniel A. Thayer. I tapped Jube's shoulder. "Open the line to number seven."

"Aye aye, my captain." Jube flicked open the line.

"Sibot?"

Sibot turned toward the compartment's touchplace and shouted. "Yes, my captain?"

"Execute sentence."

"Aye aye, my captain."

I stood up as I saw Sibot's image face the terrorists. An order in Maagvar was barked and the slack in the ropes was taken up. A bit of pressure, a little more and their heels were off the deck, just a little more . . . Kuhn was screaming like a duck with a beak full of feathers. Sibot turned toward the monitor. "Your honor, I believe that Ansel Kuhn has a desire to negotiate."

"Let them down," Thayer replied, "and escort Mr. Kuhn to the bridge."

I exhaled, laughed and shook my head. "For a second there I thought we were going to have to go through with it."

Thayer remained looking at the screen. The rope was taken from around Kuhn's neck and he was led out of the compartment on rubber legs. One of the terrorists began to say something, but a hairy hand on a rope cut him short. The judge tapped his fingers on the back of Jube's chair. "It's time to open communications to the *Asner*, Captain."

Later, after Kuhn left the bridge under escort, we all waited. Thayer and

I, along with General Caspinas's image, waited at the commo screen; Kuhn and his associates waited in their ropes. Not knowing what kind of receiving equipment the crowd on the *Asner* had, we couldn't risk communicating what he had done to General Caspinas beyond informing him that the code had been sent. What all of us were waiting for was the word that System forces had regained control of the dump ship. The screen's image turned to black and gray snow.

"What —" The judge faced me. "Captain?"

"The antenna's gone." I faced Corrigan. "Send up another wire."

As the new antenna float surfaced, the screen cleared. Caspinas's face was looking down as though he were working on some papers. Corrigan came to a halt next to me. "Any action, Captain?"

"Not yet."

"Better make it soon. That's the last wire —"

Caspinas turned off-screen for a moment and returned. He looked up. "Very well, Owens. We have control of the ship back. The gang that was on board is clear and —"

Judge Thayer leaned forward. "Are you certain there is no way that they can blow the ship, General?"

"Yes."

"Then nail those bastards who are getting away. Arrest them."

Caspinas looked puzzled for a moment. "They have no immunity?"

"You've got it, General. We can talk details later."

He nodded, smiling, as the image went out. I sighed. "That's it for the antenna. We'll have to wait until the clear belt to find out if the general nabbed them."

I reached out a hand and clapped Thayer's shoulder. "I got to admit, Judge, there was a moment or two when I thought —"

Thayer nodded slowly. "I know the feeling, Captain. Jubyalas?"

Jube worked the controls until the image of Kuhn and the terrorists appeared on the screen. "It is ready, Judge."

"Can Sibot hear me?"

"Yes."

The judge took a deep breath. "Sibot?" The Maagvar in the hold nodded. "Resume the execution."

I jumped forward shouting "Negative! Belay that —" Jube had cut off communications. I wrestled with his hand for the intercom control as I watched Kuhn and his clients struggling out their last. Kuhn's face was frozen into a curious expression. Almost like a little boy sulking because someone else didn't fight fair.

As the last of them stopped swinging I pushed myself upright and looked at Thayer. The judge smiled at me. "Nothing will happen to you or your crew, Captain. You are all protected by immunity."

"And you?"

He issued a small shrug. "Perhaps even me. If not, it was worth it." He looked back at the screen. "This won't cure the problem, but at least I brightened my little corner."

He turned and left the bridge.


"My Captain?"

I looked down at Jube. "What?"

"What should we do with them?" He pointed a claw at the screen.

I thought a moment. "Close off the compartment and reduce temperature. After we get to Dikow they'll want pictures."

Well, they did want pictures. And you should have heard the screams of outrage from everywhere in the universe. Thayer was right about one thing. The crew and me were cleared, but the high court wasn't about to sanction murder. They threw the book at the Judge. The old boy almost lost his pension, which might have been a real burden if the System Governors hadn't appointed Thayer to the System Supreme Court.

It'll be a long time before anyone knows what the Maagvars think of all this. But it's been a long time since anything was hijacked on Maagva. I think they'll remember that when it comes time to renew the System's option. I just wish the Maagvar critters would stop carrying around lengths of rope as the symbol of their obedience to the law. 

UNDER THE BOUGHS OF WESTBROOKVILLE

We are, my friends, the branches of one tree
That has a name in Norse mythology.
The lowest, thickest limbs half-dead, or wholly;
The midmost stout and trim as Sergeant Foley;
The highest, greenest blithely unaware
Of anything but sap and light and air.
Where past obstructions warped but did not kill
The struggle's ingrained shape's remembered still
By loops and kinks and inclinations from
A common kind of equilibrium.
The tree, for all of that, lives by and through
Each wooden bio logged in its *Who's Who*:
The broadest branch and thinnest, tenderest twig
Fraternal members of a tree named Yg.

— Tom Disch

Screen Reviews

by Baird Searles

Before plunging into current on-screen doings, I'd like to indulge in a bit of general commentary on an interesting phenomenon as typified by the recent *Dune* disaster, and that is the huge success of pre-opening hype by film publicists. Being in a position where I meet literally hundreds of SF and fantasy aficionados weekly, I was struck by the fact that for almost a year *before* the movie opened, it was almost everyone's favorite topic of conversation. Huge anticipation. Much excitement. Lotsa talk. If one made noises such as "I've learned to wait and see," one was branded as a cynic.

Three weeks after the opening of the movie, it was as if it had never happened, and as I write, it has become the forgotten film of the decade. I don't really know what conclusions to draw from this, and it's undoubtedly something to be expected in this age of publicity. I'm just surprised at the repetition — I remember exactly the same thing happening with *Conan*. The fact that *Dune* was, in its way, quite an extraordinary movie is rather beside the point — failure is instantaneous these days, and that's that.

(Also slightly aside from the point, but worth bringing up, is that the fact that *Dune* and *2010* did *not* do as well as expected at the box office will certainly have a bearing on the production of future SF epics. Might this third wave of SF movies be reaching its end?)

* * *

Lady of the Night

Ladyhawke takes a very good idea for a movie and stretches it way beyond what the idea can take. But in these days of continual cloning of ideas, one should be grateful for any attempt at originality, and *Ladyhawke* gets full marks for that.

It's a medieval romance, one that might have — at least one wishes it might have — come from a Provençal troubadour's song. In a Franco-Spanish never-never land in some undefined area of the Middle Ages, the beauteous Lady Isabeau loves and is loved by handsome Etienne, captain of the guards of the city of Aquila. Unfortunately, she is also desired by the all-powerful Bishop of Aquila, who, consumed by jealousy, puts a rather nasty curse on them with the aid of the Powers of Darkness.

She is to be a hunting hawk by day, and a lady only at night. *He* gets to be handsome Etienne during the day, but a black wolf by night. Right there you can see they have problems.

We learn about all this through the involvement of Phillipe, a young thief and the only prisoner ever to escape the dungeons of Aquila. (There's more than a faint resemblance to the plot of *The Thief of Bagdad* here.) Etienne rescues him as he is about to be recaptured, and more or less dragoons Phillipe into accompanying him (and of course, his hawk) in his wanderings, with the vague purpose of having Phillipe guide him secretly into Aquila.

Phillipe begins to wonder, of course, where Etienne disappears to at night, and who the lovely lady is that keeps appearing and disappearing mysteriously and nocturnally. He learns the story when the hawk is wounded. He takes her to a solitary priest, who cures her and explains the circumstances which Phillipe has fallen into; it seems that this priest was the unwitting cause of the Bishop discovering the love affair.

The renegade priest has predicted that the curse will be lifted when the two lovers confront the Bishop in their human forms together, and that this seeming impossibility can be accomplished on a day upcoming soon. The four of them decide to venture into Aquila, Phillipe by the sewer route by which he escaped, the others at night in a cart with Etienne in the form of the wolf. It all ends in a spectacular dustup in the Cathedral itself, which Etienne enters on horseback during services.

Ladyhawke is one Hell of a treat for the eyes. The sets (European castles, landscapes, and cathedrals), costumes, and photography are almost sumptuously overwhelming at times. And you couldn't ask for a handsomer Lady and Captain of the Guard than Michelle Pfeiffer and Rutger Hauer (in both their forms — the hawk and wolf are good looking, too).

The problems come with the ears and a lower part of the anatomy. To tackle the latter problem first, the movie runs for over two hours, and there's just not enough material to keep you glued to your seat. Thief, Lady, Captain, priest, hawk, and wolf can only escape, flee, and come close to capture so many times before a certain repetitiousness sets in; the movie concentrates on those four characters' alarms and excursions with

almost no relief (even though two of them have two aspects), and you begin to long for something in the way of subplot, or even some new characters in passing.

And while the photography and settings are gloriously romantic, forcibly evoking the feeling of a legend, the dialogue is sometimes jarringly modern. (I'm not of the school that believes that historical characters should always talk in the three-thousandst-prithree style, but there's a kind of neutral dialogue that doesn't sound anachronistic.) And the score is a horror: banal, repetitive, and LOUD. There's a real problem in contemporary moviegoing, I feel; since half the film audience had damaged its eardrums with walkabout cassette players, it can only comprehend a film's sound track if it's set at a volume painful to the other half's ears. Pretty soon movies will only be attended by the hearing-impaired.

Anyhow, *Ladyhawke* is an original and beautiful film, marred by its length and its decibel level.

Cameput and Lillilol

Arthur, the King was twice scheduled to be broadcast on network TV, and twice cancelled. In a perverse way, this gave one hope. Maybe it was too intelligent, too odd, too artistic. If American commercial television doesn't want it, there must be something interesting about it, goes the perversely hopeful reasoning. (And it was directed by Clive Donner, a most respected film director.)

Well, I regret to say that for once, the networks were right. This Arthur is more Camembert than Camelot.

For one thing, it was somebody's misguided idea to do a framing device that might make this version of the Arthur/Lancelot/Guinevere story more

digestible. My guess is that the frame was added after the movie was made, and it has to do with an American tourist lady who falls down a hole at Stonehenge, and finds there Merlin and Nimue (here Niniane) still quibbling after a thousand years. Miss Tourist, as a reward for her unflagging romanticism (she has obviously been raised on a diet of *Classic Comics* and the score from *Camelot* — Dyan Cannon, usually one of the more acerbically funny of contemporary actresses, plays her like a retarded soap opera fan) is shown what *really* happened at Camelot.

Half the fun of the infinite variations on the Arthurian theme is seeing in which of seemingly endless ways it can be varied. This version makes no attempt at originality. Malcolm McDowell's snub-nosed, boyish Arthur is straight out of T. H. White, as is Rosalyn Landers' intelligent Guinevere (who adds a dash of token feminism by wanting more to do with running the kingdom and less to do with castlehold chores).

The Merlin (Edward Woodward) is younger and more virile than the doddering types one generally gets, but this seems simply an excuse to justify the Niniane affair. The one attempt at something new is a horrendous bit of miscalculation; Candice Bergen, in the reddest, frightfullest red fright wig ever devised, plays Morgan as if she were doing the Wicked Queen in an amateur children's-theatre version of "Snow White."

This *Arthur, the King* must really have had Merlin turning over in his rock.

Jonathan's Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* can certainly be called one of the prime progenitors of science fiction, particularly of the Socially Significant School of the genre, in which you take

an ordinary contemporary man and place him in a hitherto undiscovered corner of the globe where he finds strange and exotic inhabitants in a strange and exotic society. This gives an opportunity to comment on one's own society; and when every corner of the globe had been discovered, the setting was simply moved to the future or another planet.

Gulliver has been filmed several times. The earliest version was by the Father of Film, George Méliès (who made SF perhaps the earliest subject matter of the movies) in 1902. In 1940 there was an animated version attempting to cash in on the sensation just made by *Snow White*, with all the Disneyesque touches including soppy songs and a pair of pint-sized, Prince-and-Princess lovers that made one long for a fly swatter. *The Three Worlds of Gulliver* in 1959 had Ray Harryhausen special effects and not much else, though it did take Gulliver beyond Lilliput to Brobdingnag, land of the giants. ("See Gulliver Fight the Giant Squirrel!")

Now on a cable channel appears a version made for British TV which takes a startling new approach to the story. It *actually sticks to the Swift novel*. Called *Gulliver in Lilliput*, it features period dialogue, manners, and morals; and is complete with Swift's jabs at 18th century society. Public officials, for instance, are chosen by tightrope-walking contests, and a religious war is about to be fought over which end of an egg should be cracked first before eating.

This may not be to everyone's taste, but the production is an interesting one. Most of the special effects (large Gulliver, small Lilliputians) are achieved by perspective shooting, with some process photography used. The big set pieces, such as the captive

Gulliver being brought into the city, are accomplished by wonderfully detailed period drawings (*not* animated) incorporating the live Gulliver. Sets and costumes are exquisitely in-period Rococo, in delicious pastel colors that emphasize the delicacy of the Lilliputians, even their (relatively) sizable Queen.

I think Swift would have approved.

VIDEOWARES

The Martian Chronicles (USA) comes on three cassettes; it was presented on television across three evenings and, *sans* commercials, probably runs about five hours in all. Bradbury's famous series of tales from the 1940s never exactly made a coherent whole — there seems to be a different Mars in every story, and different Martians. Richard Matheson's script doesn't solve the problem. We meet the Martians that disguise themselves as an American small town to protect themselves from the first expedition, and the Martian that later turns into whoever those in the Earth colony most need him to be, and a Martian lady who looks like a Ziegfeld chorus girl who lives in a cozy cave carpeted in dry ice.

Then there are the glowing blue balls that bedevil a pair of well-meaning human priests, and the elfin, gold Martians who sail across the deserts in their sand-sailboats (these provide a couple of images, closeups of the inhuman robed figures in the rigging of the exotic ships, that make the whole thing almost worthwhile).

Matheson *does* capture the unique

Bradbury flavor admirably, and it's all interesting in a bits-and-pieces way.

Splash (Touchstone), as everyone knows, is about a mermaid, usually considered a symbol of magical, romantic loveliness. The two former prominent screen mermaids — Lenore of *Mr. Peabody and the Mermaid* and Miranda of the movie of the same name — were presented in this light, though both films were concerned with the comedic aspects of a man of the modern world coping with a fishtailed lady (albeit *Miranda* certainly had its dark aspects).

Here our contemporary hero is presented as seeking magical, romantic love in an unromantic life which includes a live-in lady who walks out on him, a gross brother, and a career in wholesale vegetables. He attracts a mermaid by falling overboard in Cape Cod Sound, and she follows him to New York (by some rule, not enlarged upon, she can sport legs on land for a week, which takes care of the question asked of the mermaid by the Indian chief, which was "How?").

Unfortunately, *this* mermaid is about as unmagical and unromantic as our hero's brussels sprouts. She has all the delicate beauty of Sheena, Queen of the Jungle, and speaks with the charm of a TV quiz-show contestant. (This can be explained by the fact that she has learned English from a day of watching television in Bloomingdale's electronics department, but this doesn't make it any less tiresome.) It somehow seems symptomatic that she chooses to be called Madison, from a street sign. <

Chorus:

Roll those dice again, boy, roll those dice again.
I'm up to my aspirations in concepts for my pen,
But what's the use of unicorns or creatures from the fen?
They're only buying gaming tales, so roll those dice again!

Now life they call a random thing, and seldom fair or nice.
The workings of genetics go like rolling of the dice.
If we're born squat or squint or squelched, with no say for ourselves,
Let's chuck our mitochondria and make believe we're elves!

[Chorus]

While hunching 'cross the gaming grid, hostilities are trumps.
It don't pay playing nice guys when the trolls are on your rumps.
The meanest, slyest, shrewdest oft win underhandedly.
What I don't get is why the heck they call this fantasy!

[Chorus]

We haven't reached the nearest star — Mankind is far from old.
Who knows if on a distant world a dragon guards his gold?
In some nearby dimension he will wait for you to play
A rousing round of *Dentist's Hoard* or *Conan the C.P.A.*

[Chorus]

In case you think the grid's been rigged and someone's filed the dice,
Before you lose your temper, Bub, calm down, breathe deep, think twice.
'Cause honest dice or loaded bones, the last roll brings you down.
The whole damn game is fixed, but it's the only game in town.

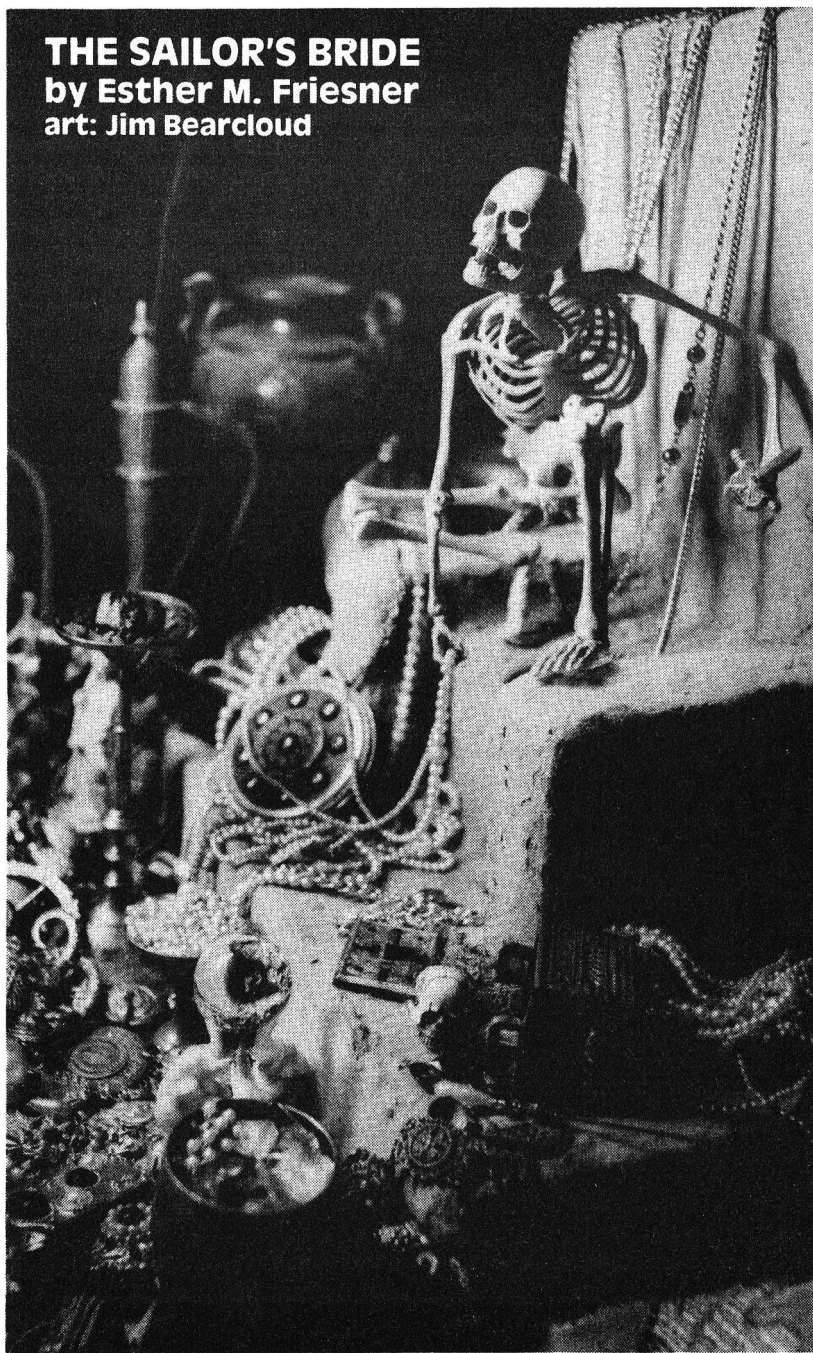
[Chorus]

— Esther M. Friesner

THE SAILOR'S BRIDE

by Esther M. Friesner

art: Jim Bearcloud



Listen, because this is a tale of Bahia, where the river meets the Brazilian sea and the old gods walk, bringing the African forests down to the salt water's edge.

Black Bonifacio was a sailor, a coal-black man who burned with life inside him. When he walked there was music and when he laughed it filled the corners of the sky. When he set out in his little fishing boat, the other men claimed he plunged into the depths of the sea to tumble Janaina herself on her bed of green weeds and coral. They called him Janaina's lover because they were jealous, and perhaps because it was true. Certainly he never missed her feast day, when the offerings of combs, perfumes, bracelets, and other trinkets were piled high, towed out to sea, and sent down, down to where she sits robed with light, crowned with pearls.

Janaina or not, a mortal man needs a mortal woman, and one day black Bonifacio found his. Her name was Marimi, a dressmaker's assistant who earned bread copying the models of high-fashion dresses from Rio for the plump wives of Portuguese shopkeepers and their sullen, skinny daughters. Marimi, flowers and spice, a perfumed dream abandoned in a dusty workroom where scraps of bright gauze and patterned cottons made a meadow at her honey-colored feet.

Well, you know how it is in Bahia. We like to feel, we poor people, that the gods don't forget us, though there are times we wish they'd turn a blind eye. It's no use; you can't have it both ways. So we live with the gods, the old gods of the spear, the storm, the steel, the sigh; the gods that flew across the ocean with our fathers in the bellies of the blackbirders; the gods that stayed to see them live and die, to dance and laugh and fight for them, for us. And if they sometimes ask for a sacrifice . . .

Black Bonifacio married Marimi because he had to. "Girl, this is too much for me," he said to her one night as they lay entwined in the starlit shadows. "I can't work for thinking about you. How can I sail from port when your hair tangles up my anchor chain? How can I follow the feeding gulls when your face rises out of the sea? What we need's to marry and fill a house with kids so I'll have to work. Yes, either we get married, or I give up the sea."

"Sailor, that would be a sin," replied Marimi, "so I think I'll have to marry you after all."

So the sailor and the seamstress married, and she was the one thought of his heart. One day, walking home from the docks where he'd tied his *Golden Dream*, Bonifacio met an old friend.

"Raimundo, I'm a married man now! Come home with me and see her. Beautiful as the sea, sweet as sugar cane, and feet born dancing."

Raimundo shook his head emphatically. "Are you mad, Bonifacio, going home at this hour, on this day? Have you forgotten?"

"Forgotten what?"

Raimundo was also a son of the waves, and he looked truly shocked at his

friend's ignorance. "Her day, you stupid fisherman! Janaina's waiting, your old love, down at the bottom of the sea. She's gathered her cloak of scarlet fishes 'round her and she's waiting for the offerings."

Bonifacio drew a long breath. "Damn my empty head. I've nothing for her now, and the stores are shut."

"Nothing? What's that, then?" Something shiny peeped from the pocket of Bonifacio's canvas trousers. The dark fisherman drew out a polished horn comb, grey and white, smooth as a silvery fish's side. Raimundo smiled.

"No," said Bonifacio. His friend frowned sharply. "No," he repeated. "This is Marimi's gift. I promised, and the goddess will have piles of trinkets to play with. Janaina can wait for one last offering."

Shaking his head, Raimundo hurried away down the hill. Over his shoulder he called, "Think twice, Bonifacio. The gods have eternity, but they don't like waiting."

Next morning, under a clear and flawless turquoise sky, black Bonifacio cast off in the *Golden Dream*, his nets and floaters wreathing her bow. All day the sky was clear, the waters calm, a day for angels walking on the sea. But when evening came and the other boats returned, Bonifacio never came home.

"We saw a strange light on the water," Antigo testified, "green as the deepest well of the sea, and we heard a wonderful singing. We sailed after, but all we found was a deserted fishing boat and a swirl of seaweed riding the foam." Marimi saw the seaweed wreath he held out in his brown, calloused hands. Tiny shells like infant stars clung among the dark green strands, the flowers of Janaina's garden. Raimundo saw, and told her what he knew.

Marimi took the horn comb from her hair and laid it on the wreath of the goddess's anger. "I will bring him back."

"Girl, there's no road under the sea, and none back," they told her. "Drowning yourself won't bring back your man. The goddess made her choice, and that's that. Go home and put on your mourning."

She went home all right. Up the steep streets to her empty house, but not to put on mourning, no. She stripped every dress she had from its hook and took them to the shop where she worked. That night she worked hard. The **clatta-clat** of the old machine kept the neighbors awake past dawn, and by then she was gone to Mama Florzinha's temple, the royal robe slung across her arm.

She kissed the ancient hands and asked the blessing. "Oh, Mama Florzinha, I'm after my man, my man Janaina stole from me. Call on Yansen, the goddess whose battle cry commands the dead. Call on her, give her this robe. Every seam is held together with my tears. Every stitch is marked with my blood. When I bring him back from Janaina's palace, let Yansen be waiting to guide us back to the paths of the living."

Mama Florzinha sighed, enormous beneath her white cambric blouse, her

tiered skirt of many colors. "You ask much of the goddess, daughter. You bring her gifts, but Yansen takes her own offerings. Will you pay when she demands it, child?"

Marimi's look was her answer. She left the holy place and ran to the docks, to the edge of the sea. She dove into the waters, and they closed over her head with a rushing sound like laughter.

She sank, she sank, never touching bottom, while the waters eddied around her, black with silt, choked with the offal of the piers. She felt her chest swell up, searching for air, drawing in only blackness, blackness swimming in her head, blackness surging to her fingertips, the blackness of death.

Then the black was silver, silver and gold and all the flashing colors of fishes' scales dazzling her eyes. They swam in a cloud, tiny mouths gaping and gulping in amazement at Marimi's presence in their midst. She felt them dart between her fingers, under her bare feet, struggling when they tangled in the sodden folds of her skirt. They blossomed around her, lifted her from the muddy harbor bottom, and carried her with them deep into the realm of the goddess.

Diamonds of yellow and blue, black and red, danced and flickered before her eyes. Then the sea-breath blew aside the curtain of fishes and Marimi stood alone, honey-dark feet buried bare in the pure white sand of the ocean floor. Roses of coral and hedges of anemones ringed her. She felt the hesitant kiss of a cool tentacle against her naked arm, the quick flick-flick of a baby octopus's hasty departure. And beyond was the throne, and on the throne was the goddess, Janaina herself, mother of the gods.

For a moment the goddess's glory blinded Marimi. She didn't see her man, her Bonifacio, tied to the sea-queen's throne of conch and scallop by a chain of knotted weeds. Then he called her name with his heart, and the spell broke. She saw him, and for the first time also she saw — truly saw — the deity he had offended.

Janaina: who can compare to her, dark queen whose womb birthed the gods, mother of the waters? Her pale green hair was like smoke beneath her diadem of pearls and shells, her fishtail ashimmer like the edges of a thousand blades, her face a storm.

"Woman, no one commanded you here, to my palace," she said, and the sharks trembled. "Go back to the shore!"

Marimi shivered. The goddess filled her sight the way a big storm wave blots out everything, even God, before it crashes down on a little fishing boat. But she found her lover's eyes then, and suddenly she wasn't afraid to speak up. She made a gesture of deepest respect before replying, then said, "Mother Janaina, I'll go back to the shore where I belong. But you've got something of mine and I've got something that's yours. I'm no dishonest woman. It's give-and-take between us and you've seen the last of me, I promise."

"Impudent girl!" blazed the goddess. Her scaly tail lashed like a wicked cat's. All around her lay piles of wilted ribbons, cheap combs, cracked vials of perfume, mirrors fogged with algae, a terrible jumble. The mother of waters looked like a day clerk in a poorly run dry goods store.

Marimi threw the horn comb on top of the nearest pile. "My Bonifacio never meant harm," she said, gaining courage. "He's been your loyal son before now. There's his gift, now give me back my man."

The fearsome tail cut the sandy bottom like a scythe. Heaps of long-neglected offerings went flying. Fishes fled in all directions. From somewhere far away came the deep boom of a blue whale's laughter and the cold, evil chuckle of sharks.

Janaina raised her sceptre. "You shall both be my slaves, my prisoners! You'll spend your lives tending my gardens, wandering like ghosts through my sunken cities. The sun will be less than a memory, and the drowned bodies of your friends will be all you'll know of the surface world."

Marimi spread her feet wide and planted her hands on her hips. "Give me Bonifacio, here or there, it doesn't matter. But drown our friends — no! That shouldn't be your way. Death sounds evil on your tongue, my mother. And you don't have the final word with death."

"Creature of earth! Little mudworm!" Janaina thundered, and struck at Marimi with her sceptre. But the brown girl ducked. Not for nothing was she called each year at Carnival to show the people how a true samba is danced. Not for nothing did her agile feet patter through Bahia, the costumed marching clubs behind her. And now she did a samba, a quick, mocking samba before Janaina's throne. She clapped her hands to accompany her steps; and Bonifacio, in his chains, took up the rhythm, deep voice singing a sailor's tune.

Who ever heard of such a thing? Exu Tiriri who makes mischief among men and gods must have danced there with her, whispering encouragement. They call him the devil, and the devil can dance. A little nothing, a seamstress dancing the samba on the ocean's bed, twirling her skirts, shaking her hips in a way guaranteed to intoxicate a man and inflame a woman with jealousy. The undersea creatures swam back to watch. Even the old moray eel came out of his hide-hole in the coral, laughter lighting up those snakey black eyes.

Janaina swung again and again with her sceptre, and Marimi side-stepped so gracefully you'd think they rehearsed the dance together. "Some things even a goddess can't do!" Marimi smiled, infuriating the divinity. "Swim and swim, but never samba! Oh, it takes more than a tail to hold a man forever!"

Bonifacio sang louder, drumming his fists on the shell throne. Dead slaves that the white men had thrown overboard came close to hear, recognizing the roots of the old songs in Bonifacio's tune. Soon they were standing in a circle around him, shaking their chains, blowing weird music on conch

shells, laughing for the first time since they'd been sold out of Africa.

Janaina was enraged. Every turn, every sway, every flirt of Marimi's hips only made her madder. With a sudden slash of her tail she severed Bonifacio's bonds and roared, "You want him, girl, you take him! But you leave my kingdom in peace and you find your own way home!" She plunged her sceptre into the sand and the ocean floor heaved. Up above they called it a seaquake, but we all knew better.

Poor Marimi! Poor Bonifacio! They were flung into each other's arms and half a mile away: in which direction, they couldn't tell. They rode the seaquake, and when the sand settled they found themselves far from Janaina's palace, near the overgrown hulk of a sunken galleon. Green bones lay in a ghastly pattern against the coral-encrusted timbers. The eyeless sockets of drowned Portuguese adventurers seemed to wink at them. Fish schooled to stare at them, then scattered in the thin, mocking ghost of Janaina's laughter.

"How we going to go home again?" wondered Bonifacio. "I know the surface seaways, not down below. Hear that laugh? That's her, the goddess. She never gives back what she takes. She never meant to let us go free." He put his strong arms around his wife and held her close. "Why you come after me, sweet girl? Should've stayed on dry land where you belong."

Marimi laughed. "Where you are, that's where I belong. Sea or land. Let Janaina laugh all she likes. She can't touch us now. I'll find us a way back. Don't you worry, we'll be home in time for me to cook you up something good to eat tonight."

"Anything but fish," said the sailor. Their laughter rose in a burst of bubbles.

Someone else was laughing; not they, not the goddess. Evil laughter, more evil than a shark's crescent leer. It chilled the bones. It came from the bones, the dead, green bones of the sunken Portuguese. In scraps of lace and velvet, holding fetters in their fleshless hands, they drifted from the rotted belly of their ship, a slaver's slow pavane around the lovers, this time to a tune that Janaina played. Fires of greed glowed in their skulls, and the ghosts of black men in irons trembled and fled before them.

"Blackbirds fly home after all these years," their voices hissed and whined through mottled teeth. "Pretty blackbirds, come home to your cages." Another step and the ring of bones tightened.

Black Bonifacio seized a shattered spar and threw himself among them. Bones clattered apart under his blows, but darted back together, long silver and green barracudas, the ring tighter still. Marimi felt the ice of their death-touch on her living skin and heard the irons clash closed on her wrists while her man fought on in vain. Then she knew for sure what her man had known all along: Janaina never does give back what she takes; what's hers is hers forever, until the seas run dry and greed doesn't light the eyes of men or gods any more. Marimi threw her head back, and the cry that went up from

the waters was full of sorrow and betrayal and despair.

From the shore we swore we saw lightning cleave the sea, slicing the cold depths in two like a machete cracks a coconut. We looked out over the waves where thick rolls of grey cloud were running in, sailing the wind that blows from the African jungles. Silver spears of light struck the green waters, and the thunder was Yansen's warcry.

Lady who rules the dead, warrior queen without equal! She burst among the dead men and scattered them, reduced their bones to sand. Their screams filled the folds of her magnificent new robes and died in the brilliant fire of her colors. The fetters fell from Marimi's wrists, the club from Bonifacio's hand. And when the dead lay truly dead, Yansen raised her iron spear and swept up a wave, stole it from Janaina's house of treasures, and made it the humpbacked horse that carried the sailor and his bride back safely to the shore.

Safely?

Yansen is the lady of the dead, with little time to notice living things. A small shark, its jagged mouth curved like a slice of lemon, rode the wave home with them. In the shallows Marimi cried out and fell. Her man scooped her up, but when they reached the sands he saw that one small dark foot was gone. She would dance the samba no more in the streets of Bahia or on the bottom of the sea. It was as Mama Florzinha said — the gods take their own offerings.

If you don't believe me, come to Bahia and see for yourself. We'll ride the *Golden Dream* together — you, I, Bonifacio, and Marimi. Her daughters dance for her now. Out to sea we'll sail on a day when angels walk the waves and Janaina's song rises out of the waters. Look over the side. Listen. She is singing the samba tune Marimi taught her, and all around the goddess the dead slaves dance. ❁

Esther M. Friesner has published a number of science-fiction stories, as well as assorted nonfiction. She has also taught Spanish at Yale University. With her husband, Walter J. Stutzman, she has collaborated on a son, Michael, and on a piece, "But Wait! There's More!," which appeared recently in these pages.



THE 9 TO 5 WIZARD

by Jackie Hyman

art: Jack Gaughan



The author advises us that she is a reporter for the Associated Press in Los Angeles; she's sold five romance novels under the pen name Jacqueline Diamond. Her agent is busily hawking a fantasy novel. Meanwhile, this is her first SF or fantasy sale.

The Silver Wizard muttered to himself as he placed a spell on the pails of emerald water from the well so that they followed him through the chapping cold air of early morning and into the steamy breathiness of the barn.

He grunted as the unicorn nudged him with its horn in passing. Mornings, particularly cold winter mornings, were not the Silver Wizard's most sparkling moments.

In his usual pre-coffee fog, he shuffled from stall to stall through the musty hay-smell, distributing oats, mint juleps and Mars bars to the griffins, the haughty Phoenix and the miasmas — who were even less alert than he this morning, resembling lumpish spoonfuls of licorice Jell-o. The chimera didn't require feeding, since it didn't actually exist.

Shivering inside his spangled cloak, the Silver Wizard trudged back to his castle, only to find that he was out of coffee filters. It was not going to be a good day.

Growing grumpier by the minute after breakfasting on instant tea and dry trail mix — he was out of milk, too — the Silver Wizard retreated to the top-most tower of his castle.

It was only two flights up, as the wizard walks, but in fact you could clearly see when you arrived at the top that you were hundreds of feet above the ground.

Without even putting in his contact lenses, the wizard could make out the irregular sprawl of the Enchanted Forest, the mounded Ancient Mysteries and the River of Lost Souls.

He put his feet up on the desk and clapped on his Magic Earphones.

A gleaming vagueness murmured into his mind, blurring the vista below. The Silver Wizard closed his eyes, thankful for the generations of magicians who had handed their secrets down to him, that he could relive this wonder each day.

The vagueness thickened into mist, warmed into a current and carried him far beyond the Spellbound Worlds. Effortlessly, he soared above the magic-carpet riders of Ley-Ong, skirted the edges of the Dreamer's Web and passed over a great sea and beyond, to a land known only to him.

Then the Silver Wizard entered the land of his fathers, the land of silver canyons and brightly colored lights, of self-telling fables and passages deep through the earth, of plentiful and wondrous bazaars.

He emerged underground, anonymous in his gray suit as he waited with carefully hidden delight for the rattling subway to take him to Lexington Avenue.

For a few hours, the Silver Wizard reflected as he boarded the subway, there would be no need to worry about an invasion by the Witches' Coven, no fear that the Emerald Well would inexplicably burst into a fountain of rubies and diamonds as it had done the previous month, and no possibility that a troll would arrive with troublesome tales of unrest in the South or cit-

ies of gold in the Far East.

The car shuddered to a halt and the throng swarmed upward, their unsuspected visitor among them. So high-spirited was he that the Silver Wizard handed the corner beggar two pieces of gold and put a spell of temporary saintliness on the knife-wielding youth who sprang at him from an alley.

Cheerfully, the wizard ascended in the El-Evator to the office of Custom Computers, high in the skyscraping tower, where he settled before his green-and-black computer screen.

For the next eight hours he amused himself with the game of writing a strange language that would link the schedules of cylindrical flying machines with the timetables of anti-magnetic rapid rail systems. Warm and rested, he drank all the coffee he wanted from the office pot and had plenty of chicken salad sandwiches sent up from the deli downstairs.

Sadly, he reflected as he emerged in the waning daylight, today was the Friday, and so two more days had to pass before he could visit again the magic land of his ancestors.

Still, the chimera was about to give birth, and the Phoenix had begun to collect cinnamon sticks and to build a small pyre in one corner of its stall. And the Fairy Princess of Mneth was giving a covered-dish dinner Saturday night.

Life wasn't bad at all, reflected the Silver Wizard as he wrapped himself in a mist and headed for home, a box of paper coffee filters and a quart of milk tucked carefully beneath his arm.



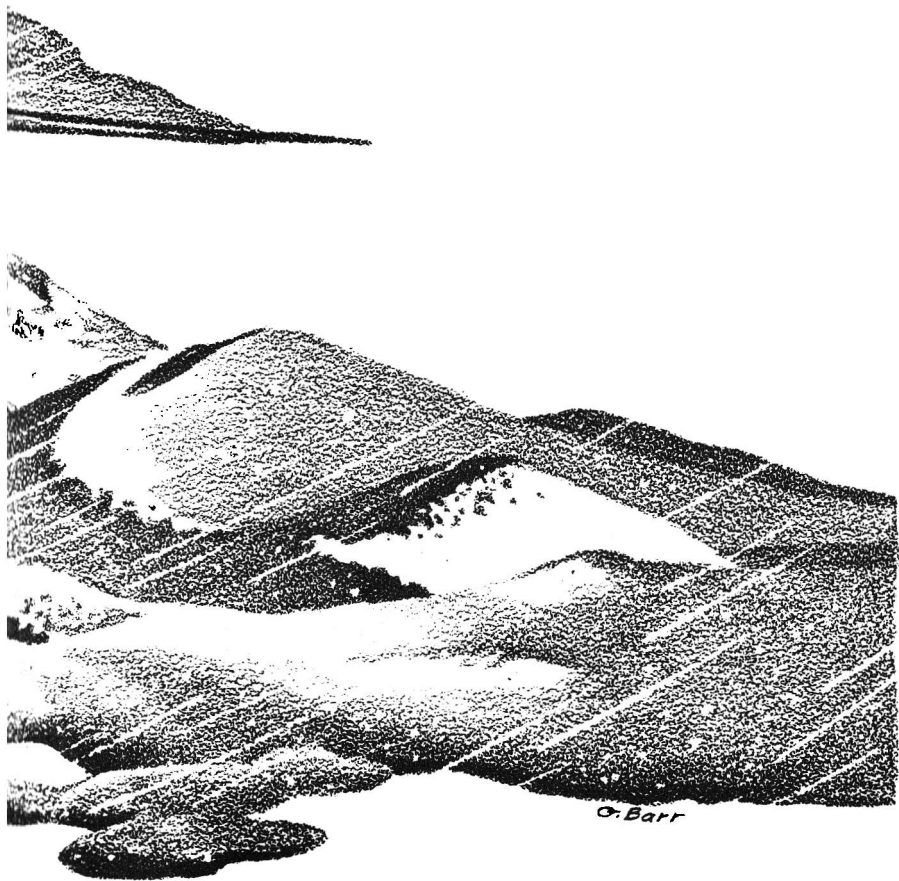
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IMMIGRANT
by Jayge Carr
art: George Barr



Jayge Carr used to work for NASA as a nuclear physicist, but that was before she made her own contribution to the population explosion. She'd like to go back into science, but in the meantime, these things have a way of working themselves out. Reports Carr, "My youngest is currently studying all she can find out about black holes. I can't figure out whether she intends to use the principle of black holes to design a time machine, or whether she intends to use a black hole as a time machine, but either way the goal is the same: to meet a dinosaur in the all too fangy flesh."

Only in a science-fictional family.

I wanted to kill it. Just looking at it, mirror-bright finish glittering even in the dimness of the crude warehouse, made my skin crawl. Instead I said, in what I hoped was a logical, persuasive tone, "We can't accept the responsibility for you. We haven't the technology to repair you when something goes wrong, or food to spare for you, or supplies, or — or anything. Can't you understand, this is a bare-ass colony. We've got nothing, *nothing* to spare. We haven't even managed to produce a reliable source of locally grown food —"

"I know that." The real horror was, the voice sounded so utterly, utterly human. I wondered which orifice produced it. "I am totally self-sufficient. This body absorbs energy from its surroundings, heat, sunlight, whatever. And there is considerable redundancy built in. If anything goes wrong, I can switch to a back-up system until it is repaired."

"If anything goes wrong, you're dead. I told you, we've no high-T left. And if we did, we'd need it for more vital things than repairing a — a tin can with what's left of a man inside it."

"You need have no fears for me, boss," the thing said, not for the first time, and I snorted under my breath. Fear for him — it? Not me! But Wheel knew, I was afraid what his — its friends would do, if we couldn't produce a working tin can the next time — five years? ten? twenty? — they condescended to visit this mud-ball of cute tricks they had dumped us on. "I have all that is necessary," it went on, "as I have already told you, more than once. Tools built in, spare parts, training and repair programs in my subsidiary chips. Everything."

"To keep you alive twenty or thirty years, if it's that long until the next wombship comes along and takes you off?" I could see a slightly distorted image of myself in its curved, chrome-plated surface, like looking into a fun-mirror back home. What had been home. The grey in the still-thick navy-blue hair and beard didn't show, nor the lines on the crude hacked features that were borderline for plas surgery in adolescence — there — except by then I was used to them and had chosen not. Only my height and shoulders

broader than Atlas's were limned clear. I needed the latter — badly. Atlas had had an easy job, compared to mine.

"I'm not going anywhere. I told you, I'm an immigrant. I wish to stay here, permanently, forever, on your world."

I became aware of a gritty, grating sound, a dull ache in my jaw. I tried to relax, separate my teeth, but as soon as I looked at that — that thing, I could feel my teeth grinding together again. With everything else this world could throw at us, we had to worry about a crazy half-man, half-machine. Want to come here? Want to live on the worst, the most malicious, deceptive world a malignant Creator had ever devised? Had the accident that maimed his body crazed his mind as well? The silvery band that was probably a vision screen seemed to pulse. With amusement? Was it reading my thoughts?

"I can be useful to you," the thing was saying. "I have plenty of excess storage in my subsidiary brains. I could keep records for you, or teach your children, and when I've had time to learn the patterns of this world, make weather forecasts, help with crop breeding, and the like."

"Why the bloody Wheel," I exploded, "did you bother to ask me, anyway? You know if I had the choice I'd stuff you back aboard that high-and-mighty wombship of yours in a second, if I didn't know those crew members of yours'd dump you back on my head."

"I can be useful, boss," the thing repeated, and somehow now it did sound like a machine.

I glared.

"All I ask is a place I can call mine and a chance to be useful."

"What's the matter, aren't you useful aboard that ship of yours?"

I could have sworn there was a smile lurking somewhere in that cylinder of synthi. It floated on levitators a half-meter or so above the mud floor of the warehouse, which is where I was supervising the storing away of the starship's cargo. What there was of it. This was a harsh world, and we'd fallen hard and fast. Half the kids thought the stars and other planets were myth, until this last ship had arrived, with its seeds and medicines and animals and high-T stuff we couldn't use a tenth of, except for raw materials, because we hadn't the equipment to use it with. A computer program is pretty useless if your last computer has had all its organics eaten away by a tiny flying scavenger we have, and gliichi growing solid inside it and — all the other hazards of this world that this idiot brain-that-was-once-a-man inside a tin can thought he was protected against and I knew he wasn't.

"I will be useful here."

I shrugged. Well, he'd taken up far more of my time than he deserved. "Your funeral."

"Then I have your permission to stay?"

"Stay, go, as long as you don't break any of our laws, you can do as you by-the-Wheel please."

I shrugged again, a problem solved, or, like most of the others on this frus-

trating world, merely postponed. But as I turned away, I felt a stinging in my nostrils and the slight acidity in the air that might mean — I took a deep breath, and looked around, saw others, freezing, sniffing. They felt it, too. Ice storm — maybe.

I ran out of the warehouse, panting, the cold air burning all the way down; around me others were clomping, panting, spurred by the same panic I felt. The chips and gravel that we had hastily surfaced the field with when the message first came seemed slippery, conspiring to slow me down. Out in the open were still high stacks of invaluable, because we had nothing but muscle-drawn sledges to move the heavier supplies into the “permanent” storage buildings, such as they were. (Native and hand-built; crumbly, dried mud-brick or flaky, badly-mortared stone, for Wheel’s sake, when the machines and synthetics from the ship could have produced ten times better products, in a fraction of the time and no human effort. I even resented the calories we’d used. If the seeds they brought this time didn’t take hold —)

“Ice coming!” But now’s problem was *now*. I wasn’t the only one yelling it, “Ice — ice — ice!”

If the landing had been confusion before, it was chaos now. Men and women pulling heavy sledges to get their cargo under shelter began running. Slipping, sliding, cursing, falling. I got to the nearest sledge and added my height and muscle to the team already struggling to move its stubborn mass over the rough field, blood pounding in my ears, the frigid air biting my lungs. Even so, I was aware of the zombies — not helping. At least, they stayed out of our way, stood aside and watched the effort that was literally life and death for us, with folded hands.

All but one.

One just stood, and then strolled languidly over to join a troop of his fellows, as though he had nothing better to do with his time and energy than a little casual sight-seeing. I cursed him under my breath, cursed all the zombies — freaks! — who had stolen us from our home worlds, frozen us, and landed us on this forsaken horror, and came just often enough with their loads to keep us from dying out completely.

If only we — I — could take it out on just one — if only we dared — if only —

There was a team of haulers running back, their now empty sledge bounding along behind them. The lone stroller kept on his merry way, sure in his superiority that they’d swerve around him, at whatever cost.

They did, though even at that distance, my eyes blurred with strain, I could see the temptation on some of their frightened faces. But we . . . needed . . . the zombies and what they brought. They had the technology we did not.

Without warning, the sledge I was pushing lightened suddenly, and I nearly fell over, to bury my face in gluey mud surfaced with little hard bits. I pedaled desperately for balance and rushed to catch up with the sledge. And

realized what had happened. It — the man-machine — was pushing.

I gulped the stinging-cold air like an astronaut shoved suitless into vacuum. There had been six, seven of us on that sledge, shoving it forward at a barely better than walking pace, for all our effort. Now the sledge was gliding along as fast as a man could run; and its human team, blinking and gasping, were picking ourselves up and staring, stunned.

I didn't know which was the worse shock: that a wombie would help, actually put out a finger — or whatever the tin can used in lieu of human limbs — for us, or that it obviously had the strength of . . . ten men? Twenty?

"Leave one man in front for guidance," it said, "and the rest of you can push another sledge, or help load and unload. I can't do what hands could in handling, but I can supply power."

At that point I would have welcomed such help from the Undoer himself, or a wombie, which was even worse. I literally ran around to the front of the sledge, told the panting pullers why their ropes had slackened so suddenly, and left one woman guiding while the rest of us split up, running to help haul other sledges.

Five minutes before the ice storm hit, all the wombies walked back to their shuttle. The shuttle took off with less than two minutes to spare. We worked frantically, worked through icy rain that turned, within minutes, to hail, struggled until the whole field was one vast sheet of ice, and all we could do was stagger and slide into the pitiful shelter of one of the warehouses.

The wombers were all gone by then, of course, and no telling how many years until we saw another ship full of betrayers.

Except for one.

It was still there. The thing. What was left of a human brain inside a pile of machinery. I had gotten on a fur coat by then, a heavy weight, but not heavy enough, when you're soaked to the skin beneath it, and the wind whips through ill-sewn seams, and water creeps through every crevice to add to the chill wet underneath. I shivered and shook, too exhausted and heartsick to even draw nearer the guttering fire, fed with lumpy chips, the dried and fibrous dung of an otherwise useless native animal.

It came up and floated beside me. If the cold bothered it, I saw no signs. "If your sledges had sharp metal runners —" it started.

I whirled, and if my hands hadn't been so numb I'd've taken it apart then and there. As if we had metal to spare for runners! But the pain of my bruised hands on its hard smooth hide brought me back to my senses — somewhat. After all, there was still a chance the thing's fellows would land again after the wind changed. I snorted. With any luck they'd sink in the softened mud and be stranded, though that wasn't the sort of good luck I'd expect on this scrummy excuse for a world.

But this one — was staying.

First we'd make sure the others were gone — and then —

But it *had* made itself useful; and as my temper cooled, I began to see other ways it could be useful. When it wasn't useful any more, *then* I could take it apart. We hadn't much left in the way of tools, but even a club'll open a can — if you hit it hard enough and often enough.

I didn't see the can again — to talk to, that is — for a couple of weeks. The glare ice lasted three days, while we huddled inside and shivered and wondered if our chips'd last, and then the wind shifted, and we got a heat blast right off M'loa, the nearby volcano. The ice melted, and we began working through a sea of mud. Matter of fact, I was so busy, I forgot our unwanted visitor. Except now and again, when I saw it pulling a plow or sledge, helping to move something heavy, or just hovering on the outskirts, listening while ostensibly looking for something to do.

But a couple or three weeks after the ice storm, it had the gall to come interrupt me working in my office. I was busy, as usual, and in a bad temper, also as usual. If it had been just me, I would have given up on this rotten world long time back, trying to fight it with tools that crumpled in my hands. But there were the kids to think of. If I — we, my generation, the originals — gave up, what would happen to the kids? They'd die, or worse, live on as barbarians, savages. In another couple of generations, they'd be animals, just another tribe of animals in this forsaken wilderness. So I'd fight, fight hard to prevent — or at least delay — that. I knew I'd sired at least four of the native-born kids, and there were others I couldn't be sure about.

Another score against the zombies. One thing they'd never supplied was contraceptives.

"Boss," the machine said without preliminary, "I have some suggestions to make."

"Oh, you do, do you," I leaned back, working my shoulders to try to get the kinks out, staring over its head at the rack of notched sticks I used to keep records on, like who had worked how many days in the fields. (Not that everybody didn't work, every day. But, given a free choice, who'd want to pull a plow when he or she could be roaming through the underbrush hunting, or doing any of a dozen other less unpleasant chores. So the nastiest ones, like plowing, were simply assigned, so many days per adult, and strict records kept. And it was not at the suggestion of the *thing* that I later changed that rule, allowing those skilled in hunting or less unpleasant chores days off plowing to do what they were best at. It was only common sense, that's all.)

"Yes. There's been a sad misuse of supplies entrusted to you —"

"Oh, there has, has there?" I soared to my full, not inconsiderable height and faced this thing that claimed to have been a man. "Well, let me tell you something — nothing *works*. Nothing your generous comrades gave us sur-

vives on this scruddy world. Nothing! Did anyone even look at this place before we were dumped here? Did anyone think for even a second about the conditions of this world and what would or wouldn't stand up, about —" I was in full throttle, and for long minutes I spewed out twenty-plus years' dammed-up measure of fury and frustration. Until I was standing, panting, dimly aware that my fists hurt, either from clenching them so tight, or pounding them against the crude slab of polished rock I used for a work surface.

"Where sophisticated tools have broken down, you have replaced them with far too crude and primitive ones. Surely you can produce —"

I shook a finger in his face — or whatever. "I'm from Graven, Graven, you imbecilic wombie; and so are the others, the ones not from New Helvetia or Star's-end or Cavett or — They're all high-T worlds, high technological —" I rolled the syllables out. "— worlds. We've had to learn it all ourselves. If your people had been honest about your recruiting, you might have picked up a few that *knew* — Your recruiting!" I snorted. "Press-ganging, rather. It would have been bad enough to have been exiled onto your wombships, but at least it would have been high-T —" There was an odd sound, almost a snicker from the thing. "As it is, none of us knows anything but machines. And mostly, it's how to use them, not how to fix the cursed things! When the worst comes, and the machines break down, and we can't repair them — and have no replacements —"

"If I may suggest —"

But I rolled over it. "Keep your scruddy yap shut! It's the cute fancies of your people that landed us here, and forced us into this spot. Any more of your good ideas I don't think I can take. So we'd appreciate it most kindly, wombier dear, if you'd lend what help you can and please, and otherwise — just — keep — your — mouth — or speaker — or whatever — *shut!*"

I could barely get it all out, I was so bitterly angry. Whenever I thought about the group of us, thinking we were being recruited (and the pressures the wombers put on my world, talk about Machiavellian) for the ships, and not terribly happy about that, either; and then waking up on this miserable excuse for a world, dumped with a pathetic scrabble of machines that broke down almost as we looked at them, and supplies that went all too rapidly. . . . Root, hog, or die! And die we did, and did, and did. I thought about it; and I saw red and every other color. But if destroying this *thing* cost us one plowed field, or the life of one child — it wasn't worth it. Not yet. Not as long as it was useful.

"I would only like to suggest —"

"Well, don't."

"That too few of your adults have time to spare to work with the children. None of the youngsters have had any formal training, they are put to work almost as soon as they can walk —"

"What good does anything but knowing how to work do them here?" I

said tiredly. My eyes were sandy from too little sleep, my throat felt as if someone had harrowed it from too much yelling, and my shoulders ached. The weight of responsibility *is* greater than the whole world.

"They know nothing of their own history, or how to add and subtract, or anything else children should know. A person without culture is only one step removed from the animal, you must be aware of that. And I can —"

The fact that it was only saying what I thought myself only made me angrier. It was accusing me of what I would have given anything I had to prevent. But life had to come first! So I sneered. "Can turn them into good little wombers. Sorry, thanks, but no thanks. Wombers are useless here. Now, if you don't mind, I have some planning to do —"

"I could teach them the history of their worlds, your worlds, the worlds you came from originally. And in my memory banks I have many of the classics of literature, and —"

"Just what we need, plow-pullers immersed in the classics of literature." Though that was one of the things I missed; back home, the pleasure of leaning back after a hard day at the console and programming a M'jorien mind-stretcher or a *gallant* adventure or — Inserting the plug into my full-senso socket and enjoying the direct mind-to-mind stimulation. . . . I frowned. "How could you, anyway? None of the kids have sockets."

I could swear the thing smiled. "There were ways before direct mind stimulation, boss. Did you know that books were once spoken aloud or what was called *read*, rather than absorbed?"

"No, I didn't, and it doesn't matter. The kids haven't time for that sort of nonsense. There's too much work to be done."

"I will simply talk to the children, while they and I are working. What can that hurt?"

I was suspicious of his every move, so I thought it over carefully. Then I shrugged. "Nothing, I guess. Long as you don't fill their heads with nonsense about the almighty wombers coming to rescue them someday. We're stuck here, and all we can do is make the best of it."

"Of course, boss. I understand. Just a few innocent tales, to amuse them. And maybe songs to sing, to pass the time. Nothing more. I would keep silence if you ordered it; you are the boss, boss; but so often work is a little easier if all are in a pleasant mood, don't you agree?"

"I suppose." How could it hurt? Though I'd have to check around, be sure the stories were as harmless as the thing claimed. I couldn't get it out of my head that the tin can was some sort of last minute womber time bomb, a dirty trick to cap the dirty trick of dumping us here.

But the stories were okay. I got reports from various adults who overheard, and listened to not a few myself. They were simple stories, most with an obvious moral. Like the one about the three kids who wanted some fruit. The can had to explain that fruit was something good to eat that grew on a tree, which was a taller-than-a-person thingie — we hadn't managed, at that

point, to grow anything taller than a waist-high bush — that couldn't be climbed, and the fruits grew higher than a person could reach, even standing on tiptoes. So, finally, after quarreling with each other over the fallen, dried-up and sour fruits, the kids realized that if two of them hold the third on their shoulders, and steady him, that third can pick enough fruit for all three to enjoy. Simple story, simple moral. Co-operate, and everybody gets a share of the goodies.

Now how could I object to that?

He taught them work songs, too. Good rhythm, so everybody could heave together. Nonsense words, though, but the kids seemed to remember them all right. Or maybe they just mouthed similar sounding nonsense syllables every time. "Aye for ankle, bee for boy, sea for candle . . ."

So it couldn't hurt, and if it kept the thing hauling a plow, so much the better.

We had one more visit from the wombship after that, about six years later; but for all my talking, I couldn't get the thing back aboard. I think it sensed — I did, pure gut intuition — that this was going to be the wombers' last visit; and we weren't the only ones to suspect it, either.

What I couldn't understand were the accusing looks I got from some of the kids, until it was announced, very publicly, that the thing was staying.

Wheel, you'd think I still wanted to crack his shell. I mean, he was *useful*. Did the work of ten men, amused babies on a padded shelf while he was at it. Plenty of tasks we could never have managed without his strength and lift, or would have cost us dear in time and precious energy. But like I told him in the beginning, this was a tough world on machines, and if anything inside his case went wrong, we couldn't fix it.

If anything did go wrong, it managed by itself.

It knew to keep out of my way, of course. Oh, for a while, there in the beginning, I could almost accept it, could almost look at all it did for us, uncomplaining and ever helpful, and forget that it was a womber thing-that-had-once-been-a-man, and see only its usefulness and not its origin. Until the night Marryea tried to birth my son.

Oh, we had medics, of course; the wombshippers had been kind. Frustrated men and women used to diagnostics and lasers, molecule strippers and analyzers, now forced to depend on hands and eyes and whatever sharp-edged tools we could supply them. All our lives were lived on the edge now, but the hardest of all was birth, the stress on bodies already exhausted of all reserves.

There were a dozen of us crowded around the furs over straw heap that was the bed Marryea and I shared, medics and those who'd discovered in themselves a sort of instinctive knowledge of what needed to be done. But sometimes there was nothing we could do but watch helplessly, as we lost a life, or even two, the new and the old.

As we lost Marryea, and the infant who would have been my son. Lost her as we did everything we could, frantically and then — me, at least — in a sort of numbed stupor, as the crimson avalanche we couldn't staunch flowed out around the dead baby.

Something snapped inside me then. I had lost everything else; now I was losing the soft compassion, the sweet voice in the exhausted night, the love that kept the loneliness and fury at bay. My hands were smeared with her blood; and I attacked him, that silent watcher, the guilty one, branded his no-longer-shiny tin shell with the mark of Cain for all to see.

The others stopped me, of course, before I could take him apart strip by strip. But the red was burned deep in my soul by then, just as he'd always had the Mark in his, if he had a soul at all. I always saw red when I saw him after that, in both senses; and he had the prudence to avoid me in any circumstances where I could have done him damage.

We worked parallel, but not together, each of us wanting the good of the colony. And even before the last wombship came, things had started to get a little better. It was the new generation, the ones who grew up on this world. They were different. They knew their world in a way we immigrants couldn't. They weren't blinkered by the way things were; they saw only the way things could be. While we struggled to use broken machines, they adapted, used their world to lick their world.

Did metal break down? There was a plant sap that could be poured in molds; and once it was hard, could be used like metal, could even be re-sharpened over and over.

Were there parasites that ate away at what we produced so laboriously, food and buildings and clothing? Then there were other scavengers that ate the parasites, or plant saps that drove them away, or seeds and leaves that made a smell they didn't like, or bushes that made a barricade they wouldn't cross.

Were the winters grimly cold, our only fuels dried animal dung or flimsy foliage that burned sullenly, with a vicious acid smoke that made eyes weep and skin peel if you got too close? But there was a fibrous kind of soil found in the marshy areas, that could be dried out and burned, and a dark, soft, crumbly kind of rock found here and there, that was an even better fuel.

Lack of fabrics a problem? But there were native animals with long fine hair that could be clipped close to the skin, or weedy plants with inner stalks that could be boiled and separated into fine threads —

Food —

We survived, some of us, if you could call it living, working like animals from dawn until you fell exhausted into bed.

Survived — and reproduced, though we lost one child in two before they reached their first year, and one in two of the survivors before they reached six. But the survivors were tough, and the next generation that grew up was even tougher.

Not that I was boss by the time the second generation grew up. I'd had the sense to stand down, to recognize when being bigger and louder, smarter and more ruthless, weren't any use any more. So I was just one of the few surviving old ones, somebody past his real usefulness, though I still had muscle and eyes for small tasks that would release somebody younger and stronger for more important duties. I knew, as others before me had and others after me would, with no word spoken aloud, that the next time food got low, a bad winter, a drought, whatever, that it would be my turn to walk away and take care of the business of my dying without putting any more strain on the ones with small enough chance as it was.

I didn't mind. Though I was young by any world's standards but this Hell. We had our start, the children were grown with children of their own. And I was tired, Wheel turning, how tired I was. Yet as long as I could be more help than the food I ate, I'd stay, ignorant as I was now, without the ability to see what was useful or could be made more so, to say, *Site a row of trees here so it would break the force of the winds and protect a crop*, or earn my way with any of a dozen new skills that had grown up, from weaving to the ability to smell which native or ours-gone-native foods were safe to eat.

The tin can was still there, somewhat to my surprise. Course, hadn't I heard somewhere that a brain was practically immortal? As long as the systems that supplied it held out, it could outlast generations of us flesh-and-blood people.

Funny. Was it people? Hard to remember, inside that synthi can was a man's brain. But womb or womb construct, it was still *responsible*.

Then it came, that bad weather I'd been waiting for; and I limped away, the sleet and snow swirling around me. I'd left my furs, my heavy clothes, even my boots — someone else could use them — and I staggered on, numb to the cold, crawling onward, until the white turned black and I fell into it.

I didn't expect to wake, or to wake feeling warm; but I did.

"It's not good for a man to die alone," the tin can said.

My hands and feet ached with cold, and instinctively I held them toward the source of the warmth before my numbed brain realized what was producing the heat. "You!" I spat, or tried to, my frozen mouth not obeying my mental command.

"Yes," it said, in that voice that had gotten more and more machine over the years, just as its shell had grown dull and scarred. "There aren't two of us that I know of."

I snarled and jerked away. My mouth hurt, cracked and bleeding from the cold. I crawled over a bit to a snow-pile and ate some of it, wanting the wetness of the snow melting in my mouth more than I feared the bite and sting and swelling from the allergic reaction that was the inevitable price for eating or drinking or touching anything in this world without boiling or neutralizing it first.

Still on my knees, I swung my head, glared at the thing suspiciously. "You

aren't planning to drag me back, are you?"

"You once respected a choice of mine, boss. Grudgingly, as I recall, but nonetheless respected. Can I do less for you now?"

I had to think that one out for a minute. "I see. So all right then, why did you follow me?"

"I told you. Because it's not good for a man to die alone. And —" An uncharacteristic hesitation. "And because I admire you. You fought for what you wanted, even when you thought it was futile."

"Your people admire that, do they?" I snorted, the snort turning into a fit of helpless, choking coughing. Wheel-cursed world and its Wheel-cursed allergens. I cleared my throat as best I could and added, "That's why they dumped us here, eh, to give us a chance to fight against hopeless odds and be admired."

"Do you really want to know the Why?"

Somehow, animal-like, I had drawn myself back toward the warmth. "If you owe me anything, you owe me the right to know what I'm dying for."

It settled itself on the soggy ground, a melted patch from its heat; an upright can, all instruments inboarded. In the dimness of its soft light, the red I always saw when I looked at it was lost in the haze. "It's a long story."

I took another bite of snow. "What have I got left, but time. Try to finish before I do, will you."

"I'll make it as short as I can. But — what do you know of the wombships, boss?"

I curled up as close to the thing and the warmth it radiated as I could. Somehow it was a refuge; and for a minute my chill-dulled mind drifted back, into memories, to the nursery mecho-mammy that brought me up, soft and warm, and not seeming at all mechanical and unalive to the child I had been. "Not very much, mammy," I murmured.

The can quivered slightly, settling us both into a more comfortable position. "But you understand about the time-flow equations, how aboard a vessel which speeds up close to the velocity of light, time slows somehow."

"Yeah, somebody tol' me once." Already I felt hazy, drifting, ready to start off on my own last journey. "Time and speed related somehow. Fast speed, slow time. I forget."

"Good enough. The wombshippers spend large portions of their lives either in cold sleep between the stars, or speeding at such high velocity that time runs slowly. A voyage that takes a wombship a few months, may be years on the slow spinning planets around a sun. So a wombship may make a circuit, say ten years crew's physiologic time, and come back to a world on which centuries have passed."

"Um-hum. But what has this got to do with —"

"It means the wombshippers see things in very long term. They live in history, their lives spanning centuries instead of years. And they — we — have seen —"

"Wha'?" Warmth was so . . . deliciously *warm*.

"Dead human worlds. War, famine, natives, pestilence, whatever. Human worlds. Dead."

I shut my eyes. Another couple of centuries, and this world might be one of them, I thought. Unless the children —

"Even worlds that seemed to be most successful a journey back. Dead." Like I would be, soon.

"So we — we've been seeding worlds, as many as we can. Like this one. Those who chose it thought it — not a bad world. The really bad ones are easy to spot, avoid. Acid seas and poison air, gravities many times what humans can stand, jungle worlds crawling with monstrous predators. The tragedies are the worlds that seem all right, whose flaws become apparent only when people try to live on them."

"Guinea pigs," I snarled, and choked again, spitting bloody phlegm on the monster's pitted synthi hide. "You used us as guinea pigs!"

"Did we?" The voice that was truly mechanical and tinny now was passionless as the loud-speaker that had once lined us up to file into the wombships for the passage to our terrible new home. Yet — somehow . . . "You still don't understand. Detail for detail, by the equations, this world is *better* than your old world, Graven. The difference is numbers, and time, and technology. If a natural disaster, or something, knocked your people on Graven back, they'd face far harsher difficulties than you have here. No, we have our choice of worlds; it's people we have to grab when and how we can. Recruited by any means, like yourselves: excess populations, refugees snatched up in front of warring armies, whenever and wherever we could steal or seduce or blackmail or induce warm bodies aboard to freeze and plant somewhere else. Because —"

Somehow, under the blatty, unhuman mechanical voice, I heard a simple, all-too-human plea: *Please* understand! "Because why?"

"Because each new world, no matter how unpromising, is another hope for humanity."

"Nice to know at last why we suffered." I slumped against warmth that was somehow soft and not hard.

"For hope. For humankind, even the humankind that calls us pariahs and denies us humanity. You new worlds are the only children we radiation-scarred pariahs can have. . . ."

"Hope, children." Something had connected in my mind. "I heard a new baby called hope once. . . ."

"Yes, hope is a baby. Or an infant baby world."

"Thanks for telling me." I was sliding, sliding away faster now, leaving finally and forever the harsh world that had been home for so long. "Mammy . . ."

"Don't call me that!" There was pain slicing through the mechanical voice, and I knew suddenly I had only been partly right when I thought of

the brain encased in the box as belonging to a *man* — and there are, indeed, fates worse than death.

“I never asked your name —”

“It doesn’t matter now, boss.” A hesitation. “You never told me yours.”

My name? I had been *boss* for so long, then just *you* or *old man*. The children didn’t even use names that sounded like ours; their names, like everything else, adapted to the harsh realities of this world. The old names — the old names —

One sounded right somehow, and I said it out loud. “Adam.”

“Of course. What else. Then I am —” An almost imperceptible pause, not quite as long as drawing a breath. “I am Lucifer.”

The old, old tale was coming back to me. “Lucifer. The fallen angel. The male fallen angel. I think not. But not Eve, either, not the mother of all.” I felt it — her! — jerk against me. “But wasn’t there a woman in that story called Lilith. . . ?”

Everything seemed very, very still suddenly, even the harsh caws of the night-stingers strangely silent. Then, slowly, “Lilith is a pretty name.”

“Take care of *our* children, eh, my Lilith — not that I need to ask you to. I’ll be wishing you well, and watching you, if I can . . . is there someone waiting for you, on the other side?”

“Yes.”

“Patient soul. Well, if he’s found himself a nice bouncy incubus by the time you’re ready to join us, look me up.”

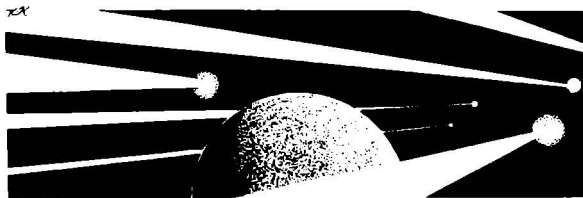
“I will, bo— . . . I mean, Adam.”

I thought I felt soft lips on my grizzled cheek, as I left to begin that last, longest-of-all journey.

But I left with an easier heart.

Not that I *knew* that the children would be safe. I’d had too many years struggling with what they’d be up against. But if faith and hope and love could work miracles . . . for years I had watched and not seen, but now my eyes were open at last.

I wished I could have kissed her back.



THROUGH TIME & SPACE WITH FERDINAND FEGHOOT € by Grendel Briarton art: Tim Kirk



If we had obtained in a Scrabble® game the letters EFGHOOT (as Mr. Briarton once did), we would have shuffled them into syllables: THE GOOF or GOETH OF.

This only goes to show the difference between cleverness and genius.

When the redoubtable Esmeralda Birdbath, Executive Professor of English Literature and Gracious Living at Weekatonk University, assumed the Presidency of the Society for the Aesthetic Rearrangement of History, she at once sent Ferdinand Feghoot off to 2882 to learn whether her pet program — for the Butlerization of Literary Criticism — was to succeed.

“I *must* know!” she cried. “Return instantly, to this precise moment!” And she herself pushed him into the Society’s) (.

A tense few minutes later, he reappeared.

“You have triumphed!” he announced. “In 2882, Samuel Butler’s great dictum that the true test of literary genius is not the ability to write an inscription but the ability to name a kitten dominates all literary criticism, and I’m happy to say that I, in the three weeks I spent there, won their much-coveted Samuel Butler Memorial Gold Medal by doing so. I and five hundred others were in the finals, and the names we chose had to reflect our kittens’ backgrounds and breeds. They brought me a delightful blue-point Siamese, a tom, and I named him instantly — *Levi Strauss* — to tremendous applause.”

“But that’s absurd!” she snapped. “A Jewish name could have nothing to do with that kitten’s heredity!”

“On the contrary, dear Esmeralda,” said Ferdinand Feghoot. “I called him that because of his blue genes.”



GAME OF THE GODS
by John & Diane Brizzolara
art: George Barr



G. Barr - 1983



Here is a fantasy story by a husband-and-wife writing duo, which marks their first appearance in the pages of Amazing. John and Diane first teamed up in Weird Tales #3, and John has since sold two of his own stories to Asimov's and Whispers.

Diane graduated from NYU and presently works as a technical editor, having worked at Esquire, House Beautiful, and DAW Books. John is a former professional rock musician, who is able to tend bookstore, bar, and even Geoffrey Byron.

Geoffrey Byron is a previous collaboration, claimed by the authors to be their most successful up to now.

Great jagged teeth stained rust and brown, they were the color of old blood. Fowler looked through the dust and grime smeared window of the bus at the mountain range surrounding the town like the jawbone of some chthonic colossus. The vehicle rolled past squat ranks of dirty pastel houses of old adobe and came to a halt at the entrance to a stone-walled plaza. The airbrakes sighed into the afternoon heat, and then silence, along with dust, settled over the plaza.

The driver announced a five-minute stop, stepped out of the bus, and strode toward the edge of the square to a shabby brick structure labeled GENTLEMEN.

Fowler toyed with the unopened envelope addressed to him at the Olympic Training Center in Colorado. It had arrived yesterday morning and he had stuffed it into his backpack hurriedly as he made his escape. It was from his father, and he knew what its contents would be: "We're so proud etcetera." To have stopped and read it would have destroyed his resolve: he never would have gone through with it. He would still be back there going through the motions of pleasing everyone: the coach, his trainers, the people he called his parents who had raised him lovingly since he was three years old, the committee, everyone but Fowler. It would have been so easy, it always had been. He loved sports and excelled in nearly all of them — anything he had ever really attempted in earnest — and as he pursued his love of physical competition and the game, whatever it happened to be, breaking records like outgrown toys, the expectations had grown and become obligations, the obligations becoming a kind of emotional blackmail until it was simply win or lose. Lose our love, lose our friendship, lose our respect. Win, that's all. That's a boy. Somewhere along the line all the juice had gone out of it; a grown man playing boyish games for boyish reasons with never a moment for the man to discover for himself what he wanted. It had all gone stale somehow back there. He had quickly scrawled a note for his roommate — "Adios, sorry. Fowler." — and he bought a bus ticket to Mexico. He had some

half-formed idea of finding his real parents down there, but he knew that wasn't it, he would never do it. It was himself he was looking for and there was nowhere in particular to look.

He saw that he had written the word ADIOS on the window of the bus with his fingertip. He clutched his pack and rose from his seat, leaving the unopened letter behind. He negotiated his way down the aisle and met the driver returning to the wheel.

"Sorry friend, five minutes was all. I've got a schedule."

"Adios," said Fowler.

"Hey, but you paid for a ticket to the border. It's just a few more miles."

Fowler shrugged.

The driver held out a piece of paper. "You get a refund if you mail this in, here. It's a few bucks, what the hey?"

"Forget it, thanks."

A wall of dust arose in the wake of the bus. Fowler patted his clothes and looked around. A series of stone benches ringed a dry fountain. Old men sat sunning in groups silently studying lottery tickets and newspapers, whittling at scraps of wood, stealing glances at Fowler with black Indian eyes. He walked toward the fountain taking in the disappointed little town dominated by a Spanish mission church; elaborate colonnades and porticos culminating in a bell tower with a stained-glass window catching the westerling sun in splashes of molten gold shot with rainbow. Carved above the fountain were the words, "Welcome to El Tajin. For the enjoyment of the people, this fountain." Fowler ran his fingers over the chalk-dry basin.

He crossed the plaza to where palms, flowered with hibiscus and oleander, offered some shade. He sat and stretched his legs, resting his head against clasped fingers. He closed his eyes, listening to the cries of children in the distance, the barking of a dog; a screen door banging shut, an engine backfiring blocks away. It was as if the town had become sullen and hushed, waiting only for the departure of the bus to resume its activity.

"You look very tired." Fowler opened his eyes to see an elderly couple smiling down at him. It was the man who had spoken, his voice heavily accented.

"I was on the bus," he began.

"Ah." The man's hair was as thick and snowy as his wife's. He sported a handlebar moustache with tracings of red at the ends. The blood of conquistadors flowed in his veins, Fowler thought irrelevantly.

"I see you are enjoying the plaza." The woman was clearly an Indian with the features of some elegant bird. "The fountain is hand carved."

"It's very nice," he answered, looking at the bowl and the ornate depictions of warriors and gods, serpents and birds.

"You work out, do you?" asked the man, studying Fowler's arms.

Fowler looked down at his track shoes, his Los Angeles Rams tee shirt and his Everlast duffle bag. *That must be it*, he thought. "Yeah, I do. Yeah." He smiled.

"There is another just like it in the Royal Game Room in Tikal."

Shifting mental gears, he looked again at the fountain; stylized cacti, jolly-faced demons.

"Play any ball?" asked the man.

"Oh yes." His grin widened. "A little."

"Jai Alai? Lacrosse?" Fowler shook his head negatively. The man looked disappointed.

"Carlos is a fan," she explained.

Carlos nodded. "I'm a fan, all right." They stood regarding the bas-relief washed in a chiaroscuro of waning sunlight. The busy carvings seemed to shift and move at the borders of perception.

Into the lengthy and somewhat awkward silence moved a woman. Bituminous hair fell straight to her back, bangs cut starkly above exotic eyes. It seemed that she had separated herself from the shadows of the square, materializing unobtrusively before them. Her voice held no trace of accent, but as her presence partook of shadows, her voice, while clear and untimid, partook of the whispering palm fronds. "Hello," she said. Her teeth in gleaming rows became a lighter patch above her peach-colored tee shirt. The word ADIDAS appeared on the shirt, the two A's stretched delightfully. "Welcome. We have few visitors. It's always nice." She rummaged in her carryall. "Here we are. Let me give you one of these." She handed him a peacock-blue paper run off on an old mimeograph machine. It was blurry but legible. The title read: MISSION CHURCH WELCOMES YOU in stenciled letters. The smaller print read:

TO AN AFTERNOON OF FUN, GAMES, WESTERN STYLE BAR-BQ,

ALL YOU CAN EAT OR DRINK; AND BALL.

The message was repeated in Spanish and then a third language, some Indian dialect he surmised. The flyer was bordered in sunbursts, panthers and monkeys, dollar signs and exclamation marks. He stared at it for a moment, oddly transfixed, waiting for recognition to crystallize, a sense of familiarity to focus. He looked up again at the woman, smelling her perfume which evoked damp jungle blossoms. "I am Sukie Coatalique." Her lips parted. "You have met Carlos and Rene Cruz. I hope you will come tomorrow, Mr. Fowler."

Trying to recover from his rapture at her beauty, her whispered scent of rain forests, he agreed. "I wouldn't miss it."

"You look like you could use sleep, perhaps bathe." She looked at him kindly and not without humor.

"I suppose I do, Sukie." He had dreamed of many women, none as intoxicating, as fine; none so promising or real. His dirt and sweat shamed

him.

"The El Capitan is two blocks." She ran her tongue over her lips, tossed her hair and pointed with her slight chin. "That way."

"Make sure you don't miss the fun tomorrow, my friend," Carlos advised him. "You would not want to."

"I am bringing my Carnitas, the finest in America." Rene prompted him further.

"Until tomorrow then." Sukie allowed her smile to linger, and then she turned away, blending again into the lengthening shadows of the plaza's vegetation. Carlos gestured up the street again as if in reminder, and then he and Rene followed her.

The group of old men had broken up. He was alone in the square.

He stood looking after them in the gathering twilight and wondered how Sukie had known his name.

The El Capitan was a modest two-story structure, not of real adobe as were most of the buildings surrounding it, but of frame and crumbling stucco. Instead of the faded anonymous decor he had expected inside, there were elegant wall hangings and friezes depicting the same kind of stuff as the fountain; illustrations for anthropology books with titles like *The Heritage of Latin America* or *The Magic and Mystery of Mexico*. Palmetto and ficus plants punctuated this motif.

Fowler was arrested by a tapestry behind the main desk: an eagle in gold and red — its beak open, its wings poised for flight, though its talons were held fast by an intertwining of human-headed serpents. The desk clerk turned his attention from a Sony portable TV set. "Brazilian soccer," he said to Fowler, jerking his thumb at the set. "Buncha meatballs." He moved the register toward him. "Here ya go, Champ." He could have been a hotel clerk anywhere, in his thirties, with thin blond hair combed over an incipient bald spot. He was just a hotel clerk, a sports fan. It was somehow reassuring.

His room was clean and unremarkable. Ignoring the sign that hung in the little bathroom — CONSERVE WATER, DO YOUR BIT — he stood under the stinging needles for several minutes until the pressure abated, became a trickle, a reluctant drip and then nothing.

Clad in a white towel, he sat on the edge of the bed and checked his Velcro wallet for the fifty-dollar bill. It was still there. He would go and get something to eat soon, but first he had to stretch out for a few minutes and untangle the knots in his back from the long bus ride. He lay staring at the ceiling, a smile forming at the corners of his lips. *Well, here you are, Fowler*, he thought to himself. *Wherever the hell this is. What's the game plan, boy?* He closed his eyes and saw the afterimage of hundreds of miles of highway, desert and dust: a white line bordered by cactus, mountains, road signs, cheap eateries and bus stations all swelling in his field of vision

and then falling away behind him. All except the white line that played out like a thread from the horizon to guide him through the maze of his confusion and deposit him in El Tajin. *No gameplan. For once no God-damned gameplan, okay?*

He rose to dress himself, find something to eat and perhaps meet the woman again, Sukie Coatalique.

He walked past the desk clerk, who was deep into the last quarter of the game, but found a moment to flash Fowler a grin and a V-sign.

He retraced his steps to the little Mom and Pop *bodega* he had passed earlier on his way to the hotel. He bought beef jerky, a container of yogurt and an apple. Since beer was unavailable, he bought a pint of milk. The old woman behind the counter spoke English haltingly but waited on him as if he were visiting royalty, averting her wizened eyes shyly. She tried to press an extra apple into his hands free of charge. "You need more than that, a man so big, so much *musculos*." He thanked her but declined. As he turned to go she suddenly reached up and touched the top of his head. Crowing happily, she shambled quickly away into the recesses of the shop.

With the sunset, the town seemed to still itself once again. The lights in the *bodega* went out behind him. The street was illuminated only by the bare bulb above the hotel entrance and the weak flickering of a streetlamp on the corner. Three boys waved at him from down the block, the light from overhead catching on the silk-like material of their athletic jackets. "Hey! Hey!"

Fowler waved back. "Hey!"

"Get a good night's sleep." They laughed and turned away, jostling each other down the block with hips, elbows and knees.

Puzzled, Fowler walked down the street in the opposite direction past the closed-up shops. The old joke about rolling up a town's sidewalks at 6 P.M. occurred to him. It was unlikely he would see the woman again tonight. There was no one on the streets. He returned to his room.

He slept fitfully that night. Inchoate nightmares moved through the landscape of his dreams on talons, wings and scales. A rain of blood fell on the desert, causing gnarled cacti to bloom with fleshy, intoxicating flowers.

He awoke, his mouth dry, his hands cramped from grasping the pillow. It was morning. He threw off the sweat-damp sheet and went to the tap in the bathroom. Placing his mouth over the faucet he turned. Nothing. Cursing, he went to the window, throwing it wide to let the air in and the night out. From somewhere nearby he heard a school marching band. His room had a clear view of the mission across town. It was perched on a hill, and he could see people approaching it from sidestreets in all directions.

Sunday.

As soon as he possibly could, he left the hotel. He bought a Pepsi from

the machine in the lobby and drained it almost at once before returning to the street, thronged now with people. A cop gave him a "thumbs up" and a nod as Fowler crossed the avenue along with a dozen people. A holiday mood was in evidence on the faces of everyone around him. Some were dressed in church clothes; girls in dirndl skirts and ruffled blouses, boys in pastel shirts with clean hands and combed hair darted after their parents. A lot of picnic baskets and Tupperware cakeholders were being displayed and examined.

"Ah, Mr. Fowler." It was Carlos and Rene Cruz. Rene was speaking. "Padre Amaya is finishing the last mass, and the Rosary Society is setting up for breakfast and bingo." The white-haired woman explained as Fowler fell into step with them. "The early birds will be there already, but I like to make an entrance. Now don't *you* keep everyone waiting." She pinched him playfully on the arm in a way that suggested she had known him all her life. Carlos winked at him, and then the couple spotted someone they knew several yards away. "Excuse us, Mr. Fowler." The flow of the crowd was toward the mission on the hill.

Fowler stood on the sidewalk for a moment; the people moved past him purposefully, some of them paused to smile sidewise at him or beam straightforwardly in his direction. He felt his arm where the woman, Rene, had pinched him lightly. He thought of the old woman in the *bodega*, the desk clerk and his V-sign, the boys on the streetcorner. Sukie Coatalique. He felt a bemused sense of entrapment, the certainty that he was caught up in something he was aware of only in some dim outback of his unconscious. His arrival here had been the starting point in a journey to discover who he was, and it was as though everyone around him, here in this place, knew the answer and was patiently, happily steering him towards it. A little girl with jet braids ran up to him giggling and presented him with a paper hibiscus. She curtsied and ran back to her parents, who hailed him from a distance. He smiled back at them, collaborating in the pleasant secret.

As he walked, he imagined himself as a native filled with a sense of belonging and pride in his little town. El Tajin. He tasted the words. They almost tasted like home. Why not?

He pursued a sidestreet, away from the main stream of people, and found himself at a cement playground adjacent to the high school. A few kids were throwing basketballs at a net at one end; and on the other, a small group was gathered watching a tall figure, slim but muscular, as he batted what looked like a medicine ball attached to a rope depending from a center pole. The man was controlling the ball in a rhythmical way. He punched with elbows, hips and knees, connected, backslapped and punched again. He turned around, allowing the ball to swing where it would, and met Fowler's eyes. He was dark with sweat-slicked black hair, his eyes beneath a shelf of brow, his cheekbones chiseled from stone.

Fowler flushed involuntarily as the man smiled a slow, serpentine challenge.

"Nice work," Fowler heard himself saying, his tongue suddenly thick in a dry mouth. The man returned his attention to the ball and the crowd nodded, satisfied. He had apparently said the right thing. A dapper man approached him and shook his hand with sincerity. "Sportsmanship," the man said grimly and approvingly. "Sportsmanship," he repeated. "A very great thing."

The man introduced himself as Jimmy; a pin-striped suit concealed his corpulence only slightly. "Would you do me the honor of accepting a drink?" It was then that Fowler noticed what had been missing from the street business in town. "I didn't notice any bars," he said looking around him. The jock with the medicine ball had made him decidedly nervous in an inexplicable way and though it was still early, he was very thirsty.

"No, no. In El Tajin we drink at the mission."

"Oh," he answered thoughtfully.

Taking his elbow, Jimmy spoke as they walked toward the main street. "Spirits, just the thing. Did you know that El Tajin means 'Place of Invisible Spirits'?"

"Really."

Jimmy chuckled and bobbed his head, happy, it seemed, to be the first to let him in on it.

They walked the few blocks together in silence to the Parish Hall. Jimmy ushered Fowler through the bingo game amid murmurings and the barker's amplified voice calling out, "Number nineteen. The big nine and teen. *El Grande numero decemonono*. Coming up on a winner!" They stopped at a row of collapsible tables in the rear of the room set with stacks of Budweiser cups and punchbowls with ladles. A man in a red and white striped shirt chomping an unlighted cigar served up two glasses with a flourish. "Salud!" He handed a cup to Fowler.

"Salud!" Jimmy echoed the man.

"Right." Fowler looked at the punch or whatever it was. He saw a greyish, foamy liquid. He took a long pull and sputtered. "My God! What is it?" Fowler caught his breath. "Some sort of local moonshine, eh?"

"Yes," Jimmy agreed, delighted at Fowler's confirmation of its potency. "It is *pulque*. Probably the last batch in town, the drought, you know . . . but of course you do." Jimmy raised his cup again. "To the end of the drought." Fowler, suppressing his rebellious tastebuds, followed suit. Jimmy motioned for two more. "Sooo . . ." Fowler heard his companion as a wave of white heat crawled from the back of his head to his eyes. "How are you feeling?" Jimmy was looking at him appraisingly. "Fit?"

"Whooee . . . like a million." They tossed off their second one.

"That's very reassuring." Jimmy relaxed visibly. "Are you a betting man, Mr. Fowler?" Through the effects of the liquor, Fowler decided that he must have mentioned his name, though he was by no means sure. As if in answer, a voice like rainwater cascading through jungle leaves — crystalline with soft edges — sounded behind him.

"Well hello there again. I'm pleased you accepted my invitation." It was Sukie. Her thin, white blouse was stretched over pear-like breasts, the peasant skirt teased about her brown thighs. She sat on the edge of the table. In the full, artificial light she seemed even more beautiful. Her eyes were Indian, almost oriental with a hint of green in them: steady beacons of unmistakable sexual power with flashes of intellect and mystery.

With a trace of disappointment in his voice, Jimmy said, "Ah, Sukie. Please join us."

She ignored him. "Fowler." She looked at him evenly. "The game begins in thirty minutes. Would you like to inspect the equipment?" Rising, she added, "Manny is already dressed."

Moving to follow her, he hesitated. "Who's Manny?"

"The guy at the playground," Jimmy supplied.

"Your opponent." Her lips formed a beautiful configuration as she pronounced the word.

He felt the strange brew and his closeness to the woman making him restless and cocky. "That lightweight?" He grinned. "I'll murder him. What is it? Medicine balls at fifty paces? Dunking for tacos?"

Jimmy leaned forward eagerly. "What do you say, Sukie? Three point spread, I've got Fowler."

"No, I've got Fowler." She put her arm in his and led him across the floor to the locker room. He swayed slightly as he followed her, his head clouded, his heart racing at her touch. He had drunk too much, or perhaps not enough. Events were telescoping and he was moving toward their center with the surety of some unguessed natural law. What he felt overtaking him at her side was not simple attraction and could be attributed only in part to the *pulque*.

When she closed the door, he reached his arms around her waist and immediately sensed the wrongness of the move as she edged away. What she offered him was not something to be seized like a haunch of meat. Her eyes told him she understood and forgave him. She picked up a kind of helmet: a bird's head emblazoned on light, beaten metal, a plume of feathers erupting from the crown. "This is you," she said. Not 'This is for you' but *This is you*. He stared somewhat drunkenly at the headgear. It awoke in him a nameless sensation akin to pride and fear and forgotten childhood dreams. Trying to dispel the momentary trepidation, he joked.

"Couldn't the Chamber of Commerce afford football helmets?" She only looked at him with patience as if to say the time was past for jokes. He watched her as she crossed to a locker and produced a pair of red athletic

shorts. The feel of her fingers as she measured them against his loins was cool.

"Father Amaya will be here in a moment. He will want to bless you," she said as he stripped in front of her. A part of him still felt he should ask if there wasn't some mistake, another explanation for the underlying assumption in the faces of everyone he had met here. Another Fowler? He said nothing, acquiescing to the bizarre reality and the warm assurance of her presence.

As he pulled on the shorts and replaced his sweat socks and running shoes, he asked her simply, "The game, Sukie. What is it?"

She turned obsidian eyes on him, her face that of some ageless, dark anima. "It is just Ball. Sometimes called *Pok-a-tok*. It is *El Juego De Los Dioses*." She whispered this last, and Fowler felt something invisible and cold touch his scalp and skin. "The Game of the Gods."

The door swung open. The man who entered was a burly giant. He wore a sweatshirt and sweatpants, a whistle dangled from his neck, and a black umpire's hat was perched high on his head. He approached Fowler with an extended hand. "Welcome." He shook hands, silently staring into the athlete's eyes, smiling wetly, welcoming a long absent son. At length he placed a hand on Fowler's forehead and intoned a brief chant in a language both musical and evocative which danced at the threshold of Fowler's comprehension. Then, in English, "Don't be afraid, my boy. You are home."

The words chilled him and, crazily, he felt tears threatening. "Father, I don't even know if I can play this game. I mean . . ."

Sukie spoke from the shadow of the priest. "Don't you want to?" It was not a question but a reminder.

He was a cauldron of conflicting impulses. The situation was unreal yet undeniably compelling. Unbidden, the image of the young man with the medicine ball came to him, and then superimposed upon it, the face of every opponent, the visage of every rival team member he had ever stood against, melding into one. Everything, he began to understand darkly, had been a rehearsal for this. "Yes, of course."

"Here's your arm and hip guards." The priest handed him folded pieces of stiff leather, stained with sweat from his predecessors; a tangle of thongs hung from them. "Come, I would like to drink with you, to your health, your victory."

Sukie took his arm and they followed Amaya out of the locker room. The bingo game was still in progress, but Fowler noticed now that the room was decorated for a party. The ceiling supported red and gold streamers and a net which held varicolored balloons. Stylized eagle banners danced on the walls. "The Ball court is this way," said Father Amaya, directing him to a door near the drink concession. The bartender waved and proffered glasses of the fiery grey stuff. Amaya proposed the

toast. "To your health, victory over your enemies, and to your quest." It sounded oddly formal and Fowler wondered if it wasn't something traditional, some old ethnic greeting. When they finished, the padre pushed through the doors to the gymnasium.

It looked like the floor of the Stock Exchange in miniature with the same crackling sense of action and money. The room was packed and, as they walked through it, the people surged around them offering Budweiser cups and encouragement: "Way to go! Get some!" and "Viva Fowler!" Money was changing hands everywhere in large bills and small. A scoreboard high above them touted odds.

The bleachers were half full, and a wave of players from the abandoned bingo game were filling them rapidly. Pom-pom girls began their routine, "Pok-a-tok, pok-a-tok, pok-a-tok!" to a sea of flushed faces and lofted beer cups. The buoyant feeling was contagious; it sent a tendril of warmth up his spine, and the *pulque* finished the job with euphoric flashes of glory. If only he knew the game.

In the center of the gymnasium floor was a wooden pole rising to a height of perhaps five meters and carved in the likeness of a rigid and upright serpent. At the top, just beneath a pair of eagle's wings that sprouted to either side of the serpent's head, was an unusual wheel-like device from which a black ball, over a foot in diameter, hung from a braided leather cord. The padre noticed Fowler studying the red line that ran the width of the court and shouted in his ear, "Your side." He gestured at one half of the floor. "Stay on it."

"Right," Fowler shouted back, scrutinizing his surroundings for the answers to a dozen unvoiced questions.

They reached the edge of the crowd, and Amaya signalled for two assistants. A pair of athletic looking youths came and rubbed Fowler down with towels before securing the elbow and thigh guards. Worked into the leather on his arms was a feather design. He looked down and noticed the thigh guards were etched with scales and talons. Picking up his helmet, he said around mouthfuls of *pulque*, "With all this, I really will feel like a bloody eagle."

"Fly like an eagle!" one of the assistants called out.

As if this were a cue, a comparative hush came over the gymnasium. Father Amaya had acquired a microphone. "Manny Olmec, the Defender." A healthy cheer went up, and several appreciative whistles sounded. "Fowler, the Challenger!" The priest waved his beefy arms over his head and the crowd screamed.

Fowler peered over heads looking for Sukie, but she was nowhere to be seen. The crowd took on a predatory aspect; there was a fanatical tinge spreading through it that sent his blood running with iced adrenalin.

"Fowler," murmured one of the assistants. "This way."

He froze, unable for a moment to place one foot in front of the other.

This was no simple case of pre-game jitters but an immobility born of the prospect of self-confrontation on an absolute level. The priest noticed his demurrals and looked down at him with disappointment. Fowler forced himself to breathe evenly, averting his eyes from the padre and then allowed himself to be guided onto the game floor.

Amaya raised his hands and silence settled over the place. Again the priest spoke in the language Fowler had heard him use earlier, words here and there familiar but elusive — the parlance of a fevered dream. The voice queried, sobbed, seemed to plead, threaten and then culminate triumphantly in the guttural shout: "*PULQUE!*" The crowd picked it up, answering '*Pulque! Pulque! Pulque!*' until Fowler feared their stomping would bring the building around their ears. Above the deafening clamor, nearly lost in it, Amaya shouted. "No hands, this ain't volleyball. No feet, this ain't soccer. I want a clean game. Elbows, hips and knees only. Play Ball!"

Fowler looked across the court to where his opponent was donning his helmet. Above glistening bronze shoulders stood a lacquered wooden mask, both comic and frightening. It was the head of the weird, jolly demon Fowler had seen on the fountain and elsewhere around El Tajin — usually in attitudes of drunkenness and merriment, not menace.

Fowler dropped his own helmet over his eyes and was effectively blinded for a moment while he sought the eye slits. When he found them, it was just in time to see the black ball growing in his field of vision as if in a half speed film. It struck with the force of a boulder in deadfall. He was sent sprawling several yards backward and onto the floor. A laconic buzzer sounded and he heard, as from a great distance, the metallic, amplified voice of Amaya saying, "One — nada. Olmec. First down." Lightheaded, knowing pain would come in a moment when he found his breath, Fowler got to his feet and began imitating the bouncing, crouching and sliding motions of the other player. He fanned at the air with his elbows. The huge, weighted ball careered wildly around the centerpole and Fowler could now see the scalloped ball-bearing track that the tether rode, the track itself revolving erratically with the tug of the ball and making it nearly impossible to gauge its trajectory. The ball rose, dipped and lurched, altering its speed at irregular intervals. Manny sprang into the air and steadied the ball with one thigh, slamming it across to Fowler's court with his elbow in one fluid combination serve. The ball came at him too quickly again, and he warded it off with both arms folded over his faceplate. He was sent staggering backward, but kept his feet. The ball wound itself around the tetherpole. A whistle blew. "Two — nada. Olmec."

A grappling pole emerged from somewhere and freed the ball. It began to circle ominously around, losing momentum. Olmec seemed to be waiting for Fowler's move. The ball slowed to a point where it nearly

fouled on the pole again. Fowler tapped it with the back of his elbow, reversing its course. He slid back and forth, dribbling the ball laterally, confining it to a small arc of movement with the insides of his elbows. He set up a shot and launched it squarely with his knee. Olmec returned it with ease, his great Bacchus-faced headdress grinning amiably. A volley was set up. The ball was sent arcing back and forth with increasing speed at a 30° angle to the pole. The players used only their hips and elbows now. The knees, Fowler surmised, were used primarily for power serves or deadstops or in fancy combinations as Olmec had flamboyantly demonstrated.

With the limited peripheral vision his headdress allowed, Fowler took in the action on the sidelines: blurred sweating red faces, shouting, chewing cigars furiously; smeared make-up; plastic cups of brew rising and falling to lips; twenty, fifty and one hundred dollar bills gripped in gesturing fists and changing owners; fingers upraised signalling ever protean odds. He focused on his opponent. Manny's muscles worked rhythmically beneath the helmet/mask that looked like something from some surreal Mardi Gras: a leering, cherub-cheeked Falstaff. The ball was booming back and forth quickly now, sounding off their elbows with staccato smacks. Pain shot to Fowler's neck with every return. He could not keep this up for long.

He retreated to the rear of the court, allowing the volley to be broken and the ball to swing back into Manny's field. Intuiting the course of Manny's next power serve, he ran at the ball, leapt into the air and met it with both knees and both elbows, deflecting all of the momentum back into the other court. If this was against the rules, he supposed they would let him know soon enough. He was only grateful that he had met the ball as he intended to, that it did not suddenly wrench its way out of his path leaving him to dash himself against the pole. No whistles sounded, no fouls were called, but the move had cost him a bright searing pain in one knee-cap and, for several moments, a lack of feeling in his right arm. He managed to keep his feet under him as he staggered backwards, uprighting himself in time to catch Manny's feeble return. He had thrown him off. The defender was moving unsteadily, almost waddling. Fowler slapped at the mass of leather, wood and lead with his entire body, leaning into and following through on the serve, his torso pivoting, his elbow shooting out like a mightily swung club or bat. The ball was sent rocketing across the court and met one of Manny's hastily raised forearms. Manny went to the floor with a howl, clutching his arm as the ball thudded twice against the pole and came to a rest. The buzzer sounded. "Two and one. Second down. Fowler."

Fowler was rapidly tiring but enjoying now the sensation of putting the hurt on the other team. The game was strange, but it had its points. *It might catch on, you never know.*

Again the grappling pole. The ball circled like a bomb or some unhatched, predatory bird. Manny's move. One knee. It came too fast again. Fowler returned accurately, but not before his own fist was driven into his face from the move. He felt dizzy, a little nauseous. Pain and exhaustion at last seemed to recede along with the pulsing roar of the fans into a kind of low, distant static. He noted a sense of removal and euphoria marred slightly with vertigo. Something odd was happening. The blow? The *pulque*? He wondered as he mechanically kept the volley going. He no longer felt his body. He was encased in a bell jar; all was silent save for the tinkling of bells and the sound of flutes playing childlike melodies.

He saw himself serve "backarm" and drive Olmec to the floor again. He performed roundhouses and leaps, launching the ball flawlessly with his knees or hips while Manny Olmec scrambled to return. Fowler could do no wrong. He did not hear the electronic tone of Amaya heralding his points. Nor did he hear the buzzer. He could feel, rather than see or hear, the chant that rose from the crowd as if from a single beast. *PULQUE PULQUE PULQUE*.

With increasing, mindless efficiency he sent the ball back into the court of the idiot, smiling god. Backarm, forearm, hips, knees. Kneel. Smash. Bend. Kick. Jump. Thrust. Pivot. Bash. He had been born to the game. All other games were a shadow, the stuff of children and . . . mortals. His surroundings disappeared. He played on an endless expanse of sunbaked earth. With titanic force he hurled the sun and the moon across mountains into the realm of the rain god and the keeper of the *pulque*. He screamed as he sent the colossal missile into the belly of the fat deity. "*PULQUE!*"

Darkness dissolved with the feel of cool water over his face and chest. Hands caressed him, slapping lightly. Sound washed over him: buzzers, bells, a wave of voices growing nearer, a tide of noise from another world.

"Ya' made me rich baby. I love ya'!"

"Fowler."

"*Que milagro!*"

"Attawayyabigbeautifulbastard!"

"Fowler."

"Slugger."

"My son, can you hear me?"

Someone handed him a quart container of brew. He took it, not feeling his body, his pain. The *pulque* ran in rivulets down his throat and chest as he slaked his thirst. "How did I do?" He lifted his lips in an exhausted grin.

"Manny's out cold. He went down first."

"You've won, my son. Of course."

"Oh Fowler." She laid her head on his chest. Her hair smelled of the

tropics and tobacco smoke.

In the next moment he was being borne along on a sea of shoulders and heads. His brew spilled out over a lanky girl who grinned up at him, straining to touch his face. Jogged and bounced unceremoniously, being passed from hand to hand, shoulder to shoulder, he lifted his hand and waved to those in the bleachers. Everyone directly beneath him and around him stretched out hands which Fowler at first began to shake, until he realized the gesture was an attempt to touch his hair or cheek. They were jostling each other vigorously and reaching to touch his head as if he were some kind of faith-healing mentalist.

Fowler's tentative grin broke into a booming, helpless laugh, even as the pain began to announce itself again. His laughter echoed off the walls of the gymnasium, audible even over the crowd. This was mad, all quite hopelessly whacko — but mother it felt good. It felt like winning. It felt like home. And . . .

Something had come over him back there during the game, something that touched on the immutable facts of his life — some kind of trance perhaps, brought on by the strange competition, the pressure of not knowing the game. No, even as he tried to tell himself it was unreal, its truth had marked him, could be felt in the throbbing of his muscles. It frightened him not a little and yet he drew a kind of abstract sustenance from it, a sense for the first time in his life of *self* and — the word assailed him — *destiny*. He had drunk from a wellspring of power that flowed from a place where primordial dreams play tag with archetypes and shadow.

Outside the gym they set him down. He was standing in an open courtyard beyond the Parish Hall and the church. It was ringed on all four sides by a high stone wall. He looked around for Amaya and the woman. They were not in evidence. He saw in the center of the vast court, rapidly filling now with people, a kind of ziggurat structure. He had seen its image elsewhere in the town, on murals, posters, the fountain. Stairs led up the facing side of the thing to a platform at the top. Around the platform were more of the carvings and glyphs: serpents, birds, suns, cacti and clouds, his opponent god. He was borne along by the crowd toward it. Something cold stirred within him.

The temple rose to a height of perhaps thirty meters. To one side of the platform was an imposing gold sculpture of a human-headed eagle poised for flight. While the features on its head were vague and unpronounced, they could, he thought, easily be his own and he imagined that they were.

Apprehension was a skittering thing up his spine.

As he looked upon it, the late afternoon sunlight suffusing it with a blinding, molten aspect, he absently received hearty claps on the back from the men and stolen, excited kisses from the women. Entranced and repelled by the thing, he moved forward. He could see Amaya and the

woman ascending steps, apparently set into the temple's interior. They rose in stages to stand beside the platform at the top of the ziggurat. The priest was now wearing a white gown embroidered with threads of primary color and a feathered headdress. Sukie appeared with a gold toga and a tiara or crown of beaten silver fashioned into the leaves of the maguey plant.

His knees turned to water. His heart was a small animal trying to scabble its way out of his throat.

The game had been the culmination of a life-long dream of the ultimate competition; and now it was to end this way, to bring rain to the valley, to please the god of *pulque*.

Somewhere, just beneath his fear, was a warm sense of enervation and surrender, a sense of correctness about what awaited him at the top of the stairs.

The people followed him to the base of the pyramid, where they halted. Fowler climbed, transfixed. They shouted and cheered him on with hoarse cries. He met Amaya halfway up the steps. Behind the priest, chanting something inaudible, was Sukie. Her face was the color of the stone beneath her feet, as impassive and ageless and cool — but there was something else there, something feral.

Amaya produced an object from the folds of his robe. It was a rolled piece of paper, a cone. The priest lifted it to his lips as if to blow it like a horn. Fowler looked momentarily puzzled as he saw that the thing contained a quantity of whitish, crystalline powder. The contents of the cone exploded into his face at point blank range with a convulsive expulsion of the priest's breath. Fowler turned his head in time to avoid the mass of the drug, though he felt himself become marginally more numb and less afraid as the white grains settled over his nose and cheek. His heart pounded rapidly and steadily in his ears as if he were approaching some particularly well deserved orgasm.

The priest took his elbow and guided him upward. He was speaking, but Fowler could not hear him. After a few paces Sukie took his other elbow. Her touch was cold. Perhaps it was the drug.

The stairs seemed endless.

Climbing up to the sky. Fly like an eagle. His limbs felt so light. Amaya and Sukie were holding him so he would not rise into the air, to the sun, before it was time.

Amaya's mouth was still moving and Sukie was reading responses from a book written in characters he could almost, but not quite, make out.

At the top, at the base of the platform, stood a man, muscular and dark, bearing an ancient war axe shaped like a great butterknife. Its edge caught the sun and winked at him. Feathers had been tied to its haft where the man, wearing a sun mask of beaten gold, fondled it tensely. Directly in front of him on the platform was a shallow depression carved into the

stone and stained a dark rust. Leading away from the depression was a channel or run-off of the same hue.

Amaya and Sukie turned him to face the silently screaming congregation. Again, as in the game, he could hear the visceral chant of *pulque*, *pulque*. The priestess held out an obsidian dagger set with turquoise as if offering it to the villagers. Her eyes began to glaze over.

Now he was being turned to face the sun-masked man. Sukie Coata-like placed her lips, like ice, against his forehead. It was time.

Amaya, one hand on Fowler's shoulder, the other on his head, began to intone the words. The man with the beaten mask touched his other shoulder, and with gentle pressure they urged him to his knees. Fowler's legs locked, and he spun around looking wildly at the priest, Sukie and the dark man. They took their hands from him. Amaya, his head cocked to one side, retreated a step. Though the mask presented an impassive countenance, the dark man appeared confused somehow as well; he too retreated a step.

Sukie looked up from the book of arcane symbols. Her eyes burned fiercely into the distance, past Fowler, looking on another realm. She seemed only dimly aware that something was wrong.

Fowler began to descend the ziggurat steps, backing away from the stunned trio. They made no move to stop him. The muscles of his shoulders tensed as he examined the blank faces in the courtyard below. His body was poised for flight, though his progress downward was deliberate and slow.

At the base of the pyramid, the people of El Tajin, as if in a collective, incredulous dream, cleared a path for him. Each of them bore the dazed look of accident victims or survivors of some disaster. Fowler hurried his pace as the sea of faces parted for him.

At the entrance to the gymnasium, he broke into a trot. He ran through the room with the red and gold streamers — the colored balloons still cupped in a net above him — overturned abandoned bingo tables and scattered plastic Budweiser cups in his path.

He sprinted through the parking lot. The world was strangely silent except for his heartbeat and the sound of his breathing — like cloth being torn into strips. No dogs barked, no screen doors swung shut, no cars backfired; there was not even a breeze to stir the newspapers in the plaza.

Across the street from the dry fountain and the sign WELCOME TO EL TAJIN, an old man in the hat and scarf of a ranchero stepped down from the cab of a flatbed truck. In the rear, contained by slats, were watermelons. Fowler raced for the truck and leaped through the open door into the recently vacated driver's seat. Ignoring the protests of the leathery old man, Fowler turned the keys in the ignition, shattering the stillness. He sped down the deserted main street, leaving a wake of scattered melons and roiling dust. The town, washed with rose and gold from the lowering

sun, was quickly left behind. No one followed him yet. An image sprang to mind of the townspeople standing in the courtyard in aspects of bewildered paralysis, looking to Amaya and Sukie, each other and the cloudless sky.

Fowler drove east toward the foothills along the county road until the stars illuminated the desert floor with a sublime brilliance. He had been running the truck on empty for the past half an hour; the gauge had registered little fuel when he stole the vehicle. The truck rolled to a halt. Fowler could see that he was in a long basin bordered on one side by the rolling hills he had just traversed to the west and, on the east, by a rocky escarpment that jutted nearly fifty meters into the night. He jogged along the base of the abutment looking for a passage upward. At length he found a shallow rift in the rock wall and with the last reserves of adrenalin he made his way up, foundering on the talus beneath him, tearing his nails and palms on the slight handholds.

He did not rest until he had scaled the face of the cliff. Sprawling on a flattened rock, he stared at the heavens, not feeling the irregularities that probed into his back. It had taken him perhaps an hour to make the ascent. The moon was a pale, worn coin riding above the horizon to his left. He allowed himself a few moments and then rose to explore the plateau.

His feet found a clumsy rhythm as he trudged over the moon-shadowed landscape. Exhaustion took its toll and he dozed as he walked, the lids of his eyes dropping, then lifting fractionally. The drug that Amaya had dosed him with on the steps of the temple was wearing off, the "comedown" dovetailing into the profound tiredness of his body and the residue of incomprehensible events to create a detached euphoria. Fowler became fascinated with the play of shadows at his feet. He watched his running shoes appear and recede, appear and recede beneath him.

Presently he saw that he was walking over rotting vegetation and heard the sounds of scolding monkeys, the staccato gibbering of macaws and a chitinous chorus of jungle insects. When he blinked his eyes and ran a hand over his face he could, for a moment, see the desert terrain superimposed over his vision. Still, he could not dispel the hallucinatory play of the tendril-like shadows of ferns and vines, the glowing eyes of unnameable beasts peering at him with awe and curiosity from the surreal forest.

In the jungle there was still daylight slanting through the explosive, fleshy growth everywhere around him. The canopy of twilight greens and lavenders was uninterrupted save for a clearing ahead where something rose out of the forest floor to a great height, seeming to both contain and reflect some impossible sun. Great birds of splendid plumage, like auras, wheeled above the shimmering structure ahead. The monkeys who played in the branches and vines to either side of him chattered to

themselves and glared at Fowler with an urgent intelligence, then capered on ahead showing him the way. He approached the clearing and saw that he stood at the base of a gilded pyramid, not unlike the one in El Tajin, though it appeared to be constructed of some shining substance. A panther, the color of the desert night he dreamed under, burst from the undergrowth and paused ahead of him, fixing him with an amber stare. The panther climbed several steps of the building and settled slowly onto its haunches with feline grace and hints of bridled musculature. A gesture of obeisance. It looked at Fowler once again and then rose. It bounded off into the jungle, its message clear.

Fowler stood at the base of the fantastic structure and then advanced several steps, imitating the panther though remaining upright. He looked toward the apex of the temple.

It was then that his vision split and he could see, simultaneously, the creatures seated at the pyramid's pinnacle, three of them in shifting, strange aspects — and himself, as if from a vantage just above the border of the jungle.


With one half of his mind's eye he gestured downward toward his human form and saw that he did so with scaled wings, pointing with a talon. Across from him was a woman, her eyes sunken in shadow as she bent over a table with dizzying patterns on its surface. Above pear-like breasts hung a knotted string bearing a chain of human hearts and skulls. On his right was the plump, Dionysian god he recognized as the keeper of the rain and the *pulque*. The fat deity was casting a handful of painted white pieces and leaves onto the gameboard, each piece marked with runes or glyphs that were tantalizingly familiar yet inaccessible. When the rain god had cast his pieces, he sat back with a grunt and drank from a gaily colored bowl. The woman tossed what looked to be jeweled teeth against the board and lifted her head, smiling. Her jet hair, he could see, was streaked with grey, her face was that of a crone. Her eyes gleamed blackly with death. From the folds of her skirt she presented an obsidian dagger and laid it on the table. With scaled claws he picked up a single die fashioned from a human joint and dropped it between the other game pieces. From the woman came a hissing intake of breath. The *pulque* god smiled and shrugged, placing his bowl in the center of the table.

When Fowler lifted his head and squinted into the light, it was no longer the gleaming temple in the jungle that blinded him, but the sun rising over the desert mesa. He lay still without thoughts for the time it took for the sun to ascend into a bruise-colored cloudbank. Lightning played over the desert beneath him and he could hear the low grumbling of some disgruntled giant. Thunder. It took him several moments to get to his feet and look around him at the infertile landscape. He turned away from the sun, being enveloped now by the clouds, and staggered back the

way he had come. The dream or hallucination of the jungle had accompanied sleep of a sort and he felt a hesitant return of sensation, a nascent clearing of his psyche. He walked toward the lip of the cliff face he had mounted the night before and breathed in lungfuls of air as if they were some rare gift of fortune.

At the edge of the plateau he could see a caravan of vehicles surrounding his abandoned truck, their headlights still glowing in the pastel, not-quite-dawn of the desert basin. A hundred or more of the men from El Tajin played flashlights over the base of the cliff in search of him. They seemed very small and lost, in a pathetic search for what had relegated their ritual to an empty husk. Fowler stood in plain sight and watched them as the flashlights winked out one after another. The thunder made its pronouncements overhead and the first drops of rain began to fall over the valley.

Soon he could see through the teeming downpour the woman, Sukie Coatalique, as she stepped from her blood-red Mustang and gestured to the men, who scurried back to their cars. It seemed to Fowler that she cast her eyes upward toward the spot he was standing on and looked at him for a moment before she too got into her car and drove away to the west.

He lifted his head to the rain and opened his mouth. His laughter was echoed by the thunder. 

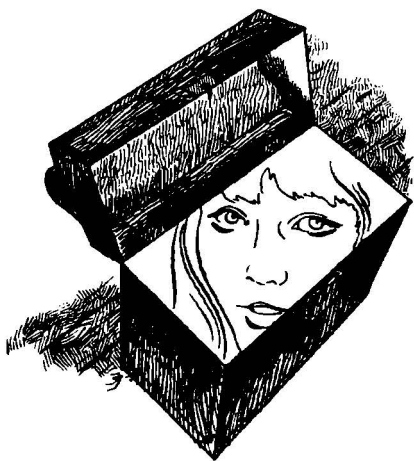
MEMO FROM A SAVAGE

From the dark mouth of my hut
I watch my kinsmen go — soon to display
a parade of leopard robes and lion robes
and capes of skittish-antelope fur
over their smooth, black skin like ebony.
An American Jungle Movie! Good *juju*, yes,
and all with bit parts for savages like us.
(Lord Greystoke, I presume? Or Sheena and
Nanook of North Africa?)
Ah, the warmth of paper money. Good *juju*, yes.
The leopard robes and lion robes
and capes of skittish-antelope fur
are polyester and cotton weave (50%)
with die-cast metal clasps that say,
'Made in Hong Kong.' Good *juju*, yes!

— John Gregory Betancourt

THE MAN WHO WENT BACK

by Damon Knight
art: Jack Gaughan



Since we have known him, Damon Knight has become downright patriarchal. He has been a critic to reckon with since the '40s; with "Not With a Bang" in 1950 he established himself in the first rank of SF writers.

Look for his novel CV from Tor Books; the New England SF Association has a book of stories, Late Knight Edition, to mark his appearance as Guest of Honor (with his wife Kate Wilhelm) at the 1985 Boskone.

Early in the morning he walked from his parents' house toward the beach, past the excavation on the corner, the library that looked like a lighthouse, the movie theater, and then the boardwalk just as it used to be, the agate-jewelry store on one side and the candy store on the other, with the gleaming nickel arms of the taffy machine endlessly revolving around one another. The light, the air, were as luminous and pure as ever. He had forgotten how easily his limbs moved, how the earth turned under his feet. It was the summer of 1948, and he was eighteen years old.

When he saw her coming toward him, his breath stopped for a moment. It was Erica George, just as he had last seen her, with her trousers rolled above her knees and her ash-blond hair blowing against her face.

"Hello, Dick. Going over to the bay?"

"I am if you are."

He was intensely aware of her hand in his as they walked together. She was nineteen, as beautiful as he remembered. He had a curious double vision of her: she seemed so young now, the first of his three lost loves. All his life he had felt the hopeless ache to see her again, to make it different. This was the time, the summer when the change had come between them. He knew that she felt it too, but he had never dared express it by a touch or a word.

"When are you leaving?" he asked.

"Tomorrow morning. I hate to go."

"You'll be back, other summers."

"Maybe not. It's a long way back here from Massachusetts."

"It's a long way from Massachusetts," he sang, "it's a long way to go . . ."

She laughed. "You goof."

"Is that why you love me?"

"I don't love you at all."

"Sure you do. Want to take the boat out one last time?"

"Yes, let's."

The boat was his parents' old cabin cruiser, the *Betty*. Erica cast off the lines while he started the engine, and they cruised through the channel into the September sky and sea. An hour later they anchored off a little cove where they had often picnicked before. "Let's swim ashore and look for periwinkles," he said.

"It's too cold."

"One last time?"

"Well — don't look."

Fuller stripped off his shirt and pants. When he turned, she had just taken off her brassiere. "Oh, Dick."

He stepped up to her with a confidence he had never felt before; her body was cool against his when he kissed her. After a moment her lips turned warm.

He spread the life jackets on the deck of the cockpit and pulled her down beside him. "Dick, this isn't good," she murmured. "I'm going away to college — we may never see each other again."

"I know. That's why. I'll never forget you, Erica."

"Oh. Oh. Me too."

On the way home they stopped at the soda shop and he bought five comic books. "What do you want those for?" she asked mournfully. That night, after his parents had gone to bed, he took the other magazines out of the big carton in his closet and looked them over. One or two were dog-eared, copies he had got from other people. He discarded those, and wrapped the others very carefully. He went to sleep, and awoke in his own bed in New York, in the year 1996.

After his mother died, Richard Fuller spent a week cleaning out the house in Newport. That was in June, 1984; the weather was warm for that time of year on the Oregon coast, but there was a chill in the old echoing rooms. The furniture was full of dust, the springs sagging. The will was in probate; the lawyer told Fuller not to expect much. "Your mother made some unwise investments in her later years, against my advice. The house is over sixty years old, and on today's market —"

In the back of the lumber room on the top floor he found an ancient steamer trunk. He emptied it layer by layer: brown photographs in wooden frames, a pair of golf shoes, a Mah-Jongg set. Halfway down, under a pile of yellowed summer dresses, there was a package wrapped in brown paper.

He opened it. Inside, between layers of white tissue paper, he found a hundred comic books, the kind he had collected when he was a kid: *Action Comics*, *Batman*, *Superman*, *All-American*, and dozens of others. The covers were still bright and glossy; the pages were only faintly yellowed. There was a note on top, in a handwriting he recognized as his own. "These are worth a lot. Don't take less than \$80,000."

He had no recollection of putting the magazines in the trunk, or of writing the note. The latest magazines in the stack were dated Fall 1948, meaning they had been published in the summer of that year. That was when he had had his first episode of amnesia, the one that had worried his parents so much. They had sent him to a psychiatrist in Portland. He had tried drugs and hypnosis, but nothing had brought the memory back. Now, for the first time, he knew something he had done that weekend. But why this?

Over the years there had been other episodes, once in the week before his marriage to Janet. Another time it happened during a trip to Mexico with Linda. Each time, he had awakened with no perception that a day had passed. It was as if a piece of his life had been snipped out and the remainder spliced together.

After med school, his interest in his own problem led him to study brain

physiology. There was an area in the brain stem, he learned, that seemed to govern perception of time. "You might have some very small lesion there," a brain surgeon told him. "Maybe congenital, or some childhood injury. There's no way to find out without cutting you open, and frankly I wouldn't recommend it. You're better off learning to live with this."

He read more and more widely. The physicists seemed to be saying that the passage of time was an artifact of consciousness. What was it, then, that fixed your mind to this one moving instant? He saw the glimmerings of a gigantic discovery, but he had neither time nor money to pursue it.

He wrapped the magazines up again and took them back to New York with him. The dealer whistled when he saw them. "Listen, I'm going to be honest with you, I haven't got enough cash to pay you what these are worth."

"What are they worth?"

The dealer touched the magazines spread out on the table. "First issue of *Action*, near-mint, that's eight thousand right there. First three *Batmans*, seven thousand. For the lot, I can give you sixty-five thousand, but I'll have to get a couple of other people to go in with me."

"Make it eighty, and you've got a deal."

"You're a shrewd bargainer, Mr. Fuller. You must have spent a long time collecting these."

"No, I inherited them. I really don't understand why they're worth so much, frankly. They sold for a dime apiece; now they're worth more than their weight in gold."

"Supply and demand," said the dealer. "This one issue, this *Action* Number One with the first "Superman" strip in it, in this condition, there's only about five copies known to exist. You can buy gold anywhere."

He handed Fuller a certified check a week later, and packed the magazines with reverent care into a suitcase. They shook hands.

"Well, Mr. Fuller, what are you going to do with all your money?"

Fuller smiled. "I'm going to invent time travel," he said.



Oh, we came from outer space
To destroy the human race,
And we'll battle face-to-face
With some eccentric scientist.
Then we'll pillage, loot, and slaughter
Everyone except his daughter
Though of course (because we've caught her)
She will struggle and resist.
So we'll throw a rope across her
And we'll tie her up and toss her
In a waiting flying saucer
And take off without delay.
Back on Mars (a little later)
The Galactic High Dictator
Will begin his plan to mate her
So she'll scream and run away!

We attack and loot and sack and shoot
Disintegrator guns,
And every human runs
Except (of course) the ones
We snatch and nab and catch and grab
And capture for the Fleet.
An then we take 'em back to Mars and *EAT!*

Every day for lunch we feed
On Earthlings fried and fricasseed,
Earthling soup and Earthling roast,
Earthling finely chopped on toast.
Then, for dinner, we'll unleash
Plans to dine on Earthling *quiche!*
(Of all the species we have faced,
Earthlings have the nicest taste.)

Our photon guns will flatten
Half the buildings in Manhattan;
All the planets we've attacked like this
Have shattered, one by one.
And we'll have such jolly games
As the Earth goes up in flames.
Ever wonder why we *act* like this?
Because it's lots of *fun*!



IMPROBABLE BESTIARY: The Empath

They touch my mind, the yearning ones,
The ever-discontented ones;
Each one invades the barricades
And borders of my mind.
I feel their thoughts: the burning ones,
The howling and demented ones,
The fever-dreams and shattered screams,
The lost and the malignant.

I've prayed that they would fade away,
But thoughts from everywhere
Invade my head with sorrow, dread,
And anger and despair.
I try to hide, I die inside;
The thoughts become a din.
The nightmares find my weary mind
And force their way within.
 They *touch* my mind,
 And *clutch* my mind,
 Until the pain is such my mind
Will burst, explode, or overload;
For I was cursed from birth:
No matter who invents the thoughts,
No matter how intense the thoughts,
*God help me, I can sense the thoughts
Of everyone on Earth!*

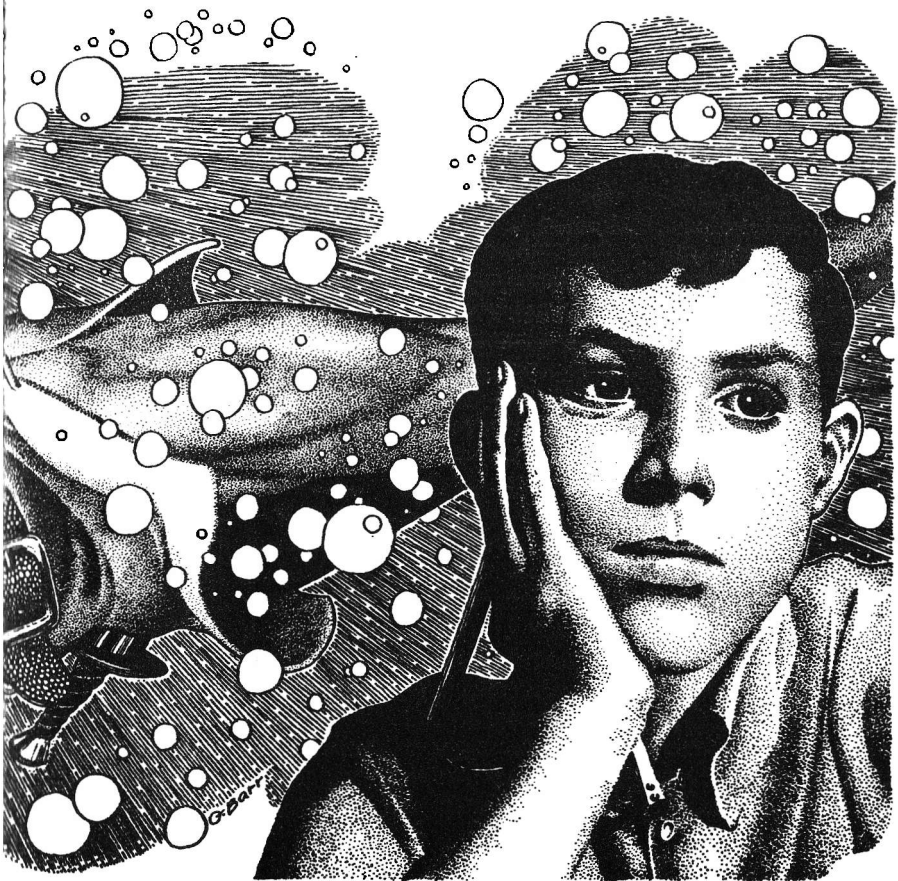
Some thoughts I sense are pleasant ones,
Infrequently surrounding me;
Brief interludes of tranquil moods
And attitudes of cheer.
But still the ever-present ones,
The thoughts forever hounding me
Are panic, grief, and disbelief
And agony and *fear*.
The screams of all humanity
Come clawing at my brain
With chaos and insanity

And never-ending pain.
And yet one question stays unclear,
One answer still unsaid:
*When I die, will I start to hear
The nightmares of the dead?*

— F. Gwynplaine MacIntyre



YOUR MOVE
by J. Michael Straczynski
art: George Barr



The author is a young professional writer — nonfiction, scripts, indeed The Complete Book of Scriptwriting — who is now turning to his first love, science fiction. He reacted to this, his second sale in the field and his first to Amazing, with a quite unprofessional delight.

He tells us, “I was one of those kids who simply lived for the classified pages of comic books and SF magazines. And yes, I even ordered the X-ray glasses described in the story.”

Kenny Jacobs flipped pages, skimming through the latest copy of *Starways: The Magazine of Imagination*. A one-year subscription had cost him eighteen dollars — eighteen dollars he'd been hard-pressed to afford, what with his limited allowance and the few dollars he earned mowing lawns around the neighborhood — but it was worth it. Not for the articles, which were always interesting, of course, or the stories, or the pictures taken Behind The Scenes on motion picture soundstages or in special-effects labs. Not for any of that.

But the ads . . . !

Once a month, he grabbed the current issue out of the mailbox as soon as the postman delivered it — at least on days when school was out, like now — and dashed upstairs to his room. With the door closed, he'd skim back to page eighty-seven of *Starways*, to the classifieds section, where unknown delights awaited his inspection. He never knew what to expect on pages 87 through 99. There were whole worlds to be had there; worlds that might cost as much as thirty dollars, or as little as a stamped, self-addressed envelope. Buttons, booklets, decals, models, t-shirts, x-ray glasses (which by experience he'd already discovered were a fraud when he tried them out on Lisa May Richardson and found himself staring at a blur rather than whatever it was she wore beneath her clothes), magazines, catalogs, posters, and fan clubs. . . .

It was wonderful. Not that he could ever actually *afford* much of what he saw splashed across those 13 pages in all their garish glory, but the possibilities alone were exciting. There were books that would show him how to become popular; other packages that would help him grow, expand his muscles into someone the other kids in the ninth grade would think twice about before pushing around; secret microphones he could use to find out where all the parties he was never invited to were being held; and books with ways to approach the girls who were as much of a mystery as the grab-bags he sent for with fair regularity.

This issue of *Starways* was, however, a disappointment. He'd seen all the ads before, knew half of them were rip-offs and the other half 'way beyond his budget. He pushed his glasses back further along his nose, his face all squished together in a gesture of dismay. Maybe next time.

Then he saw it. Right there, at the bottom of page 99 — a full quarter-page ad, which meant that it was probably legit, since only the legitimate operations could afford quarter-page ads in the first place.

FANTASTIC VENTURES INC.

How would YOU like to be in charge of an interplanetary starship? Or at the helm of a sailing ship in ancient times? Or alone, armed with special powers, combatting wizards and strange creatures in a world of YOUR creation? . . . , the advertisement asked.

Kenny skipped down to the last paragraph of copy, where everyone always got Down To Business: . . . **Neither could a world as vast as the imagination be built to your satisfaction. So FANTASTIC VENTURES INC. offers an alternative: A Correspondence Game! YOU develop your own character, with his own special powers, skills and abilities! WE will work within the world created for your character — a world filled with dangers aplenty. Each week, YOU write out your move, in as much detail as you want. And each week, WE reply to YOUR specific move! This is NOT a mass or mimeographed service. We tailor each adventure to YOUR tastes. For 12 weeks, once a week, YOU will live a life of adventure. YOU will be subjected to great dangers which only YOU will be able to escape from — all through the character that YOU create!**

Kenny was impressed. More than impressed. He was hooked, and he knew it. He glanced down at the mailing form, bearing a post office box number in White Plains, New York, and his heart sank within him. Twenty dollars.

Twenty dollars!

He weighed his options carefully. Over the past month, he'd been able to save exactly twenty-five dollars and fifty cents, money he'd planned on using to buy a new skateboard. But his old skateboard was still usable — well, more or less — and this was something special, something *different*.

Funny, how easy the decision became once he examined all the issues logically.

The coupon had said *Please allow at least six weeks for delivery of starter kit*. Despite this, he checked the mailbox nearly every day after only one week had passed. By the third week, as usual, he became concerned. What if it was just another rip-off? Had he thrown good money down the toilet — again? And there in the corner beside the dresser was his skateboard, looking older and crummier each day, while the one in the storefront, the one he'd originally intended to purchase, looked better and more unattainable.

Whenever these thoughts rose up to haunt him, he reached between the box-spring and mattress of his bed and dug out the by now dog-eared copy of *Starways* and checked page 99. It was still there. A quarter-page ad.

They *had* to be legitimate.

Finally, six weeks and two days after he'd sent away his money order for twenty dollars plus postage and handling, a large, grey, unmarked envelope arrived. He hadn't seen the postman drop it into their box, but when he raced out right afterwards to check it — as he had for the preceding five weeks and two days — he found the package waiting for him. He tucked it under one arm, deposited the rest of the mail on the kitchen table — bills, mostly, and a postcard from their aunt in New Jersey — and raced up to his room. He saw his mother glance curiously at him as he passed her in the living room and took the stairs two at a time. By now, they probably suspected that *something* was up, that he was even now in the process of "throwing away good money on more junk," as his father tended to put it. But they were too liberated to butt in. As usual, they'd end up shrugging it off as part of a phase he was going through, and remark that at least it kept him busy during summer vacation.

As soon as he reached the sanctuary of his room, he closed the door, turned on the AM/FM radio beside his bed, and tore open the package. Brochures and blank forms spilled out all over the bed. A quick survey of the forms proved them to be less complex than he'd anticipated, and the brochures were little more than a restatement of the information in the advertisement.

The first thing he had to do was to write in the name of his character at the top of page one. *Vol Darr*, he wrote, having decided *that* the day after he'd mailed off the coupon. No particular reason; he just liked the sound of it.

The next paragraph had been set aside for physical descriptions. HUGE, Kenny wrote, AT LEAST SIX FEET TALL. Remembering the instruction that all descriptions be precise, he crossed out the AT LEAST, then continued: TWO HUNDRED THIRTY POUNDS, HEAVY-THEWED MUSCLES (a description he'd come across in an Edgar Rice Burroughs book), WITH PIERCING BLUE EYES, BLACK HAIR, AND WEARING LEATHER CLOTHES. That *was* what the heroes wore in all those Frank Frazetta posters, wasn't it? He glanced up at the full-color poster of Conan the Barbarian that adorned a closet door. Yep. Leather clothes.

Special skills was the next category. GREAT STRENGTH, ABILITY TO LEAP GREAT DISTANCES IN A SINGLE BOUND (he wondered if they'd catch that one), HAWK-LIKE VISION, AND ULTRA-SENSITIVE HEARING. He briefly debated the idea of including some of the conventional superhero abilities — flight, invulnerability, wall-climbing, super-speed, that sort of thing — but vetoed the notion. He wanted a hero who would fight his way out of trouble by virtue of his own, human abilities; someone Kenny could identify with, even if he wasn't six feet tall, heavy-thewed and fond of leather clothes.

Weapons came last. BROADSWORD, STEEL HELMET, SHIELD, MACE, MAIL, DAGGER, AND AN ENCHANTED CHARM WHOSE PURPOSE HE DOES NOT YET KNOW. He allowed a smile. The charm was his ace-in-the-hole, his *deus ex*

machina in case Vol Darr got into a jam he couldn't escape from through conventional weapons.

Following supper — wolfed down in record time — he tackled the job of world-building. He decided that Vol Darr's world was distant, primitive, filled with sorcerers, wild animals, Hyperborean-style empires and peculiar religious cults. One line short of filling in all the available space, he further decided to throw in a handful of dinosaurs. He knew that dinosaurs had died off millions of years before humans had evolved on Earth, but after all, this *wasn't* Earth, now was it? It was his world, and he could do whatever he wanted with it.

The page marked **Situation** turned out to be the most difficult to fill in. He'd hoped the people at Fantastic Ventures Inc. would give him a place to start. But it was entirely up to him. After lying on his back and staring at the sheet of paper for half an hour, hoping that Providence would send down a lightning-bolt of inspiration, he decided to take the easy way out. He started Vol Darr off at the mouth of a great cave that led down beneath the surface of the planet. Vol Darr's mission was to enter the cave and attempt to defeat the evil that lurked therein. He wasn't exactly sure *why* Vol Darr wanted to go down into that cave — there wasn't much in the way of motivation, such as, say, a princess in distress or something — but he was sure it didn't make much difference. People like Vol Darr were *always* getting into tight scrapes and seeking out danger. That was what they were *for*. Plumbers plumbed, doctors doctored, and heroes did heroic stuff. Period. End of discussion.

With the last of the form filled out, all that remained was an envelope, bearing the same box number in White Plains, and a note containing final instructions: **Once a week, you will send us your described action, and we will respond with the consequences of your move within 48 hours, thus furthering the plot. You will then react to the new situation, describing the subsequent events in as much detail as you desire. The adventure shall last a total of twelve weeks. The goal of the adventure is for you to keep your character alive until the twelve-week period expires. Should you fail, the adventure is concluded. Should you cease to send in the response sheet within one week of receiving our move, you will have defaulted and your character will be presumed dead.**

This was starting to sound really terrific.

Checking the forms over one last time to make sure he hadn't left anything out, Kenny dropped the sheets of paper into the pre-stamped, pre-addressed envelope, walked down to the corner mailbox, and sent the package on its way.

En route back to the house, a question grew and started to flag down his attention. The instruction sheet clearly stated that a response would arrive within 48 hours. But the mailing address was in New York. Kenny lived in San Diego. He knew it always took at least three days for letters to get across

country — three days there, three days back, that was six days! How did they figure on getting back to him in 48 hours?

Good question.

He raced up the stairs to check the mailing information again, just in case he'd read it wrong.

The envelope, the brochures and the instruction sheets were gone. He wondered if his mother had gone in during his absence and cleaned up . . . a prospect she denied when he called out an accusation to her downstairs. He decided that she was probably embarrassed and didn't want to admit to having thrown out some of his stuff.

Parents, he thought ruefully, were like that sometimes.

True to their word, and much to Kenny's surprise, a response arrived within the prescribed 48 hours. He'd been watching the postman from the front window, and hadn't *seen* him drop anything unusual into their box, but when he went out to check, sure enough, there was a slim grey envelope waiting for him. He carried the envelope upstairs, wondering how they'd managed to pull it off. Maybe they'd worked out an Express Mail agreement with the Post Office.

Or something like that.

He tore open the envelope, found that Vol Darr had no sooner entered the cave than he stumbled into a pit filled to capacity with spiders, each armed with poisonous fangs and easily a yard across. Kenny made a face of disgust as he pictured Vol Darr up to his armpits in arachnids. Ick.

But it *did* pose an interesting dilemma — and that was what he'd hoped for.

He let a few days slide past while trying to come up with an exciting, imaginative way out. He considered writing VOL DARR BOUNDED OUT OF THE PIT AND ESCAPED, but he hated it when books did that to him. Instead, he settled on having Vol Darr use his shield to hold off the more aggressive spiders while attacking the rest with great sweeps of his broadsword. Snickety-**snack**, and another arachnid bites the big one, until all of them were at last dispatched to that great web in the sky.

Then he bounded out of the pit and escaped.

As he dropped the enclosed response envelope into the mailbox, Kenny decided that this was definitely turning out to be well worth the twenty dollars plus postage and handling. Not unexpectedly, he *liked* the idea of being a heavily-thewed hero, and hoped that the people at Fantastic Ventures Inc. could come up with threats slightly more imaginative than spiders with a thyroid condition.

To his chagrin, they did just that.

The battles, and their attendant dangers, were becoming ever greater. Each time he found himself barely able to get Vol Darr out of his troubles alive, and even then only by paying a heavy price in weaponry. Vol Darr's mace had been shattered in a battle against the Risen Dead; his shield had

been badly cracked by a thirty-foot python he'd dispatched by shoving the shield into the snake's mouth, a move which startled it long enough for him to pierce it with his broadsword; and even now, his helmet was being slowly digested by a carnivorous plant whose clutches he'd just barely managed to avoid.

Even heavily-thewed heroes had their off-days, Kenny concluded.

At least the people at Fantastic Ventures Inc. were giving him a run for his money. They were keeping every one of the promises they'd made on page 99 of *Starways*. Still, he wished he could figure out how they were getting back to him so quickly, and why he was never able to actually see the postman putting the response envelope into the family mailbox.

Not that it mattered, really.

Until the seventh week arrived.

That was the day the seventh response came in from Fantastic Ventures Inc.; the response sheet that ended with: . . . **Vol Darr does, indeed, manage to escape from the hands of the enchantress by sliding down a steep, hidden passage built into the walls of her lair. As he falls, however, he twists unexpectedly, landing hard on his left arm. The arm is broken between wrist and elbow.**

Kenny lay in bed that night, reading the letter over for the fifth time, feeling strangely disquieted. Could they actually *do* that? Break poor Vol Darr's arm like that? Obviously, they *could* do it, he realized, since they'd already done it — but it just didn't seem fair. Heroes were supposed to get flesh wounds on the arm and an occasional thwack in the back of the head, but that was about it. Still, Vol Darr had done much worse to the characters that Fantastic Ventures Inc. had thrown against him, so he supposed the development wasn't too unreasonable. At least it was his left arm, and not his good, right arm, the one with which he wielded his broadsword. That was some consolation, and it put him enough at ease to finally get some sleep.

The next morning, Kenny Jacobs awoke with a broken arm — an injury he was wholly unable to account for. The doctor guessed that he'd probably fallen out of bed, been unaware of the extent of his injury, then crawled back into bed and gone to sleep again, forgetting the incident by morning.

Kenny didn't buy a word of it. He hadn't fallen out of bed since he was three. But it seemed to soothe his parents, so he let it go.

The odd thing was that it was his left arm that was broken — broken between his wrist and his elbow.

A coincidence, he decided. A crazy coincidence.

The eighth week, Vol Darr lost his shield altogether, broken under the impact of a club-wielding Cyclops. Vol Darr pierced the Cyclops's eye and escaped, but not before severely spraining his right ankle.

The eighth week, Kenny awoke with a severely sprained right ankle. His parents wondered if he was having trouble sleeping. They suggested the

idea of purchasing a railing for his bed. Kenny said nothing.

Was he sleeping more restlessly than usual? He ran the question through his mind over and over, each time coming up with a negative response. If anything, his sleep seemed *deeper* than usual. Perhaps he'd started to identify so much with Vol Dar that he was beginning to assume his injuries, like one of those psychosomatic diseases he'd read about somewhere.

He looked down at his left arm, tapped the hard plaster cast that covered it. No way. Psychosomatic illnesses didn't show up on x-rays.

Lying in bed, his foot raised high on three pillows, Kenny shrugged. If it came down to last resorts, there was always the possibility that Fantastic Ventures Inc. was out to get him.

He shrugged again. You know you're in bad shape when you can't even laugh at your own jokes.

By the ninth week, his ankle had healed sufficiently to allow him to retrieve the response sheet from the family mailbox and read about Vol Darr's encounter with man-size flowers that spewed forth poisonous fumes.

Kenny greeted the next morning feeling terribly, terribly ill. His head was spinning, and he spent at least an hour in the bathroom, throwing up. The rest of the morning he spent coughing. A quick return visit to the doctor resulted in a diagnosis of mild poisoning, possibly from something he ate or inhaled. They asked him over and over if he'd been playing near any chemical dumps or factories. Kenny said no. His parents looked at the doctor. The doctor looked at his parents. All of them looked at Kenny, then stepped outside to talk privately. After that, Kenny found it very difficult to be alone, or to go anywhere without telling them his destination and expected time of return.

The ninth week marked the high-water point of Kenny's growing paranoia.

Fantastic Ventures Inc. was *definitely* out to get him.

The question was, what was he going to *do* about it? For that matter, what *could* he do? Call the Better Business Bureau? He could just see that one. *Hello, my name is Kenny Jacobs, I'm involved in this correspondence game handled by Fantastic Ventures Inc., only what happens to my character really happens to me as soon as I fall asleep, so I was wondering where I could file a complaint?* Forget it. He couldn't tell his parents — they thought he was troubled enough as it was — and he sure as hell couldn't go to the police with his story either.

He was starting to get scared.

Very.

He decided to call the post office where Fantastic Ventures' box was located. If he could just find out who owned box number 25001, he might be able to figure out what his next move should be. But the clerk there politely informed him that the White Plains Post Office only had boxes numbered to 25000.

He considered withdrawing from the adventure. He'd stop sending off the response sheets. But the rules were very clear: if he withdrew from the game, or failed to send off the response sheets on time, he'd default. Defaulting meant that his character, Vol Darr, would be presumed dead.

And if Vol Darr died . . .

He filled out the response sheet. He maneuvered Vol Darr well past the lair of poisonous flowers to an underground oasis. He didn't know if such a thing was possible, exactly, but by this point he was beyond caring. He didn't *want* Vol Darr seeking out any adventures for a while. He — they — needed a chance to rest, to think, to regroup.

When he finished, he walked the envelope over to the corner mailbox and dropped it inside. This time, however, he decided to wait until the postman arrived for the five-o'clock pickup. He'd been picking up the response sheets for weeks — perhaps *he* could tell Kenny something useful. After half an hour, the postman arrived, opened the front panel and scooped the mail out into a box as Kenny lingered nearby. He watched for the envelope, which should have been right on top of the pile of mail.

The grey envelope addressed to Fantastic Ventures Inc. was no longer there.

That was the beginning of the tenth week.

The tenth week, Vol Darr's coat of mail was ripped from his back by a twelve-foot giant who'd been lurking, unseen, behind a tall tree in the oasis. Armed only with his broadsword, dagger, and the charm that Kenny was holding in reserve, Vol Darr managed to escape, but not before being slammed against a stone wall for his efforts, a blow that stunned and staggered him.

Kenny set the response down on the bed beside him, unbridled fear rising in his throat. If a blow like that was enough to knock Vol Darr into next Tuesday, what on earth would it do to *him*?

One possible solution occurred to him. He wouldn't go to sleep that night. Since he only assumed Vol Darr's injuries when he slept, if he could avoid sleep long enough then maybe the transference wouldn't work. But how long was *long enough*? He didn't know, but he was determined to try anyway.

Surrounding himself with his favorite books, Kenny read until nearly midnight. When his parents went off to bed, he slipped downstairs and filled a thermos with iced tea. He made it as strong as he could stand without gagging, loaded in plenty of sugar to cut the bitterness, and headed back to his room. By two in the morning, Kenny was still feeling fairly alert, confident that he'd have no trouble welcoming the dawn.

At 4:53 A.M., abruptly and unaccountably, Kenny dozed.

When Kenny started awake at 4:56 A.M., a massive and painful bruise covered his left side, stretching from shoulder to thigh. And on his right side were three smaller bruises, arranged in a pattern of some sort. It didn't take

Kenny very long to realize that they were just the sort of bruises that would be left behind by the fingers of someone roughly twelve feet in height.

Kenny spent the next six days in varying degrees of panic. It was at its worst when, behind the locked door of his bedroom, he removed the long-sleeved shirt and long pants he wore to hide the bruises, and looked at himself in the mirror. His whole side was purpling, shot through with broken capillaries, his foot was still swollen, and he was certain that his arm wasn't setting properly inside the cast which, to add insult to injury, only bore the signature of one person — the doctor who'd put it there. He looked like shit, he felt like shit, and why the *Hell* hadn't he gone ahead and bought that skateboard when he'd had the chance?

Because, he thought ruefully, with his luck, he'd have fallen off it and broken his neck anyway.

When the seventh day arrived, and the deadline for his next response loomed up in front of him, Kenny had still failed to come up with a plan of action. There *had* to be a way out. To find it, though, he'd need more information than he had — certainly more than he'd been given in the starter kit, which, he reminded himself, had conveniently disappeared the first day. If only there were someone he could talk to, could work things through with. But there wasn't anyone.

At least, nobody around here. . . .

He grabbed pen and response sheet. Fantastic Ventures Inc. was bound to respond legitimately to his moves, so maybe, just *maybe* . . . :VOL DARR CREPT DOWN A STEEP INCLINE UNTIL HE CAME TO A NARROW PASSAGE, he wrote. HE ENTERED THE PASSAGE, AND FOUND THERE AN OLD MAN, A PROPHET. HE CAME FORWARD AND ASKED THE PROPHET THIS: "WHO ARE MY ENEMIES? WHAT DO THEY WANT WITH ME? AND HOW MAY I DEFEAT THEM?"

He tucked the response sheet into its envelope, walked it to the corner mailbox, and dropped it in. This time, he made it a point to *watch* the box carefully, never taking his eyes off it. He was positive that that had been his mistake the last time. A few passersby looked with curiosity at the kid with the broken wing and the winter clothes staring intently at a mailbox, but no one approached or disturbed him.

Then he saw it. A section of the mailbox along the rear panel shifted in color. It looked like blue, but it *wasn't*. It was a color he'd never seen before. The change only lasted a second, but the second was enough for the grey envelope he'd dropped in earlier to slip out between the molecules of the panel and into a hole in the air itself that materialized alongside it. The envelope vanished, and the hole snapped closed with an audible *pop* that sounded like a vacuum seal being broken.

Feeling weak at the knees, Kenny turned, returned home virtually on autopilot, and waited.

It was the longest 48 hours he'd ever waited.

At last, the response arrived, feeling thicker than usual. He grabbed it out of the mailbox, hurried up to his room, tore it open and skipped down to the important part.

The prophet's response: **"Your enemies are the Gamers,"** The Prophet answered Vol Darr. **"An elite group of five, they are supremely powerful. They operate from a secret location in a solar system whose name would be less than meaningless to you.**

"They run the most exclusive and dangerous games conceivable, luring players from backwater systems and tricking them into designing environments and surrogates who perform in their stead. These are then given reality in strict accordance with the player's instructions, and it is from this practice that they derive their success. With an entire universe to choose from, the possible situations are endless. The more original and dangerous the circumstances, the wealthier the audience and the greater the bets become.

"What do they want with you? Nothing. You are only a pawn, a link between the player and the Gamers. The player describes whatever action you are to take, and that action becomes real as soon as it is written. His goal is to keep you alive, for whatever happens to you also happens to him. The goal of the Gamers is to prod the player into creating the circumstances that will eventually doom him.

"Lastly, how may you defeat them? You cannot. There is no escape here, no means of defeat. As we speak, the chambers beyond, and all the passages beyond are filling with water. The very walls themselves are collapsing, sealing off the only means of escape. If you stay, you will die. If you try to leave, you will die. Either way, you, and the player who created you, are doomed."

With that, the Prophet reached out and ripped the charm from Vol Darr's neck at just the instant that a wall collapsed and water rushed into the chamber, filling it, and knocking away his broadsword. The Prophet vanished beneath the waters. Unarmed, defenseless, the water rising toward his head, Vol Darr prepared to die.

Kenny wanted to cry. He was sick, scared, banged, bruised, and now, unless he could do something, he was going to drown in the middle of his bedroom. He had one last move left, but what good would it do? *They* still had the final move. By making sure they had the last word in the twelve-week arrangement, they could do whatever they wanted. Even if Vol Darr somehow made it out of his present predicament — a virtual impossibility — they could simply decide to blow up the whole world, or have him hit by lightning, or split a handy volcano and drown him in a flood of molten lava.

It was over. They'd even seen through the charm Kenny had planted as a last resort, letting Vol Darr keep it right up until the last minute, then snatching it away. Now it was gone. In a way, he felt even sorrier for Vol Darr than for himself. He'd grown to like the barbarian, and the thought of him treading water until Kenny finally gave up or sent off a response that would inevitably get both of them killed only added to his sense of despair.

It was all his own fault. If only he'd picked something other than a hole in the ground for Vol Darr's battleground. If only he'd picked a flat field, something he could run on, try to escape. But down deep in the earth, there was nowhere to hide, no way to escape.

Of course, if Vol Darr couldn't escape, neither could the Prophet get out. And if the Prophet . . . !

He snatched the letter up from the bed, went over it again carefully. The tone and approach of the letter was an attempt — and a good one at that — to scare him, to bully him into making a rash move. They *wanted* him to despair, to stop thinking rationally.

Vol Darr was in a rapidly filling hole in the ground, with no way out for him or the Prophet. That checked. The Prophet had said that there was no means of defeat where they were. That checked also. Finally, whatever Kenny wrote down in his response sheet began to happen immediately, as soon as he wrote it.

There was a way — if the Prophet had been completely truthful when he'd said that the Gamers adhered strictly to the player's instructions.

He wrote furiously.

VOL DAR SWAM UP THROUGH THE FOUL-SMELLING WATER, UP TO WHERE AN AIR BUBBLE FORMED IN THE ROOF OF THE CAVERN. HE TOOK A DEEP BREATH, THEN DIVED DOWN INTO THE WATER. HE SWAM DOWN INTO THE MURKY DARKNESS, LOOKING FOR THE DROWNED PROPHET, AND AT LAST FOUND HIM. AS HE'D SUSPECTED, THE CHARM WAS STILL CLUTCHED IN THE PROPHET'S DEAD HANDS. HE RIPPED THE CHARM FREE AND, HIS LUNGS FEELING READY TO BURST, CONCENTRATED. THE WATER SHIMMERED ALL AROUND HIM.

ABRUPTLY, HE VANISHED.

Kenny paused, looked at his handiwork. It was a good start, but wherever he sent Vol Darr, the people at Fantastic Ventures Inc. would be able to get him. Unless . . .

VOL DARR BLINKED, FOUND HIMSELF STANDING ON A HARD SUBSTANCE. STRANGE, HORSELESS VEHICLES PASSED BY IN THE DISTANCE. HE STOOD BESIDE A POST OFFICE BOX AT THE INTERSECTION OF FIFTEENTH AND CHEROKEE STREETS, SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA, UNITED STATES, NORTH AMERICA, PLANET EARTH, SOL SYSTEM. AS HE STOOD PUZZLING OVER HOW HE HAD ARRIVED IN THIS STRANGE PLACE, A GROUP OF ODDLY DRESSED PEOPLE STARING AT HIM, HIS HAWKLIKE VISION DETECTED A SHIMMERING IN THE AIR NEAR THE MAILBOX.

AS HE WATCHED, HE SAW AN ENVELOPE SLIDE SIDEWAYS THROUGH THE MOLECULES OF THE MAILBOX AND GO THROUGH A HOLE IN THE AIR, A DOORWAY TO ANOTHER PLACE. DECIDING HE DIDN'T CARE MUCH FOR THIS PLACE, VOL DARR CONCENTRATED ON FOLLOWING THE ENVELOPE THROUGH THE SAME GAP. HE GRIPPED THE CHARM, CONCENTRATED HARDER, AND VANISHED AGAIN.

HE REAPPEARED IN A GREAT ROOM FILLED WITH STRANGE, EXOTIC LOOKING EQUIPMENT. BRIGHT LIGHTS FLASHED EVERYWHERE, AND METAL SHONE ALL AROUND HIM. SOMEONE WAS STANDING WITH HIS BACK TO VOL DARR, PICKING UP A PILE OF GREY ENVELOPES. FOUR OTHERS HUDDLED NOT FAR AWAY, LOOKING DISTURBED BY SOMETHING THEY SAW ON THEIR MONITORS. VOL DARR KNEW NOT WHO THESE WERE, BUT SENSED THAT THEY WERE HIS TRUE ENEMIES. PULLING OUT HIS DAGGER, THE LAST WEAPON LEFT TO HIM, HE LEAPT FORWARD AND SLEW THEM ALL BEFORE THEY COULD REACT TO DEFEND OR ARM THEMSELVES. WHEN THE LAST OF HIS ENEMIES WAS VANQUISHED, VOL DARR TURNED TO SURVEY THE POWER THAT WAS NOW HIS.

Kenny Jacobs crossed his fingers, sealed the envelope, and dropped it in the corner mailbox. The one at Fifteenth and Cherokee Streets.

Shortly after sunset, Kenny returned to the mailbox. A group of people were gathered around a policeman, describing a strange, tall man in leather clothes whom they had seen briefly an hour or so ago. Kenny drew nearer to the mailbox, skirting the crowd, and found a puddle of vile-smelling water. It really didn't *prove* anything, but it made him feel better.

He returned home to wait.

A day slipped past slowly. Then the second day came — and no envelope arrived for him in the family mailbox. Neither was there anything for him the next day, or the fourth day.

It was the first time his parents had ever known him to be happy about *not* getting mail.

Then came the fifth day.

On the fifth day, a grey envelope bearing his name arrived.

Kenny didn't want to put it off. If he was going to get blasted by lightning, buried by molten lava, or fall into a hole in the Earth, he didn't want to be inside the house when it happened. He tore the envelope open on the sidewalk and peeked inside. Just a single piece of paper. He pulled it out, unfolded it.

A single sentence was scrawled in poor handwriting on the sheet of crisp stationery.

NOW what do we do? the letter asked. It was signed — **Vol Darr.**

Kenny put the sheet of paper back inside the envelope and trotted back to the house, up to his room, where he lay back on the bed, sighed, and smiled a smile of relief. What next, indeed? He didn't have a single idea.

But he was sure he'd think of something.



THE PENINSULA
by Avram Davidson
art: George Barr



*Mr. Davidson warns us that there are things lots worse than a Bigfoot or two in the forests of the Pacific Northwest, where he now resides.
Lots worse . . .*

"But Borski says that, selectively cut, there's enough good timber on the Peninsula to last for years." — she (Mary Blennerhassett).

"Borski's lying. Simple as that. Not with modern logging methods. Selective cutting, you'd be hard put to make logging-off the Peninsula stretch two years. Clear-cutting, the way he usually cuts, he'd have it flat in a year. Less than a year." — he (Victor Olauson).

Scene is in the reasonably modern office of "O & B." On the walls are large old photographs of Oscar Olauson and Robert Blennerhassett: all muscles; moustaches; watch-chains; whiskers; and wicked, wicked eyes. Mary and Victor are their grandchildren.

"And then what? After Borski logs off the Peninsula if he gets hold of it? Tree-farm?"

Victor doesn't think so. "Borski doesn't tree-farm. Never has. Why should he start now? What he'd have if he logged it clear would be one very valuable piece of real estate, you know the style: you cut down all the trees and then you plant saplings and you advertise **Lots in Woodland Acres**. Well. Not a bad stroke of business, ticky-tacky summer cottages cheek by jowl and the lake all full of motor-boats. Very competent. Not a bad stroke of business for Borski. But I don't choose to allow it."

Old Oscar and Old Bob looked on with slight leers; *they* didn't choose to allow it, either. At least: *they* hadn't.

She asked if there hadn't been some suggestions, oh, a while back, that the whole Peninsula be turned into a memorial? Olauson, Blennerhassett State Park, maybe? or, "O & B" Forest Study Area? He said, yes there had been. But his father and her father hadn't chosen to allow it. Added, and neither did he.

And that, she understood, was that.

Mary recalled the first time she'd seen his wife, what was it *she* was called?, some improbably brief one-syllable Scandi name beginning and ending with a consonant. But you were also allowed to call her Emma. Victor was standing by himself with his hands hanging at his sides, no expression on his long flat face, surprisingly dark face with those very blue eyes. *One of my grandmothers was French Canadian*, perhaps a code phrase meaning *Indian blood*. In came Stig or Brum or Hoog or whatever, *Emma*, came up to him and he didn't even look at her. And she brought her mouth to his ear and she spoke and she spoke and she spoke and he didn't even look at her, and then he turned his head and brought his mouth to her ear and *he* spoke. A very very few words. And his wife nodded. Turned. Left. And that was that.

Since then, of course, she — Mary — had met Emma. Had met Emma for a drink in the golf-club bar. One drink for Emma. Had met Emma at dinner in the enormous Olauson house, miraculously kept clean without a servant. Enormous dinner. Two children, *Christ* how clean and quiet. Lighter of

hair and skin than Dad, but just as blue of eye. Emma looked a lot like the woman in *American Gothic*, but Victor didn't look a lot like the man. And Mary had met Emma for a lunch which she herself, Mary, had given them in the Vale Chalet, called the Valley Shalley for so long that this had become the place's *name*: given there because, where else? Not in Mary's tiny apartment over the dress shop. The Shalley had gourmet status, that is, no bouillon cubes were added to the French Dip's O Juice. And then, once more, one more time, she had met Emma at some semi-public function. She'd assumed that she and Emma were of a karma to meet, say, every three weeks forever. To speak almost not at all: to *meet*. But —

Mary Blennerhassett had spent Saturday night with Junius, the fry-cook at the Busy Beaver; there really wasn't enough in her ice-box to make a meal for two, and so off they went to have the Loggers' Breakfast Special at the Mountain Brook Cafe, a good bit more status than the Busy Beaver and an awful lot less than the Shalley: *who* was there, non-messily also loading up on the Special before (presumably) Church? the cleanly, neatly Victor-and-Emma-Olauson Family. Was *who*. Victor nodded his invariable brief cool Victor Nod. The kids showed no recognition. Maybe Junius was not the most delicate sight. Emma was, on view of them together, first terribly startled: then terribly shocked: then terribly, terribly tight-faced. And after that, although now and then Mary passed within a foot or two of Emma, she and Emma never again *met*. Tough titty, Em. Let Victor call Mary "Miss Blennerhassett" till the moose came home, sooner or later she would get her hands upon him, tawny skin and all. He might be a man with whom you could only go so far, but she would go as far as she could.

Although Mary B. and Victor O. perhaps should have been raised together almost like brother and sister, or anyway cousins . . . but they hadn't been raised together at all. All she had of her father was the memory of a voice, before *The Divorce*, after which she neither saw nor heard him at all: Mom had taken care of that. The late Mom eventually went wherever the late Dad had gone. To their daughter came lots of money from lots of stocks and bonds in a Company and a Mill in a distant state. It had seemed like lots of money, then it didn't seem like lots of money but just like money, then it seemed like lots of money again. Because Mary didn't have it anymore. For a while. She still had the stocks and bonds, yes, but The Bank held them as security for The Loan. And The Bank took dividends and interest to pay The Loan off. Whenever.

And rather than go around the familiar scene and ask for a job, she being then *poor*, as all might know, why, she did what seemed to her a sensible scene: she headed for the source of the money, in that distant state. The idea came in a flash as she read the news-item,

BORSKI PERSISTS IN O & B BID

Bill G. Borski, grandson of a Pomeranian

pig-farmer, says he will continue his attempts to take over the Olauson-Blennerhassett lumber interests in

Mary headed West. An old American tradition. Scarcely had she entered the state where the Mill was and had occasion to speak her family name — cashing a small traveller's check in a small roadside restaurant — when old plaid-shirt and bib over-hauls had spoken it himself. She hadn't even seen him there till then. "*Blenn-der-hass-ett*," he'd said, she not knowing if the mispronunciation were a trick of the old man's speech or a part of the local accent. "Say, you must be Old B. B.'s daughter." God, he'd looked old, old as time. Probably *was*. There may have been, for all she knew, a thousand such old-timers. Okay, getting-used-to-it-time had just begun.

"Granddaughter," said she.

He looked at her through his cataract glasses. "*I knowed dold B. B.*," he said, in his oddly-parted speech.

If Mary knew nothing of her father, what did she know of her grandfather? "Oh, what kind of a man was he?" She wanted to know —

"*He was, a nold, sund of a bitch.*" Well, now she knew. "*An dold O. O. He was another.*" The veteran said these things without malice, or, for that matter, without affection.

As good an introduction as another.

As for . . .

Here is the picture. Mary got out of her car at Olauson, Blennerhassett ("O & B"), and walked around here and there before asking directions to the main office, and by and by she found herself facing a pile of logs, rough and barked and even clotted with earth: there was a heavy-set man, no kid, taking his ease. Suddenly she was aware of another man, tall, business-suit. Not looking at her, looking at the workingman at ease. *What* it was, hard to define but making her happy the look was not being looked at *her*; exactly at this moment the burly man lounging became aware of the looker and the look. Perhaps he did not altogether go into a minor convulsion. Almost, though. Work resumed immediately for him. The man in the business suit turned. He saw Mary. He looked: and there was more in this look than the looks she was used to getting from men. Did he know who she was? Because at once she knew that she knew who *he* was. They had never met. But a hundred years of history connected them.

"Mr. Victor Blennerhassett Olauson?"

"I'm Vic Olauson, yes. Miss Blennerhassett?"

"Mary Blennerhassett."

They took, rather than shook, hands. She said, "Can you give me a job?"

"The union would say no. But as a partner, you —"

All around the life of the lumber mill went on, the saws screaming in one

key and the little locomotive engines in another; and so it had gone on here for a century. "A partner? Oh, I thought I was a stockholder."

"In The Olason and Blennerhassett Corporation, Miss Blennerhassett, you are a stockholder. But in Olason, Blennerhassett, and Company, Miss Blennerhassett, you're a partner."

It wasn't that first day that she told him how she had "mortgaged" everything to get Flick out of his immense trouble. Or who Flick was . . . or had been . . . anyway . . . It wasn't that first day that she first heard aloud the name of Borski.

The old-timers are talking about the mill. That time of day, early afternoon, mostly it is just the old-timers at the bar, each one with his one shot, little water back.

"Startin t'cut *hem*-lock, I hear."

"*Uh*-oh."

"Whut *I* say." By their tones they might have been invited not alone to cut it, but to drink it.

Someone else, a not-so-old-timer: "What's the matter with that?"

"Whut's the *matter* with it?"

Old-timers turn, ready to turn belligerent. Not-so-old-timer not so ready to turn anything, not even away. Says, "Long's the mill keeps open . . . cut *something* . . . if Borski . . ." The bar no longer serves even sandwiches. Just whatever packaged snacks are in the racks and jars: jerky, Polish sausage, pigs' feet, cheese crackers. Chips, corn chips.

"They been bringin in cottonwood and turnin it in t'chips fr the Japanese trade. The Japanese, they bring the chips back in bulk nen they grine d'm up, make plywood 'r paperboard," it is explained. Mouths are compressed, heads shaken.

An old-timer says that when O. O. was alive, mill wouldn't a bothered cuttin no hemlock, no fir, no cottonwood. "Cedarn pine, pinen cedar. Nuth nelse. Nuth nelse. Cream o' th' fawr'st. Nowdays . . . nowdays . . . all Japanese trade . . . all Japanese trade. . . . Japanese buyin *horse-chessnut*?, mill'll cut *horse-chessnut*."

"Cut it metric, too," someone says, low-voiced. At this ultimate degradation, all sigh.

"Say, *I* did-dunt know the Japanese were buyin *horse-chessnut*."

An old-timer has been watching this last old-timer for a while. Makes up his mind. "Say, 'n' I use ta see you sawin at Number 3 Mill, old O. O. still 'live?"

"Drine kill."

The first old-timer says he coulda swore he'd seen the second old-timer sawin at Number Three Mill, time old O. O. was alive. Second has had a chance to think it over, says, *Some*, he sawed at Number 3. But mostly he worked in the dryin kiln. He says, "I hear old B. B.'s daughter workin in

thoffice now."

"No kiddin."

"What I hear."

"Granddaughter," says someone.

And someone, someone else, no old-timer at all but a younger man nursing a beer, says he hears that *she*. Is hot *stuff*. That she don't care what she does, or who she does it with. And an old-timer asks, Ain't they all that way anymore? Some of them declare loudly that they sure are. But some, those who've got their own granddaughters, grunt. Look away. One says, again, Say, he didn't know the Japanese were buying horse-chestnut. And it is explained to him that this was just made up as a for-instance. And then someone asks, "So you think the mill will maybe close?"

"I didn't say the mill will maybe close!"

"You think maybe Borski will take over?"

"I didn't say Borski will maybe take over!"

"He's trying to go where Vic is."

"Yeah, well you can only go so far with Vic, y' know."

"I know it. But does Borski?"

The younger man nursing the beer says that *he* doesn't give a shit, his brother's got a foreman's job in Oregon and can get *him* a job scaling anytime either of them want to. But he orders no second beer.

And a very old-timer, whose mind had drifted away, observes it come drifting back. Waits. The bartender meanwhile speaks up. "From what I hear," he says, "you don't want to count O. & B. out too fast. Whut I hear, they been down buhfore. But they never been out." And others say, *No no. Been down before but never been out, that's true*, they say. *That used to be true of even old O. O. even in the old country*, is what someone says. And someone else begins to chuckle " 'Yust yerker it up and down,' " he says, in a sing-song. "What old O. O. used to say when the watchamacallit would stuck, by the donkey-engine; 'Yust yerker it up and down,' he'd say. Haw haw!"

And now the very old-timer says, "Plenny pinen cedar on th' P' *nin-s*'la."

Ah, they all say, *On the Peninsula . . .*

Ah. . . .

As always in the office, Mary cannot keep her eyes off the co-founders. "Oh what a pair of robber-barons!" she says.

"Oh no, Miss Blennerhassett. They were just competent businessmen. According to the standards of the day." Says Victor ("Vic") B. Olauson.

"Oh? And wouldn't you say the same is true of Borski?"

Well, no, he wouldn't. Not "just." It may have been competent of Borski to go secretly to Japan for business instead of waiting for the Japanese buyers to come over here. But it was in violation of the gentlemen's agreement between Borski and O-B not to cut each other's throat. Vic Olauson, you

would at first be taking him for thirty. Then fifty. Or maybe vice versa. He was actually forty. Borski, he said, was willing to do anything, promise anything, so long as it would unbalance an adversary. Then he'd *push* — They had to watch out for Borski.

Borski (Mary was thinking as she got gasoline early one morning), Borski held proxies, was trying to hold more. Borski held O-B's paper. And was trying to hold more. Borski —

"Borski," said a voice. It was no thought-voice, it was a real, live, *voice-voice*. Someone had come up alongside her. The woman who owned the gas station. Her name? Forgotten.

"What about him," the name came suddenly, "Laurella?"

"None a my business," said Laurella, a weather-beaten person who had certainly slaughtered, gutted, scalded home-farm hogs before ever she had ten candles to her cake; well, if it's *none of your business* why mention it, shrilled Mary's voice. Though it was only a thought-voice. "But I hear Borski's goen to th' P'nin's'la. And I seen fr myself that Prue Jensen rollin drunk over by the bar; early *start* what I mean. Tell Vic, 'f you like."

Mary, puzzled, thought best to say nought but, "Thanks, Laur'."

"You bet."

In the office. "Who's Prue Jensen?"

"Pruett Jensen?" Victor had his faults. But asking, *Why?* instead of first answering, this wasn't one of them. "He's the caretaker, the guard, at the Peninsula." Having said this, *then* he asked, "Why?" Was told *Why*.

Nothing flickered on that long flat face, dark secret-keeping face with its odd blue eyes. "'Going to the Peninsula,' hey. Well, maybe a good place for him to go. Guess I'll go, too."

"And me." His eyes looked at her. "I'm a stockholder," she said. "And a partner. And, oh, damn it! I'm a *grandchild*, even if not a grandson!"

And he said, "Yes."

But they said nothing to anyone as they got into his car and drove off. It was beautiful going there, and beautiful when gotten there. Now and then Vic pointed out where a narrow-gauge railroad line had been, and where oxen had once skidded vasty logs. The rocks and rills, the woods and templed hills, she could see for herself: they were beautiful.

"Jensen wasn't due to get drunk for another two weeks, at which time we would have relieved him. If he's drunk this early and if Borski's going to the Peninsula this early, then Jensen's drunk because Borski got him drunk. Him. Or his men. Or his women. — I'll have to get out and open the lock. Be a minute." The lock was on a chain and the chain was on the gate of a tall chain-mesh fence which came from the woods on one side of the road and entered the woods again on the other. There was a faint smell of balsam. She asked about the lock? About Borski's getting in?

Victor clicked his tongue. "Fence has mostly a moral effect. Pirate loggers know that Breaking and Entry's a more serious charge. Fence keeps out bikers and it keeps out poachers who want to jack-light deer and picnickers in cars who won't put out fires . . . like that. But this is a peninsula, you know, and it's surrounded on the other three sides by the lake and we never attempted to fence off the whole lakeshore or shoreline. Anybody can land in a boat and it's the caretaker's job to keep 'em off or send 'em back. Guess his job is now vacant." No curse. No anger. *Guess his job is now vacant.*

And, oh it was beautiful on the Peninsula! *Huge pine. Immense cedar.* The smell of balsam stronger. Place even had its own rivers! Time vanished. Suddenly — "Well, there's the caretaker's house. We have to get out of the car now. This is as far as the road goes. It's a good house, too, and rent and utilities free. Well. His choice."

The foot path wound on and on through the forest as though in a fairy tale; and Mary, reflecting, remembered that not everything which took place in those old Teutonic tales was merry and bright; and that an awful lot of Grimm was . . . well . . . *grim*. "What does Borski want here. Hm?"

Path skirted giant roots. "To spy out the land. Of course he's been over it by plane and helicopter and he's got mosaic photographs and he probably knows by expert analysis how many board feet of how many kinds of wood down to the last tooth-pick inch. But oh, there's nothing like seeing for yourself, is there, you forest-destroying, family-breaking, union-busting creep, Borski." Then they saw him.

At least she guessed it was. Who else?

The forest path went straight and it led straight up to a great rock and there was a man standing on top of the great rock. She said that it looked dangerous. Victor said that it *was* dangerous.

. . . and as they got quite close, he said in a low voice that they were not to make any noise. In her own mind Mary marveled at Vic's concern for the enemy's safety (the enemy had his back to them). But then — *no!* From somewhere Vic got a stick, a tree-branch it was, was it for a cudgel? Was he going to sneak up and bludgeon —? The man on the big rock never moved, as Vic began to walk around the rock to his right, dragging the branch after him. It was a long time, or so it seemed, before he returned. Still dragging it. He'd changed his mind, then. Well.

But how had Borski not noticed Vic circling the vast stone? Well, if Vic had stuck close to it, and it *was*, *vast*. . . .

Vic began to sing; Vic began to *sing!* What was it, the song? Not a single word could she make out, and it seemed awfully off-tune. He didn't even seem to want to face her and sort of bent down a bit with his damned stick and began to scratch the soil; was he printing something? Awfully odd letters; were the letters, was the song, even in English? Borski moved.

Borski of course turned around and looked down at them. Borski — there wasn't really another word for it — Borski snorted. He smiled, but only on

one side of his face. He wasn't one of nature's noblemen. And then he moved to the far side of the rock and vanished from sight. Maybe he had a folding ladder. Maybe there were steps in the rock. What happened next? Next they heard his feet on gravel. He came into sight. Suddenly turned around and peered back behind him. As though he'd heard something. Not the singing. Something else.

It was inexplicable but yet it was funny: the way Borski suddenly began acting like a spooked old maid in an old movie: the way Borski put his hands straight up at right angles to his arms which he'd put straight out in front of him: the way Borski began to say, "Oooo oooo oooo." The way Borski's eyes began to bulge: all that was funny. It was funny for just a second or two, then Borski began to scream and that was not funny, and next Borski started to turn and run away on tottery rubbery legs: not funny. Then Borski, still screaming and moving in slow motion, was heard to lose control of his bowels. What came around the rock was about four or five times the size of a naked man; and the head and mouth were anyway disproportionately huge, and it came on in a sort of shambling lope, and it took hold of Borski and shoved Borski into its mouth head first and got him in up to the waist and began to bite and chew, and it kept on shambling and loping and biting and chewing, and it kept on shoving Borski into its mouth, and it vanished around the other side of the rock.

Olauson watched calmly. She fell against him and he got a hold of her and she said, "Save me. Save me." Again, just like in an old movie. "Don't let it get me; don't let it get me," she said.

"Oh it won't get us. Why I drew the circle and then those runes. My grandfather said —"

She sort of melted into him. "What was it? What is it?"

"Well, Miss Blennerhassett. The Indians call it the wendigo, but my grandfather said it was a troll. My grandfather was a very competent businessman and he had this *method*, you know, from the old country, and —"

She had control of herself. "Can we just get out of here, real quick, right now, right now?" She was pressing, pressing against him.

He nodded. "Yes. But it's gone, you know. That's all it ever wants, and it gets it and it goes. So just let me rub out the circle and the runes."

They walked away, and it was she who set the pace — pretty fast — did the Peninsula woods seem less safe now? Safer? Was this the real reason why their grandfathers hadn't wanted them cut and why their fathers hadn't even wanted them to pass out of family hands? The breeze was clean and the odor of the balsam was very strong. But she began to tremble; she hadn't trembled, really, before; but she was trembling now. "There's the house," Vic Olauson said. "And the car." What was he made of? Was he made of ice? There was the car, there was the house, there —

"I want you, I want you," she said.

He had bent over to open the car door. He turned. "What?"

"You and I. There — there — in the house. Together. In bed —"

He straightened, pulled the car door open. Gestured to her. "No, no, Miss Blennerhassett," he said. "I am a married man."

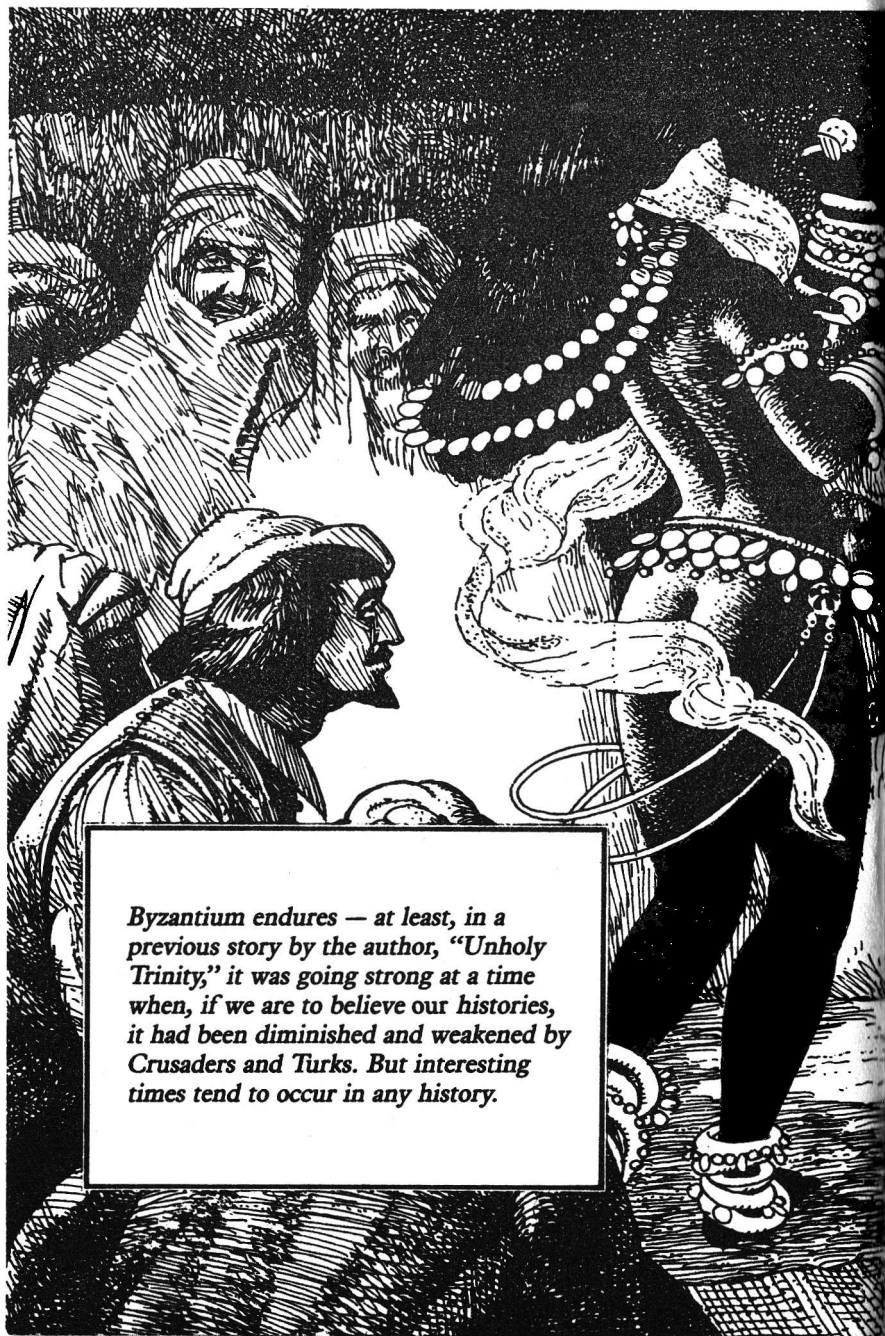
CARTOON

CARTOON



William Rotsler

Alexis Gilliland



Byzantium endures — at least, in a previous story by the author, “Unholy Trinity,” it was going strong at a time when, if we are to believe our histories, it had been diminished and weakened by Crusaders and Turks. But interesting times tend to occur in any history.

ARCHETYPES

by Harry Turtledove
("Eric G. Iverson")

art: Hank Jankus



The knock on the door was tentative, the sort any secretary learns to make when he is not sure his superior wishes to be disturbed. But to Basil Argyros the interruption came as a relief. "Come in," he called, shoving papyrus scrolls and sheets of parchment to one side of his desk.

The magistrianos had been daydreaming anyhow, looking out from his office in the Praetorium toward the great brown stucco mass of the church of Hagia Sophia and, beyond it, softened by haze, the Asian coast across the Propontis from Constantinople.

The case he had been trying to ignore was an Egyptian land dispute, which meant it would not be settled in his lifetime no matter what he did, nor probably in his grandson's either. The insane litigiousness of the Egyptians had angered the Emperor Julian almost a thousand years before. They had only grown worse since, Argyros thought. As a good Christian, he condemned Julian the Apostate to Hell; as an official of the Roman Empire, he was convinced that dealing with Egyptians gave a foretaste of it.

And so he greeted his secretary with an effusiveness alien to his usually self-contained nature: "Good day, Anthimos! What can I do for you on this fine spring morning?"

Anthimos, a lean, stooped man whose fingers were always black with ink, eyed the magistrianos suspiciously; he wanted people to be as orderly and predictable as the numbers in his ledgers. At last he shrugged and said, "The Master of Offices is here to see you, sir."

"What?" Argyros' thick black eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Show him in, of course." George Lakhano-drakon headed the corps of magistriano-i, and was one of the few officials who reported directly to the Emperor.

The solid portliness of the Master of Offices seemed all the more imposing next to Anthimos, who fluttered about nervously until Argyros dismissed him. The magistrianos bowed low to Lakhano-drakon, waved him to a chair, offered wine. "Always a pleasure to see you, your illustriousness. What brings you here today? Not this wretched mess, I hope."

Lakhano-drakon rose, walked over to pick up one of the documents Argyros so described. He held it at arm's length; he was about fifty, a dozen or so years older than the magistrianos, and his sight was beginning to lengthen. He read for a moment. His strong, rather heavy features showed his distaste. "*Pcheris vs. Sarapion*, is it? I didn't know you were stuck with such drivel. No, it's nothing to do with that, I promise."

"Then you're doubly welcome, sir," Argyros said sincerely. "I've been praying to St. Mouamet for a new assignment."

"The patron of changes, eh?" Lakhanodrakon chuckled. Born a pagan in the Arabian desert, Mouamet had accepted Christianity on a trading journey to Syria, become a famed hymnographer, and ended his days as bishop of New Carthage in Ispania near the Pillars of Herakles. That was enough change to pack into any man's life.

The amusement fell from the Master of Offices' face. "Your prayers are about to be granted. Tell me what you make of this." He fumbled in the silk pouch that hung from his gold belt of rank, produced a rolled-up parchment, and handed it to Argyros.

The magistrianos slid off the ribbon that bound the parchment, skimmed through it. "It's bad Greek," he remarked.

"Keep going."

"Of course, sir." When he was done, Argyros said, "I take it this came from one of the cities in the East, Mesopotamia or perhaps Syria?"

"Mesopotamia — from Daras, to be exact."

The magistrianos nodded. "Yes, it has all the marks of a Persian piece: a polemic against the Orthodox faith, and an invitation to the Nestorians and hardcore Monophysites and other heretics to abandon their allegiance to the Empire and go over to the King of Kings. Preferably, I suppose, bringing the fortress of Daras with them."

"No doubt," Lakhanodrakon agreed dryly.

"Forgive me, sir," Argyros said, "but I've seen a great many handbills of this sort. Why bring this particular one to my attention?"

Instead of answering directly, the Master of Offices took another parchment from his belt pouch. "When you have examined this sheet, I trust you will understand — as well as I do, at any rate, which is not a great deal."

The magistrianos looked at Lakhanodrakon in puzzlement after reading the first few lines. "But this is just the same as the other —" His voice trailed away and his eyes snapped back to the parchment. He picked up the other sheet Lakhanodrakon had given him, held one in each hand. His jaw fell.

"You see it, then," the Master of Offices said. "Good. You are as quick as I thought you were."

"Thank you," Argyros said abstractedly. He was still staring at the two pieces of parchment. They both said the same thing — exactly the same. It was not as if a scribe had copied out a message twice. Each line on both sheets had exactly the same words on it, written exactly the same size. The same word was misspelled in the third line of each sheet. A couple of lines later, the same incorrect verb form appeared in each, then an identical dative after a preposition where a genitive belonged. Near the end, the letter *pi* at the beginning of a word was half effaced on both handbills. They even shared the identical small smear of ink between two words.

The magistrianos put one sheet over the other, walked to the window. He held the parchments up to the sun, worked them until the left edges of the

two messages were precisely aligned. Any differences would have been instantly apparent. There were none.

"Mother of God, help me!" Argyros exclaimed.

"May She protect the entire Empire," George Lakhano-drakon said soberly. "Not just these two, but hundreds of such sheets, have appeared in Daras, nailed to every wall big enough to hold one, it seems. They may well provoke the uprisings they seek — you know how touchy the East always is."

Argyros knew. Despite having been a part of the Roman Empire since before Christ's Incarnation, Syria and Mesopotamia were very different from its other regions. Latin was all but unknown there, and even Greek, the Empire's dominant tongue, was spoken only by a minority in the towns. Most people used Syriac or Arabic, as their ancestors had before them. Heresy flourished there as nowhere else.

And further east lay Persia, the Empire's eternal rival. The two great powers had been struggling for 1,400 years, each dreaming of vanquishing the other for good. The Persians always fostered unrest in the eastern provinces of the Empire. Worshipers of the sun and fire themselves, they gave Nestorians refuge and stirred up religious strife to occupy the Romans with internal troubles. But never on such a scale as this —

"How are they doing it?" Argyros said, as much to himself as to the Master of Offices.

"That is what I charge you with: to find out," Lakhano-drakon said. "Your success in ferreting out the secret of the Franco-Saxons' hellpowder last year made me think of you the moment those" — he jerked a thumb at the parchments Argyros was still holding — "came to my attention."

"You flatter me, your illustriousness."

"No, I need you," the Master of Offices said. Harsh lines of worry ran from his jutting nose to the corners of his mouth. "I tell you, I fear this worse than the hellpowder. That was only a threat against our borders; we have dealt with such before, a hundred times. But this could be a blow to the heart."

Argyros frowned. "Surely you exaggerate, sir."

"Do I? I've lain awake at night imagining the chaos these sheets could create. Suppose one said one thing, one another? They could fan faction against faction, heretic against Orthodox —"

His wave encompassed all of Constantinople. "Suppose a Persian agent smuggled even a donkeyload of these accursed things into the city!" Throughout the Empire, its capital was *the* city. "Men from every corner of the world live here — Jews, Egyptians, Armenians, Sklavenoi from the lands by the Ister, Franco-Saxons. Set them at each other's throats, and it could be the Nika riots come again!"

"You've seen farther than I have," Argyros admitted, shivering. It had been eight hundred years since Constantinople's mob, shouting *Nika* — Tri-

umph — had almost toppled Justinian the Great from the Roman throne, but that was the standard against which all later urban uprisings were measured.

"Perhaps farther than the Persians, too, or they would not waste their time at the frontier," Lakhanodrakon said. "But they will not stay blind long, I fear. Beware of them, Basil. They are no rude barbarians to be fooled like the Franco-Saxons; they are as old in deceit as we."

"I shall remember," the magistrianos promised. He picked up the parchments Lakhanodrakon had given him, tucked them away. "The rest of this pile of trash I shall cheerfully consign to Anthimos. I'll leave for Daras in a day or two. As you know, I'm a widower; I have no great arrangements to make. But I would like to light a candle at church dedicated to St. Nicholas before I go."

"A good choice," the Master of Offices said.

"Yes — who better than the patron saint of thieves?"

"I've tried everything I can think of," the garrison commandant of Daras said, slamming a fist down on his desk in frustration. "Every incoming traveler has his baggage searched, and I keep patrols on the streets day and night. Yet the damned handbills keep showing up."

"I can't fault what you've done, Leontios," Argyros said, and the soldier leaned back in his chair with a sigh of relief. He was a big, burly man, almost as tall as Argyros and thicker through the shoulders, but there was no question who dominated the conversation. Magistrianoi, roving agents with their commissions directly from the Master of Offices, could make or break even the leader of an outpost as important as Daras.

"More wine?" Leontios extended a pitcher.

"Er — no thanks," Argyros said, he hoped politely. The wine, like much of what was drunk in Mesopotamia, was made from dates. He found it sickeningly sweet. But he would have to work with Leontios, and did not want to hurt his feelings, so he held out his hand, remarking, "That's a handsome jug you have there. May I see it?"

"Oh, d'you like it? Seems ordinary enough to me."

"Hardly that. I'm not used to seeing reliefwork on pottery, and the depiction of our Lord driving the moneychangers from the Temple is well done, I think."

"If it pleases you so, take it and welcome," Leontios said at once, obviously afraid to antagonize the magistrianos in even a small way. "I'm sure you've seen much better, though, coming from the city."

"There's nothing to match it in Constantinople. The potters there decorate with glazes and drawings, not reliefs."

"Fancy that, us ahead of the capital!" Leontios said. He saw that Argyros did not want the winejug, and put it down. "The style's been all the rage in these parts — both sides of the border, come to that — the last five or ten

years. I got this piece from old Abraham last summer. He's a damned Nestorian, but he does good work. His shop is only a block or so away, if you think you might find something you'd fancy."

"Perhaps I'll look him up." Argyros stood, fanned himself with his broad-brimmed hat of woven straw. It did not help much. "Is the heat always so bad?"

The garrison commandant rolled his eyes. "My dear sir, this is only June — not even summer yet. If you're still in Daras in six weeks, you'll find out what heat is."

"Do you know that in the Franco-Saxon mountain country it sometimes snows in September? Last year that seemed the most hideous thing I could imagine. Now it strikes me as delightful."

Leontios ran a hairy, sweaty forearm across his face. "It strikes me as impossible. I wish you luck on this madness, more than I've had myself. If I can help in any way, you have only to ask."

"My thanks," Argyros said, and left. The commandant's office had been very warm, shielded though it was by thick walls from the worst Daras could do. The noonday heat outside was unbelievable, stupefying. The sun blazed down mercilessly from the blue enamel bowl of the sky.

The magistrianos squinted against the glare. He wished he could strip off his boots, trousers, and tunic (even if that was gauzy linen) and go naked under his hat. Some of the locals did, walking about in loincloth and sandals. More, though, covered their heads with white cotton cloths and swaddled themselves in great flowing robes, as if they were so many ambulatory tents.

The strange clothes only accented Argyros' feeling of being in an alien land. The houses and other buildings, save for the most splendid, were of whitewashed mud brick, not stone or timber. And the signs that advertised dyeshops or jewelers, taverns and baths, were apt to be in three languages: angular Greek, the tight curlicues of Syriac, and the wild snakelike script the Arabs used. If any was missing, it was usually the Greek.

A couple of men talking in the street moved on when they saw the magistrianos approaching. They might not know him for an agent, but even if he spoke no word his outfit and his face — tanned but not swarthy — branded him as one loyal to Constantinople, and not to be trusted. He scowled. Such recognition was only going to make his job harder.

The shop across the street had to be the one Leontios had mentioned. There were dishes and jugs and cups in the window, and the Greek line of the signboard above them read **FINE POTTERY BY ABRAAM**: Greek, of course, could not show the sound of rough breathing in the middle of a word.

Abraam or Abraham stood in the doorway, crying his wares in guttural Syriac. Argyros watched as a smith came over from the foundry next door to bring him a flat, square iron plate. The two men eyed the magistrianos with

the same distrust the street idlers had shown. He was getting used to that suspicious stare in Daras. He returned it imperturbably.

The smith, an enormous fellow baked brown as his leather apron by the sun, spat in the dirt roadway and ambled toward his own place of business, still glowering Argyros' way. Abraham the potter turned his back on the magistrianos with deliberate rudeness and went back into the darkness of his shop. Argyros saw him put the iron plate under a counter and talk briefly with a woman back there — whether wife, customer, or what, he did not know.

Operating out of Leontios' barracks would have made him altogether too conspicuous, so he went looking for an inn. He did not notice when the woman emerged from the pottery and hurried after him.

The first taverner he tried spoke only Arabic and catered to nomads out of the desert. As Argyros had but a few phrases of Arabic himself, he decided to go somewhere else.

Two men were waiting for him when he came outside to retrieve his horse. Something in their stance told him their breed at once: street toughs. He walked past them without a sideways glance, hoping his size would make them choose another victim.

But one grabbed at his arm. "Where you go to, you damned swaggering Melkite?" he said grinning, showing bad teeth. He used the eastern heretics' insulting name for one loyal to the dogmas of Constantinople: it meant "king's man."

"None of your concern," Argyros snapped, shaking off the man's hand and springing back. With a curse, the ruffian leaped at him, followed by his companion. The magistrianos kicked the first one where it did the most good. Two against one left no time for chivalry. The fellow went down with a wail, clutching at himself and spewing his last meal out in the dust.

The other tough had a short bludgeon. Argyros threw up his left arm just in time to keep his head from being broken. He bared his teeth as pain shot through him from elbow to fingertips. His right hand darted to the knife at his belt. "Come on," he panted. "Even odds now."

The local was no coward. He waded in, swung again. Argyros ducked and slashed, coming up from below. The point of his dagger ripped through his enemy's sleeve. He felt the blade slice into flesh. The tough hissed. He was not through, though; he was ready for more fight.

Then a woman behind Argyros screamed something in Arabic. The magistrianos did not understand, but his opponent did. He whirled and fled. Argyros chased him, but he knew Daras' twisting alleyways as an outsider could not, and escaped.

Breathing hard and rubbing his arm, the magistrianos walked back to his horse. He saw what the woman's shout must have meant, for a squad of Leontios' soldiers had gathered round the good-for-naught he had leveled. They were prodding the wretch up, none too gently, with the butts of their

spears.

Someone who had watched the brawl pointed at Argyros, which drew the squad-leader's attention. "You ruin this fellow here?" he demanded.

"Frankly, yes. I was set on for no reason and without warning. He had it coming." Anger made him careless with his words.

The squad-leader set his hands on his hips. "Talk like you're the Emperor, don't you? Anyone else see this little scramble?" He glanced at the swelling crowd.

Argyros' heart sank. He did not want to go back to Leontios and waste time on explanations, but he was sure the witnesses would side with a man of Daras rather than an obvious stranger. Unexpectedly, though, a woman spoke up for him: "It's as the tall man says. They attacked him first."

The squad-leader was as taken aback as the magistrianos. Seizing the initiative, Argyros took him aside and pressed a gold nomisma into his palm, along with some silver to keep his men happy. The trooper pocketed the bribe in a businesslike fashion. "Haul that scum out of here," he commanded, and his squad dragged the captive off; two men still had to support him. Onlookers began to drift away.

Argyros looked round to see if he could spot the woman who had come to his aid. She had been well back in the crowd, and he had not got a glimpse of her face. But he had no doubts, for she waited in the shadow of a building across the street instead of leaving with the rest of the spectators. Above a short veil filmy enough to be no more than token concealment, she looked saucily toward him.

"My thanks," the magistrianos said, walking over to her. Something beside mere gratitude put warmth in his voice. From tightly curled black hair to gilded sandals beneath henna-soled feet, she was a strikingly attractive woman. Her dark eyes were bright and lively, her mouth, half seen, full-lipped and inviting. The fitted ankle-length robe she wore displayed her figure to the best advantage; even in the shadow in which she stood, the red, gold, and green sequins at her bodice sparkled with each breath she took.

She said, "It would be wrong for so brave — and so mighty — a man to find himself in trouble he does not deserve." Her Greek had a slight throaty accent. That and her costume told Argyros she was of Persian origin. The border between the two empires went back and forth so often that such things were common on both sides.

"Thanks again," Argyros said; and then, not wanting the conversation to end as abruptly as that, he asked, "Would you happen to know of a decent inn?"

She burst out laughing. "It just so happens that I dance at the hostel of Shahin Bahram's son. It's clean enough and the food is good, if you don't mind eating Persian fare." When Argyros shook his head, she said, "Come on, then; I'll take you there. Bringing you in will make me money, too. I'm Mirrane, by the way."

The magistrianos gave his own name, but said that he had come from Constantinople as inspector of Daras' waterworks. The famous system of cisterns and drains and the dam across the nearby Cordes river added greatly to the strength of the town's fortifications.

"An important man," she murmured, moving closer to him. "Do you think your horse can carry two?"

"For a little while, certainly." He helped her mount in front of him; her waist was supple under his hands. When the horse started forward, she leaned back against him, and did not try to pull away. It made for an enjoyable ride.

Shahin's tavern was in the western part of Daras, not far from the church of the Apostle Bartholomew that Justinian had built when he renovated the town's works. Shahin folded Argyros into a bearhug and called him his lord, his master, his owner — none of which prevented a sharp haggle when it came to the price of a room.

At last Mirrane spoke in Persian: "Don't drive him away." Argyros had a hard time holding his face straight: no use letting the girl know he was fluent in her language, though he did not think there was anything more to this than her not wanting to lose her finder's fee. Shahin became more reasonable.

As was his custom when starting an investigation, the magistrianos wandered into the taproom to drink a little wine and soak up the local gossip. Shahin's place was good for that; it featured a mixed clientele, and talk came fast and furious in the three tongues of the imperial east and Persian as well. There was more chatter about doings in Ctesiphon, the Persian capital, than over what was happening in Constantinople.

Naturally enough, the handbills were also a prominent subject, but not in a way that helped Argyros. The townsfolk seemed much less upset about them than George Lakhanodrakon or Leontios had been. One man, well in his cups, said with a shrug, "They're looking to break our nerve. I'll fret when I see a Persian army outside the walls, and not until."

The magistrianos tried to prompt him: "Don't you think the Nestorians might invite —" Several people shushed him, and he had to subside, for four musicians emerged from a back room to take their seats on low stools by the fireplace. One carried two vase-shaped drums and had a tambourine strapped to his calf, another brought a pair of flutes, the third a long trumpet, and the last a short-necked lute played with a bow, something Argyros had not seen at Constantinople.

At a nod from the lutanist, they began to play. The drummer's beat was more intricate than Argyros was used to, the tune lively but at the same time somehow languorous. Again he was conscious of the traditions older than the Roman Empire that lived on in the east.

Then Mirrane glided into the taproom, and the magistrianos worried about traditions no more. She wore only her veil and a few jeweled orna-

ments that sparkled in the torchlight; her smooth skin gleamed with oil. When she moved among the tables, it was as if she sought out a particular man to slay with lust. Sinuous as a serpent, she slid away from every arm that reached out to take hold of her.

"With a dance like that," Argyros whispered to the man at the table next to his, "why does she bother with the veil?"

The fellow was shocked enough to tear his burning gaze away from Mirrane. "It were a gross indecency, for a woman to show her face in public!"

"Oh."

Mirrane's eyes flashed as she recognized the magistrianos, and he knew she had chosen him for her victim. Laughing, she waved to the musicians; the tune grew faster and more urgent. It would have taken a man of stone, which Argyros assuredly was not, to remain unstirred as she whirled in front of him. The oil on her skin was scented with musk; under it he caught the perfume of herself.

The music rose to a fiery crescendo. With a shout, Mirrane flung herself down on the seat by Argyros, cast her arms around his neck. With her warm length pressed against him, he hardly heard the storm of applause that filled the inn.

And later, when she went upstairs with him, he ignored with equal aplomb the jealous catcalls that followed them. Knowing what was important at any given moment, he told himself, was a virtue.

He woke the next morning feeling considerably rumpled but otherwise as well as he ever had in his life. The soft straw pallet was narrow for two; Mirrane's leg sprawled over his calf. He moved slowly and carefully, but woke her anyway as he got out of bed. "Sorry."

She smiled lazily up at him. "You have nothing to be sorry for."

"I'm glad of that." He politely turned his back to use the chamberpot, then splashed water on his face and rinsed his mouth from a ewer that stood next to the bed. He ran his fingers through his hair and beard, shook his head in mock dismay at the snarls he found. "You'd think the dogs dragged me in, the way I must look."

"Do you always worry so much?" she asked, rising and stretching luxuriously.

"As a matter of fact, yes." He went over to his saddlebags, which he had not yet unpacked, in search of a comb. Several jingling trinkets and her veil were draped over the leather sacks. She took them back from him while he rummaged.

He lifted out three or four small, tightly stoppered pots with bits of rag protruding from holes drilled through their corks. "What on earth are those?" Mirrane asked; they were not the sort of thing travelers usually carried.

Argyros thought fast. "They're filled with clay," he said. "I filter water

from the cisterns through them; from the amount and type of sediment left behind, I can judge how pure the water is.”

“Ah,” she nodded, not revealing much interest in anything so mundane as the tools of his alleged trade.

All the same, he was relieved when he finally found his bone comb and stowed the pots away. They were filled, not with clay, but with the Franco-Saxon compound of charcoal, sulfur, and saltpeter that the armorers of Constantinople had dubbed hellpowder. Argyros had no intention of advertising its existence without dire need.

He combed out his tangled whiskers. “That’s — ouch — better.” When he was done dressing, he said, “I know what I do seems dull, but Daras may need all the water it can find to hold out against a Persian attack if these parchments I’ve heard about stir up the rebellion they’re after.”

Mirrane’s costume made a simple shrug worth looking at. “I’ve heard of them too, but there haven’t been many here round Shahin’s place.” She hesitated. “Are you thinking we may be disloyal because we’re of Persian blood? Shahin’s grandfather converted to Christianity — Orthodox, not Nestorian — and he worships every week at Bartholomew’s church.”

He believed her. There was no point in lying about something of that sort; it was too easy to check. “I wasn’t thinking any such thing,” he said. “I’d rather not get stuck in a siege, though, especially in a city that may run dry. And,” he added a moment later, “it would be sinful to risk you.”

Since he had used the story he did, he thought it was actually wise to examine some of Daras’ waterworks. One major cistern stood close to the church of the Apostle Bartholomew. He poked at the brickwork as if to check its soundness, then climbed the stairs to the top of the great tank and peered into it to see what the water level was.

One of the faces he noticed while he was puttering about seemed familiar. After a while he realized that the hawk-faced fellow lounging against a wall and munching a pomegranate was the flute-player at Shahin’s tavern. The man was gone by the time he got down from the cistern, which left Argyros uncertain whether his presence was coincidental or the magistrianos’ cover had satisfied him.

Leontios greeted him cordially when, having had enough play-acting, he went over to the garrison commander’s headquarters. “Any progress?”

“Not really,” Argyros said. “I have more new questions than answers. First, are you sure your men have Daras sealed off from getting these hand-bills from outside?”

“I told you so yesterday. Oh, I’ll not deny they’d take the gold to let some things through, but not that poison. We’ve lived through too many religious riots to want more.”

“Fair enough. Next question: where can I find the best map of the city?”

Leontios tugged at his beard as he thought. “That would be in the eparch’s office, not here. He collects the head-tax and the hearth-tax, so he





has to keep track of every property in the city. My own charts are years out of date — the main streets don't change much, and they're mainly what I'm concerned with as a military man."

"No blame on you," Argyros assured him. "Now — third one pays for all. Do you keep note of where in Daras your troopers have pulled down parchments?"

He waited tensely. Many soldiers would not have bothered with such minutiae. But the Roman bureaucratic tradition was strong, even in the Army, and there was a chance — Leontios' relieved grin told him he had won the gamble. "I have them," the garrison commander said. "I warn you, though, not all are in Greek. Do you read Arabic?"

"Not a word of it. But surely some bright young clerk in the eparch's chancery will. I shall go there now; when you gather your troopers' reports, please be so good as to send them after me."

"With pleasure." Leontios cocked an eyebrow at the magistrianos. "If I dared say no, I suppose you'd set upon me, as you did on those two hoodlums yesterday."

"Oh, that." Argyros had almost forgotten the incident. Doubting he would hear anything worthwhile, he asked, "What did you learn from the one your men took?"

"Ravings, I'm certain — what's the point of torturing a man who's just been kicked in the crotch? He keeps babbling of a woman who paid him and his partner to assault you. He's been eating poppy-juice, if you ask me. Anyone out to hire killers would pick a better pair than those sorry sods, don't you think?"

"I'd hope so," Argyros said, but the news disturbed him. The woman, he felt sure, was Mirrane, but he could not see the game she was playing. Had the attack been set up to make him grateful to her? If so, why was the hired tough still around to speak of it? "Perhaps I'll have a word with the fellow myself, after I'm done at the eparch's."

"Feel free. Meanwhile, I'll hunt up those notes and get them over there for you."

The chief map in the eparch's office was several feet square, an updated papyrus facsimile of the master map of Daras inscribed on a bronze tablet in the imperial chancery at Constantinople. At Argyros' request, the eparch — a plump, fussy little man named Mammianos — provided him with a small copy on a single sheet of parchment.

As the magistrianos had predicted, several of Mammianos' secretaries were fluent in Arabic. "One has to have them here, sir," the eparch said, "if one is to transact the business necessary to the fisc." He assigned Argyros a clerk named Harun, which the magistrianos guessed to be a corruption of the perfectly good Biblical name Aaron.

After that there was nothing to do but wait for Leontios' messenger, who arrived an hour or so later with an armload of papyri, parchments, and

ostraca. He dumped them in front of Argyros and departed.

The magistrianos sorted out the notes in Greek, which he could handle himself. "In front of the shop of Peter son of Damian, on the Street of the Tailors," he read. "Where's that, Harun?" The clerk pointed with a stylus. Argyros made a mark on his map.

It was nearly sunset when the last dot went into its proper place. "Many thanks," Argyros said. He gave a nomisma to the secretary, who had proven a model of patience and competence, and waved off his stammered protests. "Go on, take it — you've earned it. I couldn't have done any of this without you. Mammianos is well served."

Leontios was on the point of going home when the magistrianos came back to his headquarters. "I'd about given up on you? What did you find? That the handbills are thickest in the parts of town where the most Nestorians live?"

"That's just what I expected," Argyros said, admiring the officer's quick wits. "But it isn't so. Here; see for yourself. Each dot shows where a parchment was found."

"The damn things are everywhere!" Leontios grunted after a quick look at the map.

"Not quite." Argyros bent over the parchment, pointed. "See, here's a patch where there aren't any."

"Isn't that big square building the barracks here? No wonder the filthy rabblers stayed away. They're bastards, but they're not fools, worse luck."

"So it is. Odd, though, wouldn't you say, that your strongpoint is on the edge of the empty area instead of at the center. And what of this other blank stretch?"

"Over in the west? Ah, but look, there's the church of St. Bartholomew in it. The priests would be as likely to raise the alarm as my soldiers. Likelier, maybe; not all my men are Orthodox."

"But again," Argyros pointed out, "the church is at the edge of the clear space, not in the middle. And look, here is the Great Church, in the very center of town, with a handbill nailed to one of its gates. The agitators aren't afraid of priests, it seems."

"So it does," Leontios said reluctantly. "What then?"

"I wish I knew. What puzzles me most, though, is this third empty area, close to the northern wall. From what Mammianos' clerk said, it's a solidly Nestorian district, and yet there are no parchments up in it."

"Where is that? Let me see. Aye, the fellow's right; that's the worst part of town, probably because of the stink. Dyers and butchers and gluemakers and tanners and such work there. To say nothing of thieves, that is — the one who went for you hailed from that section."

"Oh yes, him. He almost slipped my mind again. As I said, I'd like to ask him a few questions of my own."

Leontios looked embarrassed. "There's a harsher judge than you questioning him now, I'm afraid. He died a couple of hours ago."

"Died? How?" Argyros exclaimed.

"From what the gaoler says, pain in the belly, and I don't mean on account of your foot. If I had to guess, I'd think the fish-sauce went over; you know how hard it is to keep in this climate."

"I suppose so," the magistrianos said, but the ruffian's death struck him as altogether too pat. He stared down at the map on Leontios' desk, trying by sheer force of will to extract meaning from the cryptic pattern there. It refused to yield. Grumbling in annoyance, he rolled up the map and walked back to Shahin's tavern. A copper twenty-follis piece bought the services of a torchboy to light his way through the black maze of nighttime Daras.

The taproom was jammed when he got to the inn, and for good reason: Mirrane was already dancing. Her eyes lit up when she saw him standing against the back wall drinking a mug of wine (real grape wine, and correspondingly expensive) and chewing on unleavened pocketbread stuffed with lentils, mutton, and onions.

Later that night she said petulantly, "If your things were not still in your room, I would have thought you'd gone away and left me. Are your precious cisterns so much more interesting than I am?"

"Hardly," he said, caressing her. She purred and snuggled closer. "I find you fascinating." That was true, but he hoped she did not realize in how many senses of the word he meant it.

The magistrianos visited the northern part of the city on the following day. He noted that his shadow was back. He doubted the fellow was enjoying himself much, or learning much either. All of Argyros' actions were perfectly consistent with what he would have done had he been a genuine cistern-inspector.

The second of Daras' two major water-storage areas was easy to examine, for Justinian's engineer Chryses had diverted the Cordes river to flow between the town's outworks and its main wall, thereby also serving as a moat and offering extra protection against attack. To check the level of the water, all Argyros had to do was climb to the top of the wall and look down over the battlements.

Not much of Daras' masonry still dated from Justinian's time. The city had fallen to the Persians in the reign of his successor, and again less than half a century later when the madman Phokas almost brought the Empire to ruin, and two or three more times in the years since. Once or twice it had had to stand Roman siege while in Persian hands. Just the same, the ancient fortifications had been designed well, and all later military architects used them as their model.

The wall, then, was of stone, about forty feet high and ten thick. Arrow-slits and a runway halfway up gave defenders a second level from which to

shoot at foes outside. The slits, though, were not wide enough for Argyros to stick his head through, and in any case he wanted the view from the top of the wall, so he climbed the whole long stairway. The man following him loitered at the base and bought some hot chick-peas.

The magistrianos was a little jealous; in Daras' heat, the trudge had made his heart pound. In another way, though, Argyros had the better of it, for he was above the smell. As Leontios had said, northern Daras stank. It reeked of terrified animals and their excrement from the butchers' shops; of stale, sour urine from the dyers'; of that same vile odor and the sharper tang of tanbark from the tanneries; and of a nameless but unpleasant stench from cauldrons that bubbled behind every gluemaker's establishment. Added to the usual city stink of overcrowded, unwashed humanity, it made for a savage assault on the nose. The faint breeze that blew off the Cordes carried the scent of manure from the fields outside of town, but was ambrosial by comparison.

Argyros walked along the track atop the wall, peering down into Daras. It was the broadest view he could gain of the northern district. Searching there street by street would have been fruitless, especially since he was not sure what he was looking for.

With such gloomy reflections as that, he paced back and forth for a couple of hours. The sentries at the battlements came to ignore him; down below, the musician from Shahin's inn grew bored and fell asleep sitting against the wall, his headcloth pulled low to shield his face from the sun.

The magistrianos could not have said what drew his attention to the donkey making its slow way down an alley, its driver beside it. Perhaps it was that the beast carried a couple of pots of glue along with several larger, roughly square packages, and he found it odd for an animal to be bearing burdens for two different shops. He certainly could not think of anything a gluemaker turned out that would go in those neatly wrapped bundles. They were about the size of —

His boots thumping on stone, he dashed down the steps and past his dozing shadow. Then, careless of the hard looks and angry shouts that he drew, he hurled himself into traffic, shoving past evil-tempered camels that bared their teeth at him and pushing merchants out of the way. As he trotted along, he panted out prayers that he could remember about where he had seen that donkey, and that he could find the spot now that he was at ground level.

It was somewhere near the three-story whitewashed building with the narrow windows, of that much he was sure. Just where, though, was another matter. And of course the donkey, though it was only ambling, would have gone some distance by the time he got to where he had seen it. Staring wildly down one lanelet after another, Argyros thought of Zeno's paradox about Achilles and the tortoise, and wondered if he would ever catch up.

There the beast was, about to turn into Daras' main north-south avenue,

called the Middle Street after Constantinople's Mese. Imitating Leontios' gesture of a few days before, Argyros wiped sweat from his forehead with his sleeve and took a minute or two to let his breathing slow. He needed to seem natural.

A brisk walk let him come up behind the donkey's driver. "Excuse me," he said. "Do you speak Greek?"

The man spread his hands. "Little bit."

"Ah, good." As casually as he could, Argyros asked, "Tell me, are those parchments your donkey is carrying?"

He was tense as a strung bow. If the answer to that was yes, he half expected to be attacked on the spot. But the driver only nodded. "So they are. What about it?"

"Er —" For a moment, the *magistrianos*' usually facile tongue stumbled. Then he rallied: "May I buy one? I, uh, forgot to write out a receipt for several tenants of mine, and seeing you passing by with your bundles here reminded me of it."

How much of the explanation the local understood was not clear, but he knew what they word "buy" meant. After some brisk bargaining, they settled on half a silver *miliaresion* as a fair price. The donkey-driver undid one of his packages. Again Argyros got ready for action, thinking that the man did not know what he was carrying and that the subversive handbills would now be revealed.

But the parchment the driver handed him was blank. "Is all right?"

"Hmm? Oh, yes, fine, thank you," he said, distracted. As if he were an expert testing the quality of the goods, he riffled the corners of the stacked sheets — maybe the first few were empty to conceal the rest. But none had anything on it. He gave up. "You have a very fine stock here. Whatever scribe it's going to will enjoy writing on it."

"Thank you, sir." The donkey-driver pocketed his coin and tied up the package again. "Is not to any scribe going, though?"

"Really?" the *magistrianos* said, not much interested. "To whom, then?"

The driver grinned, as if about to tell a funny story he did not think his listener would believe. "To Abraham the potter, of all peoples. He the glue wants, too."

"Really?" Argyros' tone of voice was entirely different this time. "What on earth does he need with a thousand sheets of parchment and enough glue to stick half of Daras down?"

"For all I know, he crazy," the man shrugged. "My master Yesuyab, he work on this order the last month. And when he get it ready to go, Musa the gluemaker next door, he tell me he gots for Abraham too, so would I take along? Why not, I say. My donkey strong."

"Yes, of course. Well, thank you again." Argyros let the fellow go, then stood staring after him until a man leading three packhorses yelled at him to get out of the way. He stepped aside, still scratching his head.

Something else occurred to him. He went back to the chancery. With Harun's capable help, he soon added two marks to his map of Daras, then a third, and, as an afterthought, a fourth. He studied the pattern they made. "Well, well," he said. "How interesting."

Mesopotamian night fell with dramatic suddenness. No sooner was the sun gone from the sky, it seemed, than full darkness came. Last night that had been a nuisance; now Argyros intended to take advantage of it. He had returned to Shahin's inn during the late afternoon, grumbling of having to go right back to the chancery, probably for hours. He had to stop himself from nodding at his crestfallen shadow, who looked up from a mug of beer in surprise and relief when he arrived.

The wretch trailed him again, of course, but he really did revisit Mammianos' headquarters. The scribes and secretaries eyed him curiously as he waited around doing nothing until his tracker grew bored and mooched off, convinced he was there for the evening as he had feared. The staff departed just before sunset, leaving the place to Argyros.

The magistrianos prowled through the black streets of Daras like a burglar, without any light to give away his presence. He slunk into a doorway when a squad of Leontios' troopers came tramping by. Soon he might need to call on the garrison commander for aid, but not yet.

The smithy next to Abraham's pottery shop made it easy to find, for which Argyros was grateful. As he had thought, the windows were shuttered and the place barred and locked, both front and back. Nothing surprising there — anyone in his right mind would have done the same.

He considered the lock that held the back door closed: a standard type. A hole had been drilled from top to bottom near one end of the door bar. There was a similar hole bored part of the way into the bottom board of the frame into which the bar was slid. Before Abraham had gone home, he had dropped a cylindrical metal pin down through the barhole so that half of it was in the frame and the rest above it, holding the bar in place.

The top of the metal cylinder was still lower than the level of the upper surface of the bar, so no passerby could hope to pull it out. Abraham, no doubt, had a key with hooks or catches fitted to those of the boltpin to let him draw it out again.

There were, however, other ways. Argyros reached into his beltpouch and took out a pair of long-snouted pincers, rather like the ones physicians used to clamp bleeding blood vessels. His set, though, instead of having flat inner surfaces, was curved within.

He slipped them into the bolthole. After some jiggling, he felt them slide down past the top of the pin. When he tightened them, it was easy to lift the bolt out of its socket.

The magistrianos left the door ajar to let a little light into the shop and give him the chance to find a lamp. He worked flint and steel until he got the

wick going, then closed the door after him. The shuttered windows would keep the lamp's pale illumination from showing on the street out front.

He prowled about the inside of the cramped little shop. At first everything seemed quite ordinary. Here were two kilns, their fires out for the evening but still warm to the touch. A foot-powered wheel stood between them. There lay great lumps of refined clay, and jugs of water next to them to soften them. Abraham had molds in the shape of a hand, a fish, a bunch of grapes, and other things, as well as a set of what looked like sculptors' tools to create the reliefwork popular in Daras. Pots that were ready to sell filled shelves in the front of the store.

After a snarl of frustration, Argyros began to use his head. If anything here was not as it should be, it would be connected with the parchments Yesuyab had sent Abraham. Where were they? The magistrianos held the lamp high. He made a disgusted noise deep in his throat. He'd walked right past them — they were stacked by a table just to the left of the back door.

Excitement flared in the magistrianos as he saw the gluepots sitting on top of the table. Beside them were a couple of smaller vessels that proved full of ink, along with the square iron plate the smith had given to Abraham. A low iron frame had been put in place around it. The only other thing on the table was a large paintbrush.

The frustration returned. Here were parchment and ink, right enough, but Argyros could not see how the rest of the strange array contributed to making handbills. It would take a score of scribes to turn out as many as Abraham had parchments, and in that case they would be far from identical with one another.

There were four shelves over the table, each with a dozen small clay jars on it (except for the topmost, which had thirteen). Only because they were close to the parchments and glue, Argyros lifted down one of them. He turned it around in his hand, and almost dropped it — on the side turned to the wall was written a large majuscule delta: Δ.

He tore the stopper off, held the lamp over it, and peered in. At first he saw nothing that looked like a delta. The jar held a number of small rectangular blocks of clay, each about as long as the last joint of his middle finger but not nearly so thick. He picked one up. Sure enough, there was a raised letter at one end. It was still black with ink. He lifted out another clay block. It also had a delta on it. So did the next, and the next.

No wonder Abraham was involved in the plot, Argyros thought. The potter was used to creating reliefwork of all kinds; letters would come as no challenge to him. And Leontios had said he was a Nestorian. He had reason to be hostile to Constantinople, which forced religious unity to go with the political unity it brought.

Whistling tunelessly, the magistrianos put the jar back and chose another one from a couple of shelves higher up. This one was identified by a minuscule beta: β.

Like the first, it was filled with those little blocks of fired clay. Argyros took one out, confidently expecting to find a beta on one end of it. And so, in a way, he did, but reversed: \eth .

He thought a few uncharitable thoughts about the wits of anyone incompetent enough to make his letters backwards. Certain it was a mistake, he removed several more clay blocks from the jar. They were all the same, and all reversed.

He frowned. That was going to a lot of effort to perpetuate an error. He poured all but one of the little clay lumps back into their jar, turned the last one over and over as he thought. He held it so close to his face that he had to look at it crosseyed. It was still backwards.

He squeezed it between his thumb and index finger, as if trying to wring the answer from it by brute force. Naturally, and annoyingly, such treatment harmed the clay block not at all. It was harder on him. There was a square indentation in the meaty pad of his thumb from the base of the block. And on his forefinger —

He stared at the perfect, unreversed beta pressed into his flesh. "Of course!" he exclaimed, startled into speaking aloud. "It's like a signet ring, where everything has to be done backwards to show up the right way in the wax." The delta, he thought, had misled him because it was symmetrical.

He dipped the backwards beta into an inkpot, stamped it down on the tabletop, and grinned to see the letter appear right-side-to. He stamped it again, and again. Each impression, inevitably, was just like all the rest. "This is how it's done, all right," he breathed.

He discovered that the jars on the top two shelves contained minuscule letters (they were arranged in alphabetical order, to make finding each one easy), while their counterparts on the lower shelves all held majuscules. The extra jar on the highest board proved to have slightly smaller blocks of clay without any characters on them. They puzzled Argyros until he realized they had to be used to mark the spaces between words — because they were lower than their fellows, the ink that got on them would not appear on the parchment.

Like a child with a new toy, he decided to spell out his own name. One by one, he selected the letters that went into it and set them on the iron plate, leaning them against the edge of the iron frame for security. Even so, they kept falling over. And that, he decided, was probably what the glue was for: spread over the surface of the plate, it would hold the blocks in place.

He inked the brush, painted the tops of the letters, then pressed a sheet of parchment over them. The result made him burst into startled laughter. There on the parchment, rather raggedly aligned, were the nonsense words *sorygrA lisaB*.

He thumped his forehead with the heel of his hand, muttering "Idiot!" under his breath. He quickly rearranged the clay blocks; naturally, if the letters themselves were backwards, their order had to be that way too, in order

to appear correctly on the sheet. He felt like cheering when the second try rewarded him with a smeary *Basil Argyros*.

He wondered what to compose next. Almost without conscious thought, the first words of the Gospel according to John came into his mind: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

A letter at a time, the evangelist's famous sentence took shape. Argyros suddenly stopped, halfway through, as the magnitude of what he was doing began to sink in. The Persians, with their petty subversion in Daras, were only pikers, and George Lakhanodrakon's fear of the same at Constantinople seemed just as trivial.

Of course John had been speaking of the divine Logos, Christ Himself, but his words rang with eerie aptness. These simple little blocks of clay could spell *anything*, and make as many copies of it as one wanted. What power was more godlike than that?

The magistrianos was so struck with awe that he did not pay any attention to the approaching footfalls in the alley behind Abraham's shop. But the soft cry of alarm one of the newcomers raised on seeing the bar down from the door tore Argyros from his reverie. He cursed himself for his stupidity — the only reason all these dangerous paraphernalia were so openly displayed had to be that the Persians were going to reproduce another handbill tonight.

There were three stout iron hooks-and-eyes screwed into the inside of the door panels and the doorframe. Abraham, evidently, was the sort of man who tied double knots in his sandal straps — and in his sandals, Argyros would have done the same. The potter's caution was the only thing that saved him. He had just hooked the last closure when someone large heaved an ungentle shoulder against the door. It groaned, but held.

Familiar, throaty laughter came from the alleyway. "Is that you, dear Basil?" Mirrane called mockingly. "Where will you run now?"

It was an excellent question. The pottery's front door was barred on the outside, just as the back had been. So were the stout wooden shutters, which — damn Abraham anyway! — had locks both inside and out.

Mirrane let Argyros stew just long enough, then said, "Well, it seems we shan't raise Daras yet. A pity — but then, bagging one of the Emperor's precious magistrianoi (oh yes, I know who you are!) is not the smallest prize either."

"You're behind this!" he blurted. He had thought she was merely a pleasant distraction thrown his way by the real plotter — Shahin maybe, or Abraham, or Yesuyab whom he had never seen.

She might have been reading his thoughts. Bitterness edged her voice as she answered, "Aye, by the good God Ormazd, I am! Did you think I lacked the wit or will because I am a woman? You'll not be the first to pay for that mistake, nor the last." She shifted from Greek to Persian, spoke to one of her

henchmen: "I'll waste no more time on this Roman. Burn the place down!"

Someone let out a harsh protest in Arabic.

"Don't be a donkey, Abraham," Mirrane snapped. "The noise of breaking in the door might bring the watch — we're too close to the barracks to risk it. The King of Kings will pay you more than you would earn from this miserable hovel in the next fifty years. Come on, Bahram, set the torch. The bigger the blaze, the more likely it is to destroy everything we need out of the way, Argyros included."

"... Isn't that right, Basil?" she added through the door.

The magistrianos did not answer, but could not argue with her tactics. A very accomplished young woman indeed, he thought ruefully — and in such unexpected ways. He had no doubt several armed men would be waiting when smoke and flames drove him to try bursting out through the door. He could see Bahram's torchflame flickering, hot and yellow, under the door-jamb.

But Mirrane, for all her ruthless efficiency, did not know everything. Along with his burglar's pincers, Argyros had fetched a couple of the tightly corked clay pots he had passed off to her as sediment testers. Stooping, he set them at the base of the back door.

His lamp was beginning to gutter, but it still held enough oil for his need. He touched the flame to the rags that ran through the stoppers. Those were soaked in fat themselves, and caught at once.

As soon as the magistrianos saw they were burning, he put down the lamp and dove behind Abraham's counter. He clapped his hands over his ears.

It was not a moment too soon. The hellpowder bombs went off, the explosion of the first touching off the second. The blast was like the end of the world. Shattered bits of pottery flew round the shop, deadly as slingers' bullets. The double charge of the explosive mix the Franco-Saxons had discovered flung the door off its hinges, hurling it outward at Mirrane and her companions.

Dagger in hand, Argyros scrambled to his feet. His head was ringing, but at least he knew where the thunderbolt had come from. To Mirrane and her friends in the alleyway, it was a complete and hideous surprise.

The magistrianos charged through the cloud of thick, brimstone-smelling smoke that hung in the shattered doorway. He discovered one of Mirrane's henchmen at once, by almost tripping over him. The fellow was down and writhing, his hands clutched round a long splinter of wood driven into his groin. He was no danger, and would not last long.

Several other men pelted down the alley as fast as they could run. Through half-deafened ears, Argyros heard their shouts of terror: "Devils!" "Demons!" "Mother of God, protect me from Satan!" "It's Ahriman, come to earth!" That last had to come from a Persian: Ahriman was Ormazd's wicked foe in their dualist faith.

One of the nearby shadows moved. Argyros whirled. "A trick I did not

know about, it seems," Mirrane said quietly. Her self-possession was absolute; she might have been talking of the weather. She sent on, "The game is yours this time, after all."

"And you with it!" he cried, springing toward her.

"Sorry, no." As he spoke, she opened the door behind her, stepped through, and slammed it in Argyros' face. The bar locked it just as he crashed into it. He rebounded, dazed at the impact. Mirrane said, "We'll meet again, you and I." He heard her beat a rapid retreat.

Only then did he think of anything beyond the predicament from which he had just escaped. As Mirrane had said, Abraham's pottery was only a block from the main barracks of Daras. Already Argyros could hear cries of alarm, and then the disciplined pound of a squadron running his way.

"Here!" he shouted.

The squad-leader came puffing up, torch held high. He gaped at the wrecked doorway to Abraham's shop. "What's all this about?"

"No time to explain," the magistrianos snapped. He gave the underofficer his rank; the man stiffened to attention. "Have some of your troopers break down that door," Argyros ordered, pointing to the one through which Mirrane had escaped. He quickly described her, then sent the rest of the squad round the corner to where the front entrance of the house or store or whatever it was let out.

They returned emptyhanded. At Argyros' urging, Leontios sealed the gates of Daras within the hour, and for the next two days the garrison forces searched the town from top to bottom. They caught Abraham hiding with Yesuyab the tailor, but of Mirrane no sign whatever turned up.

Argyros was disappointed, but somehow not surprised.

"Very clever, Basil, your use of the map to ferret out the nest of spies," George Lakhanodrakon said.

"Thank you, sir." Argyros' office chair creaked as he leaned back in it. "I'm only annoyed it took me as long as it did. I should have seen that the Persians deliberately avoided putting their parchments in certain parts of Daras so as to give Leontios no reason to search in them. But it wasn't until I found out that Yesuyab's tanning-works (and the gluemaker's next to it), Abraham's pottery, and Shahin's tavern were all in the exact centers of the empty areas that things began to make sense."

"A pretty piece of reasoning, no matter how you reached it." The Master of Offices hesitated, cleared his throat, went on, "All the same, I'm not entirely sure the situation you left behind satisfies me."

"I'm not certain what else I could have done, your illustriousness," the magistrianos said politely. "No more inflammatory handbills are appearing in Daras, the town was calm when I left it, and I discovered the means by which the Persians were producing so many copies of the same text." Excitement put warmth in his voice. "A means, I might add, which could

be used to —”

“Yes, yes,” the Master of Offices interrupted. “I don’t intend to slight you, my boy, not at all. As I said, you did splendidly. But all the same, there is no final resolution of the problem underlying this particular spot of trouble. It could crop up again anywhere in the east, in Kirkesion or Amida or Martyropolis, the more so as the tricky Persian baggage in charge of the scheme slipped through your net.”

“There you speak truly, sir,” Argyros said. Mirrane’s getaway still rangled. Also, it piqued him that the enjoyment she showed in his arms had probably been assumed to lull him. It had seemed very real at the time. He hoped her parting warning would come true; one way or another, he wanted to test himself against her again.

He went on, “In any case, a second outbreak is not likely to be serious as the first was. Now that we know how the thing is done, local officials should be able to search out clandestine letterers on their own. And if the government issues them sets of clay archetypes of their own, they can easily counter any lies the Persians try spreading.”

“Issue them archetypes of their own?” Lakhanodrakon spread his hands in something approaching horror. “Don’t you think this is a secret as dangerous as hellpower? It should be restricted in the same way, and the production of documents written with it limited to the imperial chancery here in the city.”

“I’d like to believe I could convince you that this new way of lettering has more applications than simply the political.”

The Master of Offices’ scowl was like a stormcloud. “My concern is for the safety of the state. You’d need a powerful demonstration to alter my opinion here.”

“I suppose so,” Argyros said with a sigh. He seemed to change the subject: “Will you still be giving another reading next week, sir?”

Lakhanodrakon’s scowl vanished. He was composing an epic on Constans II’s triumph over the Lombards in Italia, in iambic trimeters modeled after those George of Pisidia had used in his poems celebrating Herakleios’ victories. “Yes, from the third book,” he said. “I hope you’ll be there.”

“I’m looking forward to it. I only wonder how many of your guests will be familiar with what you’ve already written.”

“To some degree, a fair number, I suppose. Many will have been at the earlier readings last year and this past winter, and of course the manuscript will have circulated somewhat. I intend to summarize what’s gone before, anyhow.”

“No need for that.” Argyros opened a desk drawer, handed a pile of thin papyrus codices to Lakhanodrakon.

“What on earth are these?”

“Books one and two of your *Italiad*, sir,” Argyros said innocently. “I’ve given you thirty-five copies, which I believe will be enough for you to pass

one on to everyone who is coming. If not, I still have the letters in their frames. I would be happy to make as many more as you need."


A couple of days ago Argyros would have sung a different tune. He did not fret about the cost of seven hundred sheets of papyrus. The stuff was cheap in Constantinople, because the government used so much of it. And finding a potter from Mesopotamia who could be made to understand how to make the clay archetypes had not been difficult for one who knew the city as the magistrianos did.

But Argyros was still squinting from the unaccustomed effort of putting twenty pages of poetry into frames a letter at a time — backwards. Anthimos had helped, some, but he never did get the hang of it, and the magistrianos spent almost as much time fixing his secretary's mistakes as he did making progress of his own. After a while, he had excused the hapless scribe. And then, halfway through page eighteen, he had run out of omegas, and had to rush back to the potter to get more.

It was all worth it now, though, watching the astonishment on the Master of Offices' face turn to delight. "Thirty-five copies?" Lakkanodrakon whispered in wonder. "Why, saving the Bible and Homer, I don't know of thirty-five copies of any work here in the capital. Perhaps Thucydides or Plato or St. John Chrysostom — and me. I feel ashamed to join the company you've put me in, Basil."

"It's a very good poem, sir," the magistrianos said loyally. "Don't you see now? With this new lettering, we can make so many copies of all our authors that they'll never again risk being lost because mice ate the last remaining one three days before it was due to be redone. Not just literature, either — how much better would our armies fare if every officer carried his own copy of Maurice's *Strategikon*? And lawyers and churchmen could be sure their texts matched one another, for all would come from the same original. Ship-captains would be able to take charts and sailing-guides from port to port —"

At last the Master of Offices was beginning to catch some of the younger man's enthusiasm. "The Virgin protect me, you may be right after all! I can see how this invention could prove a great boon for government. Imperial rescripts would become much easier to produce. And — oh, think of it! We could make endless copies of the same standard forms and send them throughout the Empire. And it might not even be too much labor to have other forms, on which we could keep track of whether the first ones had been properly dispatched. I can fairly see the scheme now, can't you?"

Argyros could, only too well. He wondered if he would be able to change his boss's mind back again. 

Opinion

by Robert Silverberg

When governmental bureaucracies start turning out reports that read like something out of a novel by Poul Anderson or L. Sprague de Camp, how can we doubt that science fiction has inextricably established itself as a major problem-solving tool of the late twentieth century?

I'm referring to a group of studies commissioned by the U.S. Department of Energy to deal with the question of keeping the people of future generations from stumbling unawares into hazardous nuclear waste dumps left behind by their remote ancestors. It is currently thought that the sites chosen for dumping of nuclear junk from civilian and military power plants and weapons will remain dangerously hot for the next 10,000 years. How can we be sure that the warning messages we erect will be comprehensible to our descendants of thousands of years hence? How well will we be able to communicate with the citizens of Earth 300 generations from now? To help it in grappling with this problem, the Department of Energy hired the Battelle Memorial Institute, an Ohio research organization, to create what it called a Human Interference Task Force, made up of sociologists, communications experts, lawyers, and specialists in the difficult field of nuclear waste disposal. The first reports of this task force are now being made public, and they are fascinating indeed.

I think it's surprising — and highly commendable — that the Department

of Energy should see a problem here at all. My own first response to the issue was to argue that there's really not a lot to worry about. We ourselves have done quite a good job deciphering and decoding ancient languages, after all. Nineteenth-century scholars operating without benefit of computers managed to crack the secret of 5000-year-old Egyptian hieroglyphic script without much difficulty, thanks to the convenient discovery of the Rosetta stone, which provided Greek equivalents for hieroglyphics. Then came the decipherment of the long-forgotten Assyrian and Babylonian cuneiform scripts. Again, that was made possible by studying multilingual texts; for the cuneiform technique of writing had also been used in ancient times by the Persians, whose language had never been lost, and Assyrian and Babylonian were Semitic tongues closely related to ancient Hebrew, which likewise has remained part of the fund of human knowledge for thousands of years. Once Assyrian and Babylonian cuneiform had been deciphered, it became possible to penetrate the mysteries of the oldest known human language of all, Sumerian, which goes back at least 6000 years into Mesopotamian prehistory. Sumerian is not related to any other language, so far as we know, but the discovery of dictionaries providing Assyrian equivalents for Sumerian words opened the way to its decoding.

Even though there still are some ancient scripts and languages that

remain total mysteries to us — the Indus Valley hieroglyphics, for example, or the Etruscan language — our record of decipherment is outstanding. Since we have cracked Sumerian and Linear B and Hittite and so many other thoroughly dead scripts, why, I wondered, did the Department of Energy think that our remote descendants, who would have the benefit of a technological society's superior information-processing techniques, would have any difficulty making sense out of a sign that said **WARNING: DANGEROUS RADIATION ZONE**? But then I realized that for once the bureaucrats were way ahead of the science-fiction writer. I was falling into the old trap of extrapolating from the past. The cryptographers who had solved the puzzles of hieroglyphics and cuneiform had been lucky enough to have Rosetta stones and other multilingual texts to work from; and they had had a working knowledge of Greek or Hebrew or Persian to help them find entry to the lost languages. But what if some cataclysm (not necessarily nuclear; a worldwide famine or change of climate could do it) creates a total discontinuity between twentieth-century languages and the languages of our remote descendants? All the computer-power in the world is not likely to make sense out of mere symbols without any available cognate referents. And why do we think that the people of A.D. 10,000 will be our descendants at all? What if we have vanished without a trace, leaving only our radioactive waste dumps behind, and Earth comes to be inhabited by non-human successors who don't have a clue to our languages?

Good thinking, Department of Energy. And good thinking too — first-rate science-fictional speculation — is

to be found in the first of the task force reports, the work of Dr. Thomas A. Sebeok of the University of Indiana. Dr. Sebeok, an expert in the arcane branch of communications theory known as *semiotics*, proposed the use of various non-verbal warning systems to keep the people of the future away from the toxic dumps:

— A “modern Stonehenge” ringing the dumps with gigantic stone monoliths, bearing symbols that might be understood as keep-away warnings.

— Making nuclear waste so “repulsively malodorous” that no one in centuries hence would be able to go near it.

— Setting up stylized cartoon-like inscriptions on stone that would depict in simple and unambiguous pictures the perils of nuclear material.

— Coding a warning into the human gene structure by “micro-surgical intervention with the human molecular blueprint” that the waste dumps are not to be approached. (Dr. Sebeok notes that “this form of temporal communication is far from available as yet.”)

— Creating an “atomic priesthood” that will spread a “ritual and legend” to warn future generations against the dumps.

It seems to me that that last idea, which has been proposed in science-fiction stories many times over the past forty years, holds the most promise. Building some Stonehenge-like thing is more apt to attract the attention of future archaeologists to the dumps than to keep them away; the stylized cartoons are likely to seem quaintly primitive, not threatening, to our distant descendants; stenchs aren't going to work if those who try to explore the sites are robots or aliens; the genetic reprogramming idea carries with it all manner of political and

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technological problems. But exploiting the apparently ineradicable human susceptibility to superstition might just do it.

Dr. Sebeok proposes that "information be launched and artificially passed on into the short-term and long-term future with the supplementary aid of folkloristic devices, in particular . . . an artificially created and nurtured ritual and legend," to produce "accumulated superstition to shun a certain area permanently." To spread the myth, he says, the government should create "an atomic priesthood."

If ever there was an argument in

favor of more and better mumbo-jumbo, this may be it. (But what will happen when some future Age of Enlightenment spawns skeptics who boldly venture into the hot sites to prove that the priesthood is full of beans?) In any event, this is a fascinating area for speculation and discussion — and the most fascinating part of it, for me, is the fact that our government, no less, is seriously pondering ideas of this sort, which just a generation ago were limited to the pulpy pages of *Astounding Science Fiction* and *Amazing® Stories*.

✂

TEN COMMON MYTHS ABOUT ANCIENT MAN

He did not eat his own kind, he merely killed them.

His systems of transportation were widely accepted, even approved.

Kennedy and Christ were in fact two separate individuals and not aspects of a vegetation deity.

Despite the inaccurate portrayals of the modern entertainment industry, fossil fuel byproducts were not commonly eaten.

Reproduction was biological, of the type often observed among squirrels and other creatures in our zoos.

Less than one percent of the planet's surface was paved.

Nuclear weaponry was invented by man, not machine.

Machines were not enslaved, but were treated with dignity.

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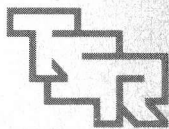
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