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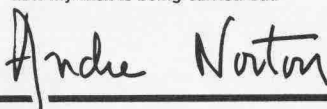
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from "At The Dixie Apple"

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**A HAUNTING TALE  
OF LOVE AND ADVENTURE  
ON A DISTANT WORLD**

# BITTERBLOOMS

By George R. R. Martin



When he finally died, Shawn found to her shame that she could not even bury him.

She had no proper digging tools; only her hands, the longknife strapped to her thigh, and the smaller blade in her boot. But it would not have mattered. Beneath its sparse covering of snow, the ground was frozen hard as rock. Shawn was sixteen, as her family counted years, and the ground had been frozen for half her lifetime. The season was deepwinter, and the world was cold.

Knowing the futility of it before she started, Shawn still tried to dig. She picked a spot a few meters from the rude lean-to she had built for their shelter, broke the thin crust of the snow and swept it away with her hands, and began to hack at the frozen earth with the smaller of her blades. But the ground was harder than her steel. The knife broke, and she looked at it helplessly, knowing how precious it had been, knowing what Creg would say. Then she began to claw at the unfeeling soil, weeping, until her hands ached and

her tears froze within her mask. It was not right for her to leave him without burial; he had been father, brother, lover. He had always been kind to her, and she had always failed him. And now she could not even bury him.

Finally, not knowing what else to do, she kissed him one last time—there was ice in his beard and his hair, and his face was twisted unnaturally by the pain and the cold, but he was still family, after all—and toppled the lean-to across his body, hiding him within a rough bier of branches and snow. It was useless, she knew; vampires and windwolves would knock it apart easily to get at his flesh. But she could not abandon him without shelter of some kind.

She left him his skis and his big silver-wood bow, its bowstring snapped by the cold. But she took his sword and his heavy fur cloak; it was little enough burden added to her pack. She had nursed him for almost a week after the vampire had left him wounded, and that long delay in the little lean-to had depleted most of their supplies. Now she hoped

to travel light and fast. She strapped on her skis, standing next to the clumsy grave she had built him, and said her last farewells leaning on her poles. Then she set off over the snow, through the terrible silence of the deepwinter woods, toward home and fire and family. It was just past midday.

By dusk, Shawn knew that she would never make it.

She was calmer then, more rational. She had left her grief and her shame behind with his body, as she had been taught to do. The stillness and the cold were all around her, but the long hours of skiing had left her flushed and almost warm beneath her layers of leather and fur. Her thoughts had the brittle clarity of the ice that hung in long spears from the bare, twisted trees around her.

As darkness threw its cloak over the world, Shawn sought shelter in the lee of the greatest of those trees, a massive blackbark whose trunk was three meters across. She spread the fur cloak she had taken on a bare patch of ground and pulled her own woven cape over her like

## BITTERBLOOMS

a blanket to shut out the rising wind. With her back to the trunk and her long-knife drawn beneath her cape, just in case, she slept a brief, wary sleep, and woke in full light to contemplate her mistakes.

The stars were out; she could see them peeking through the bare black branches above her. The Ice Wagon dominated the sky, bringing cold into the world, as it had for as long as Shawn could remember. The driver's blue eyes glared down at her, mocking.

It had been the Ice Wagon that killed Lane, she thought bitterly. Not the vampire. The vampire had mauled him badly that night, when his bowstring broke as he tried to draw in his defense. But in another season, with Shawn nursing him, he would have lived. In deepwinter, he never had a chance. The cold crept in past all the defenses she had built for him, the cold drained away all his strength, all his ferocity. The cold left him a shrunken white thing, numb and pale, his lips tinged with blue. And now the driver of the Ice Wagon would claim his soul.

And hers too, she knew. She should have abandoned Lane to his fate. That was what Creg would have done, or Leila, any of them. There had never been any hope that he would live, not in deepwinter. Nothing lived in deepwinter. The trees grew stark and bare in deepwinter, the grass and the flowers perished, the animals all froze or went underground to sleep. Even the wind-wolves and the vampires grew lean and fierce, and many starved to death before the thaw.

As Shawn would starve.

They had already been running three days late when the vampire attacked them, and Lane had had them eating short rations. Afterward he had been so weak. He had finished his own food on the fourth day, and Shawn had started feeding him some of hers, never telling him. She had very little left now, and the safety of Carinhall was still nearly two weeks of hard travel away. In deepwinter, it might as well be two years.

Curled beneath her cape, Shawn briefly considered starting a fire. A fire would bring vampires—they could feel the heat three kilometers off. They would come stalking silently between the trees, gaunt black shadows taller than Lane had been, their loose skin flapping over skeletal limbs like dark cloaks, concealing the claws. Perhaps, if

she lay in wait, she could take one by surprise. A full-grown vampire would feed her long enough to return to Carinhall. She played with the idea in the darkness, and only reluctantly put it aside. Vampires could run across the snow as fast as an arrow in flight, scarcely touching the ground, and it was virtually impossible to see them by night. But they could see her very well, by the heat she gave off. Lighting a fire would only guarantee her a quick and relatively painless death.

Shawn shivered and gripped the hilt of her longknife more tightly for reassurance. Every shadow suddenly seemed to have a vampire crouched within it, and in the keening of the wind she thought she could hear the flapping noise their skin made when they ran.

Then, louder and very real, another noise reached her ears; an angry high-pitched whistling like nothing Shawn had ever heard. And suddenly the black horizon was suffused with light, a flicker of ghostly blue radiance that outlined the naked bones of the forest and throbbed visibly against the sky. Shawn inhaled sharply, a draught of ice down her raw throat, and struggled to her feet, half-afraid she was under attack. But there was nothing. The world was cold and black and dead; only the light lived, flickering dimly in the distance, beckoning, calling to her. She watched it for long minutes, thinking back on old Jon and the terrible stories he used to tell the children when they gathered round Carinhall's great hearth. *There are worse things than vampires*, he would tell them, and remembering, Shawn was suddenly a little girl again, sitting on the thick furs with her back to the fire, listening to Jon talk of ghosts and living shadows and cannibal families who lived in great castles built of bone.

As abruptly as it had come, the strange light faded and was gone, and with it went the high-pitched noise. Shawn had marked where it had shone, however. She took up her pack and fastened Lane's cloak about her for extra warmth, then began to don her skins. She was no child now, she told herself, and that light had been no ghost dance. Whatever it was, it might be her only chance. She took her poles in hand and set off toward it.

Night travel was dangerous in the extreme, she knew. Creg had told her that a hundred times, and Lane as well. In the darkness, in the scant starlight, it

was easy to go astray, to break a ski or a leg or worse. And movement generated heat, heat that drew vampires from the deep of the woods. Better to lay low until dawn, when the nocturnal hunters had retired to their lairs; all of her training told her that, and all of her instincts. But it was deepwinter, and when she rested the cold bit through even the warmest of furs, and Lane was dead and she was hungry, and the light had been so close, so achingly close. So she followed it, going slowly, going carefully, and it seemed that this night she had a charm upon her. The terrain was all flatland, gentle to her, almost kind, and the snow cover was sparse enough so that neither root nor rock could surprise and trip her. No dark predators came gliding out of the night, and the only sound was the sound of her motion, the soft crackling of the snow crust beneath her skis.

The forest grew steadily thinner as she moved, and after an hour Shawn emerged from it entirely, into a wasteland of tumbled stone blocks and twisted, rusting metal. She knew what it was; she had seen other ruins before, where families had lived and died, and their halls and houses had gone all to rot. But never a ruin so extensive as this. The family that had lived here, however long ago, had been very great once; the shattered remains of their dwellings were more extensive than a hundred Carinhalls. She began to pick a careful path through the crumbling, snow-dusted masonry. Twice she came upon structures that were almost intact, and each time she considered seeking shelter within those ancient stone walls, but there was nothing in either of them that might have caused the light, so Shawn passed on after only a brief inspection. The river she came to soon thereafter stopped her for a slightly longer time; from the high bank where she paused, she could see the remains of two bridges that had once spanned the narrow channel, but both of them had fallen long ago. The river was frozen over, however, so she had no trouble crossing it. In deepwinter the ice was thick and solid and there was no danger of her falling through.

As she climbed painstakingly up the far bank, Shawn came upon the flower.

It was a very small thing, its thick black stem emerging from between two rocks low on the riverbank. She might never have seen it in the night, but her

pole dislodged one of the ice-covered stones as she struggled up the slope, and the noise made her glance down to where it grew.

It startled her so that she took both poles in one hand and with the other fumbled in the deepest recesses of her clothing, so that she might risk a flame. The match gave a short, intense light. But it was enough; Shawn saw.

A flower, tiny, so tiny, with four blue petals, each the same pale blue shade that Lane's lips had been just before he died. A flower, here, alive, growing in the eighth year of deepwinter, when all the world was dead.

They would never believe her, Shawn thought, not unless she brought the truth with her, back to Carinhall. She freed herself from her skis and tried to pick the flower. It was futile, as futile as her effort to bury Lane. The stem was as strong as metal wire. She struggled with it for several minutes, and fought to keep from crying when it would not come. Creg would call her a liar, a dreamer, all the things he always called her.

She did not cry, though, finally. She left the flower where it grew, and climbed to the top of the river ridge. There she paused.

Beneath her, going on and on for meters upon meters, was a wide empty field. Snow stood in great drifts in some places, and in others there was only bare flat stone, naked to the wind and the cold. In the center of the field was the strangest building Shawn had ever seen, a great fat teardrop of a building that squatted like an animal in the starlight on three black legs. The legs were bent beneath it, flexed and rimed over with ice at their joints, as if the beast had been about to leap straight up into the sky. And legs and building both were covered with flowers.

There were flowers everywhere, Shawn saw when she took her eyes off the squat building long enough to look. They sprouted, singly and in clusters, from every little crack in the field, with snow and ice all around them, making dark islands of life in the pure white stillness of deepwinter.

Shawn walked through them, closer to the building, until she stood next to one of the legs and reached up to touch its joint wonderingly with a gloved hand. It was all metal, metal and ice and flowers, like the building itself. Where each of the legs rested, the stone beneath

had broken and fractured in a hundred places, as if shattered by some great blow, and vines grew from the crevices, twisting black vines that crawled around the flanks of the structure like the webs of a summer-spinner. The flowers burst from the vines, and now that she stood up close, Shawn saw that they were not like her little river bloom at all. There were blossoms of many colors, some as big as her head, growing in wild profusion everywhere, as if they did not realize that it was deepwinter, when they should be black and dead.

She was walking around the building, looking for an entrance, when a noise made her turn her head toward the ridge.

A thin shadow flickered briefly against the snow, then seemed to vanish. Shawn trembled and retreated quickly, putting the nearest of the tall legs to her back, and then she dropped everything and Lane's sword was in her left hand and her own longknife in her right, and she stood cursing herself for that match, that stupid stupid match, and listening for the *flap-flap-flap* of death on taloned feet.

It was too dark, she realized, and her hand shook, and even as it did the shape rushed upon her from the side. Her longknife flashed at it, stabbing, slicing, but cut only the skinloak, and then the vampire gave a shriek of triumph and Shawn was buffeted to the ground and she knew she was bleeding. There was a weight on her chest, and something black and leathery settled across her eyes, and she tried to knife it and that was when she realized that her blade was gone. She screamed.

Then the vampire screamed, and the side of Shawn's head exploded in pain, and she had blood in her eyes, and she was choking on blood, and blood and blood, and nothing more . . .

It was blue, all blue; hazy, shifting blue. A pale blue, dancing, dancing, like the ghost light that had flickered on the sky. A soft blue, like the little flower, the impossible blossom by the riverbank. A cold blue, like the eyes of the Ice Wagon's black driver, like Lane's lips when last she kissed them. Blue, blue, and it moved and would not be still. Everything was blurred, unreal. There was only blue. For a long time, only blue.

Then music. But it was blurred music, blue music somehow, strange and high

and fleeting, very sad, lonely, a bit erotic. It was a lullaby, like old Tesenya used to sing when Shawn was very little, before she grew weak and sick and Creg put her out to die. It had been so long since Shawn had heard such a song; all the music she knew was Creg on his harp, and Rys on her guitar. She found herself relaxing, floating, all her limbs turned to water, lazy water, though it was deepwinter and she knew she should be ice.

Soft hands began to touch her, lifting her head, pulling off her facemask so the blue warm brushed her naked cheeks, then drifting lower, lower, loosening her clothes, stripping her of furs and cloth and leather, off with her belt and off with her jerkin and off with her pants. Her skin tingled. She was floating, floating. Everything was warm, so warm, and the hands fluttered here and there and they were so gentle, like old mother Tesenya had been, like her sister Leila was sometimes, like Devin. Like Lane, she thought, and it was a pleasant thought, comforting and arousing at the same time, and Shawn held close to it. She was with Lane, she was safe and warm and . . . and she remembered his face, the blue in his lips, the ice in his beard where his breath had frozen, the pain burned into him, twisting his features like a mask. She remembered, and suddenly she was drowning in the blue, choking on the blue, struggling, screaming.

The hands lifted her and a stranger's voice muttered something low and soothing in a language she did not understand. A cup was pressed to Shawn's lips. She opened her mouth to scream again, but instead she was drinking. It was hot and sweet and fragrant, full of spices, and some of them were very familiar, but others she could not place at all. Tea, she thought, and her hands took it from the other hands as she gulped it down.

She was in a small dim room, propped up on a bed of pillows, and her clothes were piled next to her and the air was full of blue mist from a burning stick. A woman knelt beside her, dressed in bright tatters of many different colors, and gray eyes regarded her calmly from beneath the thickest, wildest hair that Shawn had ever seen. "You . . . who . . ." Shawn said.

The woman stroked her brow with a pale soft hand. "Carin," she said clearly.

## BITTERBLOOMS

Shawn nodded, slowly, wondering who the woman was, and how she knew the family.

"Carinhall," the woman said, and her eyes seemed amused and a bit sad. "Lin and Eris and Caiti. I remember them, little girl. Beth, Voice Carin, how hard she was. And Kaya and Dale and Shawn."

"Shawn. I'm Shawn. That's me. But Creg is Voice Carin . . ."

The woman smiled faintly, and continued to stroke Shawn's brow. The skin of her hand was very soft. Shawn had never felt anything so soft. "Shawn is my lover," the woman said. "Every tenth year, at Gathering."

Shawn blinked at her, confused. She was beginning to remember. The light in the forest, the flowers, the vampire. "Where am I?" she asked.

"You are everywhere who never dreamed of being, little Carin," the woman said, and she laughed at herself.

The walls of the room shone like dark metal, Shawn noticed. "The building," she blurted, "the building on legs, with all the flowers . . ."

"Yes," the woman said.

"Do you . . . who are you? Did you make the light? I was in the forest, and Lane was dead and I was nearly out of food, and I saw a light, a blue . . ."

"That was my light, Carin child, as I came down from the sky. I was far away, oh yes, far away in lands you never heard of, but I came back." The woman stood up suddenly, and whirled around and around, and the gaudy cloth she wore flapped and shimmered, and she was wreathed in pale blue smoke. "I am the witch they warn you of in Carinhall, child," she yelled, exulting, and she whirled and whirled until finally, dizzy, she collapsed again beside Shawn's bed.

No one had ever warned Shawn of a witch. She was more puzzled than afraid. "You killed the vampire," she said. "How did you . . ."

"I am magic," the woman said. "I am magic and I can do magic things and I will live forever. And so will you, Carin child, Shawn, when I teach you. You can travel with me, and I will teach you all the magics and tell you stories, and we can be lovers. You are my lover already, you know, you've always been, at Gathering. Shawn, Shawn." She smiled.

"No," Shawn said. "That was some other person."

"You're tired, child. The vampire

hurt you, and you don't remember. But you will remember, you will." She stood up and moved across the room, snuffing out the burning stick with her fingertips, quieting the music. When her back was turned, her hair fell nearly to her waist, and all of it was curls and tangles; wild restless hair, tossing as she moved like the waves on the distant sea. Shawn had seen the sea once, years ago, before deepwinter came. She remembered.

The woman faded the dim lights somehow, and turned back to Shawn in darkness. "Rest now. I took away your pain with my magics, but it may come back. Call me if it does. I have other magics."

Shawn did feel drowsy. "Yes," she murmured, unresisting. But when the woman moved to leave, Shawn called out to her again. "Wait," she said. "Your family, mother. Tell me who you are."

The woman stood framed in yellow light, a silhouette without features. "My family is very great, child. My sisters are Liliith and Marcy and Erika Stormjones and Lamiya-Bailis and Deirdre d'Allerane. Kleronomas and Stephen Cobalt Northstar and Tomo and Walberg were all brothers to me, and fathers. Our house is up past the Ice Wagon, and my name, my name is Morgan." And then she was gone, and the door closed behind her, and Shawn was left to sleep.

Morgan, she thought as she slept. Morganmorganmorgan. The name drifted through her dreams like smoke.

She was very little, and she was watching the fire in the hearth at Carinhall, watching the flames lick and tease at the big black logs, smelling the sweet fragrances of thistleweed, and nearby someone was telling a story. Not Jon, no, this was before Jon had become storyteller, this was long ago. It was Tesenya, so very old, her face wrinkled, and she was talking in her tired voice so full of music, her lullaby voice, and all the children listened. Her stories had been different from Jon's. His were always about fighting, wars and vendettas and monsters, chock-full with blood and knives and impassioned oaths sworn by a father's corpse. Tesenya was quieter. She told of a group of travelers, six of family Alynne, who were lost in the wild one year during the season of freeze. They chanced upon a huge hall built all of metal, and the family within

welcomed them with a great feast. So the travelers ate and drank, and just as they were wiping their lips to go, another banquet was served, and thus it went. The Alynnes stayed and stayed, for the food was richer and more delightful than any they had ever tasted, and the more they ate of it, the hungrier they grew. Besides, deepwinter had set in outside the metal hall. Finally, when thaw came many years later, others of family Alynne went searching for the six wanderers. They found them dead in the forest. They had put off their good warm furs and dressed in flimsies, their steel had gone all to rust, and each of them had starved. For the name of the metal hall was Morganhall, Tesenya told the children, and the family who lived there was the family named Liar, whose food is empty stuff made of dreams and air.

Shawn woke naked and shivering.

Her clothes were still piled next to her bed. She dressed quickly, first pulling on her undergarments, and over them a heavy blackwool shift, and over that her leathers, pants and belt and jerkin, then her coat of fur with its hood, and finally the capes, her own of child's cloth and Lane's cloak. Last of all was her face-mask; she pulled the taut leather down over her head and laced it closed beneath her chin, and then she was safe from deepwinter winds and stranger's touches both. Shawn found her weapons thrown carelessly in a corner with her boots. When Lane's sword was in her hand and her longknife back in its familiar sheath, she felt complete again. She stepped outside determined to find skis and exit.

Morgan met her with laughter bright and brittle, in a chamber of glass and shining silver metal. She stood framed against the largest window Shawn had ever seen, a sheet of pure clean glass taller than a man and wider than Carinhall's great hearth, even more flawless than the mirrors of family Terhis, who were famed for their glassblowers and lensmakers. Beyond the glass it was midday; the cool blue midday of deepwinter. Shawn saw the field of stone and snow and flowers, and beyond it the low ridge that she had climbed, and beyond that the frozen river winding through the ruins.

"You look so fierce and angry," Morgan said, when her silly laughter had stopped. She had been threading her wild hair with wisps of cloth and gems on silver clips that sparkled when



she moved. "Come, Carin child, take off your furs again. The cold can't touch us here, and if it does we can leave it. There are other lands, you know." She walked across the room.

Shawn had let the point of her sword droop toward the floor; now she jerked it up again. "Stay away," she warned. Her voice sounded hoarse and strange.

"I am not afraid of you, Shawn," Morgan said. "Not you, my Shawn, my lover." She moved around the sword easily, and took off the scarf she wore, a gossamer of gray spidersilk set with tiny crimson jewels, to drape it around Shawn's neck. "See, I know what you are thinking," she said, pointing to the jewels. One by one, they were changing color; fire became blood, blood crusted and turned brown, brown faded to black. "You are frightened of me, nothing more. No anger. You would never hurt me." She tied the scarf neatly under Shawn's facemask, and smiled.

Shawn stared at the gems with horror. "How did you do that?" she demanded, backing off uncertainly.

"With magic," Morgan said. She spun on her heels and danced back to the window. "Morgan is full of magic."

"You are full of lies," Shawn said. "I know about the six Alynnes. I'm not going to eat here and starve to death. Where are my skis?"

Morgan seemed not to hear her; the older woman's eyes were clouded, wistful. "Have you ever seen Alynne House in summer, child? It's very beautiful. The sun comes up over the redstone tower, and sinks every night into Jamei's Lake. Do you know it, Shawn?"

"No," Shawn said boldly, "and you don't either. What do you talk about Alynne House for, you said your family lived on the Ice Wagon, and they all had names I never heard of, Kleraberus and things like that."

"Kleronomas," Morgan said, giggling. She raised her hand to her mouth to still herself, and chewed on a finger idly while her gray eyes shone. All her fingers were ringed with bright metal. "You should see my brother Kleronomas, child. He is half of metal and half of flesh, and his eyes are bright as glass, and he knows more than all the Voices who've ever spoken for Carin-hall."

"He does not," Shawn said. "You're lying again!"

"He *does*," Morgan said. Her hand fell and she looked cross. "He's magic.

We all are. Erika died, but she wakes up to live again and again and again. Stephen was a warrior, he killed a billion families, more than you can count, and Celia found a lot of secret places that no one had ever found before. My family all does magic things." Her expression grew suddenly sly. "I killed the vampire, didn't I? How do you think I did that?"

"With a knife!" Shawn said fiercely. But beneath her mask she flushed. Morgan *had* killed the vampire; that meant there was a debt. And she had drawn steel! She flinched under Creg's imagined fury, and dropped the sword to clatter on the floor. All at once she was very confused.

Morgan's voice was gentle. "But you had a longknife *and* a sword, and you couldn't kill the vampire, could you, child? No." She came across the room. "You are mine, Shawn Carin, you are my lover and my daughter and my sister. You have to learn to trust. I have much to teach you. Here." She took Shawn by the hand and led her to the window. "Stand here. Wait, Shawn, wait and watch, and I will show you more of Morgan's magics." At the far wall, smiling, she did something with her rings to a panel of bright metal and square dim lights.

Watching, Shawn grew suddenly afraid.

Beneath her feet, the floor began to shake, and a sound assaulted her, a high whining shriek that stabbed at her ears through the leather mask, until she clapped her gloved hands on either side of her head to shut it out. Even then she could hear it, like a vibration in her bones. Her teeth ached, and she was aware of a sudden shooting pain up in her left temple, and that was not the worst of it.

For outside, where everything had been cold and bright and still, a somber blue light was shifting and dancing and staining all the world. The snowdrifts were a pale blue, and the plumes of frozen powder that blew from each of them were paler still, and blue shadows came and went upon the river ridge where none had been before. And Shawn could see the light reflected even on the river itself, and on the ruins that stood desolate and broken upon the farther crest. Morgan was giggling behind her, and then everything in the window began to blur, until there was nothing to be seen at all, only colors, colors bright and dark running together, like pieces

of a rainbow melting in some vast stew-pot. Shawn did not budge from where she stood, but her hand fell to the hilt of her longknife, and despite herself she trembled.

"Look, Carin child!" Morgan shouted, over the terrible whine. Shawn could barely hear her. "We've jumped up into the sky now, away from all that cold. I told you, Shawn. We're going to ride the Ice Wagon now." And she did something to the wall again, and the noise vanished, and the colors were gone. Beyond the glass was sky.

Shawn cried out in fear. She could see nothing except darkness and stars, stars everywhere, more than she had ever seen before. And she knew she was lost. Lane had taught her all the stars, so she could use them for a guide, find her way from anywhere to anywhere, but these stars were wrong, were *different*. She could not find the Ice Wagon, or the Ghost Skier, or even Lara Carin with her windwolves. She could find nothing familiar; only stars, stars that leered at her like a million eyes, red and white and blue and yellow, and none of them would even blink.

Morgan was standing behind her. "Are we in the Ice Wagon?" Shawn asked in a small voice.

"Yes."

Shawn trembled, threw away her knife so that it bounded noisily off a metal wall, and turned to face her host. "Then we're dead, and the driver is taking our souls off to the frozen waste," she said. She did not cry. She had not wanted to be dead, especially not in deepwinter, but at least she would see Lane again.

Morgan began to undo the scarf she had fastened round Shawn's neck. The stones were black and frightening. "No, Shawn Carin," she said evenly. "We are not dead. Live here with me, child, and you will never die. You'll see." She pulled off the scarf and starting unlacing the thongs of Shawn's facemask. When it was loose, she pulled it up and off the girl's head, tossing it casually to the floor. "You're pretty, Shawn. You have always been pretty, though. I remember, all those years ago. I remember."

"I'm not pretty," Shawn said. "I'm too soft, and I'm too weak, and Creg says I'm skinny and my face is all pushed in. And I'm not . . ."

Morgan shushed her with a touch to her lips, and then unfastened her neck clasp. Lane's battered cloak slipped

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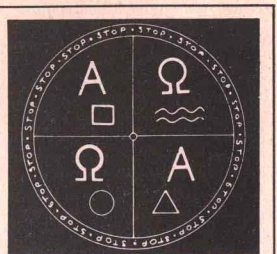
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You'll find a full description of the Earth Forces on page 21 of

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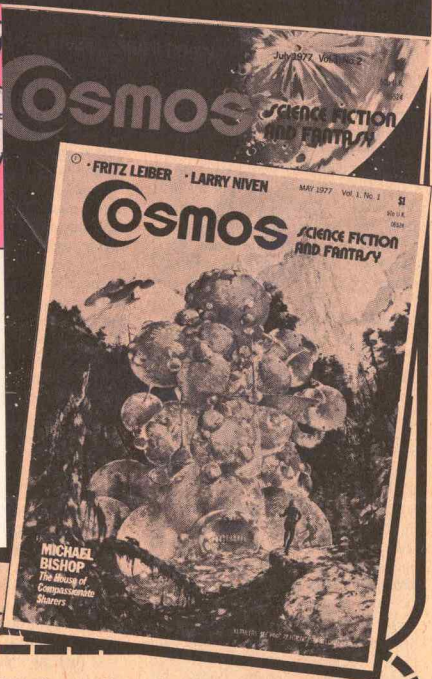
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## BITTERBLOOMS

from her shoulders. Her own cape followed, and then her coat was off, and Morgan's fingers moved down to the laces of her jerkin.

"No," Shawn said, suddenly shying away. Her back pressed up against the great window, and she felt the awful night laying its weight upon her. "I can't, Morgan. I'm Carin, and you're not family, I can't."

"Gathering," Morgan whispered. "Pretend this is Gathering, Shawn. You've always been my lover during the Gathering."

Shawn's throat was dry. "But it *isn't* Gathering," she insisted. She had seen one Gathering, down by the sea, when forty families came together to trade news and goods and love. But that had been years before her blood, so no one had taken her; she was not yet a woman, and thus untouchable. "It *isn't* Gathering," she repeated, close to tears.

Morgan giggled. "Very well. I am no Carin, but I am Morgan full-of-magic. I can make it Gathering." She darted across the room on bare feet, and thrust her rings against the wall once more, and moved them this way and that, in a strange pattern. Then she called out, "Look! Turn and look." Shawn, confused, glanced back at the window.

Under the double suns of highsummer, the world was bright and green. Sailing ships moved languidly on the slow-flowing waters of the river, and Shawn could see the bright reflections of the twin suns bobbing and rolling in their wake, balls of soft yellow butter afloat upon the blue. Even the sky seemed sweet and buttery; white clouds moved like the stately schooners of family Crien, and nowhere could a star be seen. The far shore was dotted by houses, houses small as a road shelter and greater than even Carinhall, towers as tall and sleek as the wind-carved rocks in the Broken Mountains. And here and there and all among them people moved; lithe swarthy folk strange to Shawn, and people of the families too, all mingling together. The stone field was free of snow and ice, but there were metal buildings everywhere, some larger than Morganhall, many smaller, each with its distinctive markings, and every one of them squatting on three legs. Between the buildings were the tents and stalls of the families, with their sigils and their banners. And mats, the gaily-colored lovers' mats. Shawn saw people coupling, and felt Morgan's hand resting lightly on her shoulder.

"Do you know what you are seeing, Carin child?" Morgan whispered.

Shawn turned back to her with fear and wonder in her eyes. "It is a Gathering."

Morgan smiled. "You see," she said. "It is Gathering, and I claim you. Celebrate with me." And her fingers moved to the buckle on Shawn's belt, and Shawn did not resist.

Within the metals walls of Morganhall, seasons turned to hours turned to years turned to days turned to months turned to weeks turned to seasons once again. Time had no sense. When Shawn awoke, on a shaggy fur that Morgan had spread beneath the window, highsummer had turned back into deepwinter, and the families, ships, and Gathering were gone. Dawn came earlier than it should have, and Morgan seemed annoyed, so she made it dusk; the season was freeze, with its ominous chill, and where the stars of sunrise had shown, now gray clouds raced across a copper-colored sky. They ate while the copper turned to black. Morgan served mushrooms and crunchy summer greens, dark bread dripping with honey and butter, creamed spice-tea, and thick cuts of red meat floating in blood, and afterward there was flavored ice with nuts, and finally a tall hot drink with nine layers, each a different color with a different taste. They sipped the drink from glasses of impossibly thin crystal, and it made Shawn's head ache. And she began to cry, because the food had seemed real and all of it was good, but she was afraid that if she ate any more of it she would starve to death. Morgan laughed at her and slipped away and returned with dried leathery strips of vampire meat; she told Shawn to keep it in her pack and munch on it whenever she felt hungry.

Shawn kept the meat for a long time, but never ate from it.

At first she tried to keep track of the days by counting the meals they ate, and how many times they slept, but soon the changing scenes outside the window and the random nature of life in Morganhall confused her past any hope of understanding. She worried about it for weeks—or perhaps only for days—and then she ceased to worry. Morgan could make time do anything she pleased, so there was no sense in Shawn caring about it.

Several times Shawn asked to leave, but Morgan would have none of it. She

only laughed and did some great magic that made Shawn forget about everything. Morgan took her blades away one night when she was asleep, and all her furs and leathers too, and afterward Shawn was forced to dress as Morgan wanted her to dress, in clouds of colored silk and fantastic tatters, or in nothing at all. She was angry and upset at first, but later she grew used to it. Her old clothing would have been much too hot inside Morganhall, anyway.

Morgan gave her gifts. Bags of spice that smelled of summer. A windwolf fashioned of pale blue glass. A metal mask that let Shawn see in the dark. Scented oils for her bath, and bottles of a slow golden liquor that brought her forgetfulness when her mind was troubled. A mirror, the finest mirror that had ever been. Books that Shawn could not read. A bracelet set with small red stones that drank in light all day and glowed by night. Cubes that played exotic music when Shawn warmed them with her hand. Boots woven of metal that were so light and flexible she could crumple them up in the palm of one hand. Metal miniatures of men and women and all manner of demons.

Morgan told her stories. Each gift she gave to Shawn had a story that went with it, a tale of where it came from and who had made it and how it had come here. Morgan told them all. There were tales for each of her relatives as well; indomitable Kleronomas who drove across the sky hunting for knowledge, Celia Marcyan the ever-curious and her ship *Shadow Chaser*, Erika Stormjones whose family cut her up with knives that she might live again, savage Stephen Cobalt Northstar, melancholy Tomo, bright Deirdre d'Allerane and her grim ghostly twin. Those stories Morgan told with magic. There was a place in one wall with a small square slot in it, and Morgan would go there and insert a flat metallic box, and then all the lights would go out and Morgan's dead relatives would live again, bright phantoms who walked and talked and dripped blood when they were hurt. Shawn thought they were real until the day when Deirdre first wept for her slain children, and Shawn ran to comfort her and found they could not touch. It was not until afterward that Morgan told her Deirdre and the others were only spirits, called down by her magic.

Morgan told her many things. Morgan was her teacher as well as her lover, and she was nearly as patient as Lane

had been, though much more prone to wander and lose interest. She gave Shawn a beautiful twelve-stringed guitar and began to teach her to play it, and she taught her to read a little, and she taught her a few of the simpler magics, so Shawn could move easily around the ship. That was another thing that Morgan taught her; Morganhall was no building after all, but a ship, a sky-ship that could flex its metal legs and leap from star to star. Morgan told her about the planets, lands out by those far-off stars, and said that all the gifts she had given Shawn had come from out there, from beyond the Ice Wagon; the mask and mirror were from Jamison's World, the books and cubes from Avalon, the bracelet from High Kavalaan, the oils from Braque, the spices from Rhiannon and Tara and Old Poseidon, the boots from Bastion, the figurines from Chul Damien, the golden liquor from a land so far away that even Morgan did not know its name. Only the fine glass window had been made here, on Shawn's world, Morgan said. The window had always been one of Shawn's favorites, but now she found she did not like it half so well as she had thought she did. The others were all so much more exciting. Shawn had always wanted to travel, to visit distant families in wild distant climes, to gaze on seas and mountains. But she had been too young, and when she finally reached her womanhood, Creg would not let her go; she was too slow, he said, too timid, too irresponsible. Her life would be spent at home, where she could put her meager talents to better use for Carinhall. Even the fateful trip that had led her here had been a fluke; Lane had insisted, and Lane alone of all the others was strong enough to stand up to Creg, Voice Carin.

Morgan took her traveling, though, on sails between the stars. When blue fire flickered against the icy landscape of deepwater and the sound rose up out of nowhere, higher and higher, Shawn would rush eagerly to the window, where she would wait with mounting impatience for the colors to clear. Morgan gave her all the mountains and all the seas she could dream of, and more. Through the flawless glass Shawn saw the lands from all the stories; Old Poseidon with its weathered docks and its fleets of silver ships, the meadows of Rhiannon, the vaulting black steel towers of ai-Emerel, High Kavalaan's windswept plains and rugged hills, the island-

cities of Port Jamison and Jolostar on Jamison's World. Shawn learned about cities from Morgan, and suddenly the ruins by the river seemed different in her eyes. She learned about other ways of living as well, about arcologies and holdfasts and brotherhoods, about bond-companies and slavery and armies. Family Carin no longer seemed the beginning and the end of human loyalties.

Of all the places they sailed to, they came to Avalon most often, and Shawn learned to love it best. On Avalon the landing field was always full of other wanderers, and Shawn could watch ships come and go on wands of pale blue light. And in the distance she could see the buildings of the Academy of Human Knowledge, where Kleronomas had deposited all his secrets so that they might be held in trust for Morgan's family. Those jagged glass towers filled Shawn with a longing that was almost a hurt, but a hurt that she somehow craved.

Sometimes—on several of the worlds, but most particularly on Avalon—it seemed to Shawn that some stranger was about to board their ship. She would watch them come, striding purposefully across the field, their destination clear from every step. They never came aboard, though, much to her disappointment. There was never anyone to touch or talk to except Morgan. Shawn suspected that Morgan gawked the would-be visitors away, or else lured them to their doom. She could not quite make up her mind which; Morgan was so moody that it might be both. One dinnertime she remembered Jon's story of the cannibal hall, and looked down with horror at the red meat they were eating. She ate only vegetables that meal, and for several meals thereafter, until she finally decided that she was being childish. Shawn considered asking Morgan about the strangers who approached and vanished, but she was afraid. She remembered Creg, whose temper was awful if you asked him the wrong question. And if the older woman were really killing those who tried to board her ship, it would not be wise to mention it to her. When Shawn was just a child, Creg had beaten her savagely for asking why old Tesenya had to go outside and die.

Other questions Shawn did ask, only to find that Morgan would not answer. Morgan would not talk about her own origins, or the source of their food, or

the magic that flew the ship. Twice Shawn asked to learn the spells that moved them from star to star, and both times Morgan refused with anger in her voice. She had other secrets from Shawn as well. There were rooms that would not open to Shawn, things that she was not allowed to touch, other things that Morgan would not even talk about. From time to time Morgan would disappear for what seemed like days, and Shawn would wander about desolately, with nothing outside the window to occupy her but steady unwinking stars. On those occasions Morgan would be sadder and secretive when she returned, but only for a few hours, after which she would return to normal.

For Morgan, though, normal was different than for other people.

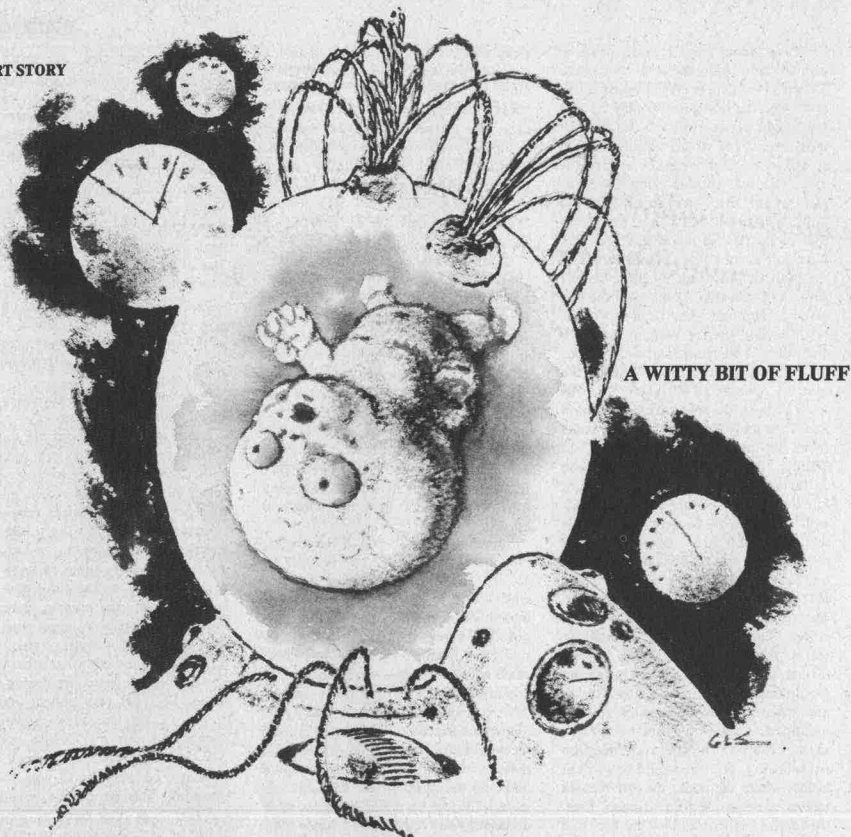
She would dance about the ship endlessly, singing to herself, sometimes with Shawn as a dancing partner and sometimes alone. She would converse with herself in a musical tongue that Shawn did not know. She would be alternately as serious as a wise old mother, and three times as knowledgeable as a Voice, and as giddy and giggly as a child of one season. Sometimes Morgan seemed to know just who Shawn was, and sometimes she insisted on confusing her with that other Shawn Carin who had loved her during Gatherings. She was very patient and very impetuous; she was unlike anyone that Shawn had ever met before. "You're silly," Shawn told her once. "You wouldn't be so silly if you lived in Carinhall. Silly people die, you know, and they hurt their families. Everyone has to be useful, and you're not useful. Creg would make you be useful. You're lucky that you aren't a Carin."

Morgan had only caressed her, and gazed at her from sad gray eyes. "Poor Shawn," she'd whispered. "They've been so hard to you. But the Carins were always hard. Alynne House was different, child. You should have been born an Alynne." And after that she would say no more of it.

Shawn squandered her days in wonder and her nights in love, and she thought of Carinhall less and less, and gradually she found that she had come to care for Morgan as if she were family. And more, she had come to trust her.

Until the day she learned about the bitterblooms.

SHORT STORY



A WITTY BIT OF FLUFF

THE  
ALPHABET  
SYSTEM

*By Mary Jean Tibbils*

It had been a perfectly ordinary day, and the family was seated on its rollarounds at the dining table when August suddenly said, "Mommydad, did I come out of an eggoplasm?"

Marianne looked quickly at Dorothy and struggled for composure. "Why do you ask, August?"

"Well, did I?"

"Who has been talking to you, darling?" Marianne insisted.

"Some of the frolics at play say that there are freople that don't come out of an eggoplasm, but they don't know where they come from, but anyway, they have hair. That's long, fine, stringy stuff, or sometimes curly, that..."

"Please don't talk about that at the table, August. Of course you hatched from an eggoplasm," Dorothy said firmly, "just like everyone else. You mustn't listen to naughty talk."

"But Daddymom, if hair..."

"If you use that word again at the table you'll just have to leave," Dorothy said.

"But I have one."

"Where?" Dorothy gasped, her face paling to tea-with-cream.

She grabbed August by the shoulder. "Show me."

August turned sideways and held up his knee. Just above the knee a very fine, almost invisible hair grew.

Marianne clutched both hands to her heart. "Pull it," she whispered. "Pull it!"

Maybe, then, her frillic, had stopped eating the instant August said "hair" and was now examining her own knees. "Did I come out of the same eggohatch as August?" she asked apprehensively.

"No, no, don't worry, sweetheart, and even if you had it wouldn't matter, because frillics and frolics coming out of the same eggohatches at different times are not linked in any way before they are given to their families. Just because August has a—a—well, I mean, you're genetically safe, darling, that's all." Dorothy glanced around the table. Nobody but August had eaten a bite since the conversation started.

She pushed her rollaround back from the table. "So much for this family dinner—but at least we did abide by the Alphabet rules—we sat down together. I think we must have a talk with you at once, August—and you too, Maydeen honey, about life."

"Aw," August began.

"August, you're ten years old and in the fifth grade at play, and you have your whole life—forty years by Alphabet rules—ahead of you. You don't realize, little one, that your loose tongue is a danger to you, so we must talk."

"But not me! I'm seventeen, and almost ready to graduate from play, and I know all about life," Maydeen said. "Besides, I have to velvetize my turvet. I'm going dancing with Shela."

"That's another thing I want to talk to you about," Dorothy said.

"But I haven't got time! I really have to velvetize my turvet!" Maydeen protested.

"We never thought of anything but flying when we were young frillics, did we, Marianne?" Dorothy said. "Why anybody would want to stay on the ground and dance, I wouldn't know."

"Oh, Daddymom, it's fun to use your feet. You can tap and slide them in a certain rhythm, and when they pat the floor it feels nice."

"Stop looking for more hairs, August," Dorothy said sharply. "I'm not so sure, Maydeen. It's not too good to show you're enjoying anything the least bit strange or new. At least wear your levitation camisole, and if you see anybody watching you too closely, get off the ground quickly."

"Oh, honestly, Daddymom," Maydeen said, pouting. Then her bright smile broke through, and she hugged Dorothy. "You're always right, Daddymom. I'll do it."

Marianne looked lovingly at Maydeen. "Well, anyway, your turvet is beautiful just as it is. You don't need to velvetize it."

Maydeen's turvet was indeed lovely, a soft but brilliant living cap of turquoise blue that matched her eyes and set off her caramel-toffee skin and pink smiling mouth beautifully. Maydeen had one dimple that gave her smile an impish charm, and frillics flocked around her like gay butterflies, their multiple-hued turvets like clusters of flowers.

Maydeen had never been troublesome and inquisitive like August, Marianne reflected. A real joy to any Daddymom-Mommydad's heart, or to any Dama-Mada's, for that matter. "Go ahead and velvetize your turvet if you want to, darling, I don't mind," she said, and Maydeen flashed her dimpling smile as she drifted out.

August was a wonderful little frolic despite his brashness and curiosity, she thought, but that hair...well, no she postponing it. The whole family must learn to deal with this.

"Come into the control room, August. We'll do our chores, and then you and Daddymom and I will talk."

"Aw," August protested, but they led him gently into the control room. The control panel in the north wall winked with colored lights and jeweled pushbuttons. Efficient and enormously attractive, it was the principle feature that had sold the house to Marianne and Dorothy. Marvin and Douglas, the Mada and Dama next door, were always having trouble with their panel, and their pushbuttons were plain, not jeweled. Their frolic and frillic, little Freddie and Shela, were somewhat plain and troublesome too, Marianne often thought.

Pushing the oblit-button, Marianne had her chore done. In the dining room the plate mats, utensils and untouched food had yielded to the oblit's tremendous suction and were well on their way to atomization and recycling. She didn't dial the breakfast setting; August or Maydeen might bring home a friend to stay over, and she could dial it in the morning.

"Why do I have to do chores?" August wanted to know, lagging.

"Alphabet rules," Dorothy said. "Chores build character in frolics."

Making a face, August stared to push the Tru-Tree fresher button, but decided to revitalize the lawn first, so pushed the Tru-Turf misting, combing and fluffing buttons instead. The soft musical tones of the mechanical trio could be heard starting up.

Dorothy pushed one of the environment buttons, choosing the family's favorite fragrance, which also eliminated all germs and released an infinitesimal amount of effergine, so good for the circulation and skin. "Well, Mommydad," she said to Marianne.

Marianne sighed. "I wouldn't know where to start," she said, sitting down. "You begin."

"Why all this fuss?" August said. "I learn everything I need to know in the subliminal sections at play. What else is there?"

"They don't teach you the truth about different kinds of freople and—and hair, and things like that, until next years," Dorothy said. "Apparently

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the frolics at play are talking and passing around misinformation, as young frolics will." She shifted uncomfortably and examined her fingernails.

"It's sort of hard to explain," she began, "but a long, long time ago freople didn't use the Buddy System, which was set up by the Alphabet System. Men married women, and women married men. There were exceptions, but usually that's how it went. Men and women, in pairs."

"Ugh," August commented, squirming restlessly.

"We know, darling," Marianne soothed. "It's hard to believe, but it was true. All over the world."

"The result was," Dorothy continued, "that men and women together created their own babies. Millions. Billions."

"How did they do that?" August demanded.

"Well, uh, instead of, uh..." Dorothy looked helplessly at Marianne.

"It's like this," Marianne said bravely. "Instead of wholesome and harmless sex as we know it now, between freople of the same sex, men had something called sperm, and they planted this in women, and that caused babies to grow in the womens' carrying baskets."

"I don't believe it," August muttered, looking disgusted.

"Well, it's true, and gradually the world got so full of freople, or people, as they called them then, that they were running out of air and water. They hated each other so much and killed each other so much..."

"What's killed?" August interrupted.

"Putting to death," Marianne said, after a moment's thought.

"What's death?" August wanted to know.

"Oh, my," Dorothy said. "Hard going, isn't it, Mommydad! Let me try. When freople didn't come from eggoplasm, but were what they called 'born,' they were always separated when they left the world. Even if they hatched—I mean, were 'born' on the same day, they didn't walk happily together to the atomizer and recycler as we do. They didn't even know for sure they would be recycled; they never knew when they'd go; and they called it death, or dying."

"They always went alone, and it was almost always sad, or terrible. Then

the world got so crowded that freople fought savagely and sent as many of each other as they could to death, bloodying and hurting each other on the way."

August shivered. "I would hate for anybody to bloody or hurt me," he said, "and I wouldn't do it to anybody else."

"Of course you wouldn't! Well, these awful problems had to be resolved, so the Alphabet Group of twenty-six scientists developed the eggoplasm system of populating with perfect freople, grown from scientifically compounded molecules. They engineered the de-sperming of men, and activated the elimination of carrying baskets in women. You see, the Alphabet Group consisted of thirteen men and thirteen women, and neither could agree on which basic design to eliminate, so we have both."

"However, as to skin shade, the scientists were of every shade imaginable, and this had caused much strife, so they developed our beautiful caramel-toffee shade."

"Why do I have to listen to all this?" August grumbled. "All I said was 'hair' and I get a lecture on genetics. We had subliminal section genetics in the third grade at play. Can't I go over next door and play with Freddie?"

"Not yet. I'm coming to why you have to hear all this. All hair, August, is nasty. All hair was eliminated in the perfect eggoplasm freople. All hair. Instead, we have turvetts on our heads and nothing anywhere else; where hair was just a vexation. But—well—occasionally a hair appears from nowhere, and..."

"Now, we love you, darling," Marianne took over, "and we want you to know that having a hair on your knee doesn't make you different or strange to us, but—does anyone else know about this?"

"Nope."

"Thank Alphabet," Marianne breathed. "Keep the hair pulled, darling, and nobody will ever know."

"You see, August," Dorothy said, "there's always been this persistent rumor that because there were some isolated elements of the pre-eggoplasm fertilizing medium used in the formula, there is occasionally a throwback. Nobody has proof of ever having seen this spectacle, but there is even a name for it—the Abominable Throwback; supposedly it has hair, and can make babies with other throwbacks."

August ran his hand over his brown turvet, his emerald-and-brown eyes anxious. His eyes wandered toward his knee. "I don't like frillies at all," he said. "Daddymom? Mommydad?"

"Yes, darling?"  
"Where is the Alphabet Group now?"

"The Alphabet Group synthesized itself and became the Twenty-Six-In-One, and it controls everything from another plane. But you know that."

"How do we know that we'll be recycled?"

"Don't worry about that, darling. We know, that's all." Marianne frowned a little. "We're 'way off the subject. To get back to it, never tell anyone about this, especially Freddie. Marvin and Douglas would never let him play with you again if they even suspected you had a hair, and they might not let their Sheila fly around with Maydeen, either, let alone dance."

August looked momentarily crushed, then brightened. "Now that I pulled it, maybe it won't come back," he suggested.

"Of course it won't! We know it won't! Well, we certainly won't let it, anyway," Mommydad and Daddymom cried in encouraging unison.

They watched from the doorway as August soared next door to engage Freddie in a game of skylark tag. Each drew a long breath; they turned to speak, and tears came to Marianne's violet eyes. Dorothy patted Marianne's lavender turvet. "There, love, it's going to come out all right. Wait and see. August is a fine little frolic. He'll be all right."

Dorothy's own mint-green eyes were clouded with worry, but she kept her voice falsely hearty. "Let's watch Tru-Life," she suggested, "at least until Geoffrey gets here. He's visiting Marvin and Douglas from Back East, remember? And they're going to send him over here to get him out of the mess while their control panel's being repaired. Again."

Marianne's preoccupation didn't waver. "It's just that—two things at once—Maydeen dancing instead of flying and August with a hair—and and they've always been so..."

"I know, I know," Dorothy said. "Don't cry, Mommydad. They're going to be all right, honestly. Try to get your mind off of it."

Tru-Life seemed to be anything but true to life, with absolutely unreal



freople walking right into their control room offering dubious wares to velvetize their turvets and fabulize their environments. Dorothy was on the point of obliterating the whole thing anyway, when Marianne said, "Look!"

"What?"

"It must be that out-of-town friend from next door—what's his name? Geoffrey...he...I can't believe it. He's walking over here."

"Hm!"

Oblitting Tru-Life, they asked Geoffrey with a little air of reservation. After all, a walker!

"Thank you so much," Geoffrey said. "Mmm," he added. "I love that scent. And isn't that effergine? Nice!"

As Dorothy dialed drinks she tried to analyze her swift and startling feelings about Geoffrey. First of all, he was completely charming, so that she couldn't understand why she had a feeling of wariness.

Any friend of Marvin and Douglas had to be perfectly all right, but...yes...there was something. Passing drinks, Dorothy decided it was his feet. He wore flexible sandals like everyone else, but his feet weren't delicate like other freople's; they were nearly coarse, in fact. Otherwise he was quite attractive, his cinnamon turvet and amber eyes blending beautifully with his caramel-toffee skin.

Was it caramel-toffee? Observing him closely while he and Marianne talked idly, she decided that it must be, though there was something that suggested lightness about his skin. Different, different. She shook her head. She didn't like that brilliant-evil smile, either.

"I'm here to evaluate the subliminal section method of education as compared to the injection system for the local Play Board," Geoffrey said, in answer to a question from Marianne.

"I noticed you walking over here," Dorothy said abruptly. "Is your levitation vest malfunctioning?"

"No, it's working fine, but I like to walk short distances," Geoffrey explained. At their startled reaction, he tempered the statement. "Of course I flew in from Back East. My multiple-speed long-distance levitation vest is a joy. I love long-distance flying, and I wouldn't want to walk far, but it's sort of fun for short hops, and it's as good for your circulation and skin as effergine. We often dance Back East, too. Shela's over there sulking next door

because her Mada and Dama won't let her go dancing with your frillic tonight. Sometimes I think Marvin and Douglas are too strict."

Marianne and Dorothy were still trying to sort out their reactions to that statement when Maydeen floated slowly in, her turquoise eyes on Geoffrey. All other eyes were on Maydeen as she settled gently; she really was a beautiful frillic, Dorothy noted with pride.

After introductions, Maydeen dialed herself a Tru-Kitten and sat quietly petting it, asking an occasional question about Geoffrey's "Back East," apparently fascinated by both the subject and the speaker. In fact, her concentration on Geoffrey made Dorothy and Marianne quite nervous, and neither protested when Geoffrey remarked that the module replacer must be finished next door and he had best leave.

"I'll look you up at play tomorrow, Maydeen," Geoffrey said as he was leaving. "I'm going to be at your play to set up preliminary investigations."

His manner was quite conventional, but when he took her hand momentarily on leaving, Maydeen snatched her hand away as if it had been burned, and then in confusion she went quickly to the control panel, obliterated the Tru-Kitten and pretended to be interested in dialing a bedtime snack. She had had the strangest electric sensation at the touch, almost—almost as if Geoffrey were a *frillic*! She felt shamed, and her caramel-toffee skin pinked to rosebeige when she turned and saw both Marianne and Dorothy looking at her.

Saying good night breathlessly, she flew to her room, where she sank down and looked at herself in the 3D mirror. She questioned the turquoise eyes with the deep down spark and the surface radiance, and she turned away.

"I'll think about Shela. I'll think about my new long-distance levitation camisole that I'm going to get when I'm 18. I'll think about..." For the first time in her life, her mind was troubled. She tried to send that troubled mind to another plane, the plane of the Alphabet. "Why is it so wrong to be different?" she asked the Alphabet. "Why is it wrong for me to think of Geoffrey?"

No answer came to her from the Alphabet.

It's a shame, Maydeen thought. It's an awful shame. She closed her eyes. *All right, then, she thought*

defiantly, *I'll think about him.*

That defiant thought was also a first in Maydeen's life. It caused her a great deal of discomfort, but gradually she became accustomed to it and drifted to sleep. In her sleep she dreamed of Geoffrey, his cinnamon turvet and amber eyes glowing ever ahead of her as he seemed to retreat, beckoning.

The next afternoon, the book Marianne was trying to read slipped from her hands and dropped to the Tru-Turf when she saw Geoffrey and Maydeen walking slowly toward her. Maydeen walking, in broad Tru-Light! Geoffrey and Maydeen! A strange combination of fear and resentment seized Marianne, and she tried to force herself to be calm. Then Shela soared overhead, circled once and settled just as Dorothy came out of the house.

"Hello, everybody," Geoffrey said.

"Hi," Shela said shortly. "Maydeen, are we going obstacle flying tonight?"

"If Geoffrey will come too," Maydeen said.

"Maydeen, what are you thinking of, darling? You know frolics don't fly with frillics!" Dorothy was aghast.

"Geoffrey says they do, Back East. Don't they, Geoffrey?"

"All the time," Geoffrey said, his brilliant-evil smile flashing.

"Well, it isn't considered nice or even decent here," Shela said pointedly. "No matter what they do Back East, see?"

"Anyway, I thought you didn't like to fly short distances much," Marianne said with equal directness.

"I don't, much," Geoffrey said. "Well, I'll be getting on next door. It's been so friendly here I hate to leave. Bye, Maydeen."

Three stars of pure distrust and Maydeen's turquoise blue gaze of distrust followed him.

"Why did you have to act like that?" Maydeen demanded.

"You know we must always be careful about strangers, especially if they seem different," Marianne said.

"He's not that kind of a stranger, and he's not different at all!"

"Not different?" Dorothy shook her head. "If he isn't different—did you see his feet?"

"I did," Shela volunteered. "And I don't think he's caramel-toffee, either. I think he's tea-with-cream with a tan."

"Oh, honestly," Maydeen said. "Nobody, absolutely nobody, has a

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tan. You know that. Why, it's against Alphabet rules. I wish you'd leave him alone."

"Glad to, believe me," Shela said.

"Did I ever tell you how very funny you are, Shela?" Maydeen said coldly. Shela burst into tears and flew away, sobbing.

"Maydeen," Marianne said in despair, "that doesn't sound like our little frillic! Why, you've never, ever..."

"I'm not a little frillic any more, Mommydad," Maydeen said. "I'm sorry I don't sound nice. But it's so unfair to pick on perfectly fine freople simply because they're strange to you. And I think Shela is jealous. That's just ridiculous."

*I hope so, Dorothy and Marianne thought simultaneously. I hope so.*

After play the following day August flew overhead, zigged and zagged a few times and settled on the Tru-Turf. "If you like Bomable Throwbacks, does that make you Bomable?" he asked, with his usual bluntness.

"Abominable, darling," Marianne corrected absently, before it registered. Then, "What?"

"Who's been talking about Abominable Throwbacks?" Dorothy demanded.

"Some of the frolics at play said Maydeen liked a Bom—an Abomable..."

"You see, Maydeen?" Marianne's tone was anguished. "If your conduct is the least bit strange it gives rise to ugly gossip."

"This is just idiotic," Maydeen said. "Unfair, too. Geoffrey is just like you or anyone else! There is absolutely nothing strange about him!"

"His attitude toward you is strange, sweetheart, and yours toward him. We've been worried. We know you're all right, Maydeen, but...well, it's so dangerous, you just don't...this settles it. You're not to see him again. The gossip'll die down, I hope."

"Gossip? Why would anybody gossip?"

"They probably figure he might plant a Throwback seed in your carrying basket," August said wisely. "They say he's one of those things, and if you like him, then you *might* have a carrying basket. And if he's one, and you have, than blick-oblit, blick-oblit, for both of you."

"August, darling, go play with Freddie," Marianne commanded. Then she turned slowly to Maydeen. "Now do you see?" she said heavily. "Oh, darling, I can't bear the thought! You *must*..."

Impatiently Maydeen flew into the house. "Don't forget, August is the one with the hair," she flung over her shoulder. "Not me."

Early that evening, while flying an obstacle course to prepare herself for the test she must pass in order to qualify for her long-distance levitation camisole, she nearly clipped into one of the obstacle balloons when she saw Geoffrey. Slowing down, she flew as if drawn by a tether to where he was hovering. Geoffrey took her by the wrist, his amber eyes glowing.



"We can't hover here—freople will talk," Maydeen said nervously, looking at the fliers below and above them.

"Maydeen, I know you'll be getting your long-distance camisole soon, and I want you to know there's a place where freople *won't* talk, and...oh Alphabet, here comes Shela."

Maydeen did an exquisite backward hummingbird retreat. "I'll see you tomorrow at play," she whispered, her heart hammering.

"No, I'm not scheduled to be at your play tomorrow. Tonight! Tonight, in the Tru-Tree behind your window!"

Maydeen nodded breathlessly as Shela flew up to them, and then she turned and flew back to the obstacle course.

In the middle of the night, Dorothy and Marianne were wakened out of troubled sleep when the muted spring peeper trills they had chosen as background noises were suddenly switched off, and light illuminated the room. Sitting up, they stared at their tear-stained sickened Maydeen. "Oh, Mommydad, Daddymom," she wept. "You were right! You're always right!"

"What happened?" Marianne cried. "Oh, Maydeen, what happened?"

"I met Geoffrey in the Tru-Tree outside my window. I don't know what came over me, but I did. And he was telling me how there's a place for couples like us—I didn't know for sure what he meant, but his voice just hypnotized me. And I put my hand up where the V of his levitation vest would be, and it felt—ugh, *spongy*, you know, under his cape. And then we decided to sit on a bigger branch, a little lower down.

"His cape and vest caught on a branch and pulled up, and oh, Mommydad, Daddymom, in the glow from my window..." Maydeen burst into fresh tears.

"What? What?" they asked, clutching her.

"Hair," Maydeen gasped. "Thick, curly, ugh, awful—all over his front." She gagged and sobbed.

"How terrible for a nice little frillic to have to see anything so obscene," Marianne said. "There, there, darling. You'll never have to see him again, thank Alphabet."

"No permanent harm done to our darling frillic," Dorothy said, smoothing Maydeen's turquoise turvet gently.

"But I caused gossip," Maydeen mourned. "I caused gossip. I'm so sorry. You'll never be able to hold your heads up again on account of me."

"We'll think of something to stop the talk," Dorothy promised.

"An engagement party for Maydeen and Shela would stop any ugly rumors that Maydeen might not be following Alphabet rules," Marianne ventured after a moment's thought.

"You're always right, Mommydad, but—do you think her Mada and Dama would allow her to..."

"Just leave it to me," Marianne assured her.

And so, Maydeen and Shela stood and greeted the guests. Marianne and Dorothy thought they looked like two delectable pastel confections on the green, green Tru-Turf, and they silently thanked the Twenty-Six-in-One that things had worked out. Neither their frillic nor their frolic would ever have to be obliterated, for to make everything perfect, August's hair really hadn't grown back, thank Alphabet.







# AT THE DIXIE-APPLE WITH THE SHOOFLY-PIE KID

By Michael Bishop

## ANOTHER DAY AT THE SUPERMARKET

Going to the Dixie-Apple. Everybody was heading that way, down to the Level 4 Mall where this morning a visitor from the 61 Cygnus system was going to be on hand for the Dixie-Apple Autumn Savings Sale. Cullen knew it was a gimmick, the come-on of the year, but lately, holding his grief at arm's length, shucking about on the Dole Roll with nothing else to do, he'd sniffed at every come-on tossed his way, just like a pigeon pecking along a trail of popcorn until the trap at the end's disclosed and there's no way to hop back out.

We're all of us pigeons, Cullen thought. And so he added himself to the crowd sashaying along the emporia-lined mall toward the city's most popular comestibulary.

Everybody loved the Dixie-Apple Comestibulary, even folks not bigwig enough to belong to the Feasters Sodality, whose members had access to the Fresh Meat Retreat off the market's final aisle. Pigeon pot pies were as close to poultry as people like Cullen ordinarily got, but he didn't much resent the feasters who had their way with both finer fowl and an occasional ill-battered slab of beef or pork imported from the Open. No point in resentment. What did it get you? Because this question brought back the specter of Cullen's grief, he shoved it aside, refused to answer it. The Dixie-Apple was a happy place, after all. And it wasn't impossible to cope along fine on synthapro comestibles and all the foil-wrapped baubles Management kept shelved and stacked about the market for the financially disadvantaged. Hey, nobody didn't like going to the Dixie-Apple!

Especially when their hither-ye-up of

the week was a refugee from a sun that had gone nova a long while back. A Cygnusian, the newstapes liked to call it. Him, rather. Cullen wanted to see the Cygnusian. He'd been gimmicked as surely as everybody else.

Going to the Dixie-Apple. Got nowhere else to go.

Cullen waltzed past paraplegic scat-singers, vending-cart impressarios, Mall gals, fall guys, freaks, fops, and faerie folk until he found the caboose of the train of people snaking into the Dixie-Apple Comestibulary. No one in line but languid teenagers and sleek middies, physically fit citizens all. These bored-seeming people did a disorderly, almost imperceptible lockstep toward the chromium doorways over which hung a cardboard-on-burlap banner proclaiming DIXIE-APPLE AUTUMN SAVINGS SALE / FEATURING "CYGNOR THE CYGNUSIAN" / TODAY ONLY.

Today only, mused Cullen at the end of this line. Monday, Autumn the 16th. And "Cygnor" wasn't really the critter's name. That was what Management was calling him because his real name was an unpronounceable mystery, as vowelless as the Tetragrammaton. But when the L.P.A. still hadn't found you a job and your heart hurt something fierce, just going to see ole Cygnor, whatever name he ought to be called by, was a way of shaking the Pluto-gloomy, smoky Monday blues. "Deed it was.

Nevertheless, it seemed that gloom was on most of these people. They looked blanched out and logy. In front of Cullen were a pair of deep-purple squas with papooses strapped to their backs, and even *they* looked a trifle faded. (One of the mamas did, anyhow. The

other gave him a slow but zestful smile.) And under the merciless fluoros the gray ghosts in the D -A. queue were so pale and sapped of pigment that Cullen felt sure his hand would penetrate their Caucasoid flesh like stainless steel through lemon jello. So right there at the end of the line, in order to melt this gloom with jollity, Cullen let his legs slide back and forth and sang aloud the lyrics of an old song he'd just remembered:

Shoofly pie 'n' apple pandowdy,

Makes yo' eyes light up

'N' yo' stomach say, "HOWDY!"

One of the squas managed, by an aggressive use of her elbows, to move up several places in the queue. The other woman—she was no more than seventeen despite the kiddo in her carrier—gave him another smile and patted her hands together in time. The two women weren't together, apparently. OK. Not everybody in this press-ganged, media-mounted crowd was a washout. Nohuh. This gal, baby on her back, had a with-it rating right up there in the high positives. Cullen winked at her. Cullen played to her. Cullen sang his song. Tap tap, stomp stomp, clap clap. He concluded his performance with a yake-it! gesture. What eyes. As big as amber glass ashrays.

"Nice," growled the big-eyed mama-child. "You goin' to see it?"

"Him," Cullen corrected, not fussily.

"My daddy say it a it," said a little black boy squeezing up from behind. He was shirtless, and his body, unlike most of the others in line, had hue, solidity, suppleness. "My daddy say it a 'chine, he say it a disney'd 'traption. Nuts 'n' bolts 'n' all like that."

"No more'n you or me," Cullen res-

ponded. He saw that fifteen or twenty people were now riding the queue's caboose, several of them peering about nervously, rubbing their chins, shifting their weight from hip to hip . . .

The little boy's name was Sammy. He insisted that The Thing inside was "a it, not a him." Insinuating himself between Cullen and the big-eyed mama-child Sammy said, "I got to buy some



Co' Cola. My daddy got to have his Co' Cola, that why I come."

"Amen," Cullen murmured. But in truth he was a believer, at least in this. He knew that "Cygnor the Cygnusian" was really, absolutely, a quasi-human sort of animal from eleven-odd light-years. He wouldn't've come if he'd thought otherwise—even with pselami and King Cotton peach in short supply

in his Level 9 cubicle, even with the smoky Monday blues smoldering in his bowels. Who'd fight this crowd for a peek at a mere machine?

"Why'd you come?" he asked the mama-child, who was reaching over her shoulder to wipe her baby's nose. Canted to one side in its carrier, the baby stared bewilderedly at Cullen. Helpless. Hauled about at other's whims. What a cross, being a baby . . .

"Everybody comin'," the girl said in a funny accent he hadn't noticed before. "So I come too, you know. My ver' first time."

Her name was Bayangumay, and as they moved toward the Dixie-Apple's doors she told Cullen her story. She was just up from the New Orleans Nucleus, where nobody'd even heard of any interstellar immigrants from the Swan. She was here because one dull-to-same, same-to-dull day in Summer her pledge-bound bodyburner—Jean-Paul, by name—had gone larki and shut her and little Etude out of the cubicle (Bayangumay said *cubicle*) they all shared. For months their relationship had been sour, Jean-Paul just standoffish, funky mean, and even their baby had been a kind of experiment, an issue Bayangumay was only now beginning to see in its own "personhood." Before, Etude had been nothing but a political contract, a cease-fire agreement.

"Also," Bayangumay said, "Jean-Paul he want to see if . . . if he work, you know." She had a throaty voice, very deep.

"Worked?"

"Yes. If he workin' correctly, you see."

"My daddy don' work," Sammy offered, "'cause L.P.A. can't find him nuthin'."

Cullen ignored this. "What happened? When Jean-Paul shut you out?"

What happened was that Jean-Paul yogically stilled his heartbeat, collapsed into himself so far that his metabolic processes slowed to near motionlessness and his body temperature just dropped and dropped. The cubicle's auto-refrigerant system, a component of the bio-monitoring equipment required by the UrNu Housing Authority, clicked on. The system had taken Jean-Paul for a sudden-deader and was humming hard and frosty to preserve his "corpse." That was just what Jean-Paul had wanted, that was precisely how he had chosen to go. He froze, Jean-Paul did,

and that was the end of him, suicidally cool right up to the ultimate and ineradicable still point. Cold. A confounding iciness of the will and emotions, his mind, personality, and essence all clocked down to Absolute Zero . . .

"Wow," said Cullen under his breath.

Bayangumay only smiled. She had come to Atlanta through the transit-tunnels because Jean-Paul's older brother, Gustave, had used an esoteric personal contact to find her a job with Atlanta's Human Development Commission, as one of the all-night baby-sitters for the children of those UrNu employees working what was called the Cremation Shift. "You are an animal," Gustave had told her when he packed her off. "Jean-Paul was pure light, pure mind, and you sullied him, quenched the bright fever he lived by. Go." Just like in the holodation dramas they showed in L.P.A. waiting rooms. Out into the storm, young woman. Never darken my endeavor for *satori* again.

"Jesus," whispered Cullen, an incredulous hush in his voice.

Because the line lagged and because Bayangumay was new to the Mall, Cullen tried to tell her what it would be like inside the comestibulary. "You ever heard of Whoops-a-Deals?" he asked her. "You ever heard of So-Sorry Markups?"

"Beg pardon, Fly-Pie Mon."

"Ain't there a Dixie-Apple in the New Orleans Nucleus?"

"Oh, no. We get our groj-ree at computer terminal, you know, one big one each level. No elbows, no angers. Much better, I think."

And so Cullen warned Bayangumay that at the Dixie-Apple the stockers, butchers, and produce people were all given a weekly quota of goods to mis-mark and a specified range of prices within which the mismarking had to be conducted. The "accidentally" inflated prices called So-Sorry Markups, the "accidentally" slashed ones Whoops-a-Deals. And because the shopping carts in the Dixie-Apple rolled at a steady, unnegotiable clip on invisible electric beams, you had to be quick to grab the infrequent Whoops-a-Deals, maybe quicker yet to avoid the more common So-Sorry Markups. Closed-circuit cameras were trained on the relentlessly herded shoppers so that you could be identified and docked an appropriate

number of earnings if you were cheap enough to try sneaking a So-Sorry Markup back into the flow of goods, at a point downstream so to speak.

Cullen thrived on these contests with electronic surveillance. He was enviously good at snatching Whoops-a-Deals and bypassing So-Sorry Markups. If he did make a mistake he was also pretty adept at either lobbing the unwanted merchandise into someone else's basket while rounding a blind corner or deep-sixing it in a frozen-food locker while pretending to rummage the ice-milk containers and pizza paks. Hey, shopping the D.-A. Way made the day dance, he told Bayangumay, when there wasn't nothing else to do . . . !

"System ver' curious," Bayangumay said. "Soun' fun, mebbe."

"Yeah," Cullen agreed, suddenly less enthusiastic. "Sometimes."

"I alway' come," Sammy interjected. "I alway' the one what do the shoppin' in my fam'ly. I know how, I do."

Cullen refrained from recounting the disadvantages of the D.-A. Way. The worst downer was that even if you'd only come for a bottle of catsup you had to hook up to an autocart—by means of a metal cuff with a nonknotting, flex-otorque chain—and Injun-glide the whole gaudy gauntlet, up and back, up and back, all nine aisles, until you came cruising bruised and indignant into the checkout stands with your lone bottle of Reddrop Tomato Condiment riding like a gargantuan, vitrified member in your autocart's kiddie seat. Sometimes the D.-A.'s herky-jerky system made you think dirty and talk to yourself, it surely did.

And it wasn't much comfort that the UrNu Food, Engineered Edibles, & Drug Authority argued that the D.-A. Way merely required you to budget, plan your needs beforehand, avoid small-purchase shopping, and develop both physical dexterity and highly desirable "reservoirs of patience."

Yessir, thought Cullen. P.A.T.I.E.N.C.E. As in, "Leggo that Whoops-a-Deal, you thugster, I had it first!" And there were enough pick-pockets around that maybe "physical dexterity" wasn't so beneficial a gift to society as the people at F.E.E.D. seemed to think. Suddenly suspicious, Cullen flattened his hands on his slash pockets and looked about. A strange assortment of people on hand today, full of twitches and shuffles. Maybe it's just

me . . . .

"What matter, Fly-Pie Mon?" Bayangumay asked Cullen. "You don' like shoppin' Dixie-Apple?"

"Sure," he said, surfacing from his reverie and his suspicions. "If you're a hive-dweller it's the only game in town."

No more time for talking. They were in the noisy, hoi-polloi-packed Dixie-Apple Comestibulatory. A wall to their left blocked their view of the store's interior aisles. Each customer was a pinball awaiting the plunger that would send him shooting into a realm of targets, bumpers, traps, buzzers, and blating lights. Yeah, the Dixie-Apple was a pinball machine, just like the antiquated ones in the Earnie Arcade on the Mall.

A steady stream of autocarts came careening through a pair of flapping doors in the lefthand wall. Then the carts cornered neatly and headed up the plunger-aisle that would finally feed them, one by one, into the guts of the machine.

*Ping! Blat! Ping!*

And somewhere inside this game, this engine, this electric maze was "Cygnor the Cygnusian," installed solely to maximize customer participation and boost corporate profits. So what? A glimpse of Cygnor, Cullen figured, was worth every extorted earne he plonked down in homage to the grandiose crassness of the Dixie-Apple's campaign . . . .

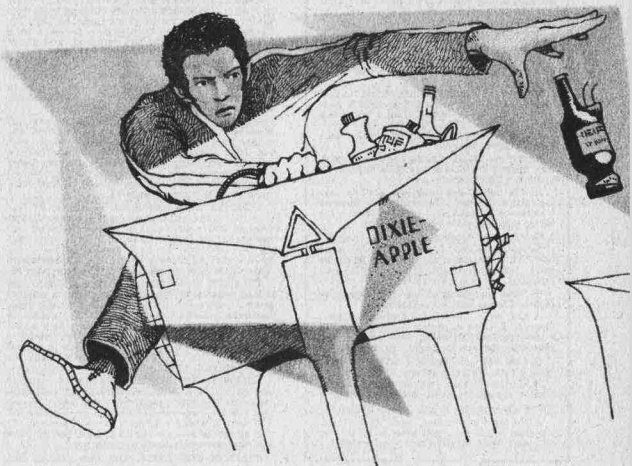
A man in a D.-A. uniform grabbed Bayangumay by the wrist, yanked her forward, and handcuffed her to one of the eerily cruising carts. She stumbled, caught herself, and then tripped off after her basket at the brisk, no-nonsense pace these carts demanded of everyone, regardless of age or infirmity. If you couldn't keep up you were supposed to send someone hale and capable in your place. If you happened to fall while navigating the market's intricate ups and downs, your instructions were to drag the capsized autocart out of the flow of traffic and wait until an employee saw fit to undo your cuff, help you up, and escort you in hot dishonor to the checkout stands for identipix, x-rays, and a laminated reprimand.

Hey, though, little Sammy was taking off!

Cullen realized that, big-brotherlike, he had been gripping the boy's naked clavicles for the last fifteen minutes. He realized this when Sammy shot out from under his hands, skipped past the D.-A. manacle-man, and jumped into the autocart behind Bayangumay's.

"You!" shouted the attendant. "Not allowed! Not allowed!" He blew a whistle, but the Muzak oozing out of wall and ceiling speakers and the human din inside the store muffled the whistle's shrillness.

Spunky Sammy didn't even look around. Inside the wire basket he hunkered on his heels and rode toward



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Within a short span, she met and happily married a young and handsome attorney. See page 47 of this amazing guide!

**CHANTS UNITE HIS FAMILY.** After years of misery, Lester M's wife left him and took their infant son. Lester turned to the Chant on page 28: "I... n... b... t... m... o... p... h... p..."  
In a few days his wife and son returned, and aware that they would live a different life!

**CHANTS LESSEN SICKNESS.** Dora T. was nearly sixty and the doctors told her she had an incurable ailment. She used two Mystic Chants to overcome age and sickness. In less than a month, her symptoms decreased. See pages 31-33.

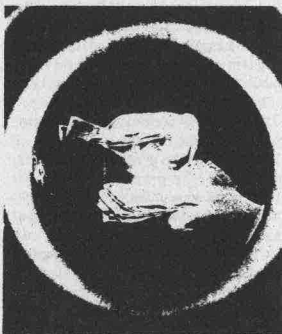
**CHANTS BRING SUCCESS.** A young girl slaved as a lowly clerk. To get out of this rut, she said: "I... a... w... c... p... a... c... s... a... p..."  
ten times a day. Lo and behold, she was given a position designing new fashions, making more money than she had ever dreamed possible! Would you like an exciting well-paying job? Use the complete set of Chants on page 51.

**CHANTS FOR PAINS.** A woman of 45 (see page 82) suffered from pains each month that were so severe she had to go to bed. A friend told her about this Mystic Chant: "I... n... l... m... a... b... c... w... t... p... p... p... o... f... g..."  
h... and she showed immediate improvement. Take a few minutes and say the Chant on page 80.

**CHANTS FOR HIDDEN TREASURE.** An elderly woman had a small home on a plot of ground where she lived after her husband died. Once the insurance money was spent, she had no source of income and used a Mystic Chant to get money. That night, she and her husband appeared to her and told her to dig at a certain spot. She found \$15,000! You too can use the Chant on page 125.

**CHANTS FOR OPERATIONS.** A woman needed \$1,000 to help her mother get an operation. She kept repeating the Mystic Chant: "I... w... l... s... o... o... f..."  
The next morning a famous surgeon assured her she could operate for no charge. See on page 144 how the operation was performed!

**CHANTS FOR LUCK.** One man playing dice



Try this Chant for Riches (see page 53) without risking a penny. See details below.

at Las Vegas used a special Mystic Chant. The first roll came up 11. He tried again, and they came up 11 again. The third roll was also successful, and as the man had let his dollar remain on the 11, his small investment brought him a small fortune! See how he did it on page 140.

**These True Histories Describe Only a Small Fraction of the Mystic Chants. In Addition, There Are Chants for:**

Finding lost relatives... Making a fortune in the stock market... Treating migraine headaches... Becoming a famous writer... Beauty... Getting a beautiful wife... Projecting your astral self to distant places... Achieving success in your own business... or anything else!

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## Your Questions About Mystic Chants Answered

**Q. Can I say these Mystic Chants just once, or do they have to be repeated over and over?**

A. Many of these Chants can be said once. Others are designed to be repeated a few times as this heightens their effectiveness. However, they are short and it would take you only a few minutes to repeat them.

**Q. Must these Chants be memorized?**

A. No. All you have to do is read them out. If you don't want to carry the book around, simply copy a few Chants on a card and put it in your pocket.

**Q. Are these Chants hard to read?**

A. Of course not. They are clearly printed, easy-to-read and do not contain words that are difficult to pronounce.

**Q. Are these Chants Black Magic or White Magic?**

A. Without a doubt, White Magic. In one case, an evil woman stole Laura M's husband using Black Magic. Laura used this chant on page 159: "I... k... I... y..."  
Within a few days her husband pleaded with her to take him back.

**Q. If these Mystic Chants are so powerful, why doesn't the author use them himself to become a millionaire?**

A. The author has done just that. By saying these Chants, Norvell has become wealthy and a celebrity. Now he devotes his life to making others rich and happy.

**Q. Are these Chants dangerous?**

A. About as dangerous as combing your hair. You see, they can be used only for good, sincere purposes. If used for an evil purpose, they will have no effect.

**Q. Time is running out for me. Can these Mystic Chants find me a husband?**

A. On page 24 you'll find the Chant George R. used to attract a rich partner in a law firm. What's more, you can attract a man with the precise character you admire.

**Q. I've only an eighth grade education. Will Mystic Chants work for me?**

A. Certainly. You need no special education or experience. Anyone can use them.

**Q. When is it best to use Mystic Chants?**

A. As soon as possible. Mail the No-Risk Coupon. We'll send you your book so you can start using Mystic Chants right away!



the top of the plunger-aisle. Around that bend, a different world, miracles and marvels . . . !

"Me," said Cullen to the manacle-man. "Hook me up."

To keep from interrupting the flow of baskets the manacle-man complied, and Cullen, too, trotted into the Dixie-Apple's maw.

How delicate and dainty this whole setup. Shopping baskets responding to electronic tractor beams rather than motorized wheel-ruts in the linoleum, which latter method would sure as Shiva provide more stability. But less excitement. There was excitement if you toppled. Irritation. Flusterment. What more could you ask for?

### *Blat! Ping! Blat!*

Bayangumay and Etude went around the miracle bend. Then Sammy, a pygmy in a cage, the mesh of his basket outlining tiny, nappy squares on the back of his head. Then Cullen cornered, and the chill air of the market was quickened again and again by fluorescent flickerings and the cries of shoppers trying mightily either to flimflam Management or call down tsuris on those who would hinder them in their selections. Sometimes the same shoppers engaged in both kinds of crying.

"Three Whoops-a-Deals on peanut butter at the end of Aisle 1," a young man two carts ahead of Bayangumay shouted. "I missed 'em, I missed 'em!" Peanut butter was protein, damn-near natural. Magnanimously he wanted to spare others the torment of his failure.

A moment later he was crying, "You! You up there! Don't touch that Tetra Nabinol! That's what I came for, I have to have it!" He ended by weeping and calling out curses. Someone had gotten the last bottle. Two failures, amid this babel and hubbub, were more than he could be magnanimous about. Far away, the ringing of the automatic registers counterpointed his despair.

Cullen looked toward the still hidden registers and finally saw "Cygnor the Cygnusian," Displaced Alien, one of the six refugees from the Cygnus nova now living in the Regency penthouse downtown. There he was, clearly visible, seated on a revolving glass platform suspended over the comestibulary's central aisle—positioned so that you

couldn't possibly miss him, no matter where in the Dixie-Apple you happened to be.

A heartstopping critter. A phizzog that would freeze lava. Nimbi played about his halo-crested head, and his mahogany countenance with its large, sideling hourglass pupils turned this way and that with a spooky majesty. Emperor of Gog, Magog, and the Urban Nucleus too was Cygnor the Cygnusian. Cool. Aloof. Impassive. You could see him all right, but you sure couldn't ask for his autograph or reach out to touch his arm just to see how that arm felt....

And on either side of Cygnor's throne Management had erected a pyramid of biodegradable toilet-tissue rolls, a nostalgia item for those whose bathbooths weren't equipped with Klens-o-Jet bidets, i.e., everyone in the five nethermost strata of the Basement. These pyramids revolved beside Cygnor as if in scaled-down synchrony with the Milky Way itself.

One cart ahead, little Sammy stood full up, put his right leg straight out behind him for balance, and swept a carton of softdrinks into his basket. Then, as the autocart cornered, he popped quick and pygmylike back into its cage and settled down for the rest of his ride.

They were heading into Aisle 3 now, and it was all Cullen could do to snatch the items he needed from shelves and frozen-food lockers as they sped toward the center of Ye Olde D.-A.

Displaced Alein, mumbled Cullen to himself. Debilitating Angina. Desdemona Applesmith . . .

Desdemona Applesmith, a girl he had loved, was two weeks dead of a cement-snapping, girder-gouging explosion that she herself had set off in front of a Level 1 branch office of the UrNu Housing Authority. This was Cullen's grief, and the fact that for two full New Calendar seasons she had pretended to be ill of a rare variety of angina pectoris. Angina pectoris, a disease of the heart usually occurring only among middies and senescent. Lord, he was a Dumb Ass for thinking of Desdemona while pinballing through this Grand Guignol machine. He had been a Dumb Ass for believing in her unlikely illness for so long . . .

A So-Sorry Markup came into Cul-

len's hand as if by its own volition, and he didn't even try to fob it off on the fox behind him.

### *Desdemona, why did you die?*

Well, she had died for a cause: "The demolishment of the Urban Nucleus as both an architectural mode and an instrument of oppression." Her very own words, those. And Cullen hadn't been any dumber than Dezdi's physicians. Even while feigning illness she had burned with a passionate intensity, and two doctors, smitten with Dezdi although at loggerheads with each other, had eventually given her the medication she had so desperately fought and feigned for. Nitroglycerin. That was what you used, after all, to ease along the victims of angina pectoris, and, clutching her arms across her breasts, whimpering a little every time she spoke, Desdemona had wheeled and cajoled until the two star-struck medics could no longer resist, city regulations be damned. Then, the illicit nitro in her possession, she had mounted a midnight commando assault on the UrNu Housing Authority, only to be hoisted with her own petard while trying to clamber out of range of the blast. The inside of the corridor, as one surviving witness later vowed, looked as if a miniature red sun had thrown molten streamers into every door panel and office front. In the larger picture, however, no harm done. Three days after a clean-up squad had eradicated every trace of her idealistic act, Desdemona died in Grady Memorial holding Cullen's hand and murmuring over and over again, "My heart, my heart." Cullen now chose to believe that she'd been addressing not her pain, but him....

At this point in his recollections a freezer bin of popsicles and ices caught Cullen's eye, and the rime glittering on their packaging seemed all at once so blinding and hurtful that he choked back a sob and scooped seven or eight of the popsicles into his cart.

Beautiful, he thought. Such beautiful frozen delights. Touched and irritated at the same time, he barely kept from falling. Why did they have to handcuff you to these carts . . . ?

Now Cullen wanted only to take Bayangumay aside and tell her the story of Desdemona Applesmith. Outside the Dixie-Apple he'd listened to Bayangumay's story of Jean-Paul and the auto-refrigerant system with such intentness that he hadn't even thought of counter-

## AT THE DIXIE APPLE

ing with a heartbreaking spiel of his own. He really hadn't. Only after seeing Cynnor surrounded by toilet tissue and zipping past a hundred of the comestibulary's in-house labels had dear, dead Dezdi popped into his mind. Only then. Maybe he was growing past his grief, maybe he was starting to shoofly pie it in his soul as well as in his overzooty outward actions....

Now they were heading into Aisle 4, barreling along.

Suddenly Cullen heard an explosion, a pop, and since nitroglycerin was on his mind he threw up an arm to ward off falling debris. No debris fell, at least not at once. Instead, the person in front of Bayangumay took a pair of wire cutters from his belt, snipped the flex-o-torque chain securing him to his autocart, and purposely turned the basket over, clattering the aisle with bottles, bags, and food packets. Then he ran. Bayangumay's autocart sloughed through this mess and toppled. Cullen saw a woman flash past him with a length of chain dangling from her wrist and realized that she had just duplicated the actions of the man. The cart behind Cullen was spinning on its side, throwing out its contents like a centrifuge. Up ahead, Sammy's basket plowed into Bayangumay and knocked her down.

The woman with the chain dangling from her wrist didn't even pause; she leapt over Sammy, sidled past Bayangumay's basket, and disappeared into Aisle 5.

Most of the comestibulary's customers were screaming. Overbalanced, Bayangumay was trying to struggle up from the floor. Sammy was squatting on his haunches now, too dumbfounded to move. Cullen yanked his cart off its invisible tractor beam and watched as another hoisterjack dangling a severed flex-o-torque strand slipped and slid through the mess he and his confederates had wrought. Going by, the hoisterjack made a triumphant gesture at Cullen and rolled his eyes.

For some reason all Cullen could hear was little Etude's terrified screaming. He tugged his fallen cart toward the child.

Overhead, a pigeon was flying about under the fluoros, and Cynnor the Cygnusian had begun swiveling his head to take in the scope and degree of the debacle. The Muzak cut off, and an alarm began to sound. Behind the checkout counters an iron grating clanged down

where ordinarily there was only a blowing air-wall tinted blue by the lamps in its generators.

Cullen froze and stared at the Displaced Alien staring down. The Dixie-Apple was all at once a closed system. This fact, the visitor on the platform understood, was enough to insure that the pinballs banging about inside it would eventually come to rest....

Cynnor the Cygnusian had been the only one in the market in a position to note the beginnings of this seeming riot. A moment before, a young woman passing beneath his platform had released a pigeon from a paper bag, blown up the bag, and then popped it with the flat of her hand.

At this signal, at least two guerrillas in each of the Dixie-Apple's aisles cut themselves loose from their carts and kicked the baskets over. Then, more than likely knowing themselves doomed, they ran for it. The hoisterjacks, Cynnor felt certain, were coreligionists of a prescribed understrata sect who feared that the Displaced Aliens now living in the Regency Hyatt House had it in mind to convert to Ortho-Urbanism, thereby giving an odious legitimacy to the city's oppressive "Official Faith." Who knew precisely what such people feared? Revolving above the clamor in the market's aisles, Cynnor both sympathized with the young guerrillas and recoiled from their terrible passion.

Meanwhile, an alarm wailed and the D.-A.'s P.A. system clicked on: "Please right your carts. Please remain calm. Management's working to restore order." The alarm very nearly drowned out the speaker's voice.

Cynnor watched. It wasn't really cold enough for him. A moment ago he had been thinking, on one track at least, of the darkened, air-conditioned suite on the top floor of the Regency which he shared with his five Cygnusian spouses. The temperature there always hovered around a delicious 0 on the Celsius scale, and Fiona Bitler, their sponsor, graciously saw to it that they didn't have to remain outside their suite longer than twelve hours at a time.

And he was thinking, maybe not solely by chance, of the first human employee who had carried food and drink to Cynnor and the others. That man was gone now, but during the first few weeks of his employment he had made himself a coat of cat pelts as protection

against the iciness of the Cygnusians' private enclave. Alley cats, poor man. But the coat had been primitively beautiful nevertheless, and when he tendered Miz Bitler his resignation he said he was going to go into business manufacturing these garments. Everyone, he said, should know the animal warmth he had discovered on the Regency's 21st floor, at the heart of his wards' surrogate homeland. A good man; a very good man. No one had heard of him since, and, more than once, through various locator services, Miz Bitler had attempted to find the mysteriously vanished Behram....

Pop!

Cynnor the Cygnusian saw a pigeon fly up, land briefly on one of the pyramids next to him, and then flap off into the fluoros again. Given impetus by the pigeon's departing toes, sixty rolls of toilet paper spilled from the platform and bounded into Aisle 5 like a rain of giant marshmallows. A cunning chaos was loosed in the Dixie-Apple. Cynnor understood it at once.

Guerrilla tactics. Insurrection. Anarchy.

Over there a young woman with a baby on her back, a victim of the hoisterjacks' misdirected zeal, was trying to regain her feet, and her baby, not surprisingly, was crying....

Cullen unfroze. Dragging his cart along behind him he reached Bayangumay and lifted Etude out of the carrier the baby was riding in. Etude's panic was increased by being suddenly in the arms of a stranger, but Cullen bounced her lightly and sang "Shoofly Pie" under his breath while the Dixie-Apple threatened to fall into ruins about them, a pinball machine tipping toward *TH!*

"I kill 'em," Bayangumay said huskily.

A fourth hoisterjack, wobbly and overweight, came sprinting toward them from the foot of Aisle 4. His dangling chain was a giveaway. But he had to go on his tiptoes to negotiate the wreckage, and when he began picking his way through broken Co' Cola bottles, shirtless Sammy lunged from his crouch and tackled the man, who fell backward against a dairy locker, slumped down its glass facing, and lay there with his eyelids rolling and unrolling like tiny scrolls, a pinball tripped by a deadfall lever disguised as a little black boy.

"Lovely shit," said Sammy. He took

the wire cutters from the hoisterjack's belt and returned to Bayangumay and Cullen. They freed themselves from their autocats, and Bayangumay led the way around the corner into Aisle 5, midmost thoroughfare in the Dixie-Apple's innards.

"I kill 'em," she repeated.

Maybe that was what Gustave had meant, calling her an animal. Cullen could tell that this mama-child acted on instincts, passions, impulses. So long as she knew Etude was safe in Cullen's arms Bayangumay was content to leave her baby there and pursue a fiery purpose of her own. Great Maynard's Ghost, didn't she spit along, though! Desdemona Applesmith was a *hant* beside her, a phantom rattling fasces of icicles in her fists. The closest Dezdi'd ever got to the heat was the bomb with which she'd almost incinerated an office of the UrNu Housing Authority. Ye Olde Cremation Shift forever....

Stop it, Cullen told himself. Sure she's a *hant* beside Bayangumay, 'course she's a phantom. She's *dead*.

Cygnor the Cygnusian was revolving toward them as they entered Aisle 5, and Cullen couldn't look away from the spaceman. The critter's head was reminiscent of an African tribal mask, his arms were like poles covered over with mummy cloth, and little Sammy's daddy, probably on the evidence of news-tape photos, thought Cygnor "a it, a 'chine." That wasn't so. That just wasn't the case....

Bayangumay was kicking toilet-paper rolls down the aisle. Sammy was too. Cullen joined them.

Then they all stopped.

The hoisterjacks—stymied by the iron grate beyond the checkout stands, driven back through the market by a platoon of concourse trolls in riot gear—were swinging their cuff chains right and left and advancing up Aisle 5 toward them. Did they think the entrance at the end of the plunger-aisle was still open? It was closed off, but the hoisterjacks didn't seem to realize this or care.

Retreat, Cullen advised himself. A flex-o-torque chain across Etude's face would scar her up good. Plastografting was mostly for surfacesiders; it was almost always denied immigrants from other nuclei, especially financially disadvantaged ones. So Cullen started to fall back.

Bayangumay and Sammy, mean-

while, lowered their heads and went shit-kicking through the debris.

We're playing for earnings now, Cullen thought at them earnestly, too surprised to speak. Turn around, turn around. He clutched Etude to his chest and backed up against a wall of dry goods. This was going to be messy, no way to get around it.

Bayangumay closed with a female hoisterjack and jujitsu'd her to the floor with a hip shift and a quicker-than-the-eye levering of her hands. Sammy downed a male commando by butting him in the groin. The remaining thugsters backed up on each other and surveyed their fallen comrades with eyes flaring and guttering like points of phosphor. Did they think perhaps Bayangumay and Sammy were members of their own group? How else could these apparent strangers have freed themselves? Cullen saw, however, that none of the hoisterjacks recognized the belligerent mama-child or the gritty little black boy confronting them, and this fact was going to tell against his friends.

"Move now," warned a jittery fox. "We comin' through."

At which point the cavalry arrived in surprising *deus-ex-machina* fashion. Neither god nor machine, Cygnor the Cygnusian had just revolved toward the hoisterjacks crowded at the head of Aisle 5. He dropped both feet over the edge of his platform and extended his legs until they reached the floor. Then, having levered himself off his throne, he collapsed upon the extensions and stood in the aisleway between the regrouping guerrillas and Bayangumay and Sammy.

Even after he had telescoped his limbs Cullen judged Cygnor to be better than two meters tall. Unbudging and unbudgeable, he spread his arms between the stock shelves and like a huge metal crucifix held the thugsters at bay. In less than a minute the concourse trolls arrived, took the offenders into custody, and began to escort them back to the checkout stands for pre-precinct processing.

When one of the trolls moved to handcuff Bayangumay and Sammy on the evidence of their dangling wrist chains, Cygnor shook his head and pointed to the hoisterjacks sprawled writhing on the floor. The officer, understanding at once, nodded to Cygnor and apologized to Cullen's two friends. The siege of the Dixie-Apple was over,

and the store's alarm finally stopped walling.

"OK," Bayangumay complimented Cygnor. "You do that ver' nice."

The Displaced Alien encircled the mama-child's shoulders with one long arm and walked her the final four aisles to the automatic registers, Sammy following two steps behind and Cullen bringing up the rear with little Etude unconcernedly pressing his lips together with her pudgy hands. By the time they'd stepped over and around all the wounded patrons and scattered food-stuffs, the pastel air-wall was blowing again and Cygnor took them through it into an open section of the Level 4 Mall. He bowed, handed Bayangumay something, and, with the blessing of a security guard, returned through the air-wall into the shambles of the Dixie-Apple. Gone.

"See what he give me," said Bayangumay. She held up a roll of toilet paper. Outside of their lives, it was the only thing they'd managed to escape the store with. "Ver' sweet, I think."

Sammy studied it skeptically. Then he glanced back at the comestibulary, most of whose lights had suddenly gone out. "I still say it a 'chine. Y'all seen how it done its legs. Jes' one big-A mah-chine, me 'n' my daddy say." The boy hunched his bare shoulders and walked off down the curiously unpeopled Mall section.

"All my groceries," Cullen complained. He shifted Etude to his right hip. "Now I ain't got a scrap for dinner. Nuthin'."

"You come my cubbicle for dinner, Fly-Pie Mon. Tomorrah we come shoppin' one more time. Much fun, I think. No?"

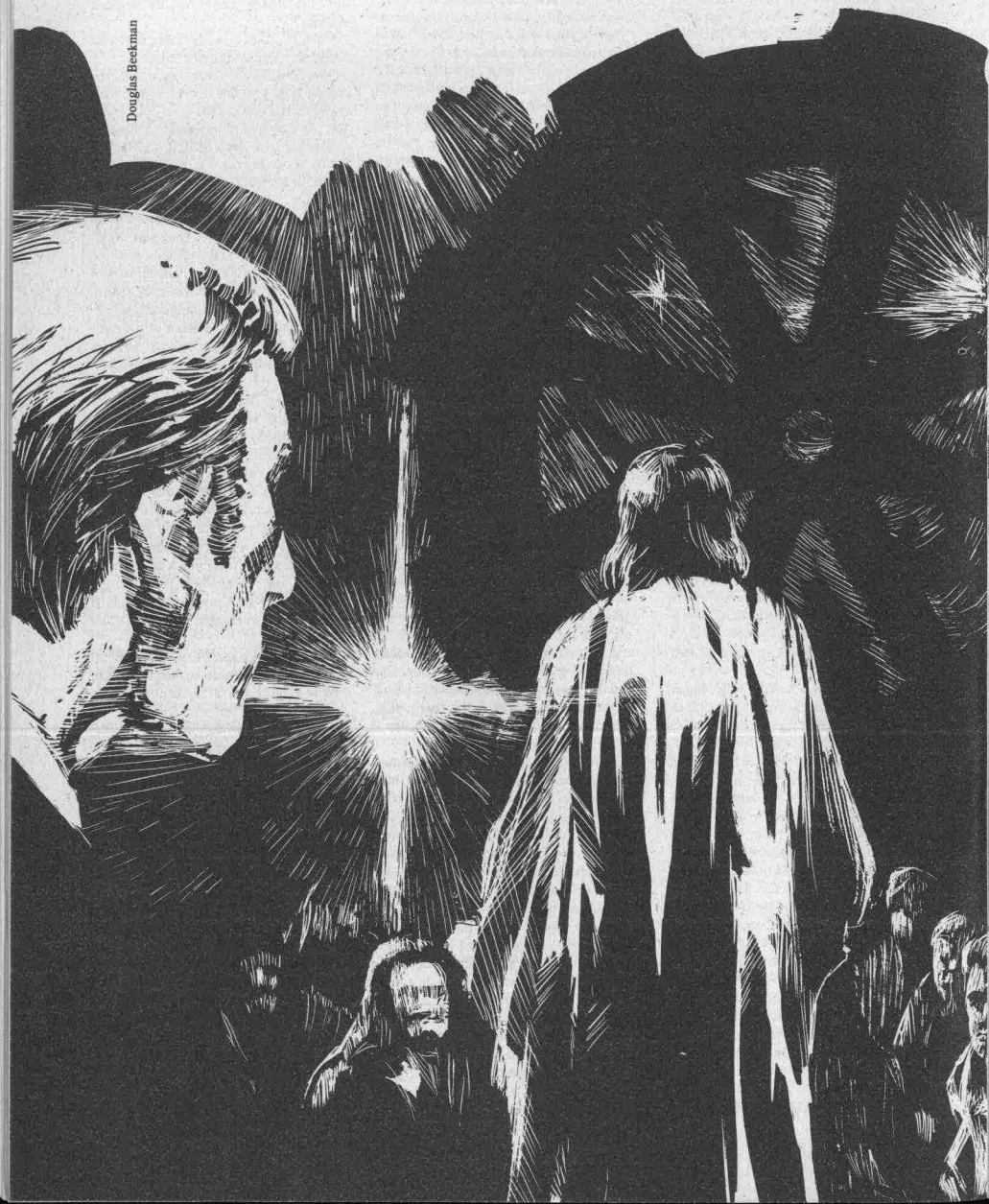
*Cubbicle*. Where was this mama-child from, really? The New Orleans Nucleus didn't seem far enough away. Not the way she talked, and moved, and thought. Cullen wondered if maybe Cygnor the Cygnusian wasn't a more comprehensible species of alien than Bayangumay. But so what, so what?


"Which way to your cubbicle?" asked the Fly-Pie Mon.

Bayangumay took Etude out of his arms and in exchange gave him the roll of toilet paper. Cullen tumbled it back and forth between his hands as they walked through the Mall together.



Douglas Beckman





# Oye Of Little Faith

A PROVOCATIVE STORY  
IN THE TRADITION OF  
"A CASE OF CONSCIENCE"

By Robert Chilson

The dining room was crowded with ministers and a scattering of reporters. Norman Burke hesitated, jarred by the noise, the confusion, the hurrying crowd. But before he could make up his mind to leave, he was approached by a heavy, round-shouldered man with a broad red face.

"No, I'm not a reporter," said the other, smiling and offering a hard hand. "Coudy, Jonathon Coudy, of Peoria."

"Oh yes, pleased to meet you, Brother Coudy," said Burke. He had recognized the conservative churchman before he read the other's name tag. "I'm Norman

Burke, Baptist, of Chillicothe."

Coudy gave him a sly look and swept his gaze over the dining room. "Now, that's a sight I like to see: the ministers tucking into their food. You can always tell a conservative by the way he eats." He chuckled, and Burke, startled by the statement, managed only a smile.

"Do you mean you think the conservatives will carry the voting?" Burke asked, feeling a sudden, surprising hope. It was not so much that he was conservative, but he had not been able to decide how he should vote. If it didn't matter....

Coudy avoided a uniformed waiter

## O YE OF LITTLE FAITH

with a heavy-laden tray, slid through a people tangle with a weave of his massive shoulders, smiled and nodded to an acquaintance. Burke followed him vaguely and gratefully. Coudy's face was solemn as he said, "I really think so. The American Protestant Council is pretty solid, you know. But some of the hoarier members oppose time travel so fanatically and doggedly that many will vote against them not to be tarred with that brush."

Burke nodded. Marshall, the president of the Council, was the worst of that breed. It was the attitudes of this silver-haired, handsome, obtuse man that put Burke off conservatism. Certainly Burke was no wild-eyed liberal, but his attitudes were not—hoary was a good word. Indeed, Burke's congregation was frequently uneasy about him.

"How about you?" Coudy asked, with the confidence of a man whose life's work is buttonholing people and asking after their souls. "You people are pretty conservative down Chillicothe way. I hear. Are you with us?"

"Frankly, Brother Coudy, I haven't made up my mind yet. To tell the truth, I'm not at all easy in my mind on this matter."

Coudy's round face, more at home when beaming redly, became still more solemn. He nodded. "Give it your prayerful thought," he urged. "But if you see it our way... It's no secret I oppose time travel absolutely, but I can understand your reluctance to cut it off short."

"Not that there's any likelihood of that, the APC to the contrary or not," said Burke wryly, rather surprised that Coudy should put it so.

"Unfortunately, no," said Coudy, brooding. "And, of course there's nothing in Scripture that would justify that."

Startled, Burke said, "I thought you based your justification on Genesis—Forbidden Fruit?"

Coudy grimaced distastefully. "I know that's the way Reverend Marshall expressed it. It may be valid for an ignoramus like him—oh, there's Norton."

They had worked their way half across the cavernous dining room without finding an empty table, but now they spotted one, just abandoned. A tall, lanky man was ambulating toward it, smiling and nodding to people at the tables around, but not stopping. The clatter of tableware was louder than the murmur of conversation.

Norton had just seated himself when

they reached the table. He rose to shake Coudy's hand, his long horsey face lighting up. Normally it was deeply gloomy in cast, so that his smile seemed especially warm, but the gloom was more apparent than real. "Come to enlighten my darkness, Jon? How's your soul?"

"As black as ever. Have you met Reverend Burke? Burke, Norton."

"Good to see you, Norm," said Norton as Burke stepped out from behind Coudy's bulk. They were acquainted but had not seen each other in several years. Burke had put on weight, he knew. Norton's mustache was gone, but his hair was as long in back as ever.

But the hovering question shaded their cheer. "How about it, Norman—decided which way you'll vote?"

"Marshall didn't quite convince him—so it's up to me to finish the job," said Coudy. The bantering expression faded and a moody, thoughtful expression came over his eyes; for a moment a highly complex man looked out.

"I don't like the fuss being made over the ballot," said the conservative churchman. "Men are too vehement on both sides—it suggests to me that they believe we will vote differently in secret than if our congregations know how we vote."

"Many will," said Norton calmly, but with a frown.

"I'm not sure whether it's a greater insult to us or our congregations."

Burke shifted uneasily. He preferred a secret ballot, he discovered. Did that mean he would vote in favor? For his congregation was strongly conservative. But surely he had no decided preference, or he wouldn't be in such an agony of doubt.

Then why a secret ballot? Was he so afraid of being found in the wrong?

A waiter, uniformed in blue and gold, appeared and apologetically wiped the table, putting the dirty dishes on a cart. Norton and Coudy, each gregarious and impervious in his way, continued their discussion of the voting battle. Burke was unused to dining out and was embarrassed at being waited on; he hovered between speaking warmly to the waiter and coldly ignoring him. In the end he said nothing, yet missed the discussion.

Another waiter, uniformed differently, descended upon them with a notebook. Burke, having prepared himself, gave his order smoothly. Coudy and Norton broke off their discussion reluctantly to look for the first time at their menus. Burke sat and suffered; they gave their orders shortly and in an offhand

manner he envied.

Norton burst out, "That fool Marshall and his silly prating about forbidden fruit! No matter which way the vote goes, *that's* the phrase that will figure in the newsmedia. Only a neolith like him could believe the term would alarm anyone in this day and age."

Burke nodded, running his eye over the cavernous dining room with its muted but colorful ceiling supported by steel beams resting on a single row of columns down the center; the cool rectangles of fluorescent lights; the air conditioning struggling valiantly against the mob; even the acoustic paneling drinking up the surf of speech and dining sounds. Knowledge held no terror for men who dined in such surroundings, he thought. Not in the sense that it had terrified men of the past. It had been domesticated.

Coudy said, "I have to agree with you there. There's not the slightest Scriptural justification for the prohibition of knowledge—Adam and Eve have already eaten of the fruit of the tree of knowledge."

"The tree of knowledge of good and evil," Norton said. "Knowledge was never specifically forbidden—and our colleagues in more liberal faiths know it well."

Oddly, this had never occurred to Burke. It lifted a load of guilt off his shoulders—if it was true. He'd have to read Genesis again, he thought cautiously, and pray over it. But if it was—Even in the Seminary, they'd said of him that he thought too much; such preachers are dangerous. A strange thing to say in a seminary, but it was very conservative, and Burke had always been fascinated by knowledge.

He had devoured science, and he had read many popularizations of the life of Christ, even the more liberal kind, even the debunking kind. This juxtaposition of studies had disturbed his colleagues; they feared he would turn out to be a doubter who'd put all his learning to evil uses—attempting to disprove the Bible, or the like.

Sometimes he wondered if he hadn't skirted close to the edge of such a fall. But he had retired to safety in conservatism at the end. Unconventional ministries such as Norton's frightened him obscurely—so open to ridicule—yet liberals such as he, with their ideas, still fascinated him.

And now came time probing to stir up the questions he had settled within him for all time—to stir them up not only in him, but in the public mind. And that was

where he must answer his questions—in public.

"Does the publicity matter so much?" he asked, clearing his throat. "After all, we're only here to feel out our thoughts on the matter and to put them on record."

Coudy smiled sourly. "True, that is and must remain our *primary* purpose. But we must also make whatever use we can of the publicity attending the decision to convert the heathen, must we not?" He shrugged his round shoulders and grimaced, his mobile mouth pursing wryly.

"I would not express it quite so cynically," said Norton, looking more like an unhappy horse than ever. "Certainly the decision will be an important benchmark for us. We must continue to redefine our positions in the light of the changing times—a point Brother Coudy here, and Reverend Marshall, don't seem to appreciate."

Coudy merely smiled and shrugged again. He made some comment about the times accommodating themselves to the Word, but they were served deftly then and Burke missed the remark. He looked curiously, and with a little embarrassment, at the bored-seeming waiter, hot in his blue and gold uniform. What did he think of all these arguments? For the room was full of ministers full of the question.

It was not likely he was a religious man; who was, these days, when even ministers were getting scarce? Burke wondered what he thought of it all, the charade of the American Protestant Council solemnly meeting to denounce and stop time probing—there was little doubt how the members would vote—like Canute stopping the tide.

It was no wonder the public had stopped coming to church.

Coudy asked grace fervently and overloudly. Burke, head bowed, was distracted, embarrassed. Surely he wasn't putting on? No, it might once have been an act, but now it was at least a habit. Or even sincere, a disturbing thought.

"It's important that we express a firm rejection of time travel," Coudy said intensely, afterward. His prayer had made him earnest. "We must organize a letter-writing campaign, hire lobbyists—do all within our power to end it."

Norton snorted, his horsey face scornful. "Are you afraid evolution will be confirmed? We lost that battle a long time ago—"

"Of course not! I'm Jonathon Coudy, not Truman Clifford Marshall. The body can evolve if it pleases; I concern myself

only with the soul—and I don't care which day of the week it was created on. But can't you see how this will shake the faith of our people?"

Burke could see how it would shake the faith of a man like Marshall; he would have been one of those ministers who preached against the new and heathenish custom of using forks. But Coudy wasn't of that hoary sort.

It was difficult for Burke, with his childish fascination with knowledge for its own sake, to see how even Marshall, let alone Coudy, could be so afraid of time probing. It appeared to be a natural power of the human mind, which could be trained and aided with autosuggestion. Those two women who found themselves in the past, at Versailles, were the first.

Now they were sending them out by the dozen. It was not expensive, nor was it dangerous, except to the prober. The past being what it was, it could not be changed. Any such change would cause the world-lines to branch off, carrying the prober with them into the new path. Several probers were long overdue and believed lost, perhaps in this manner.

Norton shook his head, unwilling to believe in such obtuseness. "Surely not even the most skeptical will deny the evidence of their own eyes when they see the films. Can't you see, Brother Coudy, what a great opportunity it is? What better method of converting the Godless than the Truth?"

But to Norton, Truth was his unflinching faith in the goodness of his fellow man. Suddenly Burke perceived that for all his, Burke's, interest in Science, the liberal churchman feared its use less than he. It could not affect his faith in Man. His faith in God was rooted in the more basic faith, hence he cared nothing for doctrine or dogma.

Coudy snorted, his round red face expressing scorn as readily as Norton's long one. "Truth? Whose truth? Which truth? Do you know just how much effort went into cobbling up the compromises that formed the Church, and how much politics there was in the splitting up, the Protestants and the Reformation? How much real revelation will be needed to show us how wrong we *all* are? But just how relevant is primitive Christianity in a highly industrialized society? We've groped our way to an effective church, based on our needs. Let's not throw it away."

Burke had to agree. But how much of Coudy's rejection of time probing was due to fear that his doctrines would be

found false? Very little, Burke decided, looking at the confident, gesticulating, red-faced man. So long as his doctrines satisfied him he would not let his mind be touched by adverse facts. He was as strong in his position as Norton, who had discarded doctrines.

Fear that the Bible would be proven false surely never touched him. Certainly, though they would rather die a thousand deaths than admit it, many opposers of time probing feared to learn that.

And how did he, Burke, feel? He decided that he fell somewhere in between Coudy and Norton. His belief in Jesus the Son of God was the rock of his existence; the doctrines and forms of worship were of small amount. Should he be proven in error he would pray for forgiveness and endeavor to live by the truth.

That was all very well, but . . .

"Gentlemen . . ." he leaned forward, troubled. "This is of course a hypothetical question . . . but what if it is shown that Jesus did not rise on the third day?"

They looked at him, startled. The silence rang, so that the murmurous surf of sound in the cavernous room seemed far-off and fading. It was hot and very bright. A waiter went by, seeming harassed, pushing a cart.

Defensively, Burke said, "Well, hard evidence of the Resurrection isn't available, after all—nothing but testimony any atheist would tell you could have been, must have been, biased."

(Did they perhaps fear too greatly the laughter of hypothetical militant atheists, Scorners? A preposterously defensive attitude. Burke at least had never met any, none but tormented teenagers crying for help.)

Surprisingly, Coudy took even this possibility in his stride. "Jesus was sent to be a sacrifice, to die for the sins of all. Certainly He did die—there can be no question about that. The Resurrection was largely symbolic and to bring the Disciples together again. It surely doesn't matter much whether He rose again or went immediately to Heaven. As I see it," with an expressive shrug.

But he frowned. "That's what I meant. That's just the kind of thing that would turn faith off. False in one thing, false in all, they'd say . . ."

Norton said, irrelevantly, "I've always wondered why the attitudes of the High Priests were not chronicled. Matthew alone mentions them, and according to him they merely bribed the watchers to say that the Disciples had stolen the body. They seem not to have wondered about

## OYE OF LITTLE FAITH

the Resurrection at all."

The sounds of the dining room were loud in Burke's ears. So great was the choking sensation in his throat he dared not even sip his coffee. He was startled by the intensity of his relief. He hadn't known he was so worried.

To think it would be Coudy who reassured him!

He was right. Though it was a powerful symbol of Hope, the Resurrection had little to do with the remission of sin. Still, he hoped nervously that it would be proven true.

But if not—he could live without it. And granted the Crucifixion—about which there could be no doubt—he, his beliefs, had nothing to fear from time probing.

Coudy's fork had ceased its rhythmic rise and fall. He looked at Burke with more curiosity than dismay. "Surely you don't think the Scriptures will turn out to be false? In any significant degree?" It was a thing he couldn't doubt.

The question struck straight to the heart of the religious opposition to time probing. *Is the Scripture true or false?* But put to him now, Burke found that it did not trouble him.

"It would depend on what you call significant. Jesus' life and death are surely true. And the rest," he surprised himself with his sincerity, "doesn't really matter. I think I could answer any doubts my congregation might have."

"Then you'll vote in favor?" Norton turned triumphantly on Coudy.

Burke didn't hear their exchange. To the innermost core of his being he was shaken by the question: because his instinctive, overwhelming reaction was *NO*. He sat shaken while he sought for the reason.

He probed as cautiously as at a broken tooth. Fear—he felt again the jab—was at the root of it; a creeping, numbing fear as of some great catastrophe. Not, surely, a fear of the Unknown? He tested cautiously and found that Science still interested him as much as before.

Nor had his interest in time probing itself faded. He had been fascinated by the idea since it was first discovered. It had quickly supplanted his enthusiasm for space travel: here was a technique anybody could use, with a little training. No elaborate rockets, billions of dollars of equipment. Why, he could take his own cameras and go back to the Mesozoic and photograph dinosaurs himself. The *simplicity* of this means of escape appealed to him.

Of course, he'd never do such a thing, but the way out was there.

That was how he saw it: a means of going to remote places and having adventures, incidentally picking up scientific knowledge. And Burke was a connoisseur of Science. He liked to study up on various theories and pick the likeliest.

From the beginning he had been skeptical of the theory that dinosaurs were exterminated by fallout from a supernova, because the birds survived. . . .

But probing into the dusty, sunbitten country of Judea, cameras and recorders concealed under robes. . . . It was a thing he had never considered doing.

The thought scared him.

Some of those time probers would have to approach Jesus Himself, get His words down on tape. They'd have to stand in the front rank of the crowd, where *His* eye might fall on them—

—And Burke knew what he feared.

But of course Burke would never do any time probing, simple as it might seem. He didn't know how, and it wasn't the kind of thing you can pick up out of a book. It was an attitude, a feel. Probably hypnosis would be needed, certainly help, and older people with fixed ideas are not susceptible. Many people seemed quite incapable of time travel. Too rigid. (Probably just as well for their sanity.)

But though no university would consider him for probing, though there was never any real possibility of his going, he had always taken it personally, basing daydreams on it. Now he couldn't change that.

He had not been troubled in any particular so long as he knew he wouldn't see the face of his Lord until the Day, so many years from now. . . . He had never expected the Second Coming in his lifetime.

Now he admitted to himself, for the first time, that he had hoped it would *not* come in his life.

Why? If Jesus were to come tomorrow, he was ready to meet Him, was he not? He asked himself, desperately. Would He not say, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant?" He was a good minister, a respected Christian, the leader of a fine church.

He suddenly remembered the Buried Talent. A *good minister*—was that all he could say of his life's work? A man who had scrupulously kept what he had? When had he gone forth and brought the Word of God to those in darkness? Never. Never. He had waited for them to come to

him—and who came? Why, those least in need.

The proof was there: his work, the work he was proudest of, was with those of his congregation who needed his help. On the fringe of divorce, adultery, drinking, drugs, shoplifting. Less than one in ten of his congregation. Whereas Jesus. . . .

Burke thought of the Man who had scourged forth the moneylenders from the temple and trembled premonitorily at the time he had spent worrying over the church funds.

*Good and faithful servant?*

"One thing thou lackest: go thy way, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come take up the cross and follow me."

The widow's mite was *all* she had. When had he ever given all of himself?

Jesus' denunciation of the Pharisees: "And He said unto them, Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition."

Burke, standing before a solemn congregation, solemnly reinforcing their tribal traditions: obey the Commandments if not too inconvenient, keep the Sabbath if not too inconvenient, strictly follow the customs of the time: style of dress, marriage and divorce, birth control, avoidance of VD, obey the laws, respect authority. . . .

It was Jesus' Face he seemed to see.

Coudy spoke. He seemed to have shrunk, his face wan, weary.

"Pray it over tonight, Brother Burke. Don't be hasty. Not that it matters greatly. I'm under no illusion that anyone cares what the American Protestant Council thinks about time travel. Or even that, should the Scripture be proven right, we could make any use of the fact to save souls." To Norton, grimly: "We lost *that* battle a long time ago, too."

Norton shrugged that off: his was not a conventional ministry, he went where the lost souls were, in the streets and parks and laundromats. Burke envied him now. He had little to fear.

"Don't let his fears shake your resolution, Brother Burke. Keep the Faith!"

Shaking hands with them, both so sure of themselves, Burke knew that he could never convince them that his trouble was *not* lack of faith.





# BOOMS

by Robert Silverberg

*The Earth Again Redeemed* by Martin Green. Basic Books, \$9.95. 359 pages.

Here is a depressing oddity—a long, intelligently conceived, eloquently written science fiction novel, impressively produced by a publishing house not previously concerned with SF, that seems to have no potential audience at all, within or without the world of science fiction. Connoisseurs of love's lost labor will want to pick up copies of this—I would suggest checking the remainder tables in late winter or early spring—and collectors of rare SF books ought to stash away a copy or two, because not many are going to survive. A pity, I suppose, although perhaps Darwinian principles should be allowed to operate without lamentation in the case of misguided ventures like this.

Martin Green is a Cambridge-educated Englishman who has lived in the United States for the past twenty years and is Professor of English at Tufts University. He is obviously familiar with science fiction's most sophisticated concepts, for this is a parallel-world novel, springing from the notion that in 1665 a European invading army was defeated in the Congo (or Kongo, as Green prefers to spell it), causing such chagrin among the imperialist powers that Europe collapsed into self-abasement, renouncing not only imperialism but technology as well. In Green's parallel world of 1984, science is still at a seventeenth-century level, the Third World peoples are running their homelands quite nicely, Europe is throttled by rampant Christianity of the medieval mystic variety, and the warriors of Islam are preparing to fight it out with the black masters of Africa. Meanwhile, the world familiar to us, in which Africa was indeed conquered and parceled out, has proceeded along its course toward atomic holocaust, which arrives in 1984 and leaves just a few survivors, perhaps only two. Green further postulates that the inhabitants of the "redeemed"

Earth of proscribed technology and puissant religious faith are somehow aware of our world, have prophesied that it will be destroyed for its sins, and are even able to make contact with it in visionary trances.

Most of this very long novel is set in the other world; the protagonists are the British Ambassador to the Kongo, Lord William Stanley, his wife Lady Catherine (a brilliantly realized character), a cynical and charming Arab named Hanta, and the black Archbishop of the Kongo, Aquin, who is a splendid creation, especially during the first half of the book, when we see his brooding, magnificent presence only through Lady Catherine's eyes. A few scenes take place in our bomb-blasted world, narrated by a smartass cyborg who apparently has survived the universal devastation by staying indoors. (There is one other survivor, a certain Rudy, whose survival is never explained, so far as I can tell.) Gradually, as events near a climax in the Kongo, contact is established between the smartass cyborg and the black archbishop, and the book moves toward such little resolution as it can muster.

Green's prose is magnificent: a rich, burnished, sonorous tone, all bassets-horns and trumpets and organ diapacons. He writes so well, in fact, that he smothers his story in its own words, and the event-oriented reader of science fiction, eager to learn something about the political structure of the parallel world, the (to me implausible and make-shift) event that brought it into being, or even the incidents of the plot, is going to be baffled and uneasy most of the time. Only the most dedicated will get all the way through. On the other hand, the reader of literary novels, reared on James and Conrad, Melville and Mann, will appreciate Green's style but will butt up against his parallel-world machinery, find it impenetrable, and abandon the book after four or five chapters. Both the litterateur and the science-fictioneer are apt to be bothered

by Green's habit of conducting most of the action of the book between chapters, and the murkiness of his historical exposition will win him no friends in either camp. In short, heroic labors, high ambitions, yet another attempt to treat the materials of science fiction in the manner of the serious novel, and considerable talent, all go to waste here in this intense, passionate, profound and lovely botch of a book, which, unless I miss my guess, is likely to sell about 147 copies. Basic Books, O Basic Books, what did you think you were doing?

*The Last Celt: A Bio-Bibliography of Robert Ervin Howard* by Glenn Lord. Donald M. Grant, Publisher, \$20. 416 pages.

Don Grant of Rhode Island was one of the first of the private press science-fiction publishers, producing such treasures as John W. Campbell's *The Mightiest Machine* and A.E. van Vogt's *The Weapon Makers* more than thirty years ago. Most of the other semi-pro SF publishers of that era have vanished by now, a few of them just a step or two ahead of the sheriff, but Grant is still around, looking not a bit older than he did way back then and still issuing books of considerable beauty and instant collector-item appeal.

The works of Robert E. Howard are Grant's long suit these days. Howard's appeal seems inexhaustible and enormous, and Grant, allying himself with Howard's executor Glenn Lord, has somehow negotiated the perilous copyright maze surrounding Howard's work and been able to bring forth a dozen or more exceedingly handsome volumes, some of them first book editions of ancient magazine stories, some of them new and beautiful books in a Collected Works series. (For those who came in late, Robert E. Howard was the generally recognized master of the sword and

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# HARLAN ELLISON'S WATCHING



## A COLUMN OF COMMENT ON THE VISUAL MEDIA

They have asked for a regular column dealing with fantasy and science fiction in the visual media: theatrical features, television movies, continuing TV series, stage productions, live performances other than plays and/or musicals. In short, everything but recordings and comic books. Okay, I can do that.

What I *cannot* do is another hype column such as the nonsense-festooned handouts one encounters in fan magazines, which are nothing better than culls from the trade papers of the motion picture industry, *Daily Variety* and *The Hollywood Reporter*. These are Rona Barrett-style ephemera that promulgate the wish-fulfillment stories planted by dynamiting publicists and every half-assed turkey who has taken an eighteen-month, two-grand option on a Zelazny or Dick novel, in hopes he or she can blue-sky a development deal with a network or studio.

Nor can I pretend to be a righteous, card-carrying *cinéaste* proffering reams of erudite and punctilious copy espousing the *auteur* theory á la Bogdanovich. I am unalterably opposed to the theory that the director is the "author" of the film, perhaps because I'm a writer and I know, from first-hand experience, that most directors cannot direct their way to the toilet on the set. But I'll talk about that another time. Right now I merely wish to set down a few ground rules about what this column *won't* be. (True *Cahiers Du Cinéma* mavens would be on to me in a hot second, even if I pretended to be a deeply serious student of film, when I copped to having fallen asleep repeatedly in *L'Avventura*, while having seen the 1939 Korda version of *The Thief of Bagdad* over fifty times, clearly making it my favorite movie of all time, beating out *Vanishing Point* by only six viewings.)

With rare exceptions, I will not review specific films or series. There are too many self-styled authorities overrunning the scene already. (You must understand: in my *schmuck* who goes to a movie and whose ego gets in the way of good sense, who runs one of those "cinematic insight" raps—as shown in example in Woody Allen's new one, *Annie Hall*—and then has the good fortune to con some editor into accepting such drivel, can be a film critic or reviewer. They do it not out of any deep and abiding love for motion pictures, nor even because of an understanding of what it takes to create a film. . . . they do it because they can get free screening passes to the studio press showings. They are scavengers. Cinematic illiterates who pontificate without a scintilla of talent for moviemaking of their own. I put them in the same social phylum with kiddie-porn producers, horse-dopers and assholes who use the phrase "scifi.")

Scaphism would be too light a fate for them.)

What this column *will* attempt to do, and I'll make a small start at it in just a bit—patience is a virtue—is explain the way the film and television industries work. To describe what it is like to work *in* the media, the psychological attitudes that prevail, the trends and endless imitative ripoffs therefrom, and—not to put too fine a point on it—service your seemingly endless morbid curiosity about how The Industry functions, how films are made, why such crap gets on the tube, who make the decisions and, in general, inform instead of insult your intelligence.

In answer to the initial questions . . .

Q: If you despise television so much, Ellison, why do you continue to work in the form?

Q: How do you write a script for movies or television?

Q: What's it like working in H•O•L•L•Y•W•O•O•D•?

Q: What is Robert Blake *really* like?

. . . I refer you (not out of venality or a desire to make even a farthing off you) to a 20,000 word essay titled "With the Eyes of a Demon: Seeing the Fantastic as a Video Image" in *The Craft of Science Fiction* (edited by Reginald Bretnor; Harper & Row; 1976). Questions answered in that exhaustive essay will not be answered in this column. But I am anxious to satisfy the readers' curiosity in any way possible; so if you have a specific question of substance, please state it *briefly*, send it on a *postcard* to this column, care of the *Cosmos* editorial offices, and they will forward the query to me. I'll do my best to give you an answer in these pages.

Now. Having labored through all the preliminary bushwah one feels required to lay down, here is a sample of the service aspects of this column.

One of the most rigidly remembered templates for a series format in the minuscule minds of television network programmers and production company executives is *The Fugitive*. Devised by Roy Huggins in 1963, it reduced to the lowest possible common denominator all the elements that stunned TV watchers have come to demand from continuing series: a strong, harried protagonist with a "mission" (find the one-armed man who killed your wife, Dr. Richard Kimble), a "deadline" or "running clock" that puts urgency into the situation (clear your name of the murder before you are recaptured and get sent to the electric chair), a not-too-closely-examined reason to get from

*Continued on P. 71*



# STAR WARS

A CONSIDERATION OF THE  
GREAT NEW S.F. FILM

By Samuel R. Delany

My first reaction as the final credits rose on the screen? "Now what happens?"—which is to say George (*American Graffiti* and *THX-1138*) Lucas's *Star Wars* is about the fastest two-hour film I've ever seen: I thought I'd been in the theater maybe twenty-five minutes.

*THX*, if you'll recall, looked like it was sired by Godard's *Contempt* out of the space station sequence in Kubrick's *2001*—i.e., it was basically white, white-on-white, and then more white. What is the visual texture of *Star Wars*?

Two moons shimmer in the heat above the horizon, and the desert evening fades to purple rather than blue; in to the starry black, huge and/or hopelessly complex artifacts flicker, flash, spin, turn, or merely progress with ponderous motion; indoors is all machinery, some old, some new; white plastic storm troopers and dull grey generals meet and march; circus-putty aliens

drink in a bar where what appears to be an automatic still gleams in the background with tarnished copper tubing; some of the spaceships are new and shiny, some are old and battered (and you get pretty good at telling the difference between the two).

Motion: that's the feeling you take away from the film more than any other. People tramp, run, sprint; sand skimmers skim; spaceships race, chase, or career off to hyperspace. One ship explodes—cut to cloaked figure striding ominously forward, as if out of the explosion itself. The door to a prison cell falls—cut to a booted foot falling on a light gridded floor.

Intelligence and invention have been lavished on keeping the background of this film coherent and logical. (This is perhaps the place to mention that—to get the film down from two and a quarter hours to a flat two—some sequences have been hacked out: two with young Luke and his friends at the beginning, during which one friend goes off to join

the rebel forces, and one at the end where a space pilot tells Luke about his father. In the middle, too, we've lost a few aliens. I hope Lucas is one of those guys who sends a complete copy of his films to the Paris Cinémathèque before the distributors *et al* start chopping.) The foreground is rather shaky. But in this sort of science fiction, the job of the background is to *be* coherent; the job of the foreground is to *be* fast. In that sense both do their job admirably.

This film is going to do very well, if not phenomenally so, and I can see a lot of the elder statesmen in the sf community intoning: "That's because it's got a good, solid story!" *Star Wars*, as far as I can tell, has no story at all—or rather, there are so many holes in the one it's got you could explode a planet in some of them (about a third of the way through, one does); but it all goes so quickly that the rents and tears and creaking places in it blur out.

You know who the good guys are and who the bad guys are: you get told, in an

introductory ribbon of text that diminishes toward the screen top—a homage to the *Flash Gordon* chapter synopses from the twelve-part Saturday afternoon serials of another age. The main good guy is the dissatisfied young farmer, Luke Skywalker, played by an engagingly naive Mark Hamill. Etymologists take note: the relation between Lucas and Luke is obvious. But note too that the name George comes from the Greek work *georgos*: farmer, i.e., “earth man,” or “earth walker.” George Lucas/Luke Skywalker, dig? The film is a blatant and self-conscious autobiographical wish fulfillment on the part of its ingenious director.

That Main Good Guy never gets a really direct encounter with Main Bad Guy (the towering and bemused Lord Darth Vader, played by a sinister and practically invisible David Prowse) is the shakiest part of the plot. Perhaps it's just an oversight. Or maybe material for a sequel. The rumour, at any rate, is that a sequel is under way. Good show.

The dialogue in *Star Wars* is conscientiously heavy handed—that kind of humor where what's so funny is the attempt at humor that falls so flat. But sometimes it's just clumsy: when Han Solo, talking about the speed of his ship, comments something to the effect, “I made the Kessel run in under three parsecs,” the preview audience with whom I saw the film groaned in unison. (A parsec, like a light-year, is a unit of distance, not time, i.e., 3.258 light years.) But despite the groaners—and *Star Wars* has its share (*turbo-lasers*)? I assume that's light that's both coherent and turbulent at the same time...? Well, there're always “wavicles.”)—we loved it.

A film is made in tiny, tiny, extremely complicated bits and pieces—and experienced as an almost total gestalt. Very rarely can you locate any element from the gestalt in one and only one of the bits. Nevertheless, some of the ges-

tal elements that worked extraordinarily well are worth noting: the particular way the Unadulterated Mysticism of the film interweaves among all the blasters and spaceships and general machinery is very effective. The variation in locations, planetscapes, starscapes, here desert, there deep space, over here jungle, over there urban spaceport, is what makes us believe in the vastness and the completeness of this universe. And the glorious special effects, that are the entrance way into each of these varied views, are too effective even to be described.

Thanks to those special effects, the worlds look big enough to be worlds. For those who haven't seen it yet, some advice: try to catch this one in a theater with a fairly big screen where you can sit pretty close. With some films it doesn't matter much, but on the purely visual level *Star Wars* is all about size—relative size, variations in size, the way the very big can make the ordinary seem very small. And a smaller screen will mute this quality.

Lucas, like his fellow American, Bogdanovich and the Italian, Bertolucci, is aware specifically of the history of film. *Last Tango in Paris* had its little recalls of Vigo and Godard; *What's Up, Doc?* paid its loving tribute to Howard Hawks and Mack Sennett. Lucas's gestures to the science fiction film as historical genre may make somebody a Ph.D. some day. Chewie's marvelous head is for those of you who loved *Planet of the Apes*. The robot C-3PO is the “Maria” robot from Lang's silent *Metropolis*. R2-D2 is first cousin to the little fellow trundling after Bruce Dern in Trumbull's *Silent Running*. I believe I recall the unextended bridge sequence from *Flash Gordon*. Certainly the last time I saw those alien clarinetists they were taking much more sinister roles in *This Island*

*Earth*; and the Death Star interior, where Kenobi (played wisely by Alec Guinness) deactivates the Whoseywhat-sit, makes a most reverential bow to the shafted city of *Forbidden Planet*.

Also I suspect Lucas rather likes Frank Herbert's novel *Dune* (“... to the spice farms!”) a lot.

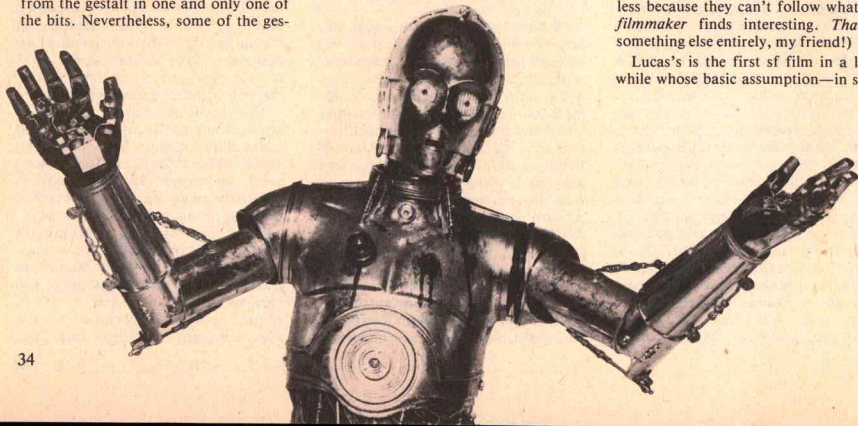
But however many filmic and other allusions there are, they don't intrude. They are there for those who enjoy them; those who wouldn't will probably never know they're there. From beginning to end, the movie is always colorful, visually energetic, and immediate.

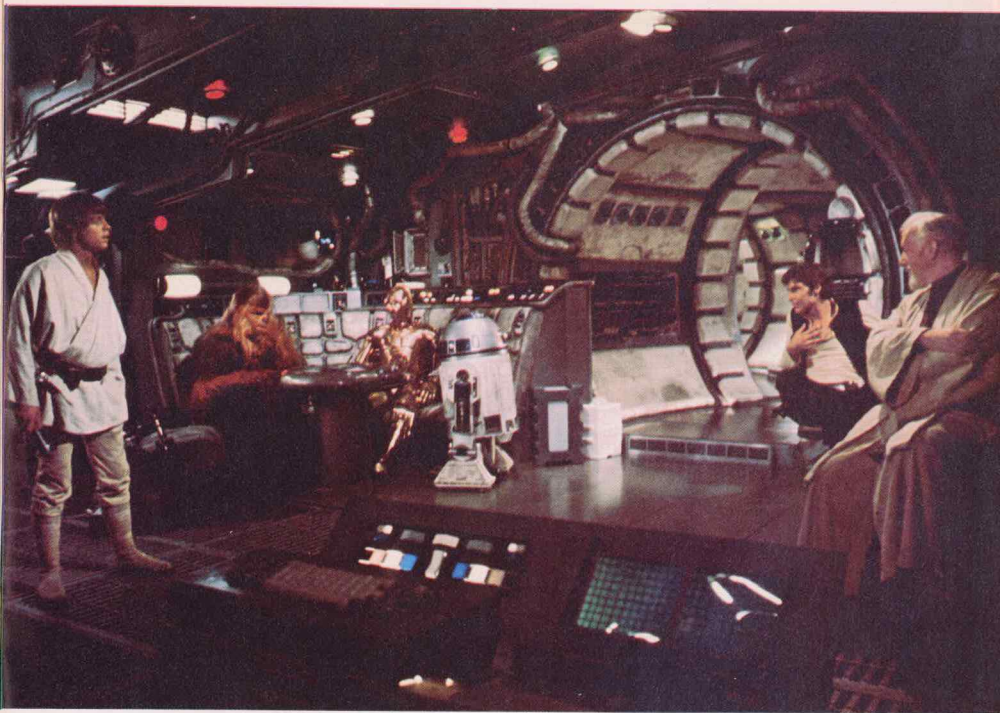
Could it possibly have been any better?

You bet! But to talk about how, we have to talk about the real accomplishment of the film, which we haven't till now touched on; and also show how the places where it falls short of that accomplishment show a lack of imagination, a lack of invention, a lack of engagement. For that, we have to delve into a little theory and talk about what's been holding the “serious” sf film back till now.

Somewhere around *Brave New World* and 1984 time, the Hollywood picture making mentality got fixed in its notoriously unsuitable, collective noggin that science fiction—all science fiction—had one and only one message: In the Future, Things will be Flat, Uninteresting, Repressive and Inhumanly Dull. Now there are only so many films you can make about the flat, uninteresting, repressive, and dull. After awhile it makes very little difference whether you call it *Alphaville* or 1984, whether you make it pretty or stark, whether the dull gets overthrown at the end or endures. How many times can you spend ninety to a hundred and twenty minutes where the filmmaker's intention is to show you that things are dull and/or meaningless. (This is not to be confused with the film the audience may find dull or meaningless because they can't follow what the filmmaker finds interesting. That is something else entirely, my friend!)

Lucas's is the first sf film in a long while whose basic assumption—in spite





of the flatness of the evil Bad Guys and pure-hearted Good Guys (and tender-tough Good-Bad guys, like Han Solo, played almost antiseptically by Harrison Ford)—is that the future will be *more* interesting than the present. When something is interesting, pretty, or colorful in Lucas's film, we are not (as we are, say, in *Logan's Run* or *Rollerball*) supposed to take it automatically and with no thought as a clear and precise sign for the Superficial, Meaningless, Meretricious and Tawdry.

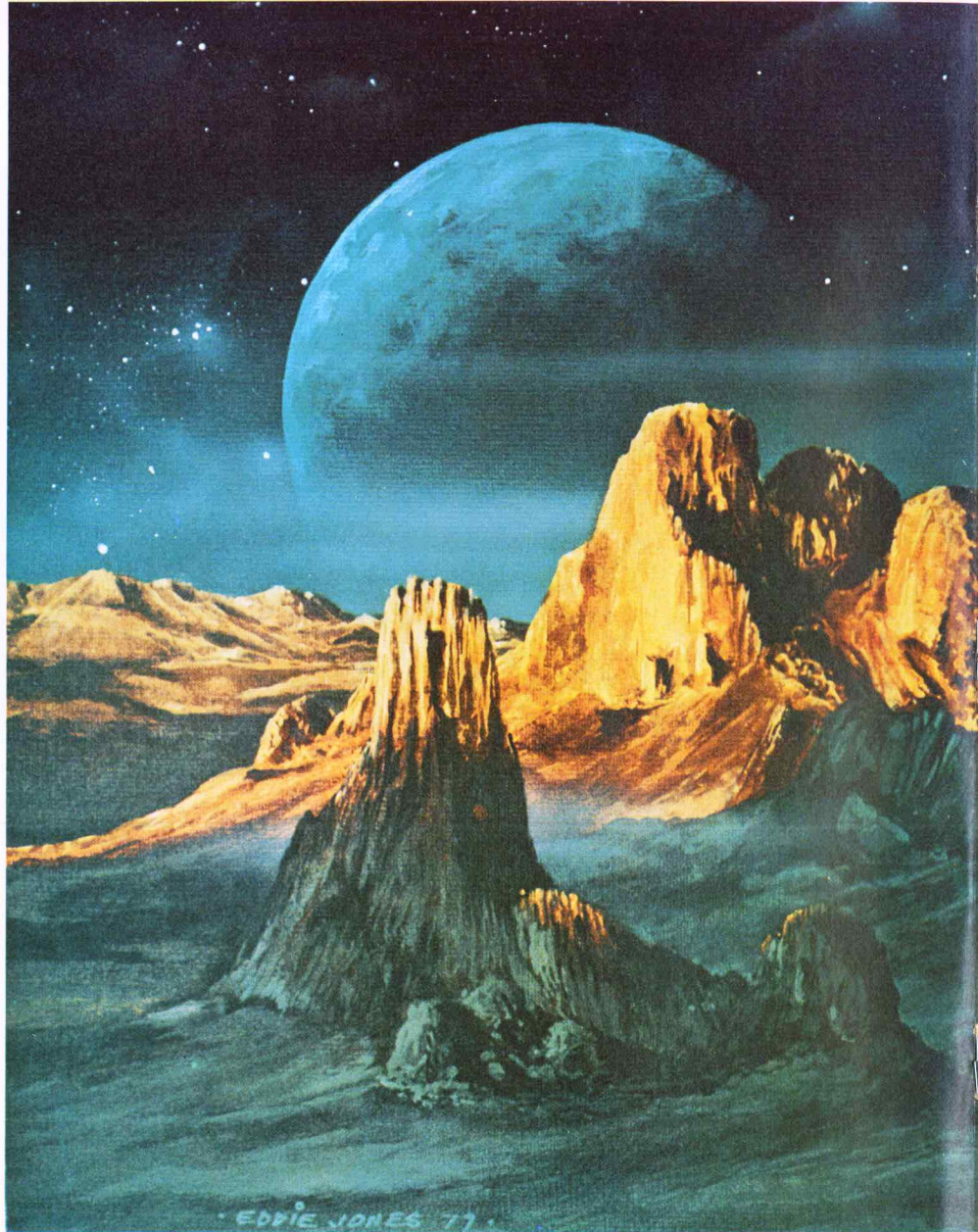
In addition to the play Lucas makes on his own name to generate Luke, the very texture and play of the film tells us Lucas would like to live in that future. Whatever the lessons this future has to teach us, about good and evil, about growing up or accepting courage, no matter how painful or unpleasant those lessons, *this* future is seen as a *good* place to learn them, a place where one will have a chance to apply them. It is not the future so many sf films depict, where things are so inhibited that, even

if we learn something about life, we will never have a chance to utilize that knowledge—short of the place's falling completely to pieces within seventy-two hours of our learning it. And assuming we are lucky enough survive. In short, there are many ways in which *Star Wars* is a very childlike film. This is to the good.



As frequently, however, it is also childish. And the childishness, whether in the dialogue or in the general conception, *doesn't* work. It is *not* interesting. And it doesn't come *close* to being exciting. Sometime, somewhere, somebody is going to write a review of *Star Wars* that begins: "In Lucas's future, the black races and the yellow races have apparently died out and a sort of mid-Western American (with a few South Westerners who seem to specialize in being war ship pilots) has taken over the universe. By and large, women have also been bred out of the human race and, save for the odd gutsy princess or the isolated and cowed aunt, humanity seems to be breeding quite nicely without them. . . ."

When these various reviews surface, somebody will no doubt object (and we'll recognize the voice; it's the same one who said, earlier, ". . . it's got a good, solid story!") with a shout: "But that's not the point. This is entertainment!"



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Well, entertainment is a complex business. And we are talking about an aspect of the film that *isn't* particularly entertaining. When you travel across three whole worlds and *all* the humans you see are so scrupulously caucasian and male, Lucas's future begins to seem a little dull. And the variation and invention suddenly turn out to be only the province of the set director and special effects crew.

How does one put in some variety, some *human* variety? The same way you put in your barrage of allusions to other films, i.e., you just *do* it and don't make a big thing.

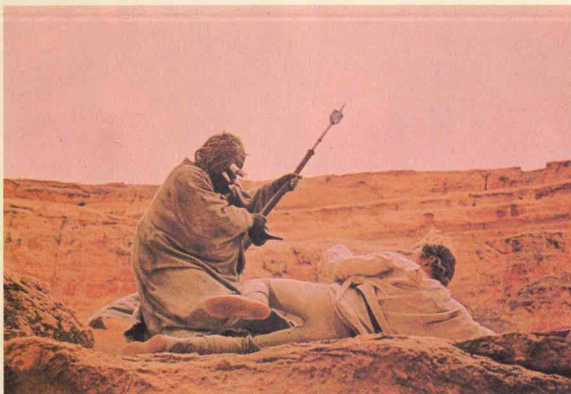
To take the tiniest example: wouldn't that future have been more *interesting* if, say, three-quarters of the rebel pilots just happened to have been Oriental women—rather than just the guys who didn't make it onto the Minnesota Ag-football team. It would even be more interesting to the guys at Minnesota Ag. This *is* science fiction after all.

No more explanation would have been needed for that (They came from a world colonized by Chinese where women were frequently pilots? Possibly they came from a dozen worlds and volunteered because they were all historically interested in the Red Guard? Or

maybe it's just because there are, indeed, lots of Chinese women?) than we get for why there just happens to be an Evil, Nasty, Octopoid Thingy in the Death Star garbage dump. (It was busy metabolizing garbage? Maybe it was an alien ambassador who felt more comfortable in that environment? Maybe it just grewed?) That kind of off-handed flip is what you can do in science fiction.

In the film world in the present, the token woman, token black, or what-have-you, is clearly propaganda, and even the people who are supposed to like that particular piece of it smile their smiles with rather more tightly pursed lips than is comfortable. In a science fiction film, however, the variety of human types should be as fascinating and luminous in itself as the variety of color in the set designer's paint box. Not to make use of that variety, in all possible combinations, seems an imaginative failure of at least the same order as not coming up with as interesting sets as possible.

In any case, *Star Wars* is a delight. (For those people who like literary parallels, it brings the sf film up to about the *Lensmen* stage.) But perhaps the most delightful thing about it is that it brings so forcefully to the imagination the possibility of sf films that are so much better in precisely the terms that *Star Wars* itself has begun to lay out.





# A Fan's Notes

by Ginjer Buchanan

I have a fan friend who is the sort of person who establishes meaningful relationships with shopping bag ladies on the subway. You know the type—compulsively friendly. Whenever we happen to be at the same mundane (as in non-fannish) party, I invariably overhear him, sometime in the course of the evening, attempting to "explain" fandom to some poor bewildered soul who would probably really rather be getting drunk. He enthusiastically recites fannish legends, speaks glowingly of the warmth and closeness of the fannish family, and invites people to fannish gatherings and conventions. In short, he carries on much like your average street-corner Moonie.

Now, while all that he says about fandom may be true, and even interesting, he has never, to my knowledge, converted anyone. Nor have I, I must confess, on those few occasions when I at-

tempted direct proselytizing. It just doesn't seem to work that way. Yet, the ranks of fandom have been growing year by year. Where are we coming from then?

Well, to paraphrase: Some people are born fans; some achieve fandom; some have fandom thrust upon them.

In the first category, we have your basic biological progression. Joephan marries Susiephan, who gives birth to Joephan, Jr., Maryphan, Johphan, etc. (Subsequently, Joephan may divorce Susiephan and marry Bettiephan, who was previously married to Billiephan, but that is, as they say, another column.) This accounts for some of the growth of fandom, though only a small part. Fans are not terribly prolific. Those that do reproduce, however, introduce their progeny to science fiction and fandom even before the word go. (Recommended reading for lying-in:

Alexei Panshin's *RITE OF PASSAGE* published by Ace Books.) The youngest con attendee I know of was a lady of approximately five weeks of age who came from Washington, D.C. to a Lunacon, accompanied by her parents. (One of our raunchier old pros inquired if she was still a virgin; she burbled at him.) A Midwestern fan-couple's oldest has, since the age of three, maintained that one of her life's ambitions is to grow up to marry Harlan Ellison! (She also wants to be Queen of the Universe. I am not sure if Harlan will then be King of the Universe, or simply her consort.) In a few instances, families are now working on the *third* generation of fans. As the twig is warped . . .

Category two is probably the largest. These are people, predominantly readers of science fiction, who have caught some glimmering of the existence of fandom. Perhaps they have read a column such as this. Perhaps they have come across a fanzine in a sf specialty book store. Perhaps they have responded to advertising for a regional or worldcon being held in their vicinity. At any rate, once they have tasted the wine of fandom, as it were, they proceed to indulge themselves in what might well become a lifelong bacchanalia. (The

*Continued on P. 72*

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# HARLAN ELLISON

# THE OTHER EYE OF POLYPHEMUS

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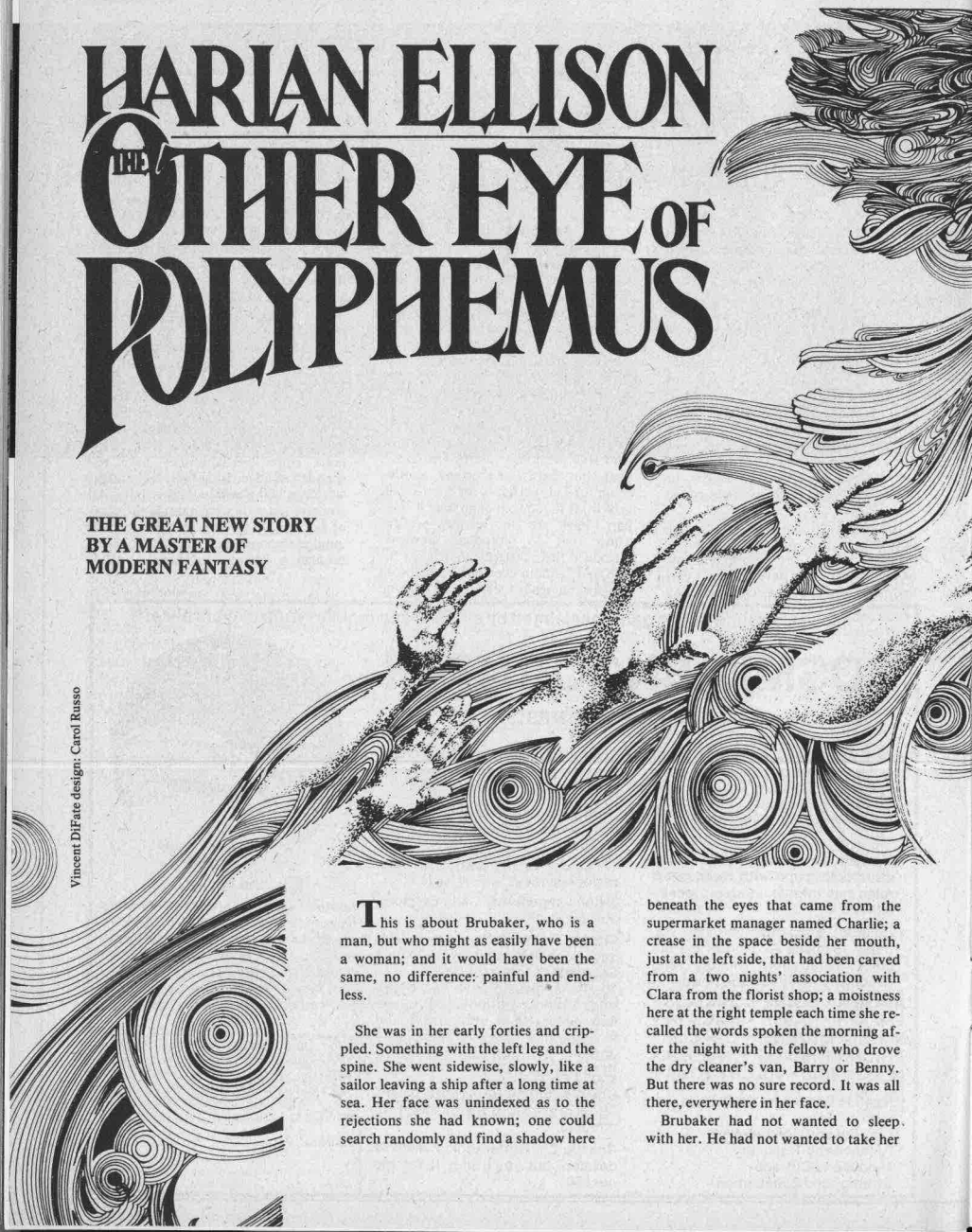
Vincent DiFate design: Carol Russo

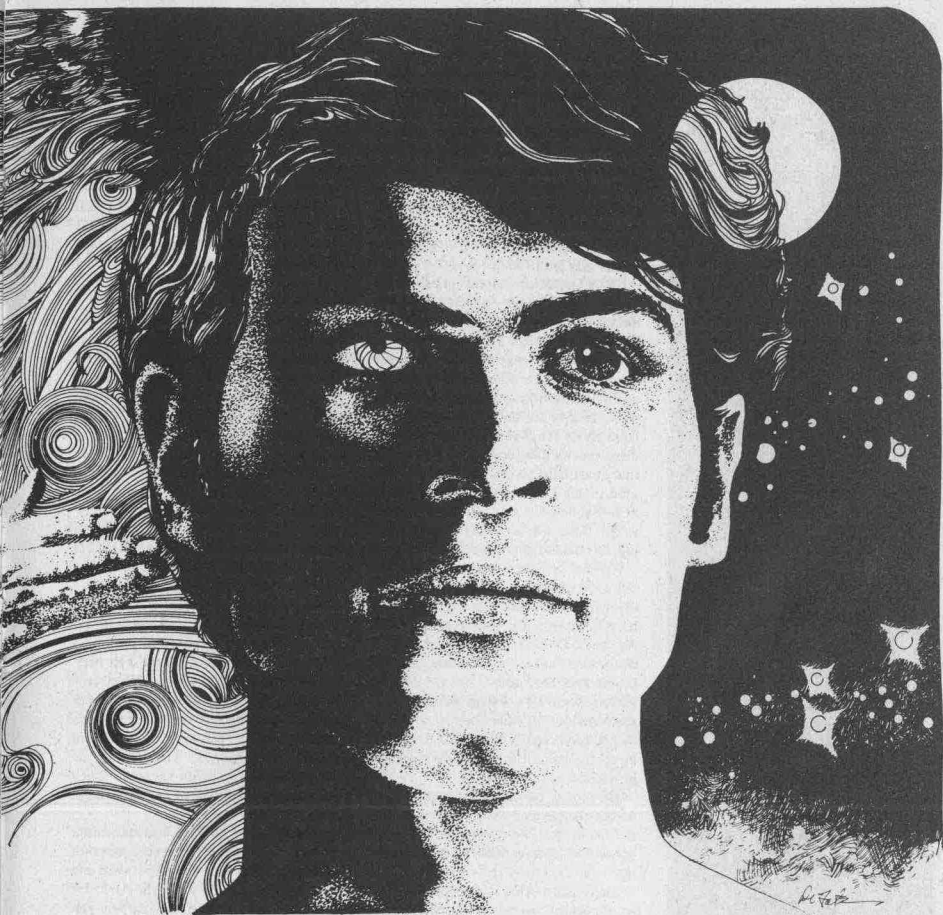
This is about Brubaker, who is a man, but who might as easily have been a woman; and it would have been the same, no difference: painful and endless.

She was in her early forties and crippled. Something with the left leg and the spine. She went sidewise, slowly, like a sailor leaving a ship after a long time at sea. Her face was unindexed as to the rejections she had known; one could search randomly and find a shadow here

beneath the eyes that came from the supermarket manager named Charlie; a crease in the space beside her mouth, just at the left side, that had been carved from a two nights' association with Clara from the florist shop; a moistness here at the right temple each time she recalled the words spoken the morning after the night with the fellow who drove the dry cleaner's van, Barry or Benny. But there was no sure record. It was all there, everywhere in her face.

Brubaker had not wanted to sleep with her. He had not wanted to take her





home or go to her home, but he had. Her apartment was small and faced out onto a narrow court that permitted sunlight only during the hour before and the hour following high noon. She had pictures from magazines taped to the walls. The bed was narrow.

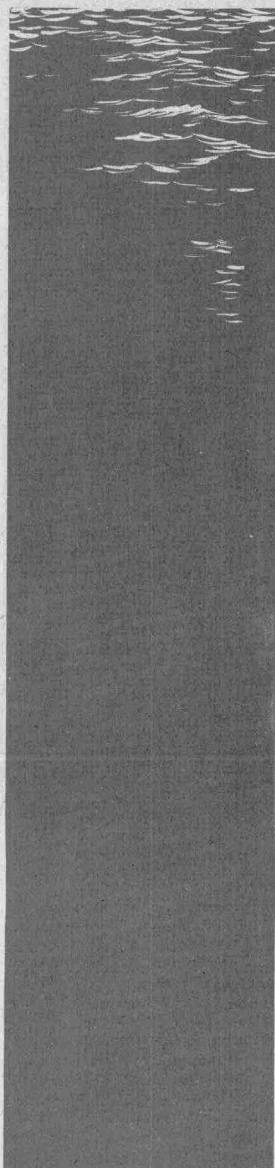
When she touched him, he felt himself going away. Thinking of warm places where he had rested on afternoons many years before; afternoons when he had been alone and had thought that was not as successful a thing to be as he now understood it to

be. He did not want to think of it in this way, but he thought of himself as a bricklayer doing a methodical job. Laying the bricks straight and true.

He made love to her in the narrow bed, and was not there. He was doing a job, and thought how unkind and how unworthy such thoughts seemed to be . . . even though she would not know he was away somewhere else. He had done this before, and kindness was something he did very well. She would feel treasured, and attended, and certainly that was the least he could do.

Her limp, her sad and lined face. She would think he was in attendance, treasuring her. He had no needs of his own, so it was possible to give her all that without trembling.

They both came awake when an ambulance screamed crosstown just beneath her window, and she looked at him warmly and said, "I have to get up early in the morning, we're doing inventory at the office, the files are really in terrible shape." But her face held a footnote expression that might have been interpreted as *You can stay if you*



*want, but I've been left in beds where the other side grows cool quickly, and I don't want to see your face in the morning with that look that tells me you're trying to work up an excuse to leave in a hurry so you can rush home to take the kind of shower that washes the memory of me off you. So I'm giving you the chance to go now, because if you stay it means you'll call tomorrow sometime before noon and ask if I'd like to have dinner and see an early movie.*

So he kissed her several times, on the cheeks and once—gently—on the mouth, with lips closed; a treasuring kiss. And he left her apartment.

The breeze blew gently and coolly off the East River, and he decided to walk down past Henderson Place to sit in the park. To give himself time to come back from those far places. He felt partially dissolved, as if in sending himself out of that apartment he had indulged in some kind of minimal astral projection. And now that he was ready to receive himself again, there was a bit of his soul missing, left behind in her bed.

He had a tiny headache, the finest point of pain, just between and above his eyes, somewhere pierced behind the hard bone over the bridge of his nose. As he walked toward the park, he rubbed the angles of his nose between thumb and forefinger.

Carl Schurz Park was calm. Unlike vast sections of the city, it could be visited after dark without fear. The stillness, the calmness: marauders seldom lurked there.

He took a bench and sat staring off across the cave of water. The pain was persistent and he massaged the inner corners of his eyes with a gentle fingertip.

There had been a woman he had met at a cocktail party. From Maine. He hesitated to think of her in such simplified ways, but there was no denying her sweetness and virginity. Congregationalist, raised too well for life in this city, she had come here from Maine to work in publishing, and the men had not been good to her. Attracted by her well-scrubbed face and her light, gentle manner, they had stepped out with her two, three, once even four times. But she had been raised too well for life taken in late night sessions, and they had drifted back to their meat racks and their lonelinesses mutually shared. One had even suggested she seduce a platonic friend of hers, a gentle young man com-

ing to grips with his sexuality, and then she would be fit for a proper affair. She had asked him to leave. The following week he was seeing the wife of a production assistant at the publishing house in which they all labored, and the girl from Maine had signed up for tap dancing lessons.

She had met Brubaker at the cocktail party and they had talked, leaning out the thirty-first-floor window to escape the smoke and the chatter.

It became clear to him that she had decided he was the one. Reality and upbringing waged their war in her, and she had decided to capitulate. He walked her home and she said, "Come in for a graham cracker. I have lots of them." He said, "What time is it?" His watch said 12:07. "I'll come up till 12:15." She smiled shyly and said, "I'm being aggressive. It's not easy for me." He said, "I don't want to come up for very long. We might get into trouble." He meant it. He liked her. But she was hurting. "It's not a kind of trouble you haven't been in before," she said. He smiled gently and said, "No, but it's a kind of trouble *you've* never been in."

But he could not refuse her. And he was good with her, as good as he could be, accepting the responsibility, hoping when she found the man she had been saving herself for, he would be very very loving. At least, he knew, he had put her out of reach of the kind of men who sought virgins. Neither the sort who would marry *only* a virgin, nor the predators who went on safari for such endangered species were human enough for her.

And when he left, the next morning, he had a headache. The same pinpoint of anguish that now pulsed between and above his eyes as he sat in the park. He had felt changed after leaving *her*, just as he did tonight. Was there a diminishing taking place?

Why did imperfect people seek him out and need him?

He knew himself to be no wiser, no nobler, no kinder than most people were capable of being, if given the chance. But he seemed to be a focal point for those who were in need of kindness, gentle words, soft touches. It had always been so for him. Yet he had no needs of his own.

Was it possible never to be touched, to give endlessly, no matter how much was asked, and never to name one's own desire? It was like living behind a pane

of one-way glass; seeing out, while no one could see in. Polyphemus, the one-eyed, trapped in his cave, ready victim for all the storm-tossed Odysseus creatures who came to him unbidden. And like Polyphemus, denied half his sight, was he always to be a victim of the storm-tossed? Was there a limit to how much he could give? All he knew of need was what was demanded of him, blind in one eye to personal necessities.

The wind rose and shivered the tops of the trees.

It smelled very clean and fresh. As she had.

Out on the East River a dark shape slid smoothly across his line of sight and he thought of some lonely scow carrying the castoff remnants of life downtide to a nameless grave where blind fish and things with many legs sculled through the darkness, picking over the remains.

He rose from the bench and walked down through the park.

To his right, in the empty playground, the wind pushed the children's swings. They squealed and creaked. The dark shape out there, skimming along obscuring Roosevelt Island, was heading south downriver. He decided to pace it. He might have gone straight ahead till Schurz Park ended, then crossed the John Finley Walkway over the East River Drive traffic, but the dark shape out there fascinated him. As far as he could tell, he had no connection with it, in any way, of any kind. Utterly uninvolved with the shape. It meant nothing to him; and for that reason, chiefly, it was something to follow.

At 79th Street, the park's southern boundary behind him, East End Avenue came to a dead end facing the side of the East End Hotel. To his left, where 79th Street's eastern extremity terminated against the edge of Manhattan Island, worlds-end, a low metal barrier blocked off the street from the Drive. He walked to the barrier. Out there the black shape had come to rest on the river.

Cars flashed past like accelerated particles, their lights blending one into another till there were chromatic bands of blue and red and silver and white forming a larger barrier beyond the low metal fencing that blocked his passage. Passage where? Across six lanes of thundering traffic and a median that provided no protection? Protection from what? He stepped off the curb and did not realize he had climbed over the metal fencing to do so. He stepped off

into the seamless, light-banded traffic.

Like walking across water. He crossed the downtown-bound lanes, between the cars, walking between the raindrops, untouched. He reached the median and kept going. Through the up-town-bound bands of light to the far side.

He looked back at the traffic. It had never touched him; but that didn't seem strange, somehow. He knew it should, but between the now-blistering headache and his feeling of being partially disembodied, it was inconsequential.

He climbed the low metal barrier and stood on the narrow ledge of concrete. The East River lay below him. He sat down on the concrete ledge and let his legs dangle. The black shape was directly across from him, in the middle of the river. He lowered himself down the face of the concrete wall till his feet touched the black skin of the East River.

He had met a woman at a library sale two years before. The New York Public Library on 42nd Street and Fifth Avenue had been clearing out excess and damaged stock. They had set up the tables in tiny Bryant Park abutting the Library on the 42nd Street side. He had reached for a copy of José Ortega y Gasset's *THE REVOLT OF THE MASSES* in the 25th anniversary Norton edition, just as she had reached for it. They came up with the book together, and looked across the table at each other. He took her for coffee at the Swiss Chalet on East 48th.

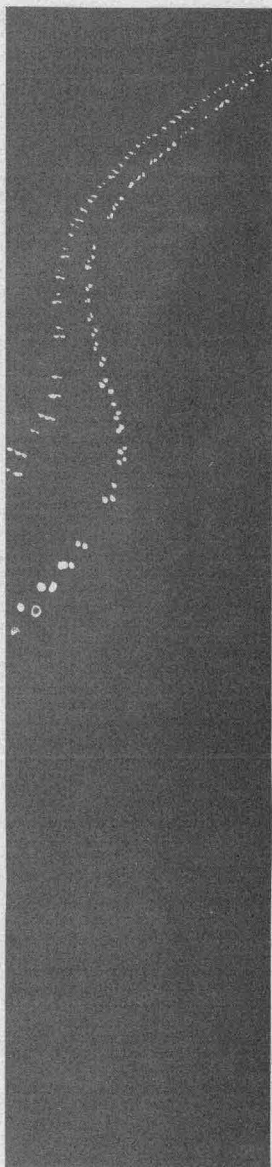
They went to bed only once, though he continued to see her for several months while she tried to make up her mind whether she would return to her husband; he was in the restaurant linen supply business. For the most part, Brubaker sat and listened to her.

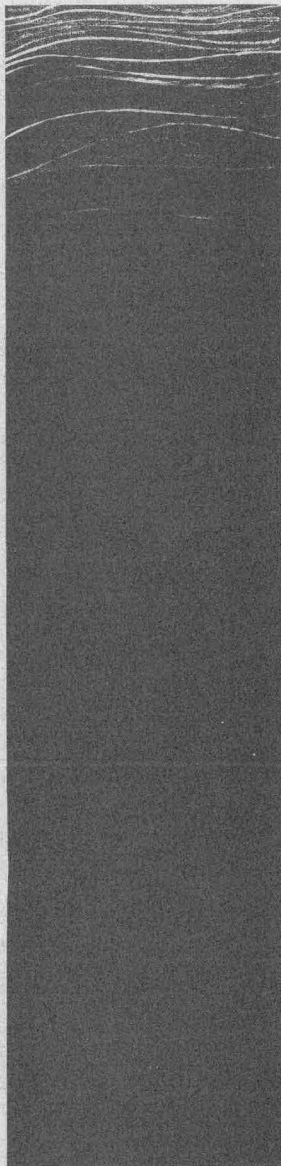
"The thing I most hate about Ed is that he's so damned self-sufficient," she said. "I always feel if I were to vanish, he'd forget me in a week and get himself another woman and keep right on the way he is."

Brubaker said, "People have confided in me, and they've been almost ashamed of saying it, though I don't know why they should be, that the pain of losing someone only lasts about a week. At least with any intensity. And then it's simply a dull ache for a while until someone else comes along."

"I feel so guilty seeing you and not, uh, you know."

"That's all right," he said, "I enjoy





your company. And if I can be of any use, talking to me, so you get your thoughts straight, well, that's better than being a factor that keeps you and Ed apart."

"You're so kind. Jesus, if Ed were only a fraction as kind as you, we'd have no problems. But he's so *selfish!* Little things. He'll squeeze the toothpaste tube from the middle, especially a new one, and he knows how that absolutely *unhinges* me, and he'll spit the paste all over the fixtures so I have to go at them a hundred times a week—"

And he listened to her and listened to her and listened to her, but she was too nervous for sex, and that was all right; he really did like her and want to be of some help.

There were times when she cried in his arms, and said they should take an apartment together, and she'd do it in a minute if it weren't for the children and half the business being in her name. There were times when she raged around his apartment, slamming cabinet doors and talking back to the television, cursing Ed for some cruelty he had visited on her. There were times when she would sit curled up staring out the window of Brubaker's apartment, running the past through her mind like prayer beads of sorrow.

Finally, one last night, she came into his bed and made ferocious love to him, then told Brubaker she was going back to Ed. For all the right reasons, she said. And a part of Brubaker had gone away, never to return. He had experienced the headache.

Now he simply walked across the soaked-black water to the dark shape. Like walking through traffic. Untouched. The tiniest ripples circled out from beneath his feet, silvered and delicate for just a moment before vanishing to either side of him.

He walked out across the East River and stepped into the dark shape. It was all mist and soft cottony fog. He stepped inside and the only light was that which he produced himself through the tiniest pinpoint that had opened between and above his eyes. The darkness smoothed around him and he was well within the shifting shape now.

It was not his sort of gathering. Everyone seemed much too intense. And the odor of their need was more pervasive than anything he had ever known before.

They lounged around in the fog, dim

against the darkness, illuminated only when Brubaker's light struck them, washed them for a moment with soft pink-white luminescence and then they became dim moving shapes in the fog. He moved among them, and once a hand touched his arm. He drew back. For the first time in his life he drew back.

He realized what he had done, and felt sorry about it.

He swept his light around through the darkness and caught the stare of a woman who had clearly been watching him. Had she been the person who had touched him? He looked at her and she smiled. It seemed a very familiar smile. The woman with the limp? The virgin? Ed's wife? One of the many other people he had known?

People moved in the darkness, rearranging themselves. He could not tell if they were carrying on conversations in the darkness, he could hear no voices, only the faint sound of fog whispering around the shadowed shapes. Were they coupling, was this some bizarre orgy? No, there was no frenetic energy being expended, no special writhing that one knew as sexual activity, even in darkness.

But they were all watching him now. He felt utterly alone among them. He was not one of them, they had not been waiting for him, their eyes did not shine.

She was still watching him, still smiling.

"Did you touch me?" he asked.

"No," she said. "No one touched you."

"I'm sure someone—"

"No one touched you." She watched him, the smile more than an answer, considerably less than a question. "No one here touched you. No one here wants anything from you."

A man spoke from behind him, saying something Brubaker could not make out. He turned away from the woman with the serious smile, trying to locate the man in the darkness. His light fell on a man lying in the fog, resting back on his elbows. There was something familiar about him, but Brubaker could not place it; something from the past, like a specific word for a specific thing that just fitted perfectly and could be recalled if he thought of nothing else.

"Did you say something?"

The man looked at him with what seemed to be concern.

"I said: you deserve better."

"If you say so."

"No, if *you* say so. That's one of the three things you most need to understand."

"Three things?"

"You deserve better. Everyone deserves better."

Brubaker did not understand. He was here in a place that seemed without substance or attachment to real time, speaking plainly to people who were—he now realized—naked—and why had he not realized it before?—and he did not wonder about it; neither did he understand what they were saying to him.

"What are the other two things I need to know?" he asked the man.

But it was a woman in the darkness who answered. Yet another woman than the one with the smile. "No one should live in fear," she said, from the fog, and he skimmed his light around to find her. She had a harelip.

"Do you mean me? That I live in fear?"

"No one should live like that," she said. "It isn't necessary. It can be overcome. Courage is as easy to replicate as cowardice. You need only practice. Do it once, then twice, and the third time it's easier, and the fourth time a matter of course, and after that it's done without even consideration. Fear washes away and everything is possible."

He wanted to settle down among them. He felt one with them now. But they made no move to invite him in. He was something they did not want among them.

"Who are you all?"

"We thought you knew," said the woman with the smile. He recognized her voice. It came and went in rises and falls of tone, as though speaking over a bad telephone connection, incomplete, partial. He felt he might be missing parts of the conversation.

"No, I have no idea," he said.

"You'll be leaving now," she said. He shone the light on her. Her eyes were milky with cataracts.

His light swept across them. They were all malformed in some way or other. Hairless, blind, atrophied, ruined. But he did not know who they were.

His light went out.

The dark shape seemed to be withdrawing from around him. The fog and mist swarmed and swirled away, and he was left standing in darkness on the East

River. A vagrant whisper of one of their voices came to him as the dark shape moved off downriver: "You'd better hurry."

He felt water lapping at his ankles, and he hurried back toward the concrete breakwall. By the time he reached it, he was swimming. The wind had died away, but he shivered with the chill of the water that soaked his clothes.

He pulled himself up the face of the wall and lay on the ledge gasping for breath.

"May I help you?" he heard someone say.

A hand touched his shoulder. He looked up and saw a woman in a long beige duster coat. She was kneeling down, deeply concerned.

"I wasn't trying to kill myself," he heard himself say.

"I hadn't thought of that," she said.

"I just thought you might need a hand up out of the water."

"Yes," he said, "I could use a hand."

She helped him up. The headache seemed to be leaving him. He heard someone speak, far out on the river, and he looked at her. "Did you hear that?"

"Yes," she said, "someone spoke. It must be one of those tricks of echo."

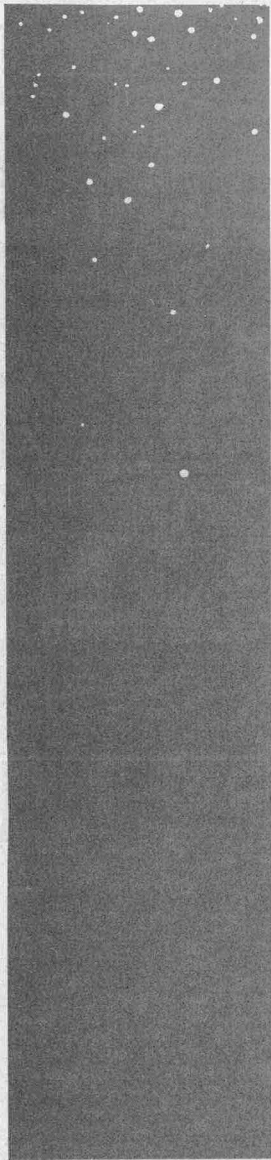
"I'm sure that's what it was," he said.

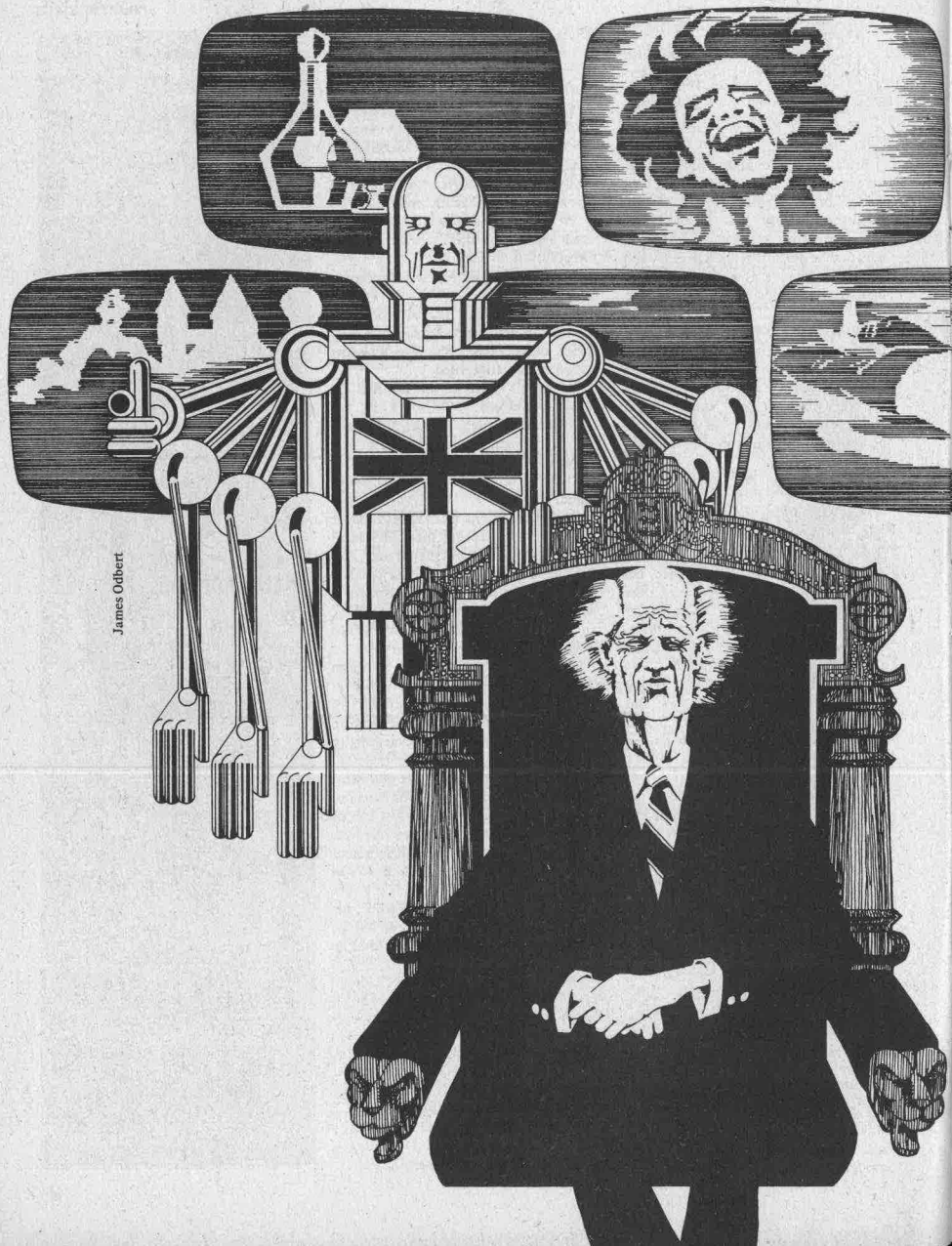
"Do you need something to warm you up?" she asked. "I live right over there in that building. Some coffee?"

"Yes," he said, allowing her to help him up the slope. "I need something to warm me up."

*Whatever you need in life you must go and get*, had been the words from out there on the river where the lost bits of himself were doomed to sail forever. Damaged, forlorn; but no longer bound to him. He seemed to be able to see more clearly now.

And he went with her, for a while, for a long while or a short while; but he went to get something to warm him; he went to get what he needed.

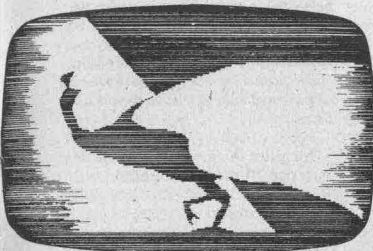




James Odbert

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**"BOW DOWN, YE LOWER  
MIDDLE CLASSES"**



# SIR RICHARD'S ROBOTS

BY FELIX C. GOTSCHALK

1. "Mercy, I should have hoped you lads would have attained a degree of restive truce by now," Sir Richard sighed from deep in his armchair. Across the huge, dim room, two young men were feinting blows at each other, boxing with open palms. A liver-colored mastiff burst through the door and began barking at the men. The sound made reverberations in Sir Richard's rib cage. "Heavens, what an absolute cacophony!" he cried. "Do leave, fellows,

and take the brute with you."

"Hey, dude," one of the boys said to the other, "the big royal codger wants us to split."

"He do?" the other replied, continuing to dance and feint and jab. "Now ain't that just too bad." The man grabbed a small jar from a shelf and threw it at Sir Richard. The throw was pegged arrow-straight, and the jar whistled just over the top of the chair-back, smashing into a tapestry.

"A missile!" Sir Richard roared. "How could one possibly regress to the throwing of missiles!" The men approached the old man, their gait purposive, measured, their treads suggesting keenly controlled stealth. Then, their stalking changed to a nervous little klog-dance, as the room brightened with light, and a deep voice crackled out: "You have violated the master's Lewinian life-space. Retire at once or be stunbolted." The young men turned to see

## SIR RICHARD'S ROBOTS

the robot hissing toward them on silent castered pods. It was about six feet tall, with a long cylindrical trunk, a revolving cranial sphere, and eight armlike extremities.

"Oh shit, the tin man is here again," one of the men snickered.

"Oh I say, good show, Reggie!" Sir Richard said to the robot. "The young scamps were about to attack me yet again—now be off, you curmudgeons!" Sir Richard waved his hand casually at the two figures, as if brushing away an insect. The men walked quickly from the room, slamming the door, and shouting obscenities as they jogged down the long hall of the huge mansion.

"However could such poor deportment have developed in civilized people?" the old man asked the robot.

"The subjects have never had role-models of a paterno-authoritarian sort, sir," the robot replied. "They know little but overt psychopathy."

"A pity, really—come, sit and talk a bit." The robot moved slowly toward Sir Richard, adjusting its 600 true pounds in a graviton matrix as it sifted onto the thick rug. It stopped in front of the old man's chair, and lowered its pistonlike leg structures. Sir Richard smiled up at the robot's physiognomy mask. "I should have been dead many times over but for your protection," he said. "Once again, my thanks for your intervention."

"Your servant, sir," the robot answered, its vocal nuances remarkably warm.

"I should certainly relish a sense of security, Reggie, but are there no signs of this revolution of young people wanting?"

"No sir. They are quite in control of the area, I'm afraid. At my last count, seventeen young men are billeted in the house. Of these, ten are nonviolent drug addicts, one is a quadruple amputee, and the remaining six are aggressive psychopaths. The drug addicts have remained in the East Wing for several weeks, the quad amp is forever driving his vehicle through the halls and around the grounds, and the psychos are difficult to monitor."

"Are they continuing to damage the house?"

"I'm afraid so. Very little window glass remains. Garbage and excrement litter the floors. The organ is ruined—"

"What a pity! My beautiful Flentrop! Tell me, Reggie, although I am moved to grief, what did they do to it?"

"They toppled the diapasons from the gallery onto the banquet hall floor and dropped the statues on the pipes."

"Obscene, ghastly, satanic."

"They machine-gunned the harpsichord."

"Senseless, brutal." Sir Richard's mouth quivered and he began to cry. He covered his face with his long skinny hands and his body shook with deep thoracic sobs. A corgi looked up at the old man and began to whine.

"I'm so sorry, Sir Richard," the robot said quietly.

"Well, we shall have to make the best of it, shan't we? I'm mortified to actually cry, but, alas, the events of these last few weeks have overwhelmed me."

"I quite understand, sir."

"Have we sufficient food and drink?"

"There has been vast wastage and spoilage. The venison locker is secure, though, and the wine cellar undiscovered."

"Ah, dear, where is England?" Sir Richard cried. "Where is the civility, the courtliness, the simple decency of Englishmen? The royal family tortured, murdered, Buckingham Palace desecrated, Parliament firebombed, the Archbishop crucified—it's too much to bear!"

"There'll always be an England, sir—"

"By jove, Reggie, but you sound gloriously English!"

"Blaw me! It's me voice—now lissen ta wot awm tellin you—"

"I beg your pardon, sir—"

"Frightfully sorry, Sir Richard. I am programmed for dialect, and that was a spurious output."

"I should say so."

"I was thinking that perhaps Mellers could help us get rid of the ruffians in the house. Mellers is so sourly Cockney that the engram stirred some of my ancillary data banks. Would you like to tune the BBC, sir?"

"Yes, well, let's have a bit of a go at it." The robot rotated its cranial sphere, antenna seeking optimal position. The radio voice came from the sphere:

... Minister McCartney has ordered cessation of vandalism. Finance Chancellor Starr has promised unlimited access of goods and services to any person forty years of age or younger. Citizens above the age of forty are instructed to open their homes to any pediat, pubescent, adolescent, young adult, or adult

below the stated age. Food, shelter, and hedonistic requests are to be obeyed immediately, although acquiescence does not insure the well-being of the geriatrics. Starr further stated that harassment, torture, and ritual geriatricide will continue. . . .

A chatter of automatic weapons fire rang out. "I shouldn't be afraid, sir," Reggie said. "I suspect they're shooting at the peacocks again."

"My lovely peafowl, oh, Reggie, whatever are we to do?"

"I think I have a truly capital idea, Sir Richard."

"By all means, my fine fellow, let us hear it."

"I shall have to tap banks which will alter my persona, sir. I will seem quite different to you for a while."

"Quite all right, old fellow—are we safe here in the library? Shall you have to maintain scanners for the rovers?"

"We are safe for the time being. The quad amp is asleep, the addicts are quiet, and the psychos are in the West Wing. One of them tried to drive a lorry through the hall. It is jammed tightly under an archway. I fused the crevices and set up force-fields."

"Very well then, let's hear your scheme."

*Pediatricide the clear plan. Behavior mod contraindicated. Hedonistic reward the only relevant stimulus. Mellers robot recommended to isolate the group.*

"Well, you did indeed sound like a device, Reginald, albeit a somewhat cryptic one," Sir Richard said, "but I am not totally clear on the actual workings of the plan, and besides, Mellers is a frightful chap. I can't abide him, you know."

"But he will be able to feign identification with the ruffians, sir, and can be used to make them vulnerable. Discordant as it is, Mellers has an appropriately pathognomonic Cockney accent."

"Oh, fie, fie!—but I suppose he knows the value of a Cockney chorus."

"He is well programmed in this respect."

"Where is he, ah, *ir*, I mean no offense, my fine robotic fellow—where is Mellers at this moment?"

"In the groundskeeper's cottage. A few hours on the charging pod and he'll be first-rate."

"He is an obstreperous fellow, is he

not?"

"A shade cantankerous, Sir Richard, but we can override those tendencies."

"Can you ring him up now? Is he sufficiently activated?"

"I trust so, sir." Reggiebot beamed in a radiophone signal to the cottage and waited for the pure-tone audials to synchronize:

"I say, Mister Mellers?"

"Aye. Oo th ells this?" the voice was gravelly, surly, rather soft at first.

"Reggie here, old chap, have a bit of an assignment for you."

"Th ell ya hev—me silicon's thick, an me wattage laow—stuff a bob up yer arse."

"Now, now, Mellers, peer, symbiont, friend—"

"Th Duke ah Winsler's ah bluddy shit, ee iz—"

"Yes, yes, I quite agree," Reggie said, wincing as best he could. Sir Richard winced significantly at the meowing dialect, and leaned in close to Reggie:

"I say, may we not program some civility into Mellers? Or at least make him—ah, it—heavens, he is just a machine—make him do precisely what we say?"

"He is programmed for interactions at lower socioeconomic levels, sir."

"Oo th ell ya talkin to, mawster eyairs Reginald?"

"The master," Reggie replied crisply.

"Ah ev naow ruddy mawster, en you know it."

"Mellars, my man," Reggie said quickly, "once again we are forced to override your programming limens. I shall arrive at your quarters shortly. You are instructed to plug in to the charging pod, and dial medial somnolence."

"You're gowin ta stend ap for th aowld codger, eh?"

"Frightful impertinence!" Sir Richard exclaimed. "I should never have acquired such a creature had I known he would wax churlish and independent. Of the few robots left in England, I seem to have the best as well as the worst. Do what you can with him, Reggie. Heavens, I hope we can control him." Reggie moved to the central power console and punched in the codes for Mellars:

*Groundsman robot activation: maximize nonverbal cognitive facilities. Delay vocal/verbal reasoning. Maximize loyalty parameters . . .*

The initial coding activated millions of specific stimulus-response couplets, and Mellars's data banks began to fill, like a swimming pool full of empty honeycombs.

"What I propose, Sir Richard, is for Mellars to ingratiate himself with the ruffians, get them all into the wine cellar, and dispatch them, all of a group."

"A pretty bit of homicide, Reginald. How will we do it?"

"I suggest the Amontillado paradigm."

"Seal the beggars in!"

"Righto!"

"I say, Reggie, you're the absolute top. We shall have our very own ritualistic killing. Are you quite sure there's no reasoning with them?"

"Quite futile, Sir Richard."

"Very well then. I shall have to rearrange my value-judgments, and with no little effort either—killing's just not cricket, you know."

"I know, sir. Now, you must protect yourself until the plan gets underway. Lock yourself in the study, activate the force-fields, wear an isomorph, and keep a phaser. I shall return as soon as possible."

II. The Reggie robot clacked, a serrated tungsten sound, whirred on levitational pods, and lifted off through the shattered glass doors of the library. Sir Richard watched briefly, then crossed the huge room, the mastiff and the corgi padding beside him. He entered the study, secured the massive oak door, and activated the protective force-fields. Sitting before the array of monitor screens, he sighed, leaned back, and palmed the screens on. A camera in the East Wing drawing room revealed several young men sprawled on piles of animal hides. A fat bulldog was defecating on the stone floor. One of the men sniffed, scowled, and threw a bottle at the dog. The camera lens panned around the room, and the young men noticed the movement, gesticulating and waving disdainfully. One threw a glass at the camera, shouting obscenities. Switching to Reggie's photo system, Sir Richard saw the wooded steeps and precipitous limestone cliffs, the pleasant alluvial meadows, overlooked by occasional rocky scars, the woods of fir, ash, beech, and oak, the forest-line growing in the screen as the robot skimmed to-

ward Mellars in the cottage. Rotating the view, Sir Richard was able to see the estate, receding: the gray towers and battlements, the luxuriant ivy, the tall cluster of six chimneys, the lawns with turf six feet deep—"Ah, I should have lived here in the 11th century," he sighed. "I am little more than a musty medieval relic." The screens for monitoring the main halls glowed dull and imageless, many of the lenses shot out. Just outside the library door, two young men squatted and listened.

"Did the tin man split?"

"Yeah, that chrome fox headed for the woods."

"Can we zilch the old phart?"

"No need, man, and besides, he ain't in there. He's probably lock-tight in the study again." Far off down the hall, a rolling, clattering noise was heard. A vehicle came into sight, a kind of high, rolling table, like a hospital bed. The spindly, top-heavy table swerved around the dim corner. Its sensor light blinked at the men.

"You there, Art?" a voice from the table called out.

"Yeah, it's me and Don." The cart rolled up to the men. Prone on the shallow foam mattress was the torso of a man, both legs and arms missing, pulled from their sockets in a torture session. Sensors capped the sockets, like convex asphalt detoids. The man's face was handsome, square, his neck was thick, strong-looking, and his high forehead was cross-hatched with surgical stitch patterns, as if a gearshift pattern or a wiring diagram was cut into his head. Multicolored wire leads snaked from the sockets, growing into cables linked to prehensile calipers, the calipers resting on handlebar throttle and steering controls. "What's happening, man?" the prone man asked.

"Sir Richard's sealed off in the study and the robot's headed for the woods. Something's up."

"McCartney said to hold down the vandalism, did you hear it?"

"Yeah, hey man, will this place burn?"

"Shit, don't ask me, but I don't want to find out. We'll need some digs, you know. We can't pull the bloody roof in on our heads."

"There's plenty of diggings left in merrie old England, and this place is starting to give me the cold willies."

"Well, I'm against burning it," the prone man said, "and besides, Sir Richard's robot is tough. I don't think we



can cut him down." One of the men kicked at the library door. "Hey, Richard the Chicken-Hearted, get your flippin' ass out here!" he roared.

"Yeah, get it out!" the other said. Deep in his study, protected by force-fields and a body isomorph, Sir Richard did not hear the taunt.

"We're going to carve your balls off, you aristocratic shit!" the prone man shouted. Silence, then machine-gun fire from outside. The prone man reverse-castered his cart and rattled off down the hall. "All the peacocks'll be dead before I get to shoot any," he said. The two young men followed him out of the house.

Meanwhile, the Reginald robot flew above the forest until he saw the Mellers cottage, then descended in a sharp parabola to the spongy ground. The cottage was of crude stone, covered with lichens and moss. Heavy creeper vines clung to the walls, irresistible new tendrils thrusting through the mortar and through the windows. Reggie irised the metal door-port and entered the cottage. Despite a homey rural exterior, the insides looked and smelled like a machine shop: the smell of smoking metal bits on a churning lathe, hot oil, solvents, gears in cosmoline, friction smells, intimidating machismo auras. The Mellers robot was upright on the charging stand, a thick umbilical cable attached to its power receptacle. Mellers was slightly squared in the torso, about seven feet in height, and fitted with four segmented thigh and calf extremities. Two very long, ball-socketed cylinders functioned as arms, and the hand-structure was adaptable for power-tool work. The central physiognomy sphere was more humanoid than Reggie's, and was adapted for the placement of amino-plast masks. Reggie moved to the power console and palmed on the verbal system:

"Enemies have invaded Sir Richard's estate, Mellers," he said, like a wing commander at a briefing session. "You are to infiltrate the group, and isolate them in one part of the house, so that they may be dispatched. Is that clear?"

"Ooz enemies?" Mellers croaked, the voice like iron filings and oil.

"Enemies of the state, Mellers, enemies of the crown—"

"Fuck th crown and the state batho—"

"They are personal enemies also. They have tried to harm Sir Richard,

they have tried to harm me, and they will attempt the same with you."

"Naow yewmun alive cun malfunction me."

"These people are *robopathic*, Mister Mellers." The word had deep significance for the robot. Deep in his semantic matrices, the word registered alarm.

"Ya mine they'll pull me plug?"

"They'll scrap you any way they can." The word scrap also registered alarm in Mellers's systems.

"Well, hits naow skin owf me arse—what is it awm ta do?"

"Get up to the big house, convince the enemies that you are *against* Sir Richard, entertain them, ingratiate them—"

"Wut th ell ya mine?"

"Just get in good with them, Mellers, join them, say you will protect them—say you can lead them to a cache of drugs—then get them all into the wine cellar. Sir Richard and I will take it from there."

"Wuts in this for may?"

"A rebuild, at least, and probably a hedonic implant."

"A hydraulic kicker?"

"Right you are."

"Blaw me! I'll do it!" Reggie coded in the back-up data, checked the regimen on the console, and punched in an increased sampling error factor. He scudded across the metal floor and stood by the door. "Stay on the pod until you're at centile ninety-nine on everything," he said. "We're counting on you. Good luck."

"Blaw me!" Mellers muttered, "a hydraulic kicker—in me aown wy, awm in like Flynn."

III. At dusk, the Mellers robot removed the six spring-loaded bolts connecting him to the charging stand. He moved across the dirty metal decks and out into the woods. He walked slowly, getting the proprioceptive feel of the graviton field, adjusting himself to 250 lbs vertical weight vector. His plasticized podiatric soles mashed the bitterness and the curlydock, ragweed pollen clung to him in a fine yellow glaze, and a solitary squirrel watched his marvelously even treads with huge eyes. Mellers levitated over some heavy brush and rose up over the trees, increasing speed, and setting an azimuth for the estate.

Settling into a small walled courtyard, he fluxed on a neutral facial mask

and walked noisily over the cobblestones into the house. The hall was dim, old yellowed bulbs glowing in heavy wall sconces. Mellers clumped up two shallow steps onto the carpeted surface and began to move along the hall. He whistled a cheerful convoluted tune, the sound like a calliope. He followed a slight turn in the hall and came upon the lorry, jammed tight, like a locomotive in a collapsed tunnel.

"Ello, wot th ell's this?" he roared, trying to attract attention. "This eer eye-way aint wide enough f' th likes of a flippin truck!" He opted to eighty decibel volume: "Bloody fuckin mess!" his voice rang through the halls. He tore away the flimsy rear doors of the truck, clumped heavily across the metal floor-panels, and hurled his 1000 net pounds through the front windshield in a great shattering crash.

"Ev cum f' yer arse, Sir Richard!" his voice flared. "Wear are ya, ye trollop's offspring!" Far down the hall, the prone man saw the huge form crash through the glass. He spun his cart around and headed for the East Wing.

"A damned big silver bot just ruined the truck," the prone man said to one of the men who sat playing cards in the drawing room.

"Yeah, we know—like, he's very loud," a voice answered.

"What shall we do?" the prone man asked, nervously idling the cogs in the cart's geared wheels.

"Henry, we can't fight robots. You know that. What we *do* is wait and see what *he's* going to do." Mellers quickly sifted over the carpets and angled for the door to the drawing room. "Ere!" he said loudly, his huge shape filling the door opening, "ere's a pretty fice a filth! Wot kinda scum are ye? Wot are ye doin ere?" The five card players got up quickly and backed away from Mellers. In a far corner of the room, two men were asleep in each other's arms, like puppies in a basket. Three other men dozed on cots. The prone man looked wonderingly, somehow longingly, at Mellers.

"Blaw me, yuv got naow flippers, man, fore nor aft," Mellers said, looking carefully at the torso on the cart. "Ye poor blowk, wut's appen'd ta ya?"

"The military governors tortured me. Who are you?"

"Hey—another big sack of tin shit!" a voice called from a corner.

"Yuv got naow call to insult me,

man," Mellers sounded hurt, "but thes aw rawt, ya knaow. Nathink pasnl. Naow mellice. Besides, aw could kill you easy."

"What do you want?" the prone man spoke again.

"Ev urd some sorta revolution's about. Ev urd awm a bloommin free agent—ev come ta give Sir Richard wut-for."

"If you're programmed for retaliatory motives, you must have cost Sir Richard plenty," one of the men said, his voice suggesting keen intelligence. "He's right here in the house,—why don't you just walk through some walls and kill him?" The man sounded clearly suspicious of Mellers.

"Ees got a robot pectectin im, that's wye! And they're both uvum locked dape in the bloommin study—and force-fields all round." A burly man entered the room, carrying an ax. He struck Mellers a tremendous blow in the trapezius area. Mellers laughed, spun his torso, and grabbed the man, like a gorilla snatching a sick kitten. "Ere's another bloody maladapt, aw wizer—Cor! You blowks are daft, ye dribblin little nit, aw could quash ye like a bedbug." The heavy chrome extremities held the man in an invincible prehensile trap, his face flattened against Mellers's pectoral plates. "Naow, awl turn ye loose, ef you'll bay a good puppy," he said, pushing the man into the center of the room. The man was obviously on psychometrics. He did a strange hopping dance, bowed to Mellers, and began to sing "A robot is a lovely thing—some tin and wires, and shit for brains—"

"Blaw me double!" Mellers roared. "Awm anged if this isn't a surly lot. You there! Yeah, you on th bed—where wuz you borned?"

"I'm a nonfucked tube-kid, if it's any of your business," an emaciated young man replied. "Hatched in Glastonbury, I was, as neat an insemination as you'll ever see."

"Eah! Ain't ya got naow nime?"

"Puddin in time—thets naow concern o yours."

"Are ye borned in th bludd Cockney?"

"What's it to you?"

"See eah, awve ed enaff o this—aw cam to tike you aht o this."

"What exactly do you mean?" the bright, suspicious voice came again from the rear of the room.

"Neva you mine—"

"No, wait. What is your motive in coming to us? Are you programmed for operant-innovative behaviors?"

"Ell, man, awv th saowl o mercy, aw ev—aw jus want ta do right by you blawks."

"Why should you be concerned with us at all?"

"Because you can help me get at Sir Richard."

"Ah, it's a trick," a voice said.

"I want to get at Sir Richard," the prone man said. "Let's hear what the big tin man has to say."

"Thets more th spirit," Mellers said to the prone man, camaraderie nuances coming through plainly. "Now, you're all heavy on th drugs, right? Ell, Sir Richard's got a stock uvvum ya wouldn't believe—en aw can tike ya to um."

"It's a trick," the suspicious man said.

"How'd you like a thousand milligram peritoneal astringent?" Mellers said, the terms produced slowly and mechanically.

"Damn me!" a man cried out. "The old bloke's really got some spider-claws?"

"Bet yer poor arse eehaz—orrzdum like gaold, ee does. There's precious little ah th stuff left—and prostate kickers, ass-wands, lysergic suppositories, thoracic heaters, morphine eclairs—you nime it—th aowl blowk's a regalar pusher."

"What do we have to do?" the suspicious man asked. "How do we know this isn't some sort of trick?"

"Simple die-vurzshun-nerry work, me lads. Just elp me get Sir Richard into the open somewhere—shit, ye mought az well do it—I could kill th lot o ye."

"Lead on, big tin stack," the burly man said, "take us to the goodies."

IV. Darkness settled on the mansion. Sir Richard and his Reggie robot were in the study, watching the camera screens. They saw Mellers lead the group of men down narrow spiral steps to the ground level, Mellers carrying the prone man and the cart. The entire group, seventeen men in all, followed, stumbling, sauntering, shuffling, talking loudly. They trooped past a richly-tiled swimming pool, pushing chairs and andirons into the dry resonant depths.

"Remarkable destructive proclivities," Sir Richard remarked, watching the screens intently.

"They perceive chattels of any sort as objects to be destroyed," Reggie said.

"But why?"

"They feel that possession of chattels confers spurious credibility upon the owners. They feel that wealth is to be liquidated. Pretty things hold no value for them."

"I should hope a thing of beauty would remain a joy forever."

"If I may say so, sir, beauty is in the eyes of the beholder, but beautiful eyes can usually be counted on to perceive things equitably." Sir Richard wondered if a true profundity lurked in the statement, but decided not to press the point. He began to walk, hands behind his back, in ever expanding concentric circles. He stopped, looked thoughtfully at the floor, then snapped his head up. "Have you coded in explicit instructions to Mellers?" he asked.

"Yes sir. He will isolate the group in the wine cellar, pretend to have located some rare wine, and ask that you come there immediately. You will appear elated, but suspicious, and agree to come if I come with you. With the men backed against the wall, we'll have the game quite well in hand."

Mellers led the straggling column of young men through the sunroom, the main ballroom, down a long, dark hallway, and into the center of the great domed main hall. They passed the library, where Sir Richard and Reggie robot sat in the adjacent study, and the group spread out as the hall widened. The psychomimetic man did a somersault, and spat plosively on the wall. The prone man kept his cart close to Mellers, looking up at him with admiration, like a child tagging after an athlete hero. Reaching the far end of the building, the group turned down a flight of steps, then on to the stone floor of the basement. The area looked like an arched tunnel, with large doors spaced every twenty feet or so. Behind the doors were storerooms, chambers, cryptlike cells, bunkers, galleys, and some tunnels leading off to mushroom cellars. The huge boiler room looked like the Titanic engine room. Stopping at a rather small metal door, Mellers coupled onto a docking device in the lock and the combination fed in through his hand-structure. Pawls and ratchets clacked, the door opened slowly, and the robot led the group into a low-ceilinged hall, dark enough so that strobe-lights on his cranial sphere lit up.

The men fell silent as they followed Mellers. The ample heat and dryness gave way to increasing chill, the hall began a gentle slope downward, mossy cracks were visible in the walls, and the sound of water dripping grew audible.

"Ere she is, boys," Mellers said, his voice startling the prone man. The group shuffled and pressed forward, trying to see what was ahead. "Naow lissen ere, for all aw know, there my be alarms and scanner ere, saow be quiet fora bit." He moved the strobes slowly over another small metal door, opened it quickly and with surprising silence, and walked into the wine cellar. The room was about ten feet in width, one hundred feet long, with a vaulted ceiling twenty feet at its peak. Dim orange lights came on. The place was rather like an undiscovered tomb, the prone man thought. The air smelled moldy, damp, earthy, cold. The men immediately began to examine the wine bottles, the priceless vintage magnums, dozens of stock-staple types, heavy ports mostly, but with Reislings, Madeiras, and Dubonnets. A connoisseur might have marveled at the array, but the group of young men might just as well have been sampling identical kegs of beer. Mellers keyed up his vocals and beamed in loudly: "Sir Richard? hits my, sir, Mellers. Can you ere me?" The voice came through clear and audible in the study, remaining subvocal in the cellar.

"Righto, Mellers," Sir Richard beamed back. "Have you contained the ruffians?"

"Aye sir, the blighters are at th grog."

"Reginald and I shall be there promptly."

"Where's the stuff, man?" the suspicious man asked Mellers.

"Behind a wall, ye'll see it soon enaff—now lissen, all of ye get down at the end of the room—yeah, tike th bottles. Blow me! ye'll hev to bay quiet awhile, and sty away th cameras. I'm going to get Sir Richard down ere—"

"Show us the stuff first," a man said.

"All in good time, me bucko."

"Show us where it is, man."

"It's sealed behind a wall. Hev a drink, man, aw ev to knock the bloomin wall daown ya know, bay patient—and dammit all, git yer arses over there fore aw bustum for ye. Git over there, all of you—you packa garbage—be thankful aw daownt do you in."

The prone man scuttled his cart up to Mellers. "Hey, mate," he said, "you've got a sense of fair play, haven't you?" Mellers gave off empathy signals and seemed respondent rather than operant. "Aw, ye ev, man, naow trundle your poor torso down there with the rest." "What's the rush?" the prone man asked.

"Naow rush. Aw wants Sir Richard daown ere, aw wants in rat naow, en you ev ta bay quiet whiles aw calls him on the audio. Naow shut yerself up or aw stunbolt th lot a ye—"

"I think the tin man wants to do us in," the suspicious man said.

"Quiet, damn all ye scum!" Mellers roared, flicking a modstun bolt at the group. The amperage hung in a filmy matrix, paralyzing the men. "Now, just you watch me," Mellers said, tuning his transmitters. "Mellers calling Sir Richard, can you ere me sir?"

"Mellers, that you?" Sir Richard's voice was clear in the wine cellar, the men obviously attentive, despite the stunbolt field. "Where are you?"

"In th wine cellar, sir."

"Whatever for, Mellers?"

"A bit o' explorin' sir. Ev faown th Rothschild you thought was lost."

"The eighteen ninety-seven?"

"Aye."

"How much, in heaven's name—Reginald, Mellers has recovered the Rothschild!"

"Looks like four or five magnums, sir."

"Capital! Oh, magnificent, my good fellow!"

"Are ye comin daown to see it?"

"Very well. I shall bring Reginald with me."

"Tike care, sir, the maladapt's are still rovin th ouse."

"I shall be safe with Reggie. Good show, Mellers, I shall reward you."

"Your servant, sir." The stunbolt field began to fade and the men stirred, like old people dozing in chairs. A few smiled, expectant, relieved, geared for geriatricide.

"Now that th aowld codger is on iz wey ere, aw shoaw ye th drug cache, boys," Mellers said, neutralizing the field. Some of the men were getting drunk, in addition to drugged. They crowded around Mellers like children following Santa Claus. Mellers pulled out a section of shelves, revealing smooth blank stone wall. He lasered the tiny seams of mortar, and clamped onto

the block, grating it out, slowly, rolling the stone away from JC's tomb. The prone man constricted his dextral semi-circular canal, the action coded for starboard caster of his cart's wheels, and the vehicle edged very close to Mellers. "I've never had spider-claws," he said, sadly, like a waif who has never tasted good food. Mellers turned his visual agates on the man. The visual engram was like a manta ray with no tail, but with fine thick humanoid neck and handsome head. Deep in his data banks, Mellers felt cognitive dissonance. He stopped lasering the adjacent stone, and looked steadily at the prone man.

"Are ye robopathic?" he asked. The prone man looked puzzled. In the silence, the sound of Reggie robot scraping across the metal bed of the lorry could be heard.

"I don't know that word," the prone man replied.

"Get on with it, tin man," a black man said.

"Yeah, you big chrome dude," another said. "Like, dig out the goodies."

"Would ye pull me plug if you could?" Mellers asked the prone man, feeling the cognitive dissonance build.

"Are ye antirobot?"

"Hell, man, you're worth your weight in gold to me," the prone man replied. "I wish I were like you."

"Ye'd be me friend?" Mellers asked, his data banks cross-phasing, empathic potentials stirred by the percept of the prone torso-man.

"Hey, what the hell is going on?" one of the psychos whined. "You two want to get married or something?"

"Sir Richard and Reggie taowld me you blowks were robopathic—that you hate me—that you would deactivate me if you got the chance." Mellers turned to the suspicious man, "Is this so?" The suspicious man sensed the strong empathic change in Mellers and was puzzled by it. His mind raced ahead, trying to predict what reinforcements would ally Mellers with the group. Basically, he felt trapped, suspecting all along that Mellers would try to kill the group one way or another. Royalty of a sort, plus two robots, does not equal compassion for revolutionaries. Upstairs, Reggie led Sir Richard down the steps. The old man wore a glowing body isomorph, and he held a phaser, notched at sun.

"We would be wrong in trying to do you harm," the suspicious man finally said to the Mellers robot. "You are

powerful and intelligent—all but invincible."

"Would ye tawk to me whenever aw wanted to?"

"Shit, man, we're lonely, of course we'd talk."

"Hey!" a black man cried out, "is this tin cat a clinging violet or a machine? Come on, dig out the fucking goodies!"

"There are no drugs," Mellers said.

In the brief and total silence that followed, the suspicious man bolted for the door. The prone man's face reddened and his eyes filled with tears. "Let's get the fuck out of here!" a voice screamed, stumbling after the suspicious man.

"Back! You scurrilous pack of blighters!" Sir Richard's voice boomed out, his phaser pointed past the flank of Reggie's massive frame. "Vandals, desecrators, enemies of her majesty!"

"Trust a goddamn robot and get zilched," the psychomimetic man said, strangely light in mood. Reggie quickly herded the men to the far end of the room again, spun a force-field around them, and scudded past Mellers back to Sir Richard's side.

"I say, Mellers, good show, old boy!" Sir Richard felt luxurious in his feeling of total control.

"They ain't a bad lot, sir," Mellers said sadly. "One uvvum's got naow flippers, fore nor aft, ee sprouts wires like a switchboard, poor blowk—"

"The quad amputee, sir," Reggie said, "but he remains a dangerous enemy."

"You may return to your quarters, Mellers," Richard said. "You'll have a rebuild for your trouble." Mellers rotated very slowly, feeling again the intense cognitive dissonance, his alliances pulled between equivocating data banks.

"What will ye do w' them?" Mellers asked.

"Pardon me, I don't believe I understand you," Sir Richard replied quickly, then grew immediately irritated. "Reginald, is Mellers programmed for disobedience?"

"He displays innovative trends that require overriding, sir. Mellers, you are to return to the cottage—get on with you, mate."

"Oo you callin' mite?" Mellers's torso glowed and twin phasers appeared at his umbilical sockets. Sir Richard looked horrified. His hands shook and he lowered his phaser. Reggie moved in

## SIR RICHARD'S ROBOTS

front of him. "I say, Mellers, whatever has come over you?" he said, the tones carefully modulated. "It is a simple, direct order: you are to return to the cottage. Is that not clear?"

"Aw'll knock your face off," Mellers said, jumping six inches forward. Reggie palmed a phaser and Sir Richard began to tremble in his isomorph.

"Can you not override him?" Sir Richard asked.

"Only from the central power console in the library, sir. Unfortunately, I neglected to bring a portable."

"Oh, fie, and double fie!" The men behind the force-field began to smile.

"Git aht o maw wye," Mellers said, treading toward Reggie.

"Daownt provowk me!" Reggie bawled out, clanking his podiatric webs into an akimbo stance. Sir Richard winced at Reggie's sudden Cockney.

"Aw kin do you in, Reggie—"

"Wots thet you sy?"

"Aw kin ruddy well bust your snotty arse."

"Frightful language!" Sir Richard sighed. "Can Mellers really outstrip you, Reginald? Must we defer to him?"

"He has a victory, sir, but it would be termed Pyrrhic." Reggie moved aside, carefully shielding Sir Richard.

"Aw wants to tike these ere blowks with me," Mellers said, motioning to the men. "Tike awye yer bloomin force-field."

"Do you agree not to harm us?" Reggie asked.

"Hit would be a stand-off or worse in

a fight, en we'd get roughed up in the bargain. So just stend aside and we go—en you can bleedin well count on me smashin the central consaow! And, aw wants me rebuild, too—saow, do aw git it, Sir Richard?"

"You have my word as an Englishman, Mellers, though your disobedience is not cricket, sir—most inappropriate—not at all British, you know." The force-field dissolved and the men swarmed toward the door. They stayed clear of the glittering isomorph fields around Reggie and Sir Richard, but cursed them liberally, making swift, feinting gestures at them as they left. As the group trooped noisily through the hall, they began to sing "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow" to Mellers.

"Dash it all, Reginald," Sir Richard said, "they'll run amok for certain now. How could such a turn of events have come to pass? Really, it's most humiliating."

"I quite understand, sir."

"What's to be done then?"

"We shall have to regroup, sir, marshal our reserves, reassess the situation, and accept our temporary position." Upstairs, Mellers noisily smashed the central computer console, while the men cheered him on.

"There is an inevitability here, sir, and one which portends ultimate victory for us."

"Really? What is that?"

"Mellers will now begin a decremental pattern. In short, sir, he will wind down in a very few hours. He has unwittingly pulled the plug on himself by disrupting the central console."

"But, your own strength?"

"I programmed a month's saturate reserves into my banks just yesterday."

"You are my very own Reginald!" Sir Richard crowed out, hugging the robot.

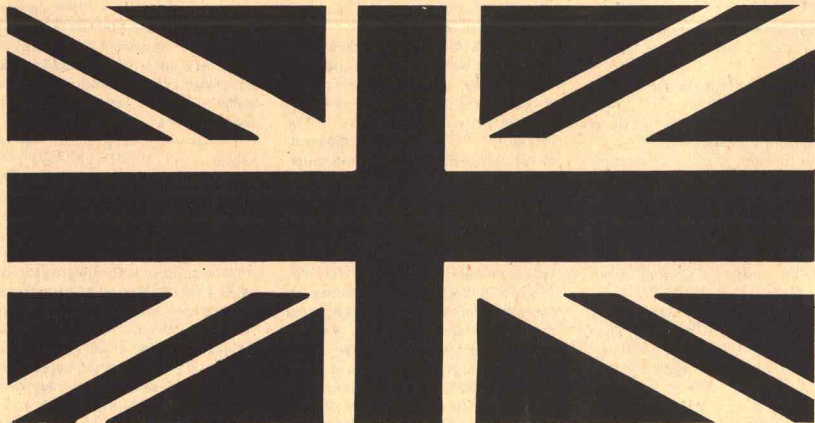
"Goodness me, I should hope so, sir."

"I say, shall we have a drink on it?" Reggie was silent, and Sir Richard realized he had made a faux pas. "So sorry, old man, here, I'll surge your lube-latch for you—there, a bit of hedonistic kick, eh?"

"Thank you, sir, that was most enjoyable." Reggie uncorked the Rothschild and handed the bottle to Sir Richard. The old man looked at the large bottle, looked around helplessly for a glass, then smiled, and drank from the priceless magnum. He lowered the bottle and looked proudly at the Union Jack painted on Reggie's chest. Tears came to his eyes.

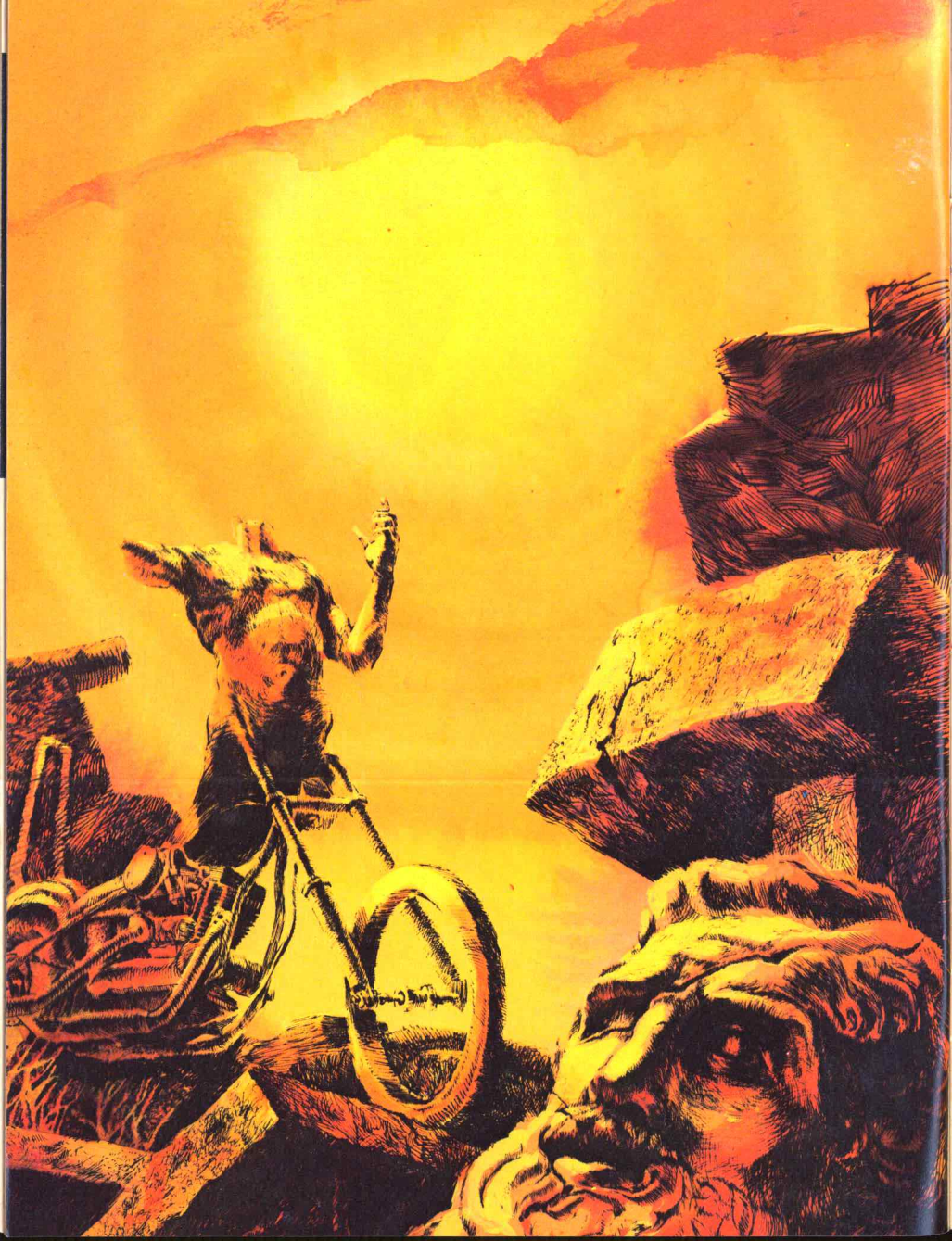
"There'll always be an England, Reggie," he said.

"Quite so, sir," the robot replied, "and we shall have our portion of it back in a short while." Sir Richard stood at attention and sang "God Save the Queen." Reggie saluted, his eight arms snapping up smartly, his Union Jack shining in the dim light.









# WHEELS WESTWARD

ON THE ROAD AGAIN . . .  
A SEQUEL TO PRIZE-  
WINNING "WHEELS"

By Robert Thurston

I

Here I am, cruising along at 75-80, and this punk kid comes zooming up beside me and honks his horn twice, grins over at me, honks the old horn two more times. The sign for challenge. He wants to challenge me. The punk kid. He looks about twelve, probably is twelve. They let anybody take a run outside the city limits these days. Not like my day when you had to sneak by road blocks and bamboozle dumb cops. My day! Shit, my day was only a few months ago. The kid guns his motor and slides on ahead of me. He's driving a souped-up Pinto. A Pinto! For God's sake, a Pinto! And he wants me to play in his yard. Goddamn roadrunner in soggy diapers. I'll take him. I pat the old Mustang on the dashboard, mutter to it in that way that Cora always found so stupid. I'm about to accept the challenge but, just as I press down on the accelerator, I hear a couple pops in the engine and I lift my foot straight off the pedal. I've been driving this car long enough to know it's disaster to ignore its complaints. I got to let the punk kid slip over the horizon, his dumb Pinto emitting a pair of explosive backfires that I have to interpret as derisive farts.

All right. Okay. That's it. That's all I can take. Punks are driving me off the roads, I can't even stand being in the same lane with them! And the fuzz, the fuzz're getting so straight, you got to make appointments with them to do two days' worth of slammer time. Cora's gone off my case, I don't even know why she stayed with me as long as she

did. The few good guys, the stubborn roadrunners and hundredplussers who're still hanging around, are avoiding me, calling me screwup. Well, let them shove it, let them all shove it. I'm taking my wheels and going on down the road, heading west, across the great plains and through the mountains, where the fields are greener and so, I'm told, are the punk kids and cops.

The punk kid is in the parking lot of the rest stop, deliberately intruding on my home-base territory. He's just leaning against his Pinto, which is hardly dented and looks like he's just this moment shined it with a toothbrush. He's so short he must use raised pedals, he looks less than twelve standing up. A Pinto, for God's sake! I'm about to stop and explain to him why I didn't accept his challenge, but he just grins to show off his black and brown baby teeth, gives me the finger, climbs in his car and zooms away.

I got to get out of here.

I go to the Mech, ask for a tune-up. He says he don't think a symphony will help the old Mustang, but he'll get to it and see what he can do. He wipes sweat off his brow with the back of his hand, after wiping the back of his hand with a clean cloth first. He says not to look over his shoulder, he'll come get me when old Musty is ready. They say there's not enough work for the Mech anymore, what with the fall in the driver population not to mention the rise in the punk kid population. Emil told me last week that the Mech's been offered a job as a supervisor in the new inspection program back in the city—where they

give the new 'government-approved' vehicles the once-over, take their pay-off, and stamp their seal of approval on the hood. The Mech won't take that job. He'd die in a day.

I have to hang around the rest stop, so I go up to the Savarin to see what's doing. Nothing's doing. Hardly anybody there.

Where's everybody, I say to Emil, who hangs around the place, rarely goes out on the road. He's your typically tall old man, bent and gaunt in all the right places. The hollows in his cheeks seem cosmetic, as if he's waiting for a traveling roadshow to offer him a character part.

Wedding bells are breaking up that old gang of mine, Emil says.

What the hell you mean by that?

He shrugs and hands me a cup of coffee. It is Emil's special act of misanthropy to give you his coffee. You got to take it, and you got to drink it in front of him, give yourself a caffeine tracheotomy. It's the only thing makes him happy.

Guess I should say good-bye, Emil old buddy, I say.

You just got here. Drink your coffee.

No, I mean I'm taking my wheels and heading for the sunset.

The Sunset Drive-In? Man, you'll never hack it there. That's blade country.

I never know whether Emil is putting me on or not.

No, man, I mean when the Mech has given my Mustang the once-over, I am leaving the territory. You'll never see me again.

## WHEELS WESTWARD

Emil acts angry. Cora, who was always Emil's special friend, used to say that when he got angry at you, you must be doing something right.

What are you co-opting? You believe all that leaflet crap about Reorganization? Dumbie, they got more rules, that's how they reorganized! Look, you had trouble getting a safety license, right? Well, now they're going to slip you one on a silver platter provided you return to the fold, and that's worse.

The memory of how my daddy's terrible driving record cost him his license, and made me ineligible to qualify as a safety, comes back to me. I'm almost

to a central agency. A monitor picks up every mistake, no matter how trivial. Two points against you for each mph over the limit, a point for failing to signal, ignoring a stop sign, that sort of thing. It's like taking a driver's test each time you go out on the road. It's like a permanent learner's permit. Pile up enough points and you can apply for a tricycle license.

Emil always gets fired up about social topics. His habit, he's an old-line political activist. Once I asked him which extremist group he was connected with, he said republican. I don't know anything about republicans, except my al-

l the rest of what?

All the rest of you dumb bastards. Look around. Nobody's here because nobody's riding the roads anymore. Everybody's copped out, gone back to the absorbent middle class, sold their wheels and bought kiddie cars. Yeah, I can see you in one of those lousy new machines, car polish on your teeth, chrome epaulettes on your shoulders. Gee-odd in heaven, I knew you'd be one of them. I never knew what the hell you were doing around here in the first place.

I feel hurt, but damned if I'll let Emil see it.

I'm not copping out, Emil, I'm—  
Your voice is shrill, drink some more of that coffee. That'll drop it an octave.

I take a sip. My tongue dissolves, the trickle down my throat leaves scars. Emil looks like he hopes I'll choke. My new low voice may be permanent.

I am not returning to the goddamned city. I wouldn't go back there if they paid me, I—

They will pay you. Amply. It's the new thing. Ask the fuzz.

Nobody ever said anything to me about that.

No, maybe they might forget to tell you.

That's an insinuation.  
That's what it is, all right. So, where in this land of opportunity and sudden ambush do you plan to go?

I don't know. Somewhere west of here.

Ah, west! Of course. People used to pursue their dreams to California. They died there, which was all part of the dream according to some. I've heard it's not so pretty there any more.

So what? It's pretty here?  
A rare smile from Emil.

You may have something there. Would you like another cup of coffee?

It is not a question, it's an order. I haven't drunk that much of my first cup. I hope the Mech gets to my car soon. Before I die would be good. A lot of the coffee spills when Emil pours it. I never noticed before how much his hand shakes. I touch my coffee cup cautiously, not wanting to get any of the spilled coffee on my skin. Emil stares off toward the bug-splattered glass window behind me.

That whole myth, the California dream, California trip, died when I was quite young, Emil says. It died first, then it traveled across the country and

tempted to go back.

I don't understand, I say to Emil, how could it be worse?

You don't know about the new monitors? They don't even need fuzz to make you toe the line. Even the roaming safedrys who used to terrorize pedestrians by goosing them with the points of their hood ornaments—even they've gotta obey the rules now. Everybody tells everybody else it's paradise, and everybody stays in their hovels getting wired in to every new device comes along. Gee-odd in heaven, I don't know how people can—

The monitors, Emil, what about the monitors?

Ah, they're butterfly's assholes, they are. There's one installed in every car, transmitting every move a driver makes

to a central agency. A monitor picks up every mistake, no matter how trivial.

Two points against you for each mph over the limit, a point for failing to signal, ignoring a stop sign, that sort of thing. It's like taking a driver's test each time you go out on the road. It's like a permanent learner's permit. Pile up enough points and you can apply for a tricycle license.

Emil always gets fired up about social topics. His habit, he's an old-line political activist. Once I asked him which extremist group he was connected with, he said republican. I don't know anything about republicans, except my al-

l the rest of what?  
All the rest of you dumb bastards. Look around. Nobody's here because nobody's riding the roads anymore. Everybody's copped out, gone back to the absorbent middle class, sold their wheels and bought kiddie cars. Yeah, I can see you in one of those lousy new machines, car polish on your teeth, chrome epaulettes on your shoulders. Gee-odd in heaven, I knew you'd be one of them. I never knew what the hell you were doing around here in the first place.  
I feel hurt, but damned if I'll let Emil see it.  
I'm not copping out, Emil, I'm—  
Your voice is shrill, drink some more of that coffee. That'll drop it an octave.  
I take a sip. My tongue dissolves, the trickle down my throat leaves scars. Emil looks like he hopes I'll choke. My new low voice may be permanent.  
I am not returning to the goddamned city. I wouldn't go back there if they paid me, I—  
They will pay you. Amply. It's the new thing. Ask the fuzz.  
Nobody ever said anything to me about that.  
No, maybe they might forget to tell you.  
That's an insinuation.  
That's what it is, all right. So, where in this land of opportunity and sudden ambush do you plan to go?  
I don't know. Somewhere west of here.  
Ah, west! Of course. People used to pursue their dreams to California. They died there, which was all part of the dream according to some. I've heard it's not so pretty there any more.  
So what? It's pretty here?  
A rare smile from Emil.  
You may have something there. Would you like another cup of coffee?  
It is not a question, it's an order. I haven't drunk that much of my first cup. I hope the Mech gets to my car soon. Before I die would be good. A lot of the coffee spills when Emil pours it. I never noticed before how much his hand shakes. I touch my coffee cup cautiously, not wanting to get any of the spilled coffee on my skin. Emil stares off toward the bug-splattered glass window behind me.  
That whole myth, the California dream, California trip, died when I was quite young, Emil says. It died first, then it traveled across the country and

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left grave-dirt on the paths it walked.

What do you mean by that?

I don't know. Drink your coffee.

He means something by all this chatter about death of myths, but it's nothing I really want to hear about. You get tired of people telling you that everything you wanted has decayed long ago.

Hi, Lee, what's on?

I recognize the voice immediately. Just exactly who I don't want to see. But I swing around in my stool anyway. Smiling.

Hello, Cora.

Cora Natalie Townsend, looking as compactly beautiful as ever. She's cut her hair, an attempt to look more African, but it doesn't work. It still looks like a white woman's hair. Large-looped earrings hang from her newly-pierced ears. She's wearing an Afro dress, a dashiki or whatever they call it, and it isn't quite right either. No matter what she does, it seems, she'll never look black enough, and that's part of her sadness. At least she has stopped using that cosmetic that made her skin darker than normal. In spite of all the tinkering with herself, and all the fights we've had, I immediately want to fall to the floor and beg her to take me back. But she won't, wouldn't ever, and so it's no use bothering with the floor.

Cora was a rider who wanted her own wheels. She kept asking me to let her drive and, almost immediately after she'd asked and I'd said no, I'd pull some dumb maneuver and she'd mock me out. When she realized that, although I might let her drive once in a while, I was still the driver and she the rider, she left me. For good reason, I sometimes think.

You look good, Lee, weatherbeaten or something, Cora says.

All that sun. Guess it affects the skin.

Affects the brain, too.

I wince, and some tears come to Cora's eyes.

Sorry, Lee. I don't want to hurt you with cheap talk. You know that, not anymore.

I don't like her being delicate. She should've let the insult stand.

Who you riding with these days? I ask her.

A guy. Nice guy, you don't know him.

Where is he?

Oh, the fuzz got him yesterday. I was with him, but he made me run away. He'll be back in the usual couple days.

Sure.

Everything's very formal these days. I hate it. Remember when this place was crowded?

Emil and I were just talking about that. He says we've lost a lot of people from the ranks, they've gone back to the city and civilization.

That's the new hustle all right. Rip it off, rip it up, rip away. They really screwed us when they repealed some of the old anticar laws. Don't get me wrong, those laws were dumb all right. Well-intentioned, maybe, but dumb. But look at it this way, we all got out of our traps just because some dumbie legislators cooked up a lot of profit-making ways to restrict the use of the old automobile. How'd they know their profits'd disappear when G.M. and Ford went down the tubes? Still, it was great—gave us all this space, all these roads.

Cora's eyes glow when she talks like this. I told her once it was like she clicked on her high beams, and she ridiculed me for days for saying it.

Well, she says, the good old days are departed. Now you can go back to the city, the megalopolis of megalopolis, and get a brand-new machine that's got so many special devices hidden in it, it can't even outrun a snail. So you can plod along, low-pollute the air with low-pollutants, and take a luxurious half-day job with all-day pay. For all-day suckers. Shit, why'd anybody want a half-day shift when they can have a no-day shift?

I don't know, Cora.

You still got the old wheels, the Mustang?

Yeah. They always say they'll impound it the next time around.

I know what you mean. They don't really care. They're not going to do any impounding or anything. Gonna let all our vehicles die natural deaths. They've got your number, Lee, that's all.

Not my number.

Oh, come on Lee, what—

No, I mean it. I'm clearing out. Heading west.

What's west?

Without waiting for an answer, she walks away, stands by the plate-glass window. It's a gray day outdoors, and it puts her in shadow, makes her for a moment as dark as she wants to be.

Emil taps me on the shoulder. Without speaking he puts a piece of paper in my hand.

What's this? I say.

Telephone number here.

What telephone?

The wall-phone, that one over there.

I never knew it worked.

'Course it works. Hardly anybody ever uses it, that's all.

Well, what should I do with this number?

Call it, schmuck.

He says this affectionately, then walks away without further explanation. I pocket the paper with the number on it, wondering why I'd ever want to call this miserable place.

Then the sun breaks out from behind a cloud (Cora steps backward), the Mech comes in, says he's got the Mustang about as healed as can be expected but that he really recommends a sanatorium for it, and I mumble goodbye to Emil and Cora and, without looking at either of them, follow the Mech out of the Savarin. I get the Mech to sell me a few cans of gasoline. I crawl into old Musty and, swinging around a broken and fallen gas pump, I am off. I forget to look back at the cafe window to see if Cora waves good-bye. I know she did, though, and I'm just as glad not to see it.

As usual, the Mech has put the magic touch on my vehicle. It never goes so good as when he's worked on it. At its worst, just before I hand it over to him, nothing responds right away, everything seems to require a moment of contemplation before the Mustang will allow it to happen. But, after the Mech has left off his working of wonders, its responses come much quicker. So quick that it seems like the car's reflex actions damn near ignore stimuli.

I go smooth for many miles, almost half the afternoon. I don't want to attract the attention of any stray fuzz looking to fill last week's quota. But the roads are clear. Not only that, they're in good shape. We have our own road teams, who work at night, making repairs with what material they can find, making the road safe for roadrunners. I've heard the roads are worse further on.

I only see a few other cars, mostly going in the other direction, on the other side of the median. It bothers me I don't see any familiar faces. Drivers I'd normally snub for their meanness, moral corruption, and coldhearted stupidity would seem like old buddies to me now. The people I do see are cretins, testing

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whether or not they are alive by riding the roads.

Finally I begin to feel free, and I floor the accelerator pedal. The Mustang springs forward without any argument, the way I like it. We pick up speed, the cool wind gusts in through my open vent-window, the rumble of the motor is mellow than it's ever been. If the speedometer worked, I'm sure it'd reveal Musty's highest speed. Everything flies by. I have not felt this good, so at-one (a favorite expression of roadrunners I have known) with my machine before. It's all illusion, I know that, but I love it. I want to cry, I am so happy. Then I want to cry because I am so sad, knowing the happiness is phony. I'm not free, I've just managed to drive away a few miles. But I've got to keep up the illusion, it's important. Why the goddamned hell did Cora have to show up at the Savarin? It wasn't right, it cast a pall over the whole goddamned trip. Hell with that, I'm going to keep this goddamned car moving. It'll get me somewhere.

That night I stop the car, take a blanket out of the back seat, stretch it out, and sleep under the stars. No, that's part of the fantasy. I can't see any stars, but I know they're there, and I sleep.

In my dream Cora and I make love in front of a penny-arcade mirror. The images of our bodies in the mirror, hers especially, are elongated and wavy. She is tender with me, the way she was when she wasn't telling me off or throwing sarcastic remarks my way. We both lose interest in lovemaking and become more fascinated with the mirror. She asks what right have I got using conventional mirror imagery in my dreams. I say I have no control over it and like conventional imagery anyway. She says I am a dumb shit, always was. She says I don't amount to diddly-squat on the wall. I say, forget the mirror and let's screw again. She laughs. I recognize the laugh as the same one she laughed the night she split with me, when she simply said it was all off and walked out the door as if on a quick errand. I realize that laugh is stored in my brain and so comes into my dream easily. She turns toward me and begins caressing my face with the back of her hand, the way she often did when she didn't think me such a dumb shit. Then her expression changes to a deep-furrowed frown. She pulls her hand abruptly from my face,

stares at the back of her fingers. They are now smeared with blotches of white. I look toward the mirror expecting to see myself in a clown getup. But my face is normal, except where Cora's been touching it, where there is now a dark patch. As I stare into the mirror she puts her hand on my face, rubs it around. With each of her strokes an area of my white skin comes away. I look back at her, at the white now all over her fingers. In a troubled gesture, she rubs the hand on her own face. The white comes off on her skin. She begins working on my face in earnest, taking my whiteness away, smearing it on her face. Soon her face is white and we both look into the mirror again. Cora is now a white woman, and it looks right on her. She looks smashing. I am a black man. A rather odd-looking black man, but I kind of like it anyway. Cora screams. Both her hands go to her face and she tries furiously to remove the white. I know she wants to smear it back onto me. But she can't remove it. She starts tearing at her skin, as if she wants to pull all the layers off. As I wake up, it begins to look like she might be successful at it.

Next morning I wake sore as hell but feeling wonderful. I tramp around a little, working out the body cramps, exercising a few muscles. What strikes me best is I don't see much litter. One or two rusty aluminum cans, crushed. A pizza carton, grease-spotted. Some old wrappers, that sort of thing. But nothing big, no old tires or car seats or cars. No rusty or disintegrating monuments to the decline of the road in the last decades of the twentieth century. Perhaps I am in a new land. It starts to rain and I return to the Mustang.

The rain continues all morning. It is a misty rain, annoying because it makes me drive slow and carefully. I can only see a few feet in front of me and have to maneuver around all the cracks and potholes in the concrete. Once I have to stop altogether. There's a wide crack bisecting most of the road. I wonder what the drivers along this way must be like, to let a crack like this go unrepaired and unmarked. It really pisses me off. Back in my own territory we always put up signs warning others against road hazards. Sometimes the fuzz came and took them down, but we kept pretty good track. No sign before this gap, I'm sure. If I'd hit it with any speed, I might have

totaled my wheels. Damn drivers, but what drivers? Come to think of it, I haven't seen any cars in some time. My temptation is to attribute this to the miserable day, although rain never discouraged any roadrunners I've known. Ah, well, no tragedy. I maneuver the Mustang onto the soft shoulder and it tiptoes by the obstruction. Back on the road, I drive even slower. I don't know what might be coming up next. I wouldn't be surprised to see a monster blocking my way. Or superintending a rotting tollbooth.

For many miles the road is clear. The rain stops. I begin to relax, settle into driving. I lean back against the bucket seat, enjoy the kinetic sensation of the car moving along. God, this is the life. The road, the Mustang, me, the horizon ahead. Nobody in sight, haven't seen another car in over an hour. I get the feeling, at least for a moment, that all the highways are mine.

I approach a rest area beside the road. I'm tempted to get out and stretch my legs for a minute, but, hell, I'll never get out west if I take rest stops all over the place, so I decide to drive on. As I pass the area, I see quick movement there, near what used to be an information building. Somebody throwing something at somebody else. I can only get a quick look because trees then obstruct my view. I slow down a little, cruise along on the edge of the rest area, try to see what's happening through the trees. They're too thick, too clumped, can't see a thing. Soon I'm at the exit road. Going past it, I look over my shoulder. Somebody's running along a sidewalk, but I can't see much else because there's this huge shack of a comfort station in my way. The running person falls, there's a scream, and I hear the zooming sound of what is unmistakably somebody gunning a motorcycle engine. I slow down to a crawl. The exit road is a few feet behind me and I can only see the shabby roof of the comfort station above a new set of trees. At first I tell myself to drive on. Whatever it is, it does not need my investigating of it. Nevertheless, my quick glimpses have caught major details, and I can't ignore them. I stop the Mustang, put it in reverse, and slowly back it to the exit road. I can't see anything now, but I can hear what sounds like an argument, interrupted irregularly by derisive taunting laughter. Nothing I can do but take

a look. First I ease the Mustang onto the exit road and slowly drive up its gravelly surface. My shoulders cringe each time a stone clangs against the car's underside. But the argument and laughter continue, so nobody up there must be hearing it. I come to a one-way sign bent over and across about half the road. There's something of a ditch on the other side of the road, so I have to pass by the sign with care. As I come near the comfort station, I can see movement on the other side. I stop the Mustang, not knowing what I can or should do. Best thing would be to approach on foot. Whoever they are, they might get distracted by a passing car. I want to be able to get back into the Mustang if I'm in a hurry, so I leave the car doors open on both sides.

I edge along the side of the comfort station, compulsively reading several of the obscene slogans scrawled all over its splintered surface. Reaching the corner, I take a careful peek around it. What I see looks like a ritual. A bunch of guys in a semicircle around another figure. I wonder if it's some kind of occult ceremony, like I've seen in movies. Some motorcycles are parked along the driveway leading to the abandoned information center. Something tells me it's not smart to fool with cycle jockeys, and I consider slinking back to the Mustang and driving gently away. But, no. Motorcycle gangs are not exactly the high society of the road, never have been, and if this particularly repellent group of bikers is gathered around somebody, that somebody is in trouble. I got to help. I don't want to, but life has its prerequisites. One of mine is, if I don't do something, I worry a lot afterward. I can't allow bad things to happen. I am not heroic, but I must respond to the needs of my fellow man, even if it means going up against a half-dozen mean bikers. I am insane, is what I am.

I crawl around the comfort station corner, crouching low behind a foul-smelling leafless set of bushes. Anybody looking my way could easily see me there, but they are all intent on the ritual. Hell, it's no ritual, it is business. They are stalking. Their object is turned away from me, but she seems to be a slim-hipped and tall young lady, in a flower-patterned dress with a long skirt. Long blond hair and fairly broad shoulders. I am impressed with what I see of her from the back and wish she'd turn around.

I take a position behind the wooden panels that form a two-sided protection against anyone spying on the ladies room. Nobody notices my move there. They're intent on their prey, don't expect an intruder. An intruder! Great, just how am I going to intrude on six brawny tattooed ugly slobs, each with a weapon in his thick hand? One of the men is pointing a gun at the girl. Jesus. All I need is to get a bullet through the heart, just when I am on the verge of finding the west. On the other hand, the girl is in real trouble. It looks like they're going to do all the numbers bikers are famous for. Beating, clubbing, shooting, raping.

Backing away from them, the girl stumbles, falls. A biker helps her up with mock politeness and she springs away from him, staggers a few steps backward, toward my watching-post. I still don't get a good look at her face.

The bikers regroup around her helper, who is apparently their leader. They face the girl. The leader's about ready to say it's time. I don't know what to do. The girl falls again, crouches. She shouts to the leader of the pack. She tells him she'll rip his balls off. She sounds like she can do it. I wonder if she is going to need me. Her voice is hoarse, as if this isn't the first insult she's screamed at them. The leader shows no reaction, makes a gesture with his gun-hand to one of the other men, who is wrapping a tire chain around his hand. The tire chain looks like a locket chain in his beefy hand. They're about to make their move. I have to do something. I can't think of anything to do.

Hey you guys! I say, stepping out from my shelter. Stop that!

Some great thing to say. I think I startle them with the girlishness of my voice. They look toward me, all six of them. Not a single one would weigh in under 180. That's at least 740 pounds if they all decided to jump on me at once. Shit.

A bit delayed in her reaction, the girl looks at me, too. Even though I'm scared, I am also stunned by her looks. It is the right kind of face to go with long blond hair and a tall slim body. Healthy, red-cheeked, long. She has a pointed chin, strong, makes her look like a tennis-player mannequin. She smiles.

Who the fuck are you? she says.

I am not ready for that question. Fortunately the bikers, dumbstruck, are not

ready for me. They are obviously not afraid of me, just not ready.

I got three buddies in the car, fellas, I say (gesturing backward toward the Mustang which they probably can't see), and each one of us's got a piece. I suggest you stand right where you are.

I try to sound as anti-gun-control square as I can. I can see they are not quite ready to doubt me. A couple of them take steps backward. The leader stays where he is, but is no longer as poised for action as before.

Okay, young lady, ma'am, uh, you—

Well, um, you can call me Vicki.

Okay, Vicki.

Wait a minute, the leader of the pack says. Vicki stands up and begins walking toward me.

Okay, Vicki, I say.

The leader takes a step forward.

He ain't got no piece. He's a fuckin'—

Okay, Vicki, I say. Run!

And I rush back to the Mustang without looking around to see if anyone is following. I nearly trip on a bush as I turn the comfort station corner. Vicki keeps pace with me. I zip around the open door and somehow make it into the driver's seat. Vicki scrambles in the passenger side, does not think to shut the door behind her. Her head knocks against my shoulder as she tries to swivel around in the seat. As I press down on the accelerator pedal with all the force that my somewhat less than 180 pounds can muster, one of the bikers rounds the car on her side. The open door hits him right in the face.

Shut the goddamn door! I yell at Vicki.

Reacting quickly she pulls it shut. At the same moment there is a sickening thump on my side. I look that way over my shoulder and see a falling biker hurling curses at me. The leader of the pack is rushing toward his cycle as I speed past him. In the rearview mirror I can see two of the bikers running after us, waving their clenched fists at the car. One of the casualties is sitting on the ground, holding onto his leg and rocking. I pat the Mustang dashboard, glad the car responded so quickly.

I have to make a wide turn out of the rest area entranceway, in order to head west again. A biker, apparently taking a shortcut through the trees, emerges at the side of the highway, but too late. In the rearview I see the leader of the pack, leaning over the handlebars of his cycle,

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taking the wide turn from the entranceway and starting his pursuit. His cohort, oblivious to the approach of his noble leader, runs onto the road, as if he thinks he can catch me on foot. The leader has to swerve to avoid him. His cycle skids and he and it slide down into a depression in the median. The other biker runs toward him. They are both soon out of sight.

Beside me, the benefactress of my rescue is twisted around on the seat watching. I look over at her. Her face is quite pretty, although the look of healthiness is due to artful makeup. Rather too much lipstick. I glance down at her chest. She is like Cora, in that I can't quite detect tits, although there is a suggestive roundedness.

I return my attention to the road ahead, letting my elation sweep through my body. Here I am heading west, freedom in my soul, and a rescued maiden at my side.

Jesus Christ, Vicki says, can't you get this crate going any faster? They're souped up, the bikes, they can catch us.

I push the Mustang to its limit. We are now flying down the road, but Vicki is still nervous.

This may be fast enough, she says, maybe. Don't see any sign of them. Just keep it up, sweetheart. Keep your balls in gear and we'll get outta this yet.

I notice a small protesting sound from the Mustang's engine. I think we should slow up a bit, but I'm afraid of upsetting Vicki. I'll keep it up for a few miles, then gradually decelerate. Vicki turns in her seat and stares straight ahead. I am a bit annoyed at her—she has yet to say anything grateful to me. A small sweetly-muttered thank you would be sufficient, but she just stares ahead and smooths out ruffles in her skirt. The hand I can see has short stubby fingers on it. Each finger has a jeweled ring.

They looked like a mean bunch, I say. The guys that were attacking you.

Mean, yeah. They abducted me. Hurtled into town on their filthy machines and fucking abducted me. They're monsters, is what they are.

What town?

What?

The town you live in, where they abducted you.

Jesus, I didn't live in that creepy place. I don't know what its name was. Truth is, way the town was, it was preferable to be abducted.

Well, Vicki, I guess it's good I came

along when I did. Looked to me they meant business.

Business?

Well, at least they looked like they were gonna rape you any minute.

Vicki laughed.

Look, rape they coulda had for free. I woulda been glad to take on any of them. No, it's murder that I couldn't cotton to, frankly.

Well, yes, Vicki, but—

Look, it takes a minute to get my head together. I know you think you're Lochinvar and all that, sweetheart, but one thing I think you gotta know right off.

What's that, Vicki?

It's the Vicki business. Well, I do call myself Vicki from time to time, and it seemed natural to be Vicki when you showed up with your armor shining in the haze and all. But, Jesus Christ, I always feel ridiculous when I have to say this—but my name isn't really Vicki except for fantasy purposes.

Well, names . . .

I'm Victor. Victor Whelan.

Victor.

Look, man, I'm a transvestite. Let's not make anything out of it, okay? I like to dress up and wear makeup, and that's that. I can't help it. My psychiatrist couldn't help it. He liked evening gowns.

I look over at him, try to imagine him without the clothes, the makeup, the wig. He still looks very beautiful.

Okay, Vicki—Victor. Vic. I mean, I'm tolerant. I been on the road a long time, know all kinds of folk. Some of your kind, too, and—

Don't be so fucking condescending. All right, you knew some fags. Good. But I'm not a fag. A transvestite is not a fag, got it?

Oh, sure. I wasn't saying that you were at all when—

You were saying then that you run into transvestites regularly?

Well, no—

I hate fags.

The sun is shining now and the glare begins to hurt my eyes. I find myself edging away from Victor, leaning against the door. He doesn't notice. He just keeps smoothing out his skirt, adjusting his wig.

We drive fast for a long time. Finally I have to slow down, for the good of the car. Victor doesn't seem to care now. There are no signs of any bikers behind us. I haven't even seen a car in hours.

II

Victor's getting to be a real pain in the ass. For two days I've been hinting that it would not cause in me great grief if he decided to stay in one of the dumb towns we've been passing through. He says he doesn't like the midwest.

He keeps asking if he can drive. I make up a story about how the Mustang has an odd feel to it (part true) and I don't like to have other people drive it. He seems to understand but always asks again an hour or two later. I can't say I just don't want him behind the wheel.

There are more vehicles on the road now. Even some trucks clearly engaged in interstate commerce. The cities don't seem so ugly and even seem to be functioning reasonably well. When we go into them or pass through them (some stretches of the turnpike are impassable), the citizens don't stare much, unless of course they realize that sweet Vicki ain't so sweet. Some of the cities that slip by our car windows look deserted. The ones that seem deserted aren't, Victor says, they got people in them, they just died, that's all—the cities, not the people. Midwestern fuzzi don't want to bother with us. Some of them wave when we go by.

I am getting damn sick of Victor's patterned dress, both for looks and odor. He's got nothing else to wear—he lost all his clothes and possessions to the bikers. I almost offer him some clothes of mine, but I don't like the idea of him in them. Finally I tell him I'll rip off something in his size. He says he can do his own ripping off, thank you, and steals a couple T-shirts and a pair of jeans at a small-town store. I'm sorry about that. It's a nickels and dimes





place and even the proprietors look tarnished. I wish I could leave them a few cents afterwards.

I keep wanting to stop the car and ask him to get out, but I can't. That would take the edge off of having saved him.

It's almost evening. I have driven most of the two days, with only a couple of stops to rest. I need to get west as soon as possible. Victor says I'll never get this car through the Rockies, not even the foothills. I tell him he doesn't nearly suspect the Mustang's capabilities. His laugh is like a sneer printed in block letters.

Special markings ahead, beside the road. Rest stop, one used by our kind. I've seen so few cars on the road that I don't expect to see people there, but I have got to stop for a while.

Think we'll lay over at this place, I tell Victor just before we reach the access road.

Whatever you say, sweetheart. Maybe there'll be a clothing exchange. I need some new duds. That dress has had it.

You'd buy a dress? Like that?

Like what?

Openly, I mean.

Sure, nobody cares.

I can't tell him that I care. I can't give him that kind of a lever. We drive up the road. It turns out that the place is more populated than I'd expected. Cars parked all over the lot, it's hard to find a spot to leave the Mustang.

This is not my kind of place. There may be a lot of vehicles, just like in the good old days back east, but it's not the same. These cars are not well kept up. They have the dust of the road on them, sure, but it looks like last year's dust. Drivers back east took pains to keep their vehicles shiny and relatively undented. These cars are lusterless, and their bodies look like they've substituted for practice drums. The few people in the parking lot remind me of the cars. They are lethargic, battered. They just lean against surfaces, not doing anything, not even talking to each other. The Mustang, with two days' driving debris scattered over its unglamorous surface, looks better than any other car in this whole goddamned lot. And that, Cora might tell me, is a switch.

I walk toward the building which had once been the rest stop restaurant. A Hot Shoppe, didn't think that chain had extended this far inland. One of its walls has partially collapsed and people are using it as an entrance. The gas pumps

in the distance are working, that's something. Although we picked up two cans of gas in one of the towns we passed through yesterday, it is always exciting to come upon a place with working pumps. Although the cost or barter is always high, it's worth it to drive off with a newly-filled tank, especially now that there are so few functioning gas stations left that will serve us.

I follow Victor. Rustling his still-stiff jeans, he walks with a cowpoke's lope. I've never seen him walk this way before. People leaving the restaurant have the same kind of walk. Victor, I have seen, is very adaptable. What I really can't get over is that he's even beautiful in men's clothes.

Victor, hey man, over here! some freak says when we enter the Hot Shoppe. And I do not use the word freak lightly, even generically. This guy is a freak. His head isn't on straight, it looks like it's been pushed over onto his left shoulder. His face is arranged casually. I feel uncomfortable looking at him. I want to take the features of that face and put them where they belong. He is wearing half a beard, on the right side of his face. He is quite muscular, barrel-chested, but his legs would look better on a ballerina. He is so freaky looking, I should feel an instant kinship with him, but I don't.

The freak is standing with a weary-looking group. We walk to him.

Link, Victor says. What're you doing here?

Just drifted here from the last place, like usual. Who's your friend?

Oh, right. Link, this's Lee.

Pleased to meet you, Lee.

Hello, Link. Link, short for Lincoln?

No, missing. But don't let it throw ya.

Link and Victor get to reminiscing. Turns out Link was in the town where Victor was kidnapped by the bikers. He had tried to intercede, but they had run him through a shop window. After picking shards out of his clothing, he had decided that the town, which was biker-controlled, was not for him, and he caught the next ride west. He must have been just ahead of us most of the time.

But our wheels died just south of here and we trekked to this place, been here a couple hours. Three of us. You guys got room in your car for us?

Sure, Victor says.

Victor, I say.

What's the matter, you can't be hospitable to a bunch of guys in trouble?

Link's two friends are bigger than he is. They all stare at me as if I am completely lacking in the milk of human kindness. I don't want to have anything to do with any one of them.

Okay, I say. Sure. The more the merrier. But one thing, I do the driving and right now I need rest.

Can fix you up immediately, Link says. Cots set up in the back.

He starts to lead me to a back room. Victor lopes along beside us.

Anybody dealing threads around here? he asks Link.

Let's see, yeah, I think you can be accommodated. Let's get our friend here some shut-eye, and we can take care of that.

Sure.

The sleep room's not my idea of luxury accommodations, but there are several cots spread around the area in no logical pattern, and I am too tired to care. I select one that looks like it's relatively new, with only a few layers of dirt and grime. I sit on it. None of the other cots is occupied. The room is dark and I know I can drop off to sleep right away.

This do? Link says.

It do fine, I say.

Link smiles. The bland pleasantness of his smile becomes freaky on that peculiar face.

You're okay, Lee, he says. The kind of easygoing dude who's immediately likable, you know?

You say so.

Victor is irritated.

C'mon, Link, I want a look at those threads.

Okay. Sleep cool, you hear?

I don't believe his phrasing but I am beginning to like Link. He takes Victor's arm and leads him out of the room. Victor's walk is now perkier, more rhythmic. Like Link's.

I test the cot. Looks like it'll hold me. I take off my shirt, but keep my trousers on, because that's where I keep my car keys. There's no real safety in protecting your car keys in a place like this. Anybody wants them bad enough, they can get them. Still, I feel safer with them on me. I stretch out on the cot. It is hard on the back but more comfortable than grabbing a few winks in the bucket seat of the Mustang. I find myself thinking of the keys as I drift off to sleep.

I wake up suddenly, with a start. The room seems much darker. It is a minute before I realize that somebody is stand-

ing over me, another minute before I realize it's Victor. He has apparently been successful in his search for threads. He has discovered a lovely peasant blouse with full sleeves, white with some red at the fringes. And a multicolored skirt in bright hues—orange, yellow, and green—running downwards in a rainbow pattern from the waist. I find myself compulsively turning over in my cot to check out his footwear. Only a tip of what might be a high-heeled plain



black shoe peeks out from underneath the hem of the floor-length skirt. I look up again. He still stares at me. He has done something to the blond wig, wound up some of it in braids by the ears, while letting most of the hair fall onto and past his shoulders.

I try to see if there are any sleepers on the other cot yet. There are not. We are alone in the room. Something about Victor's eyes frightens me.

Abruptly he sits down on a cot across from me. He lifts up a hand. There is a tube of lipstick in it. He holds it in front of his face, examines it. He has already applied some rouge and is beginning to look like Vicki again. He applies a little of the lipstick, then works his lips to spread it. He can apparently do this sort of thing without a mirror.

I sit up, decide I should make conversation.

What's doing, Vic?

My voice seems to echo around the room and come back to me, sounding

more false than when it had started.

Victor doesn't answer. He merely works the lipstick. It is orange, the lipstick's color. It suits him.

Did I sleep long? I ask. I have absolutely no sense of time.

Long enough, Victor mumbles, between compressing his lips and running a finger along the edges of his mouth to remove excess. When he puckers, it is remarkable how evenly he has applied the lipstick. The orange goes beyond the border of one side of his upper lip, but the rest is put on as well as if he had a mirror.

I feel rested, I say. Where's Link, and the rest?

Out somewhere.

They'll be coming back, won't they?

Sure. They're just dealing for some food. Some cat up in the hills has a lot hoarded away, and he sells it at inflated prices.

Victor's voice stays in a monotone. He seems to be done with the lipstick, though he still holds it in his hand. Rings on his fingers again, reflecting more light than seems logical for the room. Maybe they store up light. His other hand is toying with a strand of hair while he stares at me. I feel I should say something more, try to break the mood or something, but I have forgotten my native language. Victor runs a tongue along his upper lip, as if tasting the lipstick.

Lean forward, he says abruptly. In a louder voice.

Why?

Don't get tensed up. I'm not trying to seduce you or anything. I just want to touch you.

But isn't that—

No, it is not the same, if that's what you're trying to say.

That's not what I was trying to say.

Well, fuck it, anyway. Lean forward. C'mon. I'm dangerous, even you must've figured that out.

Dangerous.

I guess you haven't. Well, maybe dangerous isn't the right word. Maybe unpredictable. Lean forward.

I am out of responses. I lean forward. With the hand that had been twisting his golden locks, he touches my cheek. He doesn't stroke or press or do anything with the hand, he just puts some fingers against the skin. His hand is cold, as if it's abandoned circulation: We sit like this for quite a long time. It is hard for me to hold my head steady in this posi-

tion, but somehow I do it. I am afraid to remove my cheek from his hand.

Still sit, he whispers finally. Like that. You're doing fine. Just for a moment. Still.

I am staring at his forehead and so at first I am not sure what he's doing. Then I sense his other hand coming at my face. It still holds the tube of lipstick in it. I start to spring back, but he moves fast and presses the stick against my upper lip. In another quick move, his other hand goes to the back of my neck and stops my retreat. His grip is surprisingly strong. As if reading my thoughts, he says:

I'm stronger than you are. I've taken some courses. Martial arts, shit like that. Just sit still.

He applies the lipstick to my lips with the same care he had used on his own. For a moment I let him, then I twist my head sideways. I feel the lipstick slide off the corner of my mouth onto the skin.

Shit, Victor says. I can't do this if you squirm.

I don't want you to do it.

I really don't care about that, sweetheart.

He tries again, manages hardly to touch my lip as I twist my head away again. I feel like a dental patient moving out of the way of a drill.

Goddamn it, sit still or I'll kill you.

Something strange in his voice makes me stop squirming. He releases my neck. Touches my hair.

You really should shampoo once in a while.

What's it to you?

Nothing to me. Absolutely nothing.

He smiles and presses his free hand against my cheek again. It is a curiously nonsexual gesture. On the other hand, it may not be a completely sane gesture.

With his thumb, he tries to fix where the lipstick has smudged. He curses under his breath.

Do with your tongue like this, he says. He runs his own tongue along part of his upper lip. Without protesting I duplicate the move, then look at him quizzically.

Like the taste? he asks.

Not especially.

I do.

We are a curious tableau for I don't know how long. When Victor speaks again, it is in a soft and friendly voice:

There's something I'd like to tell you.

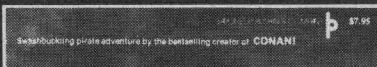
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## WHEELS WESTWARD

Although I know I don't want to hear anything he has to tell me, the situation dictates that I say:

What?

He sits across from me again, seems to be thinking about something. His hands fidget deliberately, almost with a plan. The rings flash. Where the hell do they find all that light?

Well, he says once, but does not go on. There is something oddly appealing about the way he slumps, the contemplation in it. Suddenly he stands up, saying:

What was that?

What?

That.

What?

That, you asshole.

Then I realize what. It is a rumble slowly growing louder. The noise of an engine, but not an automobile engine. It is a sound Victor apparently recognizes right away. He springs away from me, goes to the door of the sleep room. I touch my lips, wonder if I can even dare go out the door right now, but Victor hollers:

Jesus Christ!

The tension in his voice makes me forget the way I look. I run out the door after him.

Even though the front window is crusted with dirt, you can see out just enough. Weaving in and around the parked vehicles is a gang of motorcyclists. Bikers. For the moment they seem to be treating the parking area as a big fun maze. The people who'd been lounging against cars are checking out in all directions, most of them making for the wooded area around the rest stop.

Victor stands to the side of the window, watching, his eyes wide.

Is that them? I ask.

Of course it's them, he says. I don't cover in a corner for every bike gang that comes along. They must've been following us all the way. I knew it.

Hell, they coulda caught us easy if that was true.

They're goddamn catching us, aren't they?

I mean before this.

Maybe, maybe not. We kept a pretty good pace, not stopping and all. They're patient. They could've—what the fuck am I doing here analyzing? We got to find a way out of this.

We got to?

Victor glares at me. For a moment he

looks more frightening than the biker gang.

Of course we, I say quickly. I didn't mean any—I mean, we can—if we can just make it to the Mustang.

And how the fuck are we going to do that? They're all, the entire gang, between us and the goddamned car. What good is the car, anyway? They'd catch up in two miles.

I don't know. It's something. Better than here.

You may be right.

When he turns away from the window, his wide eyes dominate his face, and not just because of the eyeliner he used on them. He reminds me of the kind of frightened lady you see on the cover of some paperback novels. He rushes past me, to the middle of the room. Only a few people remain here, most of them pressed against a wall.

Those bastards out there, Victor shouts, are after me. They're going to kill me probably. Going to try. Anybody here willing to—ah, shit, forget it.

He turns back toward the window. His skirt takes a wide swirl, revealing his stockinged legs, his shiny black high-heeled shoes. Of course they're basic black, Victor has taste. People are edging their way to the door of the sleep room. Except for Victor and me, this room'll be empty in a minute.

If only Link'd get back, Victor says. And his friends. He'd know what to do.

He wasn't much help the time they abducted you, was he?

What difference does that make?

No difference.

The bikers have finished their fun with the maze now. They are pulling up their bikes in front of the building. I recognize the leader now, he's already got his gun out. He'll remember me, I realize suddenly. This time I'm not the anonymous intruder, the innocent bystander. I made a fool out of him, he won't be pleased. Suddenly I want to retreat to the sleep room, too. Why do I want to help Victor? What's he ever done for me? No time to decide that issue. The bikers are spreading out into two flanks, one group on each side of the leader. Sort of an unbalanced line. The leader shouts something. I can't quite make out each word, but mainly he's hollering for Victor to come quietly. He says *Vicki* derisively. Even I get pissed off at that kind of smugness.

We need some kind of weapon, I say. I run to the lunch counter, hoping

there'll be a sharp-edged knife there. I'm stopped for a moment when I catch my reflection in the mirror behind the counter. Victor has put more lipstick on and around my mouth than I'd suspected. A long thin orange line streaks out from the corner of my mouth. The shape of my mouth is indistinct. I rub the back of my hand across it but the orange is only smeared more.

It's no time to make yourself beautiful, Victor says.

I look behind the counter. It's been cleaned out, nothing we can use as a weapon.

Look, we better get out of here, I say to Victor. We can't do anything against those bastards.

No point running. Besides, I got a piece.

He pulls up his skirt and reaches inside his panty hose, down to where an athletic supporter would be if he wears an athletic supporter. He pulls out a gun, a small caliber revolver.

Where the hell did that come from? I ask.

You just saw.

I don't mean that. Where'd you get it in the first place?

Always had it. Just never told you about it. I had it in my crotch that day you rescued me. I was trying to figure a way to get at it when you stuck your nose in. Then I didn't need it any more.

Well, okay, so you got a piece. What good is it? There're six of them. If you get one you're lucky, and then'd it have to be at close range.

I'll just have to get close.

You'll never.

You have an alternative suggestion?

No.

So.

Victor—

C'mon, out the side.

I spot a two-pronged cooking fork next to an encrusted griddle. I pick it up, it's got scum all over it, and follow Victor toward the opening in the side wall.

The bike gang is heading toward the main entrance of the Hot Shoppe, so apparently they didn't notice, or didn't care to use, the wall opening. At least we have room to maneuver then. Victor starts through the opening, hesitates.

What's the matter? I ask.

My clothes, my other clothes. I left them back there.

This is no time to sort out your wardrobe.

You're right.

He takes another step, then mumbles:  
I'm always leaving my duds behind  
somewhere.

We get outside. The day is terrible. Humid, murky, that unpleasantness that comes with dusk on awful days. Outside, we are worse off, since we can't see the bikers anymore.

Maybe we *can* make a break for it, I say, they don't know where we are.

I want to kill that bastard.

How about some other time, maybe we—

One of the bikers strides around the corner of the building. He smiles. What teeth are left in his mouth seem white and shining, adding a conditional brightness to his smile.

They look at this, he shouts over his shoulder. Victor's arm moves backward, he hides the gun in the fold of his flowing skirt. The biker turns back. He is particularly ugly, some crisscrossed scars on his cheek, the shape of his face doughy.

Remember later, Vicki baby, he says, I found you first. Remember I got rights.

You got about as much rights as you got balls. Zero on both counts.

Dough-face feints a blow. Victor steps back. The others appear around the corner of the building. The leader pushes dough-face aside. He is a lot prettier than his gang, but you'd rather spend a casual evening with any one of them. There is malice in his eyes above and beyond any provocation.

Well, Vicki, he says, it's been a thrilling chase, honey, now we've got matters to—

Victor shoots through his skirt. The leader, stunned, grabs at the side of the building, at the border of the wall opening. I glance quickly toward Victor. He seems about to collapse. Dough-face is first to react. He lunges at Victor, past me. As he runs past, I bring the scummy fork upwards. Amazingly, I get both prongs into his beefy neck, just below the jaw line. Some blood starts running down the prongs as dough-face falls sideways. Victor is still retreating, ignoring what I've done, staring past me at the man he's shot. He's scared shitless, I can tell. Suddenly there is movement all around me. One of the bikers jumps at me, I hear some shots off to my left. The biker hits me twice in the stomach, once against the side of the head. Last thing I see is somebody else's

fist coming at my face.

### III

Link is looking down at me as I come to. At first I see his face in fuzzy outline, an improvement on its normal state, then I see him more clearly. He is smiling.

What's so amusing?

That you're alive. Considering, it's worth momentary amusement.

Okay, guess you're right. What happened?

You all right?

If I move anymore I'll discover my whole body's in pain. Other than that, I'm okay. What happened?

You had a run-in with some bikers.

I remember that. I mean, after I got knocked out.

Well, not much after that. I saw you two and the bikers as we came out of the woods. I saw the shot and what came after, dropped the box of food I was carrying. You were falling as we ran into the parking lot. A couple of bikers came after us, and we had a good old brawl. 'Course we outnumbered them three to two and we managed to win out. I carried you in here about ten minutes ago and, oh, about forty-five seconds ago you woke up.

You're leaving out something.

Yes, well, I am assigning priorities to certain pieces of information.

It is all too confusing to me. I shake my head to clear it, but that only makes it hurt more. I wonder if I have a skull fracture. A concussion, at least.

What happened to the bikers? I ask.

You mean, besides the dead one?

Which was the dead one, mine or Victor's?

Yours.

I was afraid of that. What about Victor's?

I don't know. He isn't around anymore. None of them are. His bike's gone, too.

Suddenly I discern a missing piece of information.

Where's Victor?

Gone, too.

Where? How?

He took off in your car.

In my car?

Zoomed it outta here on two wheels down the road.

Oh, Jesus.

I lie back and think about it for a minute. Then something occurs to me

and I reach in my pocket. My keys are gone.

That son of a bitch! I shout.

Which son of a bitch?

Victor!

Oh, should've known.

The son of a bitch stole my keys. He must've, *had* to do it before those bastards even showed up. He picked my pocket back there when I was asleep, he had to. He *intended* to steal the car all along.

That'd figure. For Victor, I mean.

I am about to ask Link to explain that remark, then I realize he doesn't have to. I understand it completely.

Rest a while, he says.

I try to rest, but I can think only of that rotten son of a bitch and how he must've picked my pocket. I can see his hand sliding in, him watching me breathe deeply, perhaps stopping for a moment if I snored or stirred. That son of a bitch. I put my hand in my pocket, scrounge around to see if maybe I have missed the keys and they're still there, hoping that maybe Victor ran off in somebody else's Mustang. Nothing. At the very bottom I come upon a crumpled-up piece of paper. I pull it out, open it up partially with the fingers of my one hand. Just some numbers. It's a minute before I recognize them. This is the paper Emil gave me before I left. The telephone number there. I stare at it for a long time, then I start to get up. Link is beside me immediately, asking what's the matter. I tell him I'm going to make a phone call. He sees I am determined and helps me to the other side of the room, where the telephone hangs unsurely on a decaying wall. Every step is agony, pain shooting up and down my arm. Link shows me how to use the phone, how to beat Ma Bell out of the coins. I dial the number and wait through several rings before a recorded voice answers and tells me the number I have dialed is not a working number. Hell it ain't, I shout at the voice. She tells me all over again that the number I have dialed is not a working number. I redial it, get the recorded lady again. She sounds like she's ready to die as soon as she finishes with me. I try to slam the receiver down on the hook, but it slips off and out of my hands, dangles like a forgotten string. Link gently replaces it but I continue to stare at the phone. I want to tell Emil that I am almost out west, hear him cackle so what? I want to talk to Cora, ask her to con-

## WHEELS WESTWARD

sider meeting me out here somewhere. I want to go back there, see them both. But how the hell could I get back there, with no wheels and no luck?

Link comes up and says some new dude is offering the bunch of us a ride and would I like to come. I say yes and hobble out of the restaurant.

We drive in bleak darkness. I keep dozing off and, after one of the dozes, suddenly awaken to bleak sunlight. The guy who's given us the ride, a short professorial type, seems to be antiventionation. He won't let us open any windows. The inside of the car is unbearably hot. I can't breathe. I press my head against the side window, as if I could somehow draw air through the glass. We drive for a few miles, then I spot an overturned motorcycle off the side of the road.

Stop! I yell at the driver.

I ain't got time, gotta barrelhouse to—

Stop, you can leave me here, it's okay.

I'll go with him, Link says, stop the car.

Jesus, the driver says and pulls to a stop. I am out of the car before it comes to a complete halt and running down the road on my aching legs. I hear Link's ambling footsteps behind me. Even when I get to the motorcycle I have no way of knowing if it belonged to any of the gang. I look past it and see a flash of green, the shade of the Mustang's paint job, behind some trees in front of me. Link catches up with me and says:

What do you think?

Over there, I say, and we both head toward the trees. It is the Mustang all right. Overturned, the windshield glass shattered, part of the top crushed. I am looking at the passenger side. I slowly walk around the car and see what I expect to see. Victor, the upper half of his body sticking out the driver's-side window, pieces of broken glass and other debris around him. I find it odd that his new blouse has only a couple of stains on it. I lean down to him. Beside his face there is an upper denture plate, split in half. He must have spit it out. How it broke I can't figure out.

How is he? Link says.

He's still breathing. But I don't know.

We should do something.

What can we do?

I don't know. Something.

What can we do?

Maybe we should—but, no, I don't know where we could go, or how to get anywhere.

Then what should we do? The roads are—

You could start by pulling me out of this goddamned wreck of a fucking car, Victor says.

Link looks at me and I look at him and, without commenting, we begin pulling Victor out of the Mustang. As we work on him, I notice more and more that is destroyed on my car. More things twisted out of shape, more things that cannot possibly function again, more places where it is smashed in completely. It looks worse than it did when I first bought it, and that was astonishingly bad.

Victor complains about the way we are delicately removing him from the mangled vehicle. I kick him in the ribs and tell him to shut up. Link laughs. Victor continues to grouse anyway.

We finally get him out. As he stands up, he tests his body. Apparently he is in no more pain than I am. His mouth when he talks looks funny. Because he's half-toothless, of course. The condition does not seem to alter his complaining abilities, but it sure looks weird.

What happened to the biker? I ask.

Beats me, Victor says, shrugging.

Link taps me on the shoulder.

Over there, he says. Noticed it while we were extracting our friend here.

I look where he points, and see the biker. Or the body of the biker. I guess such distinctions should be made. Upside down, feet aimed at the sky, the body rests, reclines almost, against the trunk of an old leafless tree.

We should check him out, I say, see if he's still alive.

No way he's alive, Link says.

He looks into my eyes, seems to see something there. Misery maybe.

Well, okay, he says, I'll check it out. You two stay here.

He goes to the tree. He walks like a gorilla in traction, he looks weird even from behind. I follow him a few steps. Victor stays behind, leaning against the car, looking toward the body as if it's a normal piece of the landscape. As Link leans over the body, I see its face for the first time. The biker looks much better dead. His face looks angelic in a kind of strangely-colored way. Like in one of those very old no-perspective paintings you sometimes see on religious calendars.

Link walks back to me.

He's dead all right. C'mon.

We return to Victor, give him the news.

I'm brokenhearted, Victor says.

What did those guys have against you anyway? Link asks. Victor just shrugs.

I lean against the Mustang.

Do you think it'll run again? I ask Link.

Who the fuck cares? Victor says.

I don't know, Link says. It's possible. I heard of a dude, at a town not too far from here. If the challenge is impossible enough, he'll work on anything. He's good, I hear. Let's go see.

Okay.

I remember the Mech, who has given me great faith in mechanical miracle workers.

Jesus Christ, don't you two guys have a car? Victor says.

We did, I say.

But we don't any more, Link says.

Jesus Christ, you mean we got to walk?

Take off your goddamned heels and c'mon, I say. Victor is about to reply, but thinks better of it.

We all stand still for a minute, nobody ready to take the first step out. I look away from Link and Victor, examine the underside of the Mustang. It's spotted with rust, just like the outside. Hell, I should just leave it behind, get another set of wheels. But, shit, what would I do with a different set of wheels? Make the same mistakes twice, Cora would probably say. I turn around. Victor is smirking at me as if he realizes how stupidly sentimental I'm getting. Well, why shouldn't I? Here I've maybe lost my wheels forever and I'm stuck with Victor for who knows how long. Not too long, I hope. I know I can ditch him. How seems to be the problem.

Let's go, Link says.

Okay, I say.

Finally, Victor says.

As he passes the Mustang, Link gives one of the front wheels a good spin. He and Victor go on. I watch the wheel's spin diminish, then give it another good spin before starting after them.



Shawn woke up one morning to find that the window was full of stars, and Morgan had vanished. That usually meant a long boring wait, but this time Shawn was still eating the food that Morgan had left out for her when the older woman returned with her hands full of pale blue flowers.

She was so eager; Shawn had never seen her so eager. She made Shawn leave her breakfast half-eaten, and come across the room to the fur rug by the window, so that she could wind the flowers in Shawn's hair. "I saw while you were sleeping, child," she said happily as she worked. "Your hair has grown long. It used to be so short, chopped off and ugly, but you've been here long enough and now it's better, long like mine. The bitterblooms will make it best of all."

"Bitterblooms?" Shawn asked, curious. "Is that what you call them? I never knew."

"Yes, child," Morgan replied, still fussing and arranging. Shawn had her back to her, so she could not see her face. "The little blue ones are the bitterblooms. They flower even in the bitterest cold, so that's why they call them that. Originally they came from a world named Ymir, very far off, where they have winters nearly as long and cold as we do. The other flowers are from Ymir too, the ones that grow on the vines around the ship. Those are called frost-flowers. Deepwinter is always so bleak, so I planted them to make everything look nicer." She took Shawn by the shoulder and turned her around. "You look like me now," she said. "Go and get your mirror and see for yourself, Carin child."

"It's over there," Shawn answered, and she darted around Morgan to get it. Her bare foot came down in something cold and wet. She flinched from it and made a noise; there was a puddle on the rug.

Shawn frowned. She stood very still and looked at Morgan. The woman had not removed her boots. They dripped.

And behind Morgan, there was nothing to be seen but blackness and unfamiliar stars. Shawn was afraid; something was very wrong. Morgan was looking at her uneasily.

She wet her lips, then smiled shyly, and went to get the mirror.

Morgan magicked the stars away before she went to sleep; it was night out-

side their window, but a gentle night far from the frozen rigor of deepwinter. Leafy trees swayed in the wind on the perimeter of their landing field, and a moon overhead made everything bright and beautiful. A good safe world to sleep on, Morgan said.

Shawn did not sleep. She sat across the room from Morgan, staring at the moon. For the first time since she had come to Morganhall, she was using her mind like a Carin. Lane would have been proud of her; Creg would only have asked what took her so long.

Morgan had returned with a handful of bitterblooms and boots wet with snow. But outside had been nothing, only the emptiness that Morgan said filled the space between the stars.

Morgan said that the light Shawn had seen in the forest had been the fires of her ship as it landed. But the thick vines of the frost-flowers grew in and around and over the legs of that ship, and they had been growing for years.

Morgan would not let her go outside. Morgan showed her everything through the great window. But Shawn could not remember seeing any window when she had been *outside* Morganhall. And if the window was a window, where were the vines that should have crept across it, the deepwinter frost that should have covered it?

For the name of the metal hall was Morganhall, Tesenya told the children, and the family who lived there was the family named Liar, whose food is empty stuff made of dreams and air.

Shawn arose in the lie of moonlight and went to where she kept the gifts that Morgan had given her. She looked at them each in turn, and lifted the heaviest of them, the glass windwolf. It was a large sculpture, hefty enough so that Shawn used two hands to lift it, one hand on the creature's snarling snout, the other around its tail. "Morgan!" she shouted.

Morgan sat up drowsily, and smiled. "Shawn," she murmured. "Shawn child. What are you doing with your windwolf?"

Shawn advanced and lifted the glass animal high above her head. "You lied to me. We've never gone anywhere. We're still in the ruined city, and it's still deepwinter."

Morgan's face was somber. "You don't know what you're saying." She got shakily to her feet. "Are you going to hit me with that thing, child? I'm not

afraid of it. Once you held a sword on me, and I wasn't afraid of you then, either. I am Morgan, full-of-magic. You cannot hurt me, Shawn."

"I want to leave," Shawn said. "Bring me my blades and my clothing, my old clothing. I'm going back to Carinhall. I am a woman of Carin, not a child. You've made a child of me. Bring me food too."

Morgan giggled. "So serious. And if I don't?"

"If you don't," Shawn said, "then I'll throw this right through your window." She held the windwolf for emphasis.

"No," Morgan said. Her expression was unreadable. "You don't want to do that, child."

"I will," Shawn said. "Unless you do as I say."

"You don't want to leave me, Shawn Carin, no you don't. We're lovers, remember. We're family. I can do magics for you." Her voice trembled. "Put that down, child. I'll show you things I never showed you before. There are so many places we can go together, so many stories I can tell you. Put that down." She was pleading.

Shawn could sense triumph; oddly enough, there were tears in her eyes.

"Why are you so afraid?" she demanded angrily. "You can fix a broken window with your magic, can't you? Even I can fix a broken window, and Creg says I'm hardly good for anything at all." The tears were rolling down her naked cheeks now, but silently, silently. "It's warm outside, you can see that, and there's moonlight to work by, and even a city. You could hire a glazier. I don't see why you are so afraid. It isn't as if I were deepwinter out there, with cold and ice, vampires gliding through the dark. It isn't like that."

"No," Morgan said, "No."

"No," Shawn echoed. "Bring me my things."

Morgan did not move. "It wasn't all lies. It wasn't. If you stay with me, you'll live for a long time. I think it's the food, but it's true. A lot of it was true, Shawn. I didn't mean to lie to you. I wanted it to be best, the way it was for me at first. You just have to pretend, you know. Forget that the ship can't move. It's better that way." Her voice sounded young, frightened; she was a woman, and she begged like a little girl, in a little girl's voice. "Don't break the window. The window is the most magic

## BITTERBLOOMS

thing. It can take us anywhere, almost. Please, please, don't break it, Shawn. Don't."

Morgan was shaking. The fluttering rags she wore seemed faded and shabby suddenly, and her rings did not sparkle. She was just a crazy old woman. Shawn lowered the heavy glass window. "I want my clothing, and my sword, and my skin. And food. Lots and lots of food. Bring it to me and maybe I won't break your window, liar. Do you hear me?"

And Morgan, no longer full of magic, nodded and did as she was told. Shawn watched her in silence. They never spoke again.

Shawn returned to Carinhall and grew old.

Her return was a sensation. She had been missing for more than a standard year, she discovered, and everyone had presumed that both she and Lane were dead. Creg refused to believe her story at first, and the others followed his lead, until Shawn produced a handful of bitterblooms that she had picked from her hair. Even then, Creg could not accept the more fanciful parts of her tale. "Illusions," he snorted, "every bit of it illusion. Tesenya told it true. If you went back, your magic ship would be gone, with no sign that it had ever been there. Believe me, Shawn." But it was never clear to her whether Creg truly believed himself. He issued orders, and no man or woman of family Carin ever went that way again.

Things were different at Carinhall after Shawn's return. The family was smaller. Lane's was not the only face she missed at the meal table. Food had grown very short while she had been away, and Creg, as was the custom, had sent the weakest and most useless out to die. Jon was among the missing. Leila was gone too, Leila who had been so young and strong. A vampire had taken her three months ago. But not everything was sadness. Deepwinter was ending. And, on a more personal level, Shawn found that her position in the family had changed. Now even Creg treated her with a rough respect. A year later, when thaw was well under way, she bore her first child, and was accepted as an equal into the councils of Carinhall. Shawn named her daughter Lane.

She settled easily into family life. When it was time for her to choose a

permanent profession, she asked to be a trader, and was surprised to find that Creg did not speak against her choice. Rys took her as apprentice, and after three years she got an assignment of her own. Her work kept her on the road a great deal. When she was home in Carinhall, however, Shawn found to her surprise that she had become the favored family storyteller. The children said she knew the best stories of anyone. Creg, ever practical, said that her fancies set the children a bad example and had no proper lesson to them. But by that time he was very sick, a victim of highsummer fever, and his opposition carried little weight. He died soon after, and Devin became Voice, a gentler and more moderate Voice than Creg. Family Carin had a generation of peace while he spoke for Carinhall, and their numbers increased from forty to nearly one hundred.

Shawn was frequently his lover. Her reading had improved a great deal by then, through long study, and Devin once yielded to her whim and showed her the secret library of the Voices, where each Voice for untold centuries had kept a journal detailing the events of his service. As Shawn had suspected, one of the thicker volumes was called *The Book of Beth, Voice Carin*. It was about sixty years old.

Lane was the first of nine children for Shawn. She was lucky. Six of them lived, two fathered by family and four that she brought back with her from Gathering. Devin honored her for bringing so much fresh blood into Carinhall, and later another Voice would name her for exceptional prowess as a trader. She traveled widely, met many families, saw waterfalls and volcanoes as well as seas and mountains, sailed halfway around the world on a Crien schooner. She had many lovers and much esteem. Jannis followed Devin as Voice, but she had a bitter unhappy time of it, and when she passed, the mothers and fathers of family Carin offered the position to Shawn. She turned it down. It would not have made her happy. Despite everything she had done, she was not a happy person.

She remembered too much, and sometimes she could not sleep very well at night.

During the fourth deepwinter of her life, the family numbered two hundred and thirty-seven, fully a hundred of them children. But game was scarce,

even in the third year after freeze, and Shawn could see the hard cold times approaching. The Voice was a kind woman who found it hard to make the decisions that had to be made, but Shawn knew what was coming. She was the second eldest of those in Carinhall. One night she stole some food—just enough, two weeks' traveling supply—and a pair of skis, left Carinhall at dawn, and spared the Voice the giving of the order.

She was not so fast as she had been when she was young. The journey took closer to three weeks than to two, and she was lean and weak when she finally entered the ruined city.

But the ship was just as she had left it. Extremes of heat and cold had cracked the stone of the spacfield over the years, and the alien flowers had taken advantage of every little opening. The stone was dotted with bitterblooms, and the frost-flow vines that twined around the ship were twice as thick as Shawn remembered them. The big brightly-colored blossoms stirred faintly in the wind.

Nothing else moved.

She circled the ship three times, waiting for a door to open, waiting for someone to see her and appear. But if the metal noticed her presence, it gave no sign. On the far side of the ship, you can't see it from outside, Shawn found something she hadn't seen before—writing, faded but still legible, obscured only by ice and flowers. She used her longknife to shatter the ice and cut the vines, so she might read. It said:

MORGAN LE FAY

Registry: Avalon 476 3319

Shawn smiled. So even her name had been a lie. Well, it did not matter now. She cupped her gloved hands together over her mouth. "Morgan," she shouted. "It's Shawn." The wind whipped her words away from her. "Let me in, Morgan. Lie to me, Morgan full-of-magic. I'm sorry. Lie to me and make me believe."

There was no answer. Shawn dug herself a hollow in the snow, and sat down to wait. She was tired and hungry, and dusk was close at hand. Already she could see the driver's ice blue eyes staring through the wispy clouds of twilight.

When at last she slept, she dreamt of Avalon.





story to story each segment (you are running from the police), and something behind him that "pushes him forward" while the "mission" exerts its pull (Lt. Gerard is obsessively on your trail).

In its limited horizon thinking, each network has attempted to repeat the success of *The Fugitive* with dozens of cliché imitations of this format: *Run for Your Life*, *The Invaders*, *The Immortal*, *Quest*, *Then Came Bronson*, *Route 66*, *The Guns of Will Sonnett*. I'm sure you can think of fifty others on your own. With the tunnel vision that lies at the core of what is wrong with television programming, the networks and packagers who sell their wares to the networks are clearly much less interested in serving the commonweal, of uplifting the taste of viewers, and of being responsible to the people (who own the airwaves) than they are to getting David Janssen or an identifiable somatotype of Janssen back on the road.

The most recent manifestation of this obsession, and one that concerns of readers, relates to the success (or *apparent* success in the myth-misted minds of network honchos) of the film *The Man Who Fell to Earth*.

Within ninety days of the opening of the theatrical feature, and its seeming popularity among that demographically desirable audience of youngfolk perceived by the networks and the advertising agencies as being best adjusted to the Consumer Society, I received three phone calls: two from production companies, one from a major network. All three said, in either these exact words or in close approximations thereof, "We want to do something just like *The Man Who Fell to Earth*."

"So go buy the TV rights to the book or the film and do it," I responded.

"Well, uh, er, we can't exactly buy the rights, they're tied up," they said. "But we want you to think up an idea like that."

"In other words," I said innocently, "you want me to rip off the original concept of the book and/or the movie, and change it just enough so you won't get sued."

Much huffing and puffing. Much pfumph'ing and clearing of throats. Much backing and filling. "Not ezactly," they said, wishing they had called someone a lot less troublesome. "We want to do an alien that falls to Earth, but not the movie."

"But the movie is about an alien who falls to Earth," I said. I was having a terrific little time for myself, listening to them squirm.

"We'll talk to you later about this," two of the three said. "We'll noodle it

around here and get back to you."

Is there anyone who would care to guess how many centuries will pass before they call back?

The third call, from a production outfit that supplies many dozens of hours of prime-time product each season, did not end at that point. I was told that an industry-weary writer, whom I'd worked with when he was producer of a short-lived fantasy series at Screen Gems several years before, had written a ten page *précis* of such an idea, and though the network they'd hustled with it liked the basic concept (an alien who falls to Earth), they wanted me to write the show's pilot. So the production company *had* to talk to me.

They wanted me to read the ten pages. I said I would. They sent them over. I hated them. I called the packaging producer, and advised him I thought the material sucked. I called it "sophomoric, derivative, predictable, idiotic adolescent twaddle." He asked me to spell "twaddle." I spelled it.

Then I explained it.

And explained why the ten pages were dumb. He liked my enthusiasm.

But the network wanted me, so he continued hustling, and got me to agree to come in for a network meeting. I told him I'd only badrap the material. He said that was okay, that it would "open up everyone's thinking." I suggested napalm would have the same beneficial effect. He laughed.

Well, to make a short story as tedious as possible, I took the meeting with the production company and the network. I told them how stupid I thought the original material was, and suggested a completely different approach. Not all that fresh and original, because they can't handle fresh and original. Remember David Janssen? But fresh and original enough that I wouldn't be ripping-off Walter Tevis, who wrote the original novel of *The Man Who Fell to*

*Earth*, and sufficiently fresh and original that I could develop it without suffering constant upset stomach.

So the upshot was that they went for it, put us into "development," which meant I had to write a treatment of what I wanted to do with the series and its pilot. I spent weeks arguing with the guy who had written the ten odoriferous pages and the producer, and finally came up with a *précis*, a treatment, an outline, what they call in The Industry "a bible" for the pilot and series. . . .

And I called it *Two from Nowhere*. . . .

And they started trying to turn it into *The Fugitive*. . . .

And I made myself scarce. . . .

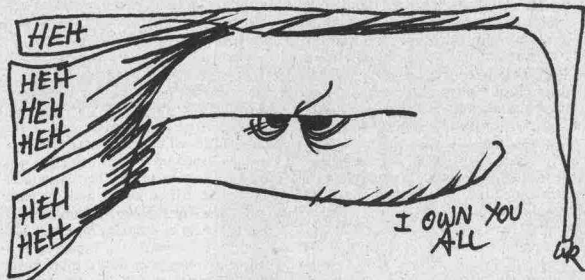
And the network started bugging them for it. . . .

And I'm hiding out from CBS and William P. D'Angelo and Joel Rogosin; and anyone tells them where I am, I'll punch out your fucking heart, as George Segal put it.

But what is this all in aid of? It answers your question, what sf can we look forward to next season? And the answer is *Lucan*, *The Man With the Power*, *The Man From Atlantis*, *Logan's Run* and several other "sci-fi" or related series.

All of which are surrogates of David Janssen running from Inspector Javert, trying to clear his name and escape the minions of the Law'n'Order till he can find the one-arm man . . . or the parents who deserted him in the forest where he became a feral child . . . or Sanctuary . . . or his father from another planet . . . or his lost continent . . . or . . .

Which is to say, you can expect more of the same dreadfulness you didn't watch this season. And as for that *Star Trek* movie, gentle friends, before you find that one, you'll find your parents who deserted you in the forest where you became a feral child . . . or Sanctuary . . . or . . .



wine of fandom, by the way, is called blog. It is concocted of cranberry juice, ginger ale and 180 proof pure grain alcohol. (If the latter is not available, vodka may be substituted.) Depending on their personalities and interests, these people may attempt to attend every regional con in the country, or they may devote countless hours of their lives to the publication of various and sundry fanzines, or they may concentrate on the deadly serious business of convention running and fanfannish politics. Or a combination of ingredients. Whatever! They have, whether consciously or not, set out to achieve fandom and succeeded.

Finally, we have category number three: those who have fandom thrust upon them. This is best illustrated by example: Say you are a mild-mannered computer programmer from a great metropolitan city. You meet, fall in love with and marry a young woman majoring in technical writing at the university which employs you. You set up house-keeping together and discover that your furnishings consist of a sofa bed, a

table, 100 reams of mimeo paper, and a used Electric typewriter. Your blushing bride takes a portion of the wedding gift money and purchases an A.B. Dick mimeo. As time goes by, you learn, in self-defense, how to run said mimeo, how to slip-sheet, and how to use the white space on a magazine page. One year, you find yourself on the Hugo ballot as coeditor in the "Best Fanzine" category. Another year, you and your wife are fan-Guests of Honor at a convention. You have to make a speech. You are stunned. You have had fandom thrust upon you.

Or, say you are a young pro with a half-dozen stories to your credit. You are advised that it is good P.R. to be seen at conventions, to become a familiar face to the fans. So you go to a regional or two and your first Worldcon. You discover that, by and large, fans understand your particular brand of madness much better than your old high school classmates from Podunk. You join the fan club in your current town of residence; you write the odd fanzine article here and there, and you eventual-

ly wind up living with and/or marrying a fanfannish lady.

At future cons, you divide your time, delicately, between serious discussion of the state of the field and your career with your professional peers and general rabble rousing with your fanfannish friends. Face it, you too have had fandom thrust upon you.

It is insidious, actually. Unless you are a born fan the process of becoming a fan can be a deceptive one. You may think you are confining yourself to being a fringe-fan and suddenly discover that you are indeed, a small name fan, or even a Big Name Fan.



sorcery genre, best known for his Conan the Barbarian stories. He began writing in 1924, at the age of eighteen, and in the next dozen years produced a phenomenal quantity of wild, bloody, ferocious, and irresistibly exciting fantasy, before taking his own life in 1936 upon learning that his beloved mother was dying.) Having done well by Howard's fiction, Grant has now commissioned Lord to put together a book about him, and those who are fascinated by Howard's work or even simply his career should make tracks for this one before it, like the rest of Grant's books, takes its place on the out-of-print shelves at three or four times its present price.

It is not, alas, a biography of Howard. (Perhaps L. Sprague de Camp is even now accumulating data for that.) Rather, it is a sort of gigantic scrapbook for Howard fans. Howard himself is present with some scraps of autobiographical essays and a fragmentary short story; Glenn Lord contributes a brief biographical sketch; other glimpses of Howard from people who knew him, such as H.P. Lovecraft and E. Hoffman Price, provide a bit of parallax; there is a photo album, a gallery of magazine covers, and an assortment of other miscellanea; but the heart of the book is a 250-page bibliography, complete through 1973, which demonstrates Howard's eternal appeal by parading the multitude of editions of his books that have come forth posthumously and continue to come forth in

awesome array. This jumbo volume may be a bit on the formless side, but it is comprehensive and thorough and—I am no Howard scholar—apparently accurate. Those who have long been under Howard's spell will, of course, have bough this one on publication day; those who, like I, are less interested in Howard's fiction than in the dynamics of his career, will find much stimulation here. As for Don Grant and his one-man publishing company, I wish him another thirty years, at the very least, of high-quality book production.

*Rocannon's World* by Ursula K. Le Guin. Harper & Row, \$6.95. 136 pages.

At the 1964 World Science Fiction Convention in Oakland, California, Cele Goldsmith of *Amazing Stories* introduced me to a slender, dark-haired woman named Ursula Le Guin who had had a couple of stories lately published in her magazine. We greeted one another politely but vaguely, for I had read none of her works, not even the novelette that was on the stands in that month's issue of *Amazing*, and if she had read any of the hundreds of stories I had published up to that time, she was too well bred to express her opinion of them. She drifted away, and the next time I saw her she was famous. As for that novelette in *Amazing Stories*, "The Dowry of Angyar," she expanded it a couple of years later into a short novel that appeared as half an Ace Double

paperback, and now—the ultimate accolade—here is that Ace paperback, re-issued in hardcover form for the first time. It is not often that a paperback original achieves a trade hardcover edition a dozen years later, but it is not often that a science-fiction writer makes the impact on the field that this quiet woman from California has made, either. After the extraordinary commercial success of her novels *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed*, Le Guin is no risk for a publisher, and this reissue, far from being a bit of publisher's courtesy, is probably a clever dollar-generating notion.

In any event, it is good to have it in permanent form, especially with Le Guin's modest and charming new introduction. The novel is short, briskly told, inventive, and literate in the pre-Raphaelite sort of mode she employed so well in *Left Hand*; I think it can best be described as Poul Anderson without the lectures on astrophysics. Reading it in 20-20 hindsight one can, of course, easily discern the traces of her future greatness; taking it strictly on its own merits—as much as is possible to do so—it is superior space-opera, good vivid fun, worth reading in its own right as well as for its value as an historical document in a significant career. Le Guin's other paperback novels will presumably follow from Harper in due course—there are two more, I think—and all three would make a dandy omnibus volume for some smart paperback house.



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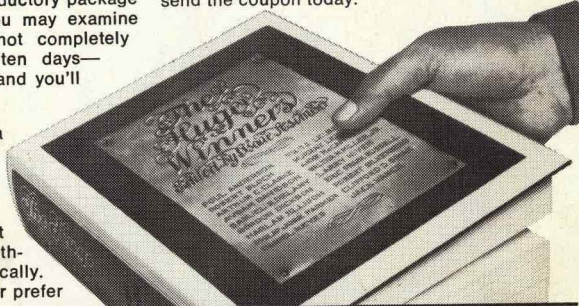
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