# NEW WORLDS SCIENCE FICTION

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★

15th Year
of Publication

# Brian Lewis

London

**"He always wanted to be an artist," Brian's father recently informed us when we were attending the christening of young Kevin, the latest edition in the Lewis family. "Ever since he was about as big as these two," and he pointed to Brian's three-year-old twin daughters who were doing acrobatics on the floor and will probably end up as a beautiful circus act. To which dedication of purpose Brian heartily agrees and can now be said to have justified all the hard work which has gone before—for he is now a full time freelance artist.**

**Following technical school he entered the R.A.F. for a seven year term and it was during this period that he first started reading science fiction, although he never expected to be connected with the medium other than as a reader. After his Service time expired he took up engineering draughtsmanship which eventually led him to being a technical artist with Decca radar, a position he left last October when an opportunity presented itself to draw picture strips for Beaverbrook Newspapers. Currently he is working on football strips in the Scottish *Daily Express* but hopes to be assigned to one in the London edition shortly.**

**By coincidence he works in the same studio as Syd Jordan who draws the "Jeff Hawke" science fiction strip in the *Daily Express*, which makes for more than pleasant companionship but sometimes results in Brian's footballs being powered by rockets instead of feet.**

# NEW WORLDS SCIENCE FICTION

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Editor : JOHN CARNELL

Cover painting by LEWIS illustrating "Venus Plus X"


**TWO SHILLINGS AND SIXPENCE**

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# Old . . . .

This isn't a space-saving idea—fusing the Editorial with " The Literary Line-up "—although on the surface it may look as though it is, but this month I needed more space to devote to your comments and reactions to our 100th issue, published last November. The stories in that issue were due for a rating this month—if you have never noticed that little item I can assure you that the authors follow the listings with keen interest, and editorially I am just as interested in finding out whether it is the plot of a particular story, or its literary quality, or just the author's name, which puts one story ahead of another. While you may be prepared to discount the last-mentioned, I can assure you that some readers have favourite authors who can do no wrong in their eyes. Especially if they have met them personally, perhaps at a Convention, and found them to be ordinary human beings and not slan-tendrilled aliens.

With the 100th issue, however, you have fooled us completely. Not one single card or letter has been received rating all the eight stories it contained, although the issue has pulled in more correspondence than any previously published one. In fact, not one reader has rated a story top at all ; four stories tying for first place being the average in each letter. How can I make a rating up from that ?

*Every* story received individual praise ; it was said of each author, somewhere in the general correspondence, that his particular story in the 100th issue was the best he had ever written ; John Rackham's article on science fiction drew as much praise as any of the stories (an almost unheard of thing); and Eric Frank Russell's guest editorial drew more appreciative comments than most of mine all put together. Alfie Bester congratulated us upon one of the best balanced science fiction issues he had read in many years—and No. 100 also brought a letter from rancher Jack Williamson in New Mexico bemoaning the fact that he no longer has time to write science fiction.

Belated (but public) thanks to all of you who sent letters and telegrams of congratulations. Every one was appreciated but for a long time I haven't been in a position to reply to all the correspondence that comes in.

# Hundred

The other big surprise in the correspondence (and something of a disappointment to myself) was the general reaction to the cameo art-work experiment I started in that issue. Or rather, lack of reaction from that most voceriferous section of the community known as science fiction fandom—the same section that, in the main, has been requesting the return of art work in *New Worlds* ever since we dropped it some years ago. One lone voice from Sweden was heard shouting " Hurray !"; quite a few readers commended the use of the small illustrations for the 100th issue *only* ; but, by and large, those readers who did mention them did so in such a negative manner that it was obvious the idea was not going to develop along the lines I had originally planned.

From there it was far easier to cancel the idea out than persevere with it—after all, the illustrations cost you about 3000 words of fiction. Of particular interest, too, is the fact that the two succeeding issues to No. 101 which have not had illustrations, have not produced any comment on the lack of art work. My final summary, therefore, is that you couldn't care one way or the other and as it is easier, editorially, not to have art work in the magazine, I see no reason to belabour the fact.

Apart from the small personal point about the art work there is little doubt that No. 100 was an outstanding success and gives me the idea that we should have a special issue at frequent intervals. Certainly the issue reached a far greater reading audience than usual and we can but hope that many of those newcomers will have stayed on with us to dip into Theodore Sturgeon's thought-provoking serial.

In case you have overlooked the fact—our companion *Science Fantasy* is coming up to its 50th issue in over ten years of existence. There are some fine stories in store there, too, including a Sturgeon long novelette next month.

*John Carnell*

*Tandy Two was a breaking planet for faster-than-light ships between star systems. When a FTL ship hit Tandy, time went haywire — and so did the lives of its inhabitants.*

# MOON OF DELIGHT

## by BRIAN W. ALDISS

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### one

Murragh lay on the ground to await consummation. It was now less than five minutes away and it would fall from the air.

The alarms had sounded near and distant. Their echoes had died from the high hills of Region Six. Stretched full length on the edge of a grassy cliff, Murragh Harrison adjusted the plugs in his ears and laid his fume mask ready by his side.

Everything calm and silent now. The whole world silent. And in him : a growing tension, as strange and ever-delightful as the tensions of love.

He raised binoculars to his eyes and peered into the valley, where lay the Flange, that wide and forbidden highway down which the starships blazed. Even from his elevation, he could hardly discern the other side of the Flange ; it ran East-West right round the equator of Tandy Two, unbroken and unalterable, an undeviating—he'd forgotten the figure—ten, was it, or twelve, or fifteen miles wide. In the sunlight, the innumerable facets of the Flange glittered and moved.

His glasses picked out the mountains on the south side of the Flange. Black and white they were, picked as clean as a dead man's ribs under the abrasion of total vacuum.

" I must bring Fay here before she goes back to Earth," he said aloud. " Wonderful, wonderful . . ." Assuming a different tone, he said, " There is terror here on Tandy's equator, terror and sublimity. The most awe-full place in the universe. Where vacuum and atmosphere kiss : and the kiss is a kiss of death ! Yes. Remember that. ' The kiss is a kiss of death '."

In his little leisure time Murragh was writing—and had been ever since I first met him—a book about Tandy Two as he experienced it. Yet he knew, he told me, he knew that the sentences he formed up there on the hill were too coloured, too big, too false. Under his excitement, more truthful images struggled to be born.

While they struggled, while he lay and wished he had brought Fay with him, the starship came in.

This ! This was the moment, the fearsome apocalyptic moment ! Unthinking, he dropped his glasses and ducked his head to the earth, clinging to it in desperate excitement with all his bones from his toes to his skull.

Tandy Two *lurched.*

The Faster-Than-Light ship burst into normal space on automatic control, invisible and unheard at first. Boring for the world like a metal fist swung at a defenceless heart, it was a gale of force. It was brutality . . . and it skimmed the Flange as gently as lover's cheek brushes lover's cheek.

Yet so mighty was that gentleness, that for an instant a loop of fire was spun completely round Tandy Two. Over the Flange a mirage flickered : a curious elongated blurr that only an educated retina could take for the after-image of a Faster-Than-Light ship chasing to catch up with its object. Then a haze arose, obscuring the Flange. Cerenkov radiations flickered outwards, distorting vision.

The transgravitic screens to the north of the Flange—on Murragh's side of it, and ranged along the valley beneath his perch—buckled but held as they always held. The towering BGL pylons were bathed in amber. Atmosphere and vacuum roared at each other from either side of the invisible screens. But as ever the wafer-thin geogravitics held them apart, held order and chaos separate.

A gale swept up the mountainsides.

The sun jerked wildly across the sky.

All this happened in one instant, a sudden momentous climax.

And in the next instant it was deepest night.

Murragh dug his hands out of the soft earth and stood up. His chest was soaked with sweat, his trousers were damp. Trembling, he clamped his fume mask over his face, guarding himself against the toxic gases generated by the FTL's passage.

Tears still ran down his face as limply he turned to make his way back to the highland farm.

" ' Kiss of death, embrace of flame ' . . ." he muttered to himself as he climbed aboard his tractor ; but still the elusive image he really wanted did not come.

In a north-facing fold of hills lay the farmhouse, burrowed deeply into the granite just in case of accidents. Murragh's headlights washed over it. Its outhouses were terraced below it, covered pen after covered pen, all now full of Farmer Doughty's sheep, locked in as always during entry time ; not a single animal could be allowed outside when the FTL's came down.

Everything lay still as Murragh drove up in his tractor. Even the sheep were silent, crouching mutely under the jack-in-a-box dark. Not a bird flew, not an insect sparked into the headlights ; such life had almost died out during the four hundred years the Flange had been in operation. The toxic gases hardly encouraged fecundity in nature.

Soon Tandy itself might rise to shine down on its earthlike second moon. The planet Tandy was a gas giant as big as Jupiter, a beautiful object when it rose into Tandy Two's skies, but uninhabitable and unapproachable.

Tandy One equally was not a place for human beings. But the second satellite, Tandy Two, was a gentle world with mild seasons and an oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere. People lived on Tandy Two, loved, hated, struggled, aspired there as on any of the multitudinous civilized planets in the galaxy, with this difference : that because there was something individual about Tandy Two, there was something individual about its problems.

The southern hemisphere of Tandy Two was lifeless under vacuum ; the northern existed mainly for the vast terminal towns of Blerioh, Touchdown, and Ma-Gee-Neh. Apart from the cities, there was nothing but grass, grass and lakes and

silicone desert stretching to the pole. And by courtesy an occasional sheep farm was allowed on the grasslands.

" What a satellite !" Murragh said, climbing from the tractor. Admiration sounded in his voice. He was a curious man, Murragh Harrison—but I'll stick to fact and let you understand what you will.

He pushed through the spaced double doors that served the Doughty farmstead as a crude airlock when the gases were in the air. In the living-eating-cooking room beyond, Colin Doughty himself stood by the CV watching its colours absently. He looked up as Murragh removed his face mask.

" Good *evening*, Murragh," he said with heavy jocularity " Great to see so nice a morning followed by so nice a night without so much as a bloody sunset in between."

" You should be used to the system by now," Murragh murmured, hanging his binoculars with his jacket in the A-G cupboard. After being alone in the overwhelming presence of Tandy, it always took him a moment to adjust to people again.

" So I should, so I should. Fourteen years and I still see red to think how men have messed about with one of God's worlds. Thank heaven we'll all be off this crazy moon in another three weeks ! I can't wait to see Earth now, I'm telling you."

" You'll miss the green grass and the open spaces."

" So you keep telling me. What do you think I am ? One of my bloody sheep ! Just as soon—"

" But once you get away—"

" Just a minute, Murragh !" Doughty held up a brown hand as he cocked his eye at the CV. " Here comes Touchdown to tell us if it's bedtime yet."

Murragh had halted on the way upstairs to his room. Now he came back to peer into the globe with the shepherd. Even Hock the housedog glanced up momentarily at the assured face that appeared in the bright bowl.

" CVA Touchdown talking," the face said, smiling at its unseen audience. " The FTL ship ' Droffoln-Jingguring-Mapynga-Bill '—and I rehearsed its name beforehand !—has just made a safe and successful entry on the Flange some three hundred and twenty miles outside Touchdown station. As you can see from this live shot, passengers are already being met by helicopter and taken to the STL port in Touchdown. The ' Droffoln-Jingguring-Mapynga-Bill ' has come from Pyvriss

Thirteen in the Outer Magellans. You are looking at a typical Magellanic now. He is, as you observe, octipedal.

" We hope to bring you news and interviews with passengers and crew in two hours time, when all the occupants of the FTL have undergone the customary revival. You notice that at present they are still under Light-freeze.

" Now we go over to Chronos-Touchdown for a new time check."

The assured face gave way to a very shaggy one. Behind it, the untidy computing room of this astronomical department greeted viewers. The shaggy face smiled and said, " As yet we have only a rough schema for you. It will, as usual, take a little while to feed accurate figures into our machines, and some reports have still to come in.

" Meanwhile, here is an approximate time check. The FTL ship—I will not attempt its name—entered Flange influence at roughly 1219 hours 47.66 seconds on today, Seventeenday of Cowl Month. Inertia absorption thrust Tandy through approximately 108.75 degrees axial revolution in approximately 200 milliseconds. So the time at the end of that very short period became roughly 1934 hours 47.66 seconds.

" Since that was about twenty-four and a half minutes ago, the time to which everyone in Touchdown zone should set their watches and clocks is . . . coming up . . . 1959 hours and 18 seconds . . . Now ! I repeat, the time is now 1959 hours, one minute to eight o'clock at night, plus 18 seconds.

" It is still, of course, Seventeenday of Cowl.

" We shall be back to bring you more accurate information on the time in another two hours."

Doughty snorted and switched the globe off. It slid obediently out of sight into the wall.

" Mucking about with the clocks !" he growled. " Here I've just had my midday bite and there's Bess upstairs putting the kids to bed !"

" That's what happens on Tandy Two," Murragh said, edging from the room. Without wishing to seem rude, he was bored with Doughty's complaints which occurred with little variation once a fortnight—whenever, in fact, an FTL ship arrived. He ducked out of the room and almost scuttled up the stairs.

" It may happen on Tandy Two," Doughty said, not averse to having only Hock to talk to, " but that don't mean to say

Colin Doughty has to like it." He squared his broad shoulders, thrust out his chest, and stuck his thumbs in his spunsteel jacket. " I was born on Earth where a man gets twenty-four hours to his day—every day."

Hock thumped his tail idly twice as if in ironic applause.

As Murragh got upstairs, Tessie marched past him on her way from the washing room. She was absolutely naked.

' High time the girl was taken to civilization and learnt the common rules of decency,' Murragh thought good-humouredly. The girl was several months past her thirteenth birthday. Perhaps it was as well the Doughty family were off back to Earth in three weeks ; their departure and Tessie's puberty were just about coincident.

" Going to bed at this hour of the day !" Tessie grunted, not deigning to look at her father's help as she thumped past him.

" It's eight o'clock at night. The man on the CV has just said so," Murragh replied.

" Poof !"

With that she disappeared into her bedroom. Murragh did the same into his. He took the time changes in his stride ; on Tandy now the changes had to be considered natural, ' for use can almost change the stamp of nature.' Life on the sheep farm was rigorous. Murragh, Doughty, and his wife rose early and slept early. Murragh planned to lie and think for an hour, possibly to write a page more of his book, and then to take a somnulizer and sleep till four the next morning.

His thinking had no time to grow elaborate and deep. The door burst open and Fay rushed in, squealing with exuberance.

" Did you see it ? Did you see it ?" she asked.

He had no need to ask to what she referred.

" I sat on the top of the cliff and watched it," he said.

" You are lucky ! Gosh !" She did a pirouette, and pulled an ugly grimace at him. " That's what I call my Life-begins-at-forty face, Murragh ; did it scare you ? Oh fancy, to see one of those starships actually plonk down in the Flange. Tell me all about it !"

She wore only vest and knickers. A tangle of arms and legs flashed as she jumped on to the bed beside him and began tugging his ears. She was six, gay, primitive, adorable, unpredictable.

" You're supposed to be going to bed. Your mother will be after you, girl."

" Blow her, she's always after me. Tell me about the starships and how they land and—oh, gummy, you know—all that bunk you talk."

" When you've wrenched my ears off I will."

He was not easy with her leaning on him. Rising, he pointed out of his little window with its double panes. Since his room was at the front of the farmhouse, he had this view out across the valley. The girls slept in a room considered more safe, at the back of the house, tucked into solid granite (" the living granite," Doughty always called it), and without windows.

"Outside there now, Fay," he said as the little girl peered into the dark, " are vapours that would make you ill if you inhaled them. They are breathed off by the Flange under the stress of absorbing the speed of the FTL ships. The geogravitic screens on this side of the Flange undergo terrific pressures at such times and do very peculiar things. But the beautiful part is that when we wake in the morning the stinks will all have blown away ; Tandy itself, this marvellous moon we live on, will absorb them and send us a fresh supply of clean mountain sir to breathe."

" Do the mountains have air ?"

" We call the air on the mountains ' mountain air.' That's all it means."

As he sat down beside her, she asked, " Do the vapours make it dark so quickly ?"

" No they don't, Fay, and you know they don't. I've explained that bit before. The Faster-Than-Light ships do that."

" Are the Vaster-Than-Light ships dark ?"

" Faster-Than Light. No, they're not dark. They come in from deep space so fast—at speeds above that of light, because those are the only speeds they can travel at—that they shoot right round Tandy one and a half times before the Flange can stop them, before its works can absorb the ship's momentum. And in doing that they twirl Tandy round a bit on its axis with them."

" Like turntables ?"

" That's what I told you, didn't I ? If you ran very fast on to a light wooden turntable that was not moving, you would stop but your motion would make the turntable turn. Transference of energy, in other words. And this twirling sometimes moves us round from sunshine into darkness."

" Like today. I bet you were scared out on the hillside when it suddenly got dark !"

He tickled her in the ribs.

" No I wasn't, because I was prepared for it. But that's why we have to get your Daddy's sheep all safely under cover before a ship comes—otherwise *they'd* all get scared and jump over precipices and things, and then your Daddy'd lose all his money and you wouldn't be able to go back to Earth."

Fay looked meditatively at him.

" Frankly speaking, these Vaster-Than-Light ships are rather a bloody nuisance to us, aren't they ?" she said.

Murragh hooted with laughter.

" If you put it like that—" he began, when Mrs. Doughty thrust her head round the door.

" There you are, Fay, you little minx ! I thought as much. Come on and get into bed at once."

Bess Doughty was a solid woman in her early forties, very plain, very clean. She of them all was least at home on Tandy Two, yet she grumbled about it least ; among all her many faults one could not include grumbling. She marched into Murragh's room and seized her younger daughter by the wrists.

"You're killing me!" Fay yelled in feigned agony. "Murragh and I were discussing transparency of energy. Let me kiss him goodnight and then I'll come. He is a lovely man and I wish he was coming to Earth with us."

She gave Murragh an explosive kiss that rocked him backwards. Then she rushed from the room. Bess paused before following ; she winked at Murragh.

" Pity you don't like us two to carry on a bit more in that style, Mr. Harrison," she said, and shut the door after her as she left.

It was something of a relief to him that her crude physical advances were now replaced by nothing more trying than innuendo. Murragh put his feet up on the bed and lay back.

He looked round the room with its sparse plastic furniture. This would be home for only three weeks more : then he would move on to work for Farmer Clay in Region Five. Nothing would he miss—except Fay, Fay who alone among all the people he knew shared his curiosity and his love for Tandy Two.

A phrase of hers floated back to him. ' The Vaster-Than-Light ships.' Oddly appropriate name for craft existing in

' phase space ' where their mass exceeded ' normal ' infinity ! His mind began to play with the little girl's phrase ; reverie overcame him, so that in sinking down into a nest of his own thought he found, even amid the complexity gathered round him, a comforting simplicity, a simplicity he had learnt to look for because it told him that to see clearly into his own inner nature he had merely to crystallise the attraction Tandy Two held for him and all would be clear eternally ; he would be a man free of shackles, or free at least to unlock them when he wished. So again, as on the cliff and as many times before, he plunged through the deceptions of the imagination towards that wished-for truthful image.

Perhaps his search itself was a delusion ; but it led him tenderly to sleep.

## two

Murragh and Doughty were out early next morning, going wrapped into the cool hour before dawn. The air, as Murragh had predicted, was sweet to breathe again, although full of a light rain.

Hock and the other dog—Pedro, the yard dog—ran with them as they whistled out the autocollies. Ten of them came pogoing into the open, light machines unfailingly obedient to the instructions from Doughty's throat mike. Although they had their limitations, they could herd sheep twice as quickly as live dogs. Murragh unlocked the doors of the great covered pens. The autocollies went in to get the sheep out as he climbed aboard his tractor. As the sheep poured forth bleating into the open, he and Doughty revved their engines and followed behind, watching as the flock fanned out towards the choicer grasslands. Then they bumped along in the rear, keeping the autodogs constantly on course.

Dawn seeped through the eastern clouds and the rain stopped. Filmy sun created miracles of chiaroscuro over valley and hill. By then they had the sheep split into four flocks each of which was established on a separate hillside for pasturing. They returned to the farmland in time to breakfast with the rest of the family.

" Do they get miserable wet days on Earth like this ?" Tessie asked.

" Nothing wrong with today. Rain's holding off now," her father said. Breakfast was not his best meal.

" It depends on what part of Earth you live, just as it does here, you silly girl," said her mother.

" They haven't got any weather in the south half of Tandy," Fay volunteered, talking round an epoch-making mouthful of mutton sausage, " 'cos it's had to be vacuumised so's the starships coming in at such a lick wouldn't hit any molecules of air and get wrecked and without air you don't have weather, isn't that so, Murragh ?"

Murragh, who had heard some of this sausage-and-sentence, agreed it was so.

" Shut up talking about the Flange. It's all you seem to think of, these days, young lady," Doughty growled.

" I never mentioned the Flange, Daddy. You did."

" I'm not interested in arguing, Fay, so save your energy. You're getting too cheeky these days."

She put both elbows on the plastic table and said with deliberate devilment, " The Flange is just a huge device for absorbing FTL momentum, Daddy, as I suppose you know, don't you ? Isn't it, Mr. Murragh ?"

Her mother leant forward and slapped her hard across the wrist.

" You like to sauce your Dad, don't you ? Well take that ! And it's no good coming crying to me about it. It's your fault for being so saucy."

But Fay had no intention of going crying to her mother. Bursting into tears, she flung down her spoon and fork and dashed upstairs howling. A moment later her bedroom door slammed.

" Jolly well serve her *right* !" Tessie said.

" You be quiet too," her mother said angrily.

" Never get a peaceful meal now," Doughty said.

Murragh Harrison said nothing.

After the meal, as the two men went out to work again, Doughty said stiffly, " If you don't mind, Harrison, I'd rather you left young Fay alone till we leave here."

" Oh ? Why's that ?"

The older man thrust him a suspicious glance, then looked away.

" Because she's my daughter and I say so."

" Can't you give me a reason rather than an evasion ?"

A dying bird lay in the yard. Birds were as scarce as gold nuggets on Tandy Two. This one had evidently been overcome by the fumes generated in the previous day's entry. Its wings fluttered pitifully as the men approached. Doughty kicked it to one side.

"If you must know—because she's getting mad on the Flange. Flange, Flange, Flange, that's all we hear from the kid! She didn't know or care a thing about it till this year when you keep telling her about it. You're worse than Captain Rogers when he calls, and he has got an excuse because he works on the damn thing. So you keep quiet in future. Bess and me will leave here with no regrets. Tessie doesn't care either way. But we don't want Fay to keep thinking about this place and upsetting herself and thinking Earth isn't her proper home, which it is going to be."

This was a long speech for Doughty. The reasons he gave were good enough, but irritation made Murragh ask, "Did Mrs. Doughty get you to speak to me about this?"

Doughty stopped by the garage. He swung round and looked Murragh up and down, anger in his eye.

"You've been with me in Region Six nigh on four years, Harrison. I was the man who gave you work when you wanted it, though I had not much need of you, nor much to pay you with. You've worked hard, I don't deny—"

"I can't see—"

"I'm talking, aren't I? When you came here you said you were—what was it—'in revolt against ultra-urbanised planets'; you said you were a poet or something; you said—heck, you said a lot of stuff, dressed up in fine bloody phrases. Remember you used to keep me and Bess up half the night sometimes, until we saw it was all just blather!"

"Look here, if you're—"

The farmer bunched his fists and stuck out his lower lip.

"You listen to me for a change. I've been wanting to say this for a long time. Poet indeed! We weren't taken in by your blather, you know. And luckily it had no effect on young Tessie either. She's more like me than her sister is—a quiet sensible girl. But Fay is a baby. She's silly as yet, and we reckon you're having a bad influence on her—"

"All right then, you've had your say. Now I'll have mine. Leaving aside the question of whether you and your wife can understand any concept you weren't born with—"

" You be careful now, Harrison, what you're saying about Bess. I'm on to you ! I'm not so daft as you think. Let me tell you Bess has had about enough of you giving her the glad eye and making passes at her as if she was just some—"

" By God !" Murragh exploded in anger. " She tells you that ? The boot's on the other foot by a long chalk, and you'd better get that clear right away. If you think I'd touch—if I'd lay a hand on that dismal, salacious . . . No, it'd make me sick."

The mere thought of it took the edge of Murragh's wrath. It had the opposite effect on Doughty. He swung his left fist hard at Murragh's jaw. Murragh blocked it with his right forearm and counter-attacked in self-defence with his left. He caught Doughty glancingly on the ear as the farmer kicked out at him. Unable to step back in time, Murragh grabbed the steel-studded boot and wrenched it upwards.

Doughty staggered back and fell heavily on to the ground.

Murragh stood over him, all fury gone.

" If I had known how much you resented me all these years," he said miserably, staring down at his employer's face, " I'd not have stayed here. Don't worry, I'll say no more to Fay. Now let's go and get the tractors out, unless you want to sack me on the spot—and that's entirely up to you."

As he helped the older man to his feet, Doughty muttered shame-facedly, " I've not resented you, man, you know that perfectly well . . ."

Then they got the tractors out in silence.

The result of Doughty's fall was what he termed ' a bad back.' He was—and when he said it he spoke with an air of surprise more appropriate to a discovery than a cliche—" not as young as he was." For a day or so he sat gloomily indoors by his CV, letting Murragh do the outside work, and brooding over his lot.

Tandy Two is a harder satellite than it seems at first—I know that after two five-year spells of duty on it. Although in size it is only negligibly larger than Earth (its equatorial circumference being one hundred and forty-six miles longer), its composition is denser, so that gravity exacts a noticeably heavier strain than on Earth. And the fortnightly time hop when the FTLs enter takes a psychological toll. In the big towns like Touchdown and Blerioh, civilization can compensate

for these disadvantages. On the scattered sheep stations there are no compensations.

Moreover, Colin Doughty had found his farming far less profitable than it had looked on paper from Earth fourteen years ago. Tandy Two offered the best grazing in a stellar region full of ready-made mutton markets : twenty hundred over-urbanised planets within twice twenty light years. But his costs had been stiff, the costs of transport above all, and now he counted himself lucky to be able to get away with enough brass saved to buy a small shop, a butcher's, earthside. As it was, margins were narrow : he was reckoning on the sale of farm and stock to buy passages home for himself and his family.

Much of this I heard on my periodic tours through Region Six, when I generally managed a visit to the Doughtys. I heard it all again the next time I called, thirteen days after the scuffle between Doughty and Murragh.

I looked in to see Bess, and found Doughty himself, sitting by a fire, looking surly. Having returned to work, he had again wrenched his back and was having to rest it once more.

" It's the first time I've ever known you to be off work. Cheer up, you've only got a week to go before you're making tracks for home," I said, removing my coat.

My truck was outside. Though only half a mile away by hill paths, the unit to which I was attached was at least ten miles off by the circuitous track round the mountains.

" Look how long the flaming journey back to Earth takes when we do get off from Touchdown," he complained. " Pity we can't get an FTL ship to Earth— there are enough of them around."

He spoke as if the FTL ships were my responsibility, which in a sense they were.

" You know by their nature they're only fit for trans-galactic distances," I said, speaking as though to a child. " Earth's too near—you have to catch a STL to get there. And even STL's are fast enough to make the subjective time of the journey no more than three or four months."

" Don't start explaining," he said. He waved his hand dismissively. " You know I'm only a simple farmer. I don't grasp all that technical stuff."

That is what I love about simple farmers. They practically invite you to give them explanations, they swallow them, then

they say they do not want them. I often found it hard not to despise Doughty.

The two girls Fay and Tessie were there, having just finished their CV lessons. Tessie was preparing lunch ; eyeing me warily—she was a mistrustful creature—she told me that her mother was out helping Murragh with the flocks while Doughty was laid up. Both girls came over to the farmer to join in the discussion ; I coaxed Fay up on to my knee.

She wanted the whole business of how they got home explained to her.

" You're a Flange Maintenance Officer, Captain Rogers," she said. " Tell *me* all about it and then I'll tell Daddy so's he can understand."

" You don't have to understand," Doughty said. " We just take a ship and it'll get us there eventually and that's all there is to it, thank God. The likes of us don't need to bother our heads about the technicalities."

" *I'm* going to be educated," Fay replied.

" It's *good* for us to listen," Tessie said, " though I understand it all already. A child could understand it."

" I'm a child and I don't understand it," her sister said.

" The universe is full of civilized planets, and in a week's time you're all going to hop from one such to another such," I began. And as I sought for the simple words and the vivid pictures with which to put my explanation across to them, the wonder of the universe overcame me as if for a moment I too was a child.

For the galaxy had grown up into a great and peaceful unit. War existed, but it remained planet-bound and never spread between planets. Crime survived, but did not flourish. Evil lived, but knowledge kept pace with it and fought it. Man prospered and grew kindlier rather than otherwise. Certainly his old vices were as green as ever, but he had devised sociological systems that contained them better than had been the case in earlier epochs.

The galaxy worked something like a clock, its parts interdependent. Space ships formed its connecting links.

Because of the varying distances that had to be covered between planets, some of them colossal, some relatively small distances, two main classes of space ships had been developed.

Bridging all but the lesser distances went the FTL ships, travelling in super-universes at multiple-light velocities. Bridging the lesser distances went the STL, the Slower-Than-Light ships. And the two sorts of travel were like the planetary economies themselves, inter-dependent.

The FTL ship, that ultimate miracle of technology, has one disadvantage : it moves—as far as the ' normal ' universe is concerned—at only two speeds, faster than light and stationary.

An FTL ship has to stop directly it comes out of phase space and enters the quantative fields of the normal universe. Hence bodies such as Tandy Two, spread throughout the galaxy ; they are the Braking Planets or Satellites.

An FTL cannot ' stop ' in space (a meaningless expression). Instead, its velocities are absorbed by the braking planets or, more accurately, by the inertial absorbers of the flanges which girdle such planets. The FTL's burst in and are reduced to zero velocity within a time limit of about 200 milli-seconds—in which time they have circuited the flange, gone completely round the planet, one and a half times.

STL's then disperse the passengers to local star systems, much in the way that stratoliners land travellers who then disperse to nearby points by helicab.

Though STL's are slow, relativistic time contractions shorten the subjective journeys in them to tolerable limits of months or weeks.

So the universe ticks, not perfectly (or I'll be accused of smugness !) but workably.

And this was what I told Doughty and his daughters, as Fay snuggled against me, and Tessie kept her distance.

" Well, I'd better go and finish getting your dinner, Daddy," Tessie said, after a pause.

He patted her bottom and chuckled with approval.

" That's it, girl," he said. " Food's more in our line than all this relativistic stuff. Give me a lamb cutlet any day."

I had no answer. Nor had Fay, though I saw by her face that she was still thinking over what I had said, as she slid off my knee to go and help Tessie. How much did it mean to her ? How much does it all mean to any of us ? Though Doughty had little time for theory, I also relished the thought of the lamb cutlet.

## three

Before the food was ready, I took a turn outside with the farmer, who used his stick as support.

" You'll miss this view," I said, gazing over the great mysterious body of Tandy whose contours were clad in green and freckled here and there with sheep. I must admit it, I am fonder of the beauties of women than of landscape; for all that, the prospect was fine. In the voluptuous downward curve between two hills, Tandy the primary was setting. Even by daylight the banded and beautiful reds swirling over its oblate surface were impressive.

Doughty looked about him, sniffing, admitting nothing. He appeared not to have heard what I said.

" Rain coming up from somewhere," he observed.

In my turn I ignored him.

" You'll miss this view back on Earth," I repeated.

" Blast the view !" Doughty exclaimed and laughed. " I'm not a clever man like you and young Murragh, Captain ; I get simple satisfaction out of simple things, like being in the place where I was born."

Although I happened to know he was born eight layers under the skyport in Birmingham, where they still had slot meters for your ration of fresh air, I made no answer. All he meant was that he valued his personal illusions, and there I was with him every time. Convictions or illusions : what matter if all conviction is illusion, so long as we hang on to it ? You would never shift Doughty from his, fool though he was in many ways.

I could never get under his skin as surely as I could with some people—Murragh, for instance, a more complicated creature altogether ; but often the simplest person has a sort of characterless opacity about him. So it seemed with Doughty and if I have drawn him flat and lumpy here, that was how I experienced him then.

To produce talk between us, for his silence made me uneasy, I asked after Murragh.

Doughty had little to say on that subject. Instead he pointed with his stick to a tracked vehicle bumping southwards towards us.

" That'll be Murragh with Bess now, coming home for a bit of grub," he said.

He was mistaken. When the tractor drew nearer, we saw that only Bess was inside it.

As we strolled forward, she drove round the covered pens and pulled up beside us. Her face was flushed, and—I thought—angry looking, but she smiled when she saw me.

" Hullo, Captain Rogers !" She climbed down and clasped my hand briefly. " I was forgetting we'd be having your company today. Nice to see a strange face, though I'd hardly call yours that." She turned straight to her husband and said, " We got trouble up on Pike's Brow. Two autocollies plunged straight down a crevasse. Murragh's up there with them now trying to get them out."

" What were you doing up on Pike's Brow ?" he demanded. " I told you to keep number three flock over the other side while I was off—you know it's tricky on Pike's with all that faulting, you silly woman. Why didn't you do as I told you ?"

" It wouldn't have happened if my throat mike hadn't jammed. I couldn't call the collies off before they went down the hole."

" Don't make excuses. I can't take a day off without something going wrong, I—"

" You've had six days off already, Colin Doughty, so shut your trapper—"

" How's Harrison managing ?" I asked, thinking an interruption was necessary.

Mrs. Doughty flashed me a look of gratitude.

" I tell you, he's trying to get down the crevasse after the autocollies. Trouble is, they're still going and won't answer to orders, so they're working themselves down deeper and deeper. That's why I come back here, to switch off the juice ; they work on beamed power, you know."

I heard Doughty's teeth grind.

" Then buck up and switch off, woman, before the creatures ruin themselves ! You know they cost money. What you waiting for ?"

" What ? For some old fool to stop arguing with me, of course. Let me by."

She marched past us, an aggressive woman, rather ugly, and yet still to my taste pleasing, as though the thickness of her body bore some direct if mysterious relationship to the adversities of life. Going into the control shed, she killed the power and then came back to where we stood.

" I'll come with you, Mrs. Doughty, and see what I can do to help," I said. " I don't need to get back to my outfit for another hour."

A look of understanding moved across her face and I climbed on to the tractor with her after a brief nod to Doughty.

There was some justification for this. If the situation was as she said it was, then the matter was one of urgency—for the next FTL ship was due in under four hours and forty thousand sheep had to be herded under lock and key before that. *Had to be :* or darkness would be on them, they would stampede and kill or injure themselves on the rocky slopes, and Doughty's hard-earned savings would be down to nil. If, that is, the situation was as Bess said it was.

When we were out of sight of old Doughty and the farm, Bess stopped the tractor. We looked at each other. My whole system changed gear as we saw the greed in each other's eyes.

" How much of this story is a lie to get me alone and at your mercy ?" I asked.

She put her hard broad hand over mine.

" None of it, Vasco. We'll have to shift back to Murragh as soon as possible, if he hasn't already broken his neck down that crevasse. But with Colin hanging about the house I couldn't have seen you alone if this opportunity hadn't turned up—and this'll be our last meeting, won't it ?"

" Unless you change your mind and don't go to Earth with him next week."

" You know I can't do that, Vasco."

I did know. I was safe. Not to put too fine a point on it, she'd have been a nuisance if she had stayed for my sake. There were dozens of women like Bessy Doughty—one on nearly every hill farm I visited, bored, lonely, willing, only too happy to indulge in an affair with a Flange Maintenance Official. It was not as if I loved her.

" Then we'll make it really good this last time," I said.

And there was the greed again, plain and undisguised and sweet. We almost fell out on to the grass. That's how these things should be : raw, unglamourised. That's the way it must be for me. Bess and I never made love. We coupled.

Afterwards, when we came to our ordinary senses, we were aware that we had been longer than we should have been. Scrambling back into the tractor, we headed fast and bumpy for Pike's Brow.

"I hope Murragh's all right," I muttered, glancing at my arm watch.

She neither liked nor understood my perpetual interest in Murragh Harrison.

"He's queer!" she sneered.

I didn't ask her to elaborate her crudity. I had heard it before, and the pattern behind it was obvious enough: Murragh disliked her hungry advances—and why not? She was plain, solid, coarse . . . no, I do myself no justice saying all this—for though she was all that, Bess also had a pure peasant honesty that in my eyes excused everything—or so I told myself to justify the circumstances. There you are: I'm the kind that prefers bread to cake.

At first when Murragh arrived at Doughty's farm, I had been jealous, afraid that he would spoil my innocent little game. When it was clear he would do no such thing, that he was not a bread man, I grew interested in him for his own involved sake. Sometimes this had caused trouble between Bess and me—but enough of this; I am trying to tell Murragh's tale, not mine. If I deviate, well, one life is very much tangled with the next man's.

We must have created some sort of a speed record to the foot of Pike's Brow. Then the terrain became so steep that we had to halt, leave the tractor, and climb on our own two feet.

Bending our backs, we climbed. Sheep moved reluctantly out of our path, eyeing us with that asinine division of feature that marks a Tandy sheep's face: all rabbity and timid about the eyes and nose, and as arrogant as a camel about the lower lip.

Rain came on us with the unexpectedness it reserves for Region Six, as if a giant over the hump of the mountains had suddenly emptied his biggest bucket across our path. I remembered Doughty's forecast as I turned up my collar. Still we climbed, watching little rivulets form among the short blades under our boots. After my recent exertions, I began to wish I hadn't volunteered for this.

At last we reached the crevasse. We scrambled along by its side towards the point where Murragh had climbed over into it, a point marked by the two live dogs, Hock and Pedro, who sat patiently in the rain, barking at our approach.

The downpour was dying by now. We stood, pulled our backbones painfully upright, and breathed the damp air deep before bothering about Murragh.

He was some twenty feet down into the crack, where it was so narrow that he could rest with his back to one side of it and his feet to the other. He was drenched from the water pouring over the edge ; it splashed past him and gargled down into a ribbon of a stream a further thirty feet beneath his boots.

One of the autocollies was wedged beside him, covered in mud. The other lay a little way away and some feet lower down, upside down but seemingly unharmed.

I noted the expression on Murragh's face. It was blank, while he seemed to gaze into nothing, ignoring the rivulets that splashed round him.

" Murragh !" Bess called sharply. " Wake up. We're back at last."

He looked up at us.

" Hello," he said. " Hello, Vasco ! I was just communing with the great earth mother. She's really swallowed me . . . It's funny, stuck down here in a fissure . . . like climbing between the lips of a whale."

And there would have been more like that ! Generally I had patience with his curious fancies, enjoyed them even, but not at such a moment, not with Bess standing there sneering, and the water running down my back, and a stitch in my side, and the time against us.

" It's raining, Dreamer Boy," I reminded him. " In case you didn't notice, we're all wet through. For god's sake stir yourself."

He seemed to pull himself together, dashing wet hair back from his face. Peering upwards rather stupidly, as if he were a fish regarding from a ditch his first humans, he said, " Fine day for mountaineering, isn't it ? If we're not careful, the earth under this autocollie will crumble and the machine may get wedged or damaged. As it is, it is still in working order. Fling me the rope down, Bess. You and Vasco can haul it up while I steady it."

She stared blankly into my face.

" Damn it to hell, I left the bloody rope back in the tractor," she said.

I remembered then. She'd unhooked it from her waist when we lay on the grass and later had not bothered in her haste to tie it on again, tossing it instead into the back of the vehicle.

" For god's sake go and get it then," Murragh shouted impatiently, as if suddenly realising how long he had waited. " I can't stay down here much longer."

Again Bess looked at me. I gazed away down at my muddy boots.

" Go and get it for me Vasco," she urged.

" I'm out of breath," I said. " I've got the stitch."

"—you !" she said. She started off down the hillside again without another word.

Murragh looked sharply up at me ; I did not return his stare.

It took her twenty-five minutes to return with the rope. In that time, the rain cleared entirely. I squatted by Pedro and Hock, gazing over the dull and tumbled terrain. Murragh and I did not speak to each other.

The best part of another hour passed before we three bedraggled creatures had managed to haul the autocollies up safely. We could have done the job in half the time, had we not been so careful to preserve them from harm ; we all knew the balance of the Doughty finances, and an autocollie can cost anything from twenty percentages to five parapounds.

Panting, I looked at my arm watch.

In two hours less six minutes the next FTL was due for entry on Tandy Two. It was past the time I should have reported back to my unit for duty.

I told Murragh and Bess that I must be going—told them curtly, for after missing my lunch, getting a soaking, and nearly wrenching my arms off rescuing the dogs, I was none to sweet-humoured.

" You can't leave us *now*, Vasco," Murragh said. " The whole flock's in jeopardy, and not only this lot on the Brow. We've *got* to have every sheep under cover in two hours—and first of all someone must go back to the farm and switch the beam on again to get the dogs going. We want your help still."

His eyes were as appealing as Bess's.

God, I thought, the way some people need people ! He has his emotional requirements the way she has her physical ones. Whereas hers are crashingly simple, his I don't understand ; once these autodogs are running again, they will see the sheep homeno in time, without help.

Right then, I could not think of two people I would less like to be stuck on a mountain with. But all I said was, " I'm a maintenance officer, Murragh, not a shepherd. I've made myself late for duty as it is. Since my truck's at the farm, I'll have to go back to collect it, so when I get there I'll tell Colin to beam the juice to you—but from then on you're on your own."

As I turned to go, Bess put her hand round my wrist. When I swung round on her, I saw her flinch from my expression.

" You can't just ditch us like this, Vasco," she said.

" I'm ditching nobody. I helped you drag the collies out, didn't I ? I've got a job to do, and I'll be in the cart for reporting back late as it is. Now let me go."

She dropped my hand.

I made off down the slope at a slow trot, digging in my heels as I went. Now and again I slipped, falling back on the wet grass. Before I got to the level, I saw another tractor approaching.

Doughty was in it. He yelled to me as we drew nearer.

"I came to see what you lot were doing all this time. You've been taking so long I thought you'd all fallen down the hole with the collies."

Briefly I told him what was happening, while he climbed slowly out of the tractor, clutching his back.

" So I'm borrowing Bess's tractor to go back and switch on the juice, so that the autos can start herding as soon as possible," I finished.

He fell to cursing, saying he was going to lose all his livestock, that they could never be driven under cover before the FTL arrived. I tried to reassure him before going over to the other vehicle.

As I climbed in he said, " When you get there, tell Tessie to come back here with the tractor. She can drive well enough, and we'll need her help. The more hands here the better. And tell her to bring the signal pistols. They'll get the sheep moving."

" And Fay ?"

" She'd only be in the damned way here."

Giving him a wave, I stood on the acceleration and rattled back to the farm. By now the sun was bright and the sky free of cloud, which did not stop my boots squelching nor my clothes from clinging to me like wet wallpaper.

## four

Directly I reached the farm buildings, I marched into the control shed, crossed to the appropriate board and pushed the rheostat over. Power began its ancient song, that hum of content that sounds perpetually as if it is ascending the scale. Up on the pastures, the electronic dogs would be leaping into activity.

Everything appeared in order, though Colin Doughty was not a man to keep his equipment spotless—and I reflected, not for the first time that day, that if he had cared to lay out an extra twenty parapounds or so he could have had switchboard-to-flock communication, which would have saved him valuable time on a day like this.

Well, it was not my concern.

In the living-eating-cooking room, Tessie was alone. She stood in her slip, cutting out a dress for Earthside, and I surveyed her ; she was developing well.

As usual, she seemed displeased to see me—baffling creatures adolescent girls ; you never know whether they are acting or not. I gave her her father's orders and told her to get out to Pike Brow as soon as she could.

" And where's Fay ?" I asked.

" It's none of your business, Captain Rogers."

As if she felt this was a bit too sharp, she added, " and anyhow I don't know. This is one of my great not-knowing days."

I sniffed. I was in a hurry and anyhow it was, as she said, none of my business now, although I would dearly have liked a farewell word with the younger girl. Nodding to Tessie, I squelched out of the building, collected the maintenance truck, and drove fast back to my unit round the other side of the mountains. To perdition with all Doughtys !

Murragh used to say that there wasn't a more interesting job than mine on all Tandy. Though he was prepared to talk for hours about his feelings—" my Tandian tenebrosities," he sometimes called them—he was equally prepared to listen for hours while I explained in minute detail the working of the Flange and the problems of repair it posed. He learnt from me any facts he filtered on to Fay.

Maintaining the Flange is a costly and complicated business, and would be even more so had we not costly and complicated

machines with which to operate. Between FTL arrivals, my unit is working ceaselessly over the Region Six strip, testing, checking, replacing, making good.

The complex nature of the Flange necessitates this.

To start with, there is the Bonfiglioli Geogravitic Layer, marked by tall pylons, along the north of the Flange, which maintains all of Tandy Two's atmosphere within its stress ; were this to contract more than a minimum leakage, the lives of everyone on the planet would be in jeopardy.

Before the BGL comes the " fence," which prevents any creature from entering the Flange zone, while after it come our equipment stores, bunkers, etc., before you get to the actual twelve mile width of the Flange itself.

If you want to learn how the beast works, you must mug it up in a technical publication. All I will say here is that the Flange is a huge shock absorber, three stories deep and girdling the planet. It has to absorb the biggest man-made shock of all time, though it is a delicate instrument with an upper surface of free-grooved pyr-glass needles. Its functioning depends first and foremost on the taubesi thermocouple, of which there is one to every square millimetre of surface ; these detect an FTL ship before it re-enters normal space and activate the rest of the system immediately. The rest of the system is, briefly, an inertia vacuum. The FTL ship never actually makes contact with the Flange surface, of course, but its detectors mesh with the inertials and transfer velocities, stopping it, as was explained earlier, in milliseconds—the figure varies according to planetary and ship's mass, but for Tandy Two is generally in the order of 201.5 milliseconds.

The whole Flange is activated—switched on metre by metre of its entire twenty-five thousand miles length—two hours before an FTL ship arrives (only the computers beneath the trip know precisely when the starship will materialise from phase space). At that time the various maintenance units give the whole system a final check-over, and the needle-like surface of the Flange looks first one way and then another, like stroked fur, as it searches for breakthrough point. I should have been back for that event.

I had come down to the valleys by now. Over to my left ran the graceful BGM pylons with the Flange itself behind, already stretching itself like a self-activated rubber sheet ; beyond it burned the dead half of Tandy, sealed off in vacuum, bleached

dust-white in the sun. Less than a mile remained between me and the unit post. Then I saw Fay.

Her blue dress shone clearly against the tawny ground. She was several hundred yards ahead of me, not looking in my direction and running directly towards the electrified " fence " that guards the BGL and the Flange itself.

" Fay !" I yelled. " Come back !"

Instinctive stuff ; I was enclosed in the truck ; had she heard my cry it would only have speeded her on her way.

This was her last chance to see an FTL ship enter before she went back to Earth. The absence of her father and mother had given her the chance to slip out, so she had taken it.

In my head as I gunned my vehicle sharply forward, I heard again some of the silly sweet inquisitive questions she had asked me on my visits.

" Can you *see* the ships when they land ?"

" You do get an image of them, but it's after they've passed because they're moving fractionally faster than light."

" Gosh, Captain Rogers, light is funny stuff when you come to think. Everything's funny stuff when you come to think."

And now she was darting towards the electrified fence, and that was not funny.

" Fay !" I yelled as I drove, letting my lungs shout because in my fear I could not stop them.

The fence was built of two components, an ordinary strand fence with a mild shock to keep sheep away, and then, some yards beyond that, a trellis of high voltage designed simply and crudely to kill. Warning notices ran all the way between the two fences, one every three hundred and fifty yards, 125,714 of them right round the planet—and this kid in a blue frock ignoring every one.

She dived through the strand fence without touching it.

Now I was level with her. Seeing me, she began running parallel between the two fences. Beyond her the eyes of the needles of the Flange turned first this way then that, restless and expectant.

I jumped from the truck before it stopped moving.

" You'll get killed, Fay !" I bellowed.

She turned then, her face half mischievous, half scared. She was running off course towards the second fence as she turned. Something she called to me—I could not make out, still cannot make out what.

As I ducked under the sheep strand after her, she hit the other fence.

Fay ! Ah, my Fay, my own sweet free-born daughter ! She was outlined in bright light, she was black as a cinder, the universe screamed and yapped like a dying dog. My face hit the dust shrieking as I fell nearby. Noise, death, heat, slapped me down.

Then there was mind-devouring silence.

Peace rolled down like a steam roller, flattening everything, the eternal hush of damnation into which I wept as if the universe were a pocket handkerchief made for my grief.

Fay, oh Fay, my own child !

Beyond the BGL, safe in vacuum, the Flange peered towards the heavens, twisting its spiked eyes. I rolled in the blistered dust without comprehension.

How long I lay there I have no idea.

Eventually the alarms roused me. They washed round me and through me until they too were gone and the silence came back. When my hearing returned, I heard a throbbing in the silence. At first I could not place it, had no wish to place it, but at last I sat up and realised that the motor of my truck was still patiently turning over. I stood up shakily on my two legs. The ill-co-ordinated action brought a measure of intelligence back to my system.

All that presented itself to me was that I had to return to the farm and tell Bess what had happened. Everything else was forgotten, even that the FTL ship was due at any time.

I got back somehow under the sheep fence, and into the cab. Somehow I kicked in the gears and we lurched into motion. Fay, Fay, Fay, my blood kept saying.

As I steered away from the Flange, from the burnt ground to grass again, a figure presented itself before me. Blankly I stopped and climbed out to meet it, hardly knowing what I did.

It was Murragh, waving his arms like one possessed.

" Thanks to your aid we got the flocks under cover in time," he said. " So I came down here to see the FTL entry. You know for me to see an entry—well, it's like watching the creation."

He stopped, eyeing me, his face full of a private emotion.

" It's like the creation, is it ?" I said dumbly. My mouth felt puffy. Fay, Fay, Fay . . . okay, I was all kinds of a cur, but I didn't deserve that, that actually before my eyes . . .

" And Vasco, we've always been close friends, I don't have to mind what I say to you, you know that this event once a fortnight—it's the excitement of all excitements for me. I mean . . . well, it's just that even something like sex palls beside watching an FTL entry—"

In the state I was in, I could not grasp what he was saying or meaning. It came back to me long after, like finding a private letter behind the wainscotting of an empty house : titillating, but all old history.

" And I've got the image of Tandy Two I was after, Vasco . . ." his eyes were alight. Full of that divine inner fire of a poet : it lit him too well inside for him to see me. " Tandy's a woman—"

There was no warning.

The FTL ship entered.

Cerenkov radiations belched outwards, distorting our vision. For a second, Murragh and I were embedded in amber. Tandy was girdled in a noose of flame, most of which expanded south safely into vacuum. Then the giant fist of inertial reaction struck us.

The sun plunged across the sky like a frightened horse.

As we fell, day turned to night.

For one of those long minutes that under their own weight can iron themselves into a small eternity, I lay on the ground with Murragh half on top of me.

He moved before I did. Vaguely I realised he was fumbling round doing something. When it penetrated my mind that he wa slipping a fume mask on, I automatically did the same ; without thinking, I had carried my mask from the vehicle with me.

He had switched on a torch. It lay on the ground as we sprouted bug-eyed jumbo faces, and splashed a great caricature of us up the mountainside. In the sky, Tandy had appeared, near full and bright, a phantom. As ever it was impossible to believe it was not our moon rather than vice versa ; facts have no power against the imagination.

Sitting there stupidly, I heard the words of an old poet scatter through my head, half of his verse missing.

O, moon of my delight who know'st no wane,
Something something once again.
How oft hereafter rising shall she look
Through this same garden after me—in vain !

But I had no time to connect up the missing words; if I had thought of it, I preferred them missing to emphasise my sense of loss. But no rational thought came.

All that came was the clash of two nightmares, Murragh's and mine. It seemed that I kept crying "Fay is dead !" that he kept crying "Tandy Two's a woman !" And we were fighting, struggling together while the ground steamed, I hating him because he did not care where I had expected him to care, he hating me because I had spoilt his vigil, ruined his climax.

My mind ran in shapes, not thoughts, until I realised that I had begun the fight. When I went limp, Murragh's fist caught me between the eyes.

I do not have to say what I felt then, slumped on the ground —the place I hated and Murragh loved—for this is supposed to be his story, not mine, although I have become tangled up in it in the same directionless bindweedy way I became entangled in Bess's life.

Murragh—you have to say it—could not feel like ordinary people. When I heard from him again, he never even mentioned Fay ; he had only used her to talk about his real obsession.

When, a week later, the STL ship *Monteith* lit out for Earth from Tandy, Colin, Bess and Tessie Doughty travelled in it. So did I. I lay in a bunk in the medical bay, classified under some obscure technical label that meant I was dull of mind and unfit for further service.

The Doughtys came to see me.

They were cheerful as crickets. After all, they had made their packet and were about to begin life anew. Even Bess never referred to Fay ; I always said she was hard and coarse.

They brought me a letter from Murragh. It was elaborately over-written. Wrapped in his own discoveries, he clearly mourned as little for Fay as did the Doughtys. His letter, in fact, displayed his usual sensitivity and his blindness where other humans were concerned. I had no patience with it, though I later re-read the final passages (which he has since used in his successful book *To my Undeniable Tandy*).

". . . Yilmoff's twenty-third century Theory of Images reveals how places can hold for men deep psychic significances; we inherit an Experience of place as we do of (say) women. So

when a planet exists with as distinct a personality—for the term in context is no exaggeration—as Tandy Two's, the significance is increased, the effect on the psyche deepened.

" I declare myself to be in love, in the true psychological sense of the word, with Tandy. She is my needful feminine, dwelling in my psyche, filling it to the exclusion of other needs.

" So I give you my true portrait image of her : the planethead of a girl, all sweet rich hair north, but the south face a skull, and bound round her brow a ribbon of flame. This is the portrait of my terrible lover."

You may make of this what you will. Crazy was he ?

Only Murragh of all mankind has his mistress perpetually beneath him.

*Brian W. Aldiss*

*Regulations decreed that all Earth nationals shonld be interred for the duration of the war. There was only one on the ship — a woman !*

# THE SINGING GRASSES

## by MIKE DAVIES

———

" You !" she said, with unintended rudeness.

" Who else ?" The Captain's voice held the dry slither of ice. " If you look to your right you will see a notice on the door."

Linda Varne recovered, smoothing her uniform. " I'm so sorry, Captain." The twin stars glittered on her shoulders. She was strong-limbed, darkly beautiful. " I'm afraid I chose the wrong office."

" You will find Lieutenant Corder in the office next door—just one moment !"

She turned back reluctantly. " Yes, Captain ?"

" As biologist of this expedition perhaps you would devote more of your attention to—biology."

" That's exactly what I am doing, Captain."

She was gone, and Brandt, the First Officer, grinned secretly. She had taken a chance with that answer. Then he glanced at the serious figure and grew serious in turn.

But the Captain, noting all, felt old. How old was he ? Forty-two, forty-three next birthday. And so long in space, sailing down between the island suns. The years had gone in a drift of stars past the belly of his fine ship. He looked out of the port.

Out there lay hills and valleys and forests and clear water. This unmapped world was young, fresh like Moltar, his own

planet, green like the legendary Earth that he had never seen. Thinking of Earth, he thought also of the girl ; she had been born there, of Terran parentage. Was that why he had taken her to task, and at a time like this ?

" You were saying, Sir, that there was little hope of peace."

Of peace, no ; no hope of peace. Aloud he said : " Earth ships invaded the Eridani sector this morning, local time. Our ultimatum will expire tomorrow."

Brandt nodded. He had expected as much. He jerked his thumb at the wall. " What'll happen to her ?"

The Captain looked at him. " We're awaiting instructions."

But the answer seemed plain to both of them. The woman would be interned—interned on Moltar till the war was over.

The Captain stood up in dismissal. " Well, there it is, Jim. Get the armaments checked over—we'll be under way soon. I'll talk to the crew later."

In the cool turn of the world from the sun he walked towards the river. The wind sang in the moving grass beneath his feet. At the crest of a rise he stopped, as was his habit, to look back at the ship.

She lay there with one star awake in the sky above her, and so beautiful she held him still, quietly watching. He loved her, as some extinct sea-captain must have loved his own white-winged vessel. He loved her subtle fingers and hidden voices, the deadly powers of her body, all the mysteries of her electronic arts. Walking the bridge, or watching from afar, he knew her pride and loneliness were like his own.

He went on to the riverbank and upstream towards the derelict farm. Years past, Earth settlers had come here and left their mark and vanished. Wild goats and pigs moved in the undergrowth ; wild chickens scratched and peered in the dead leaves. Once, he reflected, there was hope and liveliness about this place. And now the wind blew down fireless chimneys and through tattered walls. Only the gate creaked and creaked and like a childhood memory would never quite shut on the scenes of long ago.

The curve of the river flanked the ancient farm. The Captain walked the bank under trees like green fountains, pouring their foliage in the dusk. He was suddenly startled by the sound of voices. He stopped.

Ten paces before him two bare and pretty feet stretched from behind a bush. He heard the woman's voice. The man could

not be seen, but he knew that it was Corder. As he hesitated the woman spoke again.

" Don't you know what a farm is ? But of course, you don't have things like that on Moltar." She laughed, and Corder murmured something in reply.

" When I was a little girl," she went on clearly, " we had a farm—one of the very last on Earth—pigs and chickens and cows and horses. I used to help my mother after father died. There were fields and hedges—so green—and a river where we used to swim in summer. And when the snow fell in winter the world was white and lovely and lonely as a mountain-top." There was a pause. " Darling," she said suddenly, " wouldn't it be wonderful if we had a place like this—I mean, like this farm used to be ?"

" Wonderful !" said Corder.

She laughed again. " Paradise for two, my love. No—it's still too hot—I'm going to swim."

Too late the Captain turned. Out of the corner of his eye he saw her pearly body cleave the surface. He strode off, furious with himself for lingering. He knew that they had seen him. He felt the blood in his face as the warm wind echoed her laughter.

That night a woman's feet ran through his dreams ; feet that in summer stirred the singing grasses, in winter made music in the snow.

In the morning when the hour of decision was near he assembled the officers and men. In the glittering ward-room before the star-map he plotted the forces of Moltar and of Earth. He spoke of their common terrestrial ancestry, of the treaty of independence signed five hundred years before, of the guaranteed neutrality of the Eridani sector. He spoke of the disputed trading rights, the need for Moltar to preserve her spheres of influence intact.

He saw the faces of his crew still and shut before him, like the faces of drowned men, as he told of Earth's violation of the Neutral Zone. For the first time he used the word " enemy." Looking among his officers, he was glad that the woman was not there.

" Equipped as we are for war, our mission here has been one of peaceful exploration. All that is over. In a few moments of local time the ultimatum will expire."

Fascinated, they watched the clock ticking away the lives of men.

" Gentlemen," said the Captain steadily, " we are at war with Earth."

Seated at his desk, the Captain sent for Linda Varne. She opened the door without knocking, came in slowly without saluting. She stood before him and looked at him in equality.

His face was set in the customary mould of duty, quick and keen. The old authority was in his glance, but inside he felt weak and restless. He started to speak :

" You will have heard—"

" I've heard everything, Captain. I know we're enemies now."

He stiffened. Damn her, why need she make it so difficult ? He put a new edge to his voice :

" It was of course unfortunate that they gave you this job two years ago, but that is neither my fault nor yours. No-one then could have foreseen war."

She shrugged. " Moltar was short of trained biologists. I was not the only one." There was a condescension in her voice that stung him. He went on quickly, eager to be done.

" I've signalled Base for instructions concerning you, but there is little doubt that you will be interned on Moltar. In the meantime—as a technicality only—I'm afraid I must confine you to your quarters."

She opened her eyes wide in mockery. " Really, Captain. I wonder you don't claim me as a prisoner of war."

He stared at her. I'm sorry Linda, I'm sorry, he wanted to say. But he said nothing. He watched her fingers move at her left shoulder, then at her right. Almost gently, she set down the epaulettes on the desk and walked out.

For a long time he sat staring at the twin stars reflected in the metal surface. Brandt came in and spoke to him. He looked at him vacantly. " What ?"

"—operation orders, Sir, and the instructions on Linda Varne." The Captain saw the look in the other's eyes. " What is it, man ?" he almost shouted.

Brandt placed the signals on the desk. " We are to leave within forty-eight hours for the Eridani sector and come under command of the Tenth Fleet."

" Yes, yes, and the girl ?"

" She's to be left here."

" Left here ? They're mad, mad ! Send a signal back explaining . . ."

" Very well, Sir, but the situation was already very fully covered by our last signal. We might ask them to clarify and confirm, but it won't be well received."

The Captain knew what was meant. There could be no argument with an order from Base. In war or peace the need for discipline was paramount. He was silent.

" Poor bitch . . ." said the First Officer.

Now a new life hummed in the body of the great ship. In the control room her power relays flickered, her time signals leapt the void. Her guns were re-checked, loaded, her torpedoes armed ; her spacemines lay in deadly sequence in their racks. Like a bright and vicious dart in the hands of a god she was poised for war-flight down the stars. She awaited the Captain's order that would send her forth upon her mission.

The Captain, pacing the quarterdeck, felt the joy and eagerness of his beloved ship, but he could not share it. The all-too-tangible ghost of the woman stood between them. He shuddered as he remembered that second interview, how she had screamed palely at his broken words. He had helped her to a chair, brought her a drink, and she had dashed the glass from his hand in horror.

And then, more dreadful than her fear, her cold acceptance, her bitter contempt.

The Captain struck fist into palm as he walked. There was no way, no way. The answer to his last signal had been abrupt. The order would be obeyed.

The word had flashed with electric impetus through the ship. The Captain saw the unrest of the crew. The only woman on board had turned each head towards her, brought a smile to every mouth. The Captain could not bear the eyes of his men. Accepted as leader in his own right, he was therefore more vulnerable. It's not my fault, you fools ! he wanted to shout. This is war ! The individual must be subjected to the needs of the whole—the needs of Moltar. Yet with it all he knew the bonds of obedience would hold, and once the ship had left and the inevitable had occurred the tension among his men would be released. But even the unholy baptism of war itself would never wash out the vision of the woman left behind.

Back in the day-cabin he touched a switch as a light winked at his elbow. " Yes ?"

" Lieutenant Corder wishes to see you, Sir."

" Show him in."

Now, he must be patient, patient with this young officer who would not know, could not know, that their agony was shared. " Come in," he said.

Corder stood there. He had the look of a man still dazed with sleep, torn from his dreams by some secret night-arrest.

" Linda—Lieutenant Varne, Sir."

" Miss Varne, you mean. Sit down, Corder." He tried to make his voice gentle.

" Why, Sir, why ?"

He picked his words with care, explaining. It was vital that the ship entered the theatre of operations immediately. To take an enemy national into battle was unthinkable. The survival of Moltar was at stake. Ruthless though it might be, the morals of such an order—or of any lawful command—could not be questioned.

" But that's not the point," said Corder wildly, " not the point. She'll die, out there alone—go mad and die, with the fear, Sir, and the loneliness." His face grew tense suddenly, as if reaching a decision. His eyes narrowed.

" She can't be left, Sir, she *can't*—not on her own. I'll stay with her—I'll desert ship—you can't stop me . . ."

So, thought the Captain in sudden pity, the young fool had left him no choice, no choice at all. As he pressed the bell he did not even lift his voice from its quietness : " Lieutenant Corder," he said, " for your own sake and for the sake of the ship I am placing you in close arrest."

Alone among his thoughts, he heard the faraway tap on the door. It was Kinch, the ship's quartermaster. The Captain looked up in irritation. " What is it ?"

" Lieutenant Varne, Sir—"

" *Miss* Varne."

" Yes sir, Miss Varne." He cleared his throat and consulted a piece of paper. " She wants to live at the old farm, Sir. She wants the pigs and chickens caught and penned, the fields re-fenced. She wants the roof and walls repaired, the floor relaid, the chimneys rebuilt, the furniture—"

" Do it."

" Yessir. She wants a portable solar cooker, seeds, fishing tackle, medical supplies, a store of tinned food—"

" Get them."

" Yessir. She wants carpenter's tools, materials, needles, knives, axes, saws, small arms, a hunting rifle and ammunition. She wants half the books in the ship's library—"

" Then give them to her, dolt !" roared the Captain. " God blast it, give her everything she wants !"

Yes, he thought desperately, alone again, give her everything she wants. " Jim," he cried over the intercom, " Jim, send an urgent signal to Base. Ask permission to leave one man with Miss Varne as—escort, guard, custodian—any damn thing Make a good case. Do it at once ; at once, you understand ?"

" Very good, sir."

He had made it a practice never to drink alone. Now, waiting for that reply, he went to his cabin and tumbled liquor into a glass.

It was morning and his orderly was putting down a tray. Brandt was there too. The Captain sat up. " Well ?" he croaked.

Brandt shook his head.

" Right, the bastards," muttered the Captain.

" You said something, Sir ?"

" No. Yes. Get Corder to the day-cabin in twenty minutes. Twenty minutes." He swung his feet over the edge of the bunk.

" You'll deal with him summarily ?"

" Just get him."

The water of the shower was a benison to his aching head. Ignoring the food, he dressed hastily.

Across the desk of his day-cabin he looked at Corder, noting the wildness had gone out of the man. He was smart and repentant in his uniform. His escorting officer stood at his side.

" Lieutenant Corder, I've reconsidered the circumstances under which disciplinary action was taken against you, and am prepared to give you the benefit of the doubt." Pompous fool, he told himself.

" I am therefore releasing you from arrest." He jerked his head at the escort, who saluted and left.

Now, get it settled, get it settled, he thought. He went on carefully : " I know your fondness for Miss Varne. No doubt you would like to help her in these last few hours. If so you

have my full permission. The ship leaves at 0500 local time tomorrow."

They stared at each other. Something flickered in Corder's eyes. " I would like to say, Sir, that I had ample time to think things over while I was under arrest. It would have been stupid of me to get myself shot for desertion."

The Captain did not answer.

" However, Sir, if I had written permission from you to remain on this planet—"

There was a quietness in the room. Slowly the Captain reached for a slip of paper. He wrote a few words, signed and stamped it. Without speaking, he held it out.

" Thank you, Sir."

After Corder had left the Captain did not move for several moments. He knew he had disobeyed an order from Base, That would cost him—what ? Forfeiture of seniority, at least, if not the loss of his ship. To hell with it, he thought suddenly, standing up, at least she won't go mad with loneliness. Yet worse than his disobedience, was the thought that he had, somehow, been disloyal to his ship.

But he had been disloyal already, he remembered bitterly, disloyal from the moment he had released Corder from arrest.

In the darkness of that last night before the dawn of departure the Captain stood at the foot of the great ramp. He had walked up and down, up and down in the fresh grass. Hours earlier, he had looked across at the warmly-lit farm that housed the girl and her lover. Desperately he had wanted to say goodbye, but he was afraid of her contempt, and of Corder's respect that hid something like contempt.

She has everything, he told himself yet again, everything that I could give her. Yes, even my integrity . . .

There was a sound in his ears ; a swish of feet through the grasses. A figure stumbled towards him and halted, swaying. It was Corder.

In the cold starlight they stood face to face. " Well ?" said the Captain.

" I can't do it, Sir," said Corder, thickly.

Through the mutual silence they could both hear the wind in the grasses, blowing between them, blowing pretence away.

Yes, thought the Captain, I understand well, Corder. I understand. You have looked into the mirror of time and seen the long hard years, the bitter years of exile. You have seen

that she may die first and leave you to your solitary madness. I have asked you to do that which no man should ask another.

Almost imperceptibly, he jerked his head towards the ship. Corder thrust something at him, saluted pitifully, and climbed the ramp.

The Captain followed, crushing the piece of paper in his hand.

The slow, calm flood of dawn lapped the edges of the world. The crew, watching from the ports in the soundless rising of the ship, saw the woman dwindle beneath them. She stood still and quiet, her feet apart, her arms loose at her sides. The winds of the last day, the first day, blew through her hair. For a moment longer they saw her, tiny now, turn back towards the farm.

Then in the powerful acceleration of the ship the colours of the dawn ran together and the rim of the planet bent like a bow.

Lifting her head, she saw him standing in the doorway of the farm. Astonishment rounded her eyes. Her lips parted.

"You!" she said, and then: "You fool! You fool! They'll courtmartial you—kill you! You're the Captain—"

"Not any more. I resigned my command. Brandt's Captain now. And I claimed my right under the regulations of not serving as subordinate in a ship I had previously commanded."

"But they'll come back for you . . ."

He shook his head. "I acted lawfully, whatever the result may be. In any case we are far from any possible theatre of war. And afterwards, it may well be that no-one, no-one, will ever come here again."

There was a liquid joy and brightness in her eyes. She held out her arms.

"You!" she sobbed.

He came to her awkwardly and put his arms about her. She clung to him. The world held a strange and bitter loveliness, but it was not lonely any more.

"Who else?" he answered.

*Mike Davies*

*All the out-world colonists wanted was to get back home to Mother Earth. The yearning and nostalgia became so intense that it almost developed into a national neurosis.*

# GIGOLO

## by E. C. TUBB

---

They were hitting nostalgia on a high note when I entered the Sjailma. Toni was on stage singing *The Terran Blues* and she had just the voice for it. Deep, soft as cream with a hint of tears and a brave kind of gaiety which broke into a terrible yearning. Good as she was Sammy matched her with his zaliba players. The sound of waves, the beat of rain, the sigh of snow-laden wind augmented and enhanced the singing. It was, I had to admit, a superb performance.

The tourists loved it. You can always pick out the tourists ; they are the ones who sit, a little smug, a little ashamed, trying their best not to cry. The residents don't even try. Sometimes it's contagious.

I spotted the girl right away. She was slim, blonde with that nice milky complexion true blondes have, and her simple white dress did nothing to detract from her shape. Her eyes were closed and tears had traced a path down either cheek. She looked like a little girl sitting alone in the tavern, the mug of hulan neatly before her. I just knew that her eyes were blue.

The music stopped, the singing died and, for a moment, there was a deathly silence. Then it exploded into a storm of noise in which the sounds of coins tossed to the stage was hardly noticeable. The zaliba orchestra broke up as the players

scrabbled for the money, their chitin making unmusical squeaks as they scooped up the coins. Toni, her eyes brimming with tears, blew us a kiss as the curtains cut off the stage. A dozen waiters dived from the edges of the big room intent on business.

" Joe !" Pete Welch caught me by the arm. " Did you hear that, Joe ? Did you feel it !" He wiped the back of his hand across his eyes. " Earth !" he sobbed. " Home !"

I shrugged off his arm and weaved towards the blonde, reaching her table just ahead of a professional sobster. He glared at me as I elbowed him away, sat down without asking and waited for her to open her eyes. She did. They were blue.

Solemnly I took a coin from my left-hand pocket, gave it to my right hand, put it into my right-hand pocket. " Thank you."

" For what ?" Her voice, like the rest of her, was soft and smooth and wonderful.

" I bet myself that your eyes were blue. They are. I've just paid myself my winnings."

" Congratulations." Her eyes were appraising. " But hardly original." Her gaze swept the tavern. " I think I should explain that I am expecting a friend."

" When he arrives I'll leave. In the meanwhile, will you allow me to buy you a drink ?"

" I have one." She gestured towards the untouched hulan. " And I don't make it a practice to drink with strange men."

" That is something easily remedied." I signalled to a waiter, gave my order, and filled in while he went to obtain the drinks. Despite herself she couldn't resist the aroma rising from the small glass of thick green nectar. She picked it up, smelt it, looked astonished. I anticipated her questions.

" There's no mistake. It sells back home for fifteen hundred the liter and you use it for perfume. Here we drink it." I showed her how. " Go ahead, give yourself a new experience."

She took a cautious sip and then another. She looked at me, her eyes like stars.

" Why—it's wonderful !"

" So are you."

" What ?" Her eyes lost some of their rapture. " What did you say ?"

" I said that you are wonderful." I was quietly serious. " Now please don't get all upset and conventional. This is

Malibar, not Earth, and here we say what we mean. When we like someone we say so. I like you. Do you like me ?"

She smiled, opened her mouth as if to answer, then the music of the zaliba orchestra halted all conversation.

It didn't seem possible that anyone could have coaxed such sounds from overgrown insects but Sammy had his own peculiar genius. Beneath his direction chitin touched chitin, mandibles scraped, delicate limbs rubbed each other and the segmented bodies while air gushed through trachea and antenna whipped the air. The results were incredible. Suddenly the tavern was full of the mutter of surf, the wash and hiss of waves on a single beach, the forlorn sough of empty wind and the faint, eerie screaming of gulls. Sprays scented the air with the odours of brine and seaweed and Toni, dressed all in shimmering white, stepped forward and began to sing *Mother Earth.*

I don't know who had written the song, no one did. It was something which had grown together with the expansion into space but it was known and sung on every planet inhabited by man. It had power, that song, even when yelled by drunken spacemen and with Sammy's zalibars and Toni giving it all she had it was irresistible. I felt my emotions twist all to hell and wetness ran down my cheeks. It wasn't anything to be ashamed of.

Something touched my hand and I looked down to where slim white fingers rested against mine. I lifted my eyes along the rounded length of arm to where it disappeared into a smooth white dress, higher to where a face like a flower stared at me with brimming eyes. Beyond Shelia I could see other faces, all with tearful eyes, but not all with the same expression. Those of the residents held undiluted misery ; those of the tourists pity.

" Joe !" whispered Shelia. " Oh, Joe !"

I frowned her to silence, squeezing her fingers and shaking my head. The song died on a high, quavering note laden with tormented hope and bitter longing and, abruptly, both song and music ceased. This time there was no storm of cheering, instead a wavering sigh rose from the audience and the ugly, snuffling sounds of undisguised grief.

" Earth !" Glen Mulligan, fifty years old and as hard and as tough as they came, groaned deep in his chest. " The sea,

the fields, the snow-capped mountains !" His voice broke. " Home !"

" The sky," babbled Fred Easton, not to be outdone. " The little fleecy clouds scudding across the bowl of heaven. The tiny birds and the soft, soft wind."

" Earth," they all muttered together. " Home !"

It was impressive, as impressive as the song. Shelia couldn't help herself.

" Oh, you poor people," she sobbed. " You poor, poor people !"

I sighed and downed my drink and signalled for another. The sobster who had tried to beat my time earlier on scowled at me from where he sat alone. I winked at him then, conscious of Shelia's eyes, pretended that I had something in my eye.

" Joe." Her voice was very soft. " Is it really so bad ?"

" Sometimes we can manage to forget. Taming a new world doesn't leave much time for memories but sometimes, especially at times like these, well—" I swallowed. " You know how it is."

" No," she said gently. " I don't know, how could I ? But I can guess." Her dress lifted as she sighed. " It seems so cruel. So terribly unfair. Surely something could be done."

" What do you suggest ? An immigration quota ? That would be better than nothing, I agree, but what then ? How do we pick the lucky ones ? The oldest ? The richest ? By ballot or how ?" I leaned forward, my fingers tight around her own. " Suppose they did allow a quota, can you guess what would happen ? Every man and woman on this planet would do anything to be included. They would fight, bribe, kill even. And it would be the same everywhere else."

" I suppose so." She didn't sound too certain.

" It would be so, take my word for it."

" What else then ?" She ran the tip of her tongue over her lips. " I can't see—"

" Repeal the Edict." My fingers tightened on her own. " Throw aside that devilish legislation and allow us to return home."

She had been warned, naturally, and had certainly been primed with the correct answers together with the reasons for same but emotion had clouded her good sense. For a moment I thought she was going to agree with me but I didn't give her a chance to speak.

" Oh, I know all the reasons against it," I said. " The old bogey that perhaps off-worlders are mutated in some way or couldn't acclimatise to Earth conditions, all the rest of it. But we both know the real reason for the Edict. Earth is overcrowded as it is and just doesn't want us."

" Conditions are pretty crowded," she admitted. " But—"

" What did I tell you !" I was triumphant. " Earth needs what we can produce and needs the markets we supply but they don't want us and we know it. Why else did they pass the Edict ? Just because a man is born off-Earth, or owns property on another planet or travels other than as a guided tourist, is that any good reason for denying him permission to go home ? Must we all be exiles ?"

" Poor, Joe." Her hand, light as a butterfly, touched my hair. " Does Earth mean so much to you ?"

" More than you guess. Why else do you think we meet all the ships ? Why else do we like to talk to the tourists ? It isn't much but it's something to be with those from Home." My voice thickened a little. " Even if it's all we can ever hope for."

" Perhaps not." Her voice was even more gentle. " We're here for three days, Joe. Perhaps—" Her voice faded but I could read sign as well as the next man. It promised to be a busy three days.

There is an art about things but it all depends on a single fact. Emotion must have no place, everything must be calculated and, above all, cold and deliberate. With Shelia I didn't find it so easy.

We explored the settlement and I showed her the warehouses and the factories where the local plants were processed for their rare oils. I hired mounts and we went deep into the country among the fields cultivated by patient zalibars. I hired relays and we touched the Smoking Hills where the bezen build their hives and where the scent of their honey is strong enough to turn the senses. We ate fluffy zengra and I played tricks on the tiny creatures who made their homes among the snowy white pods.

The nights were the worst. Then the stars blazed from the sky and the swollen orbs of the moons traced their magic in shifting shadows which breathed of romance. And Shelia was young and soft and it was easy to forget that she was important and that I was more than I seemed.

Collins joined me after I had left her on the second evening. He fell in beside me and together we walked away from the squat terminal which housed the tourists, away from the sleek ship which waited to carry them back home.

" Bad case, Joe ?"

I didn't answer. Soft light spilled from the moons and an alien scent was in my nostrils. The scent of Earth and the woman of Earth.

" She's a beautiful woman," said Collins absently. " Plenty of influence too if she wants to use it." He looked up at the sky. " Impressionable, too."

" So ?"

" She thinks that she's in love with you, Joe. Of course, we both know she's not. It's just the place and the circumstances." He paused. " And pity, too, let's not forget that."

" Go to hell."

" She's sorry for you, Joe. A tall, handsome, well-built colonial so far from Home and so pathetically grateful for any contact with anybody from Earth. So she's trying to be kind to you, give you something to remember. How do you like receiving charity, Joe ?"

I halted and faced him, our shadows spilling around us, his face a pale blob in the moonlight. From a tavern a man staggered, squinted up at the ship tall against the stars, spat and weaved away. His footsteps shuffled into silence.

" What's the matter, Joe ? Collins voice was even. " Can't you take it ?"

I stepped towards him, conscious only of my anger and the pale blob of his face. He read my intent and moved away.

" Don't be a fool, Joe !" His voice, no longer even, reflected his anger. " What's the matter with you, man ? Can't you see what she is ? Have you forgotten what you are supposed to do ?"

" I haven't forgotten."

" You're a wet-nurse," he said deliberately. " A nice, warm shield against the sharpers who would only be too glad to get their hooks into her. You are supplied entertainment, educated to act a part and that's all."

" In other words," I said bitterly, " I'm a gigolo. Why don't you say it ?"

" And get my teeth knocked down my throat ?" He shook his head. " You think I'm silly ?"

" Are you ?"

" You're only part-time," he said. " Only when the tourist ships come in." His voice softened. " Are you in love with her ?"

I couldn't answer that one. She was everything soft and warm and wonderful and I liked being with her. But love ? I didn't know.

" You're not in love." Collins sounded quite definite. " Infatuated, perhaps, but not in love. You'll know for certain tomorrow and you'll owe me for the drinks we're going to have tonight." He stepped forward and grabbed my arm. " Come on, Joe, it'll soon be over."

It was a long night. We had drinks and there was talk and more drinks and, slowly, as the night gave way to dawn, I began to get on an even keel. Toni helped, and Sammy and all the others who had specific duties during the three-day stop-over the tourists' ships made. We could manage three days, four even and, at a pinch, five. Longer than that would be straining things ; you can only disrupt normal routine for just so long.

I showered and dressed and was waiting for Shelia when she finished her breakfast. She smiled at me as she mounted and then fell silent as we cantered from the settlement. I found a quiet place by a river and we sat beneath drooping trees watching the fish leap from the water and the frenzied manoeuvres of bright-winged insects as they tried to escape the darting tongues.

" Joe." She leaned back against a grassy hummock, her limbs pale against the sward.

" Yes, dear ?"

" Joe, are you happy here on Malibar ?"

" Can a man be happy when he's an exile ?"

" Do you mean that you would exchange all this for Earth ?" Her hand gestured to the countryside. " Swap it all for a cramped room in a cramped city ?"

" Of course—if the city were on Earth."

" Then you're a fool !" She turned and leaned on an elbow watching me with those blue, blue eyes. " Have you ever been on Earth, Joe ?"

" No."

" I thought not. In fact I doubt if any of you have ever been on Earth. It isn't quite what you may imagine. You know, Joe, Earth isn't like this at all. There are no wide, open fields,

no clean rivers, no free mountains, no room in which to breath. Earth is overpopulated, overbuilt, overdeveloped. Compared to Malibar it's a slum !"

Her eyes stared into mine and became somehow hard and a little angry.

" You don't believe me, do you ?"

" Earth is Home." I plucked a blade of grass, chewed it to shreds. " Shelia, does it give you any pleasure to torment me ?"

" You think that ?" She leaned back, the lines of her throat firm and slender above her dress. Her perfume assailed my nostrils. " Is it possible," she said quietly, " that you could be so stupid ?"

The sun was shining and the air was warm but I felt a sudden chill. It had come, the thing which I dreaded each time the tourist ship landed and I hooked on to a prospect to act as guide, protector, watchdog and barrier in general. I supplied interest, nostalgia, romance if I had to and, if necessary, something other than that. I took a deep breath.

" I don't understand."

" I think that you do," she said evenly. And now she was no longer utterly desirable, wonderfully soft and pleasingly innocent. This woman wasn't all she seemed. Here was no empty-headed tourist, rich enough to pay for the trip and, by that fact, rich enough to enjoy the luxury of blinkers when back home. She had eyes and used them.

" I'm curious," she said. " You aren't unintelligent people and yet you seem to be devoid of reason. You simply don't seem to know when you're well off. This pining for Earth, it's ridiculous !"

" Please." I was hurt. I rose and brushed myself down. " It's getting late and we'd better be heading back. You don't want to miss the ship."

" No ?" She smiled at me and patted the grass at her side. " Sit down, Joe. The ship can wait."

" Are you that important ?"

" It will wait." Her confidence was disturbing. It was born of wealth and power and the arrogance those qualities gave. " I told you that I was curious and I am. I like to look beneath the surface. What does the average tourist see ? A shamble of huts and a group of people who seem to spend all their time wishing they were on Earth. The songs, the music,

the primitive transport, all adding up to a backward colony every member of which seems to want nothing more than to get to Earth. Why, Joe ? Why ?"

" Because it's true !" Emotion thickened my voice. " Do you think I like living like this, that any of us do ? We're here because we have no choice. We aren't savages content to eat and breed, people without imagination or a sense of loss. Perhaps Earth is everything you say it is—but not to us. To us it is a place of magic, a wonderland, our Home !"

I hadn't reached her, I could sense it and the knowledge brought panic. She had to be convinced, one way or another she had to have all doubts quashed for all time. Or—I hoped it wouldn't have to come to that.

" What is Malibar ?" I said quietly. " An undeveloped world without proper communications, without any civilised luxuries, without anything but emptiness and a routine monotonous means of existence." I leaned towards her, gripped her hands, let my breath fall on her cheek. " My God, Shelia ! Can't you realise how bored we all are !"

I had won. I could feel it in the way she pressed my hands, the way she sighed, the way she relaxed. Rich, spoiled, protected from all unpleasantness, she could appreciate boredom. Her hand freed itself, touched my cheek.

" You poor, darling," she whispered. " How well I understand." She paused a moment and then released her bombshell " But don't worry, my sweet, you're coming back with me."

It was as well that she couldn't see my face.

Collins was waiting when we rode into the settlement. He caught my arm as I dismounted, his face taut with strain.

" Joe ! Where have you been ? I was getting worried, I thought—"

" Relax." I helped Shelia to dismount. " Collins !" It burst out of me like a torrent. " I'm going Home ! She's taking me with her !"

For a moment our eyes met and then he was pumping my hand, slapping my shoulder, his face a perfect blend of pleasure and naked envy.

" Congratulations ! You finally made it ! Hell, Joe, I—" He broke off, swallowing, looking a little deflated. " But can you ? I mean, is it all right ?"

" Sure it is." I glared at him.

" Of course." He swallowed again. " But Joe, have you thought of—"

" Shut your mouth !" He fell back from me, his eyes scared. "I'm going to Earth," I said deliberately. "Shelia is taking me and nothing is going to stop me. Understand ? Nothing !" I turned to her, silent at my side. " Let's go, darling."

" I understand." She squeezed my arm.

" He's jealous," I said. " They all are. Pay no attention to anything they may say."

" I know how it is." She led the way towards where the ship waited like some impatient animal. " I'll see the captain and arrange your passage."

" I'll come with you." I knew that I couldn't but it was the thing to say. She shook her head.

" You wouldn't be allowed on the ship, dear. Just wait in the annex and they'll send for you when it's time."

It was the longest hour of my life. The annex was comfortable enough. There was a water dispenser and stereo views of Earth. There were magazines on the tables and a strip viewer mounted on one wall but to me the place was oppressive, too small, too neat, too much like a prison. From the off-window I could see the rolling plains of the Smoking Hills. From the near-window, triple plated glass and water cooled, I could see the slim hulk of the ship. I didn't want to look at it.

I should have killed her. I should have led her into a patch of badland and waited until she was stung or infected by pollen or poisoned by nectar. I should have played it differently and yet, how could I have played it other than I had ? I had acted a part and that part dictated every answer and mood. It was just my bad luck that Shelia had been just that little different from the others. Words, to her, weren't enough. She had decided on action. The bitch !

Couldn't she have guessed that I didn't want to leave Malibar ? That no one in their right mind would ever want to go to the noxious dung-heap that was Earth ? Did she have to be so dumb ?

It wasn't her fault, of course I tried to be fair. Earth was bloated with population, economically unstable and, compared to the colony planets, a cess-pool of nastiness. Earth was also greedy, destructive and strong. Let them think, for one minute, that we didn't want any part of them and the people of Earth would be screaming for our blood. Wrong thinking ?

Perhaps, but history is full of examples. People want what they can't get and, conversely, don't want what isn't valued.

And so the facade. The nostalgia, the songs, the music, the yearning for Home. All as false as hell, laid on for the benefit of the tourists, but all part of a scheme. It convinced them that we wanted nothing of what we had ; that what we had was exile and that we'd all cheerfully starve on Earth rather than thrive on Malibar. And those tourists went on their way full of smugness that they were the elite, a little sorry for us and pitying the poor exiles.

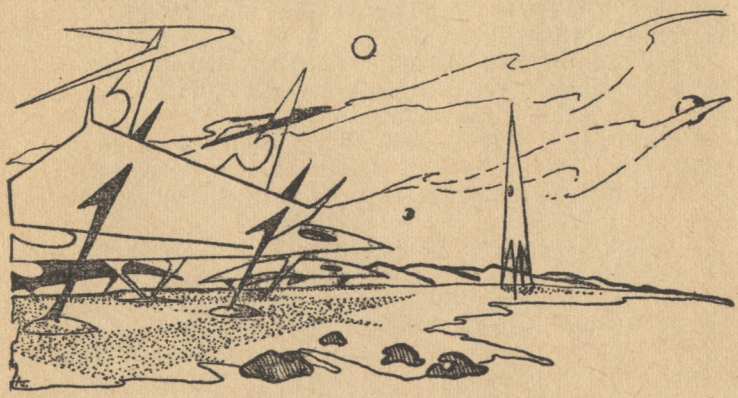
You don't envy what you pity. You don't fear what admits your superiority. You don't destroy the thing which inflates your ego.

So I waited, like a rat in a trap, a sacrifice to the common good, the object of a selfish gesture by a spoiled bitch from Earth who would kick me out into the cold the moment the novelty wore off. And there was nothing I could do about it except pray.

Pray that Collins had done his best, that Captain Mayhew, who was no fool, would work for me, that Shelia, who had maybe tried to prove a point, would imagine that she had won it. Pray that, just for once, I could get out of the net so that I could marry Toni and settle down with some nice, clean, intelligent zalibars and raise crops and sell oil and have kids and get rich and be happy.

I was still praying when the ship took off leaving me the happiest exile there ever was.

*E. C. Tubb*



**Article**

*Life aboard the early spaceships will not be all honey — or even a bowl of cherries. In fact, foodwise, it will probably be a combination of algae and recycled sewage! But, scientifically, the latter can be made into very tasty dishes.*

# THE VERTICAL FRONTIER

## by KENNETH JOHNS

A few miles up lies the vertical frontier through which Man has yet to voyage. It is an alien frontier, albeit a natural one, for it will be there perpetually, indestructible. Every spaceman will have to break it, facing the hazards of space; yet it will remain as unbroken as a barrier when a thousand have dared it as when the first man blasts out into the unknown.

The paradox is deadly. Past explorers pushed on into new lands, living partly on the food of the plains, forests, seas and of the air, as well as on their own portered supplies. Always there supported them the knowledge that others following would one day day turn the wilderness to use, that frontiers were being pushed back by the land-hungry masses behind.

Space is different. It is as unyielding as a neutrino, as pliant as nothingness. It is the deserts of the far past and future rolled into one. Our only terrestrial equivalent is the barren icecap of the Antarctic; but even there there is gravity, water and air and an absence of sleeting radiation and killing meteorites.

To dare the vertical frontier the spaceman must carry his Earth with him, cramming the necessities of life in a few cubic feet, desperately saving mass at the expense of everything save useful existence. Food, drink and air will determine what chance he has of old age, even if he escapes the dangers of non-earthly gravity, temperature and radiation.

Round trips to the Moon and back present little victualling difficulty. Pre-cooked, pre-packaged food will sustain the crew—should they desire to eat amid the nervous strain of flight. Oxygen from liquid or compressed supplies will be sufficient for breathing.

Food is not likely to be a serious problem for trips of less than a year; but when Man first heads out for the planets, minimum-power orbits will involve him in voyages of many years.

Even on the early manned Moon shots water will have to be recycled by purification and distillation, whilst waste matter will be incinerated. Chemical removal of carbon dioxide is simple and effective.

Beyond the breakpoint of a year, the position becomes far more complex. There must be recycling of food and oxygen as well as water.

The facts are simple. Each spaceman requires 2 lbs. of oxygen, 5 lbs. of water and just over 1 lb. of food each day. Water can easily be recycled and, in fact, burning up of food produces an extra half pound of water every day, which more than makes up for small losses and might well lead to a surplus available for electrolysis to oxygen.

The food, to give a well balanced diet, should contain 15 per cent protein, 42 per cent carbohydrates and 43 per cent fats, together with the odds and ends of minerals, vitamins and specific trace compounds required for the human body.

Those may be the facts. But—where in space can those requirements be found?

The answer lies in the spaceship cabin, in the waste products of the crew.

Algae have long been said to answer most of the problems of removing carbon dioxide and of feeding the human portion of the ship. 40,000 different types of algae are catalogued but few have been thoroughly investigated. Chlorella are still the favourite algae for experimenters.

The air-plant of science fiction has been a steady feature for many years; but these days of intensified spatial research are throwing up the snags in increasing numbers. What looks fine on paper becomes shockingly difficult when attempts are made to employ the theories efficiently in practice. This state of affairs is not unusual. There is a name for it. It is known as the development stage.

Experiments have shown that cultures of algae had ageing and self-inhibiting processes which appeared within a month in a simple system, a drastic curtailment of life even by the standards of modern throw-away mass production. The protein content of harvested algae was too high for a balanced diet. Small amounts of carbon monoxide could build up to a lethal concentration. Outside problems also occurred: since algae are plants using photosynthesis to absorb carbon dioxide and evolve oxygen, they need light as their energy source. No single lamp was found to be really suitable. Even fluorescent lamps were too bulky, and, with the required level of illumination a tenth that of full sunlight, adequate lamps must be of manageable size.

Apart from these directly hindering obstacles, another snag was the sheer amount of water needed for algol cultures. Every day each man uses 603 litres of oxygen and this amount requires the growth of one and a third pounds of dry algae. But, when immersed in water and growing, the algae plants analyse at only ten per cent solids, and the culture can contain a maximum of one per cent algae plants. The net result is that for every one and a third pounds of dry algae—for one man for one day—the ship will have to carry eleven hundredweights of water to keep it growing.

Perhaps most important of all, algol food was found to be unpleasant to eat and unpleasant to taste.

That algol air-plant of science fiction recedes with every new fact, seemingly . . .

But, in spite of these drawbacks, algae present many favourable points. They are unspecialized and have, for plants, a very high intrinsic growth rate so that a minimum mass of plants is needed for a given oxygen output. As a food, they contain very little cellulose, a material common in most plants and indigestible by humans, and they have a high protein content, taking plants as a whole and not comparing them with a specialised plant product such as beans.

Algae are efficient carbon dioxide users, 90 to 95 per cent of that absorbed being built into their cells. Their photosythesis is carried out with visible light and is 19 per cent efficient on a machine basis. Their carbon dioxide to oxygen exchange ratio is favourable and very similar to the oxygen to carbon dioxide ratio of humans.

This latter fact is illustrated by two mice kept in a small glass container for one month, their air being cycled through an algae culture to replace carbon dioxide by oxygen. The mice were fed on normal mouse food and water and the algae were harvested once a day. The system was found to be self balancing since the algae growth was controlled by the carbon dioxide produced by the mice. In time, the $C0^2$ content of the air in the bottle stabilised itself at 0.5 to 1.0 per cent: higher than the 0.03 per cent we are used to but not high enough to harm the mice. The oxygen content slowly climbed from its original 21 to an energising 25 per cent. By the end of the month the small amount of carbon monoxide produced did not appear to have harmed the mice.

Physiologists have been attempting to work out semi-closed cycle systems which combine the good points of algol culture with the sidetracking of its worst. They all involve cycles within cycles and lack the simplicity of the earlier concept of man and algae in an efficient closed cycle.

One such system designed to produce a more palatable food involves bacteria, algae and yeast—the yeast being harvested as crew food. Here, the carbon dioxide from the crew, bacteria and yeast is taken up by the algae whilst the food for the yeast to live on is produced by bacteria and algae, themselves utilising human waste products. All the food produced for human consumption goes through at least two conversion stages: but the greater the number of stages then the smaller the overall energy conversion efficiency.

A not-so-ambitious cycle uses part of the algae harvest to grow higher plants whose vegetable products, together with some of the algae, would be incorporated in the crew's diet—the resulting dish should not be too rich in protein. Here again, algae act as the carbon dioxide to oxygen converters.

An alternative is to use animals such as slugs, snails or fish fed on algae to produce an acceptable food for long trips. This is not as nauseating as it sounds, since slugs and snails are a natural part of diets in many parts of the world. It's

first just a question of what you are used to—and second and most important—how hungry you are.

Even stranger at first sight is a suggested lichen-moss low-moisture cycle where no algol suspensions are involved, although the food comes from normal higher plants. Here bacteria convert the crew's waste into carbon dioxide and food for higher plants. The sole job of the lichens or moss is as carbon dioxide to oxygen exchangers. Since neither moss nor lichens require much moisture, it may be that, in spite of their slow and inefficient operation, there would be a saving in mass compared to a Chlorella system. The cycle is closed by higher plants subsisting on waste converted into plant food by bacteria. But the ubiquitous algae is still not left out completely, for lichens use algae in a two-plant symbiosis.

Bacteria have also been proposed as a direct food for human consumption, in a system that utilises bacteria living on human and plant waste whilst plants are used to replace carbon dioxide by oxygen. It has been suggested that the protoplasm from the bacteria would need artificial flavouring before it was acceptable as being even edible by humans. Perhaps even processed algae would be preferable. Still—a piping hot bacterial Irish Stew with Algol dumplings . . .

The most ambitious scheme proposed for study so far uses techniques developed for sewage treatment. Sewage farms are going to see a lot of space scientists in the future. Liquid and solid wastes from men, plants and animals are fed to a bed containing aerobic (oxygen using) bacteria able to decompose cellulose. Their products travel through a deep luminescent filter bed used both as an algol growth unit and a hydroponic tank. Instead of using sand, this bed is composed of a radio-active material encased in tiny plastic capsules lined with phosphors. The radiation energy is converted into light by the phosphors and, because of the large surface area of the tiny grains, provides near-ideal conditions for algae photosynthesis.

Air blown through the bed as liquid percolates down is regenerated by removal of $CO^2$ by the algae. At the same time the roots of plants growing on the surface take up nutrient and minerals. Algae are harvested from the liquid from the bed and the whole unit should be so efficient that reasonably pure water should be obtained without distilla-

tion. The harvested algae are fed to animals which, in turn, become part of the crew's diet.

This interesting system could, in theory, provide an almost completely closed ecological system but, at the present state of technology, is far from practical.

All these ideas do pin-point one fact—the need for a great deal more intensive basic research, particularly into the metabolism of algae and the conversion of algae into an acceptable food for humans.

Hand in hand with this work must go on investigation of the symbiosis of algae and bacteria and the innumerable ways in which plants and animals interact on the vast laboratory—in running order and good repair—that is the Earth.

One point that was turned up by the two mice in their bottle, living on algol-produced oxygen, was the increase of that oxygen content in their air.

This was eventually traced to an inexact balance between the oxygen absorbed and carbon dioxide exhaled by the mice and the reverse procedure of the algae. This basic fact suggested other factors at work. Now we know how to prevent such mismatching—just vary the type of nitrogen content fed to the algae.

It is important knowledge of this nature that we are lacking; knowledge that can come only from experiment after experiment.

We are building the mechanical techniques and ships needed for exploration of space and its planetary inhabitants. In an earlier article the pollution of spaceships' cabins was dealt with, and this work must, of necessity, go hand in hand with the investigation of algae and other plants for the oxygen, carbon dioxide, food cycles. The layman reading the daily paper sees pictures of rockets blasting off and hears of growing success in launching and control techniques; satellies grow more sophisticated by the week.

But life is built and designed for the Earth and we must be certain, when the time comes to put men aboard those successful rockets, that the vertical frontier is not a barrier for ever through which we cannot pass because of the frailty of our Earth-born bodies and the ecological systems upon which we are parasites.

*Kenneth Johns*

*This first story by a new Australian writer produces an interesting ecological problem on an alien planet where the main reproductive principle for the inhabitants is a plant-like symbiosis.*

# FIVE

## by D. S. STEWART

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I headed tiredly for the Bridge, to write up the log and think over my notes for the day. Behind and below me I could hear the others heading for their rooms. Outside, late afternoon shadows were drawing their silencing fingers across the alien countryside.

An enigmatic world. It puzzled all of us. So like Earth, and yet not quite. Natural conditions—temperature, gravity, chemical composition, and so on—were almost identical, but the dominant life-form had us completely bushed. What were they? Animal or vegetable? Ten days' investigation, and we still didn't know—didn't even know how they reproduced.

I reached for the stylus and began to write.

*' Tenth day. Houtzen remained on guard in ship. Remaining five, Caberman, Willis, Ling, Alstone and myself, Boyes, went to local town to continue work. Language difficulties now largely resolved and Caberman, anthropologist, fairly fluent. Coolness apparent over last few days on part of inhabitants has gone. Caberman still unable to break down taboos on procreation (though they are now as friendly as when we first arrived) as locals give evasive answers or none at all. Ling again examined native, no objection, but physiology frankly stumps him. Says interior must be radically different from ours. No visible reproductive organ.'*

I paused, listening.

" Houtzen! Where are you? " Sounded like Willis. Houtzen

goes into another world when he is examining, testing and classifying his mineral specimens. " Houtzen! "

I resumed.

*' Local animals present same anomaly. Three similar species of quadruped herbivore, which range in size from rat to large sheep, have no visible reproductive organs. None dissected as yet, as the natives seem to place some value on them, perhaps they are of use or are owned, and we have not discovered the legal method of buying one. On the other hand . . .'*

" Houtzen! " Willis and Ling shouting together.

*' . . . the several varieties of carnivore and all the larger herbivores display all the usual bisexual features. The natives are, like us, omnivores, but . . .'*

There was a scrabbling on the ladder, and Willis and Ling burst onto the Bridge. Noises off suggested that Alstone and Caberman were following.

" Bill, Houtzen's not here! " Willis was white, Ling scared.

For a moment I just gaped; we may be a bit casual (the Commander of Planetary Exploration Teams once yelled at us, in exasperation, " You're nothing but a gang of educated bums! " we were very flattered) but we are very strict about survival on strange planets. One man always stays with the ship and never, never leaves it or permits aliens to enter. An inflexible rule, and Jan Houtzen is the nearest amongst us to a congenital observer of rules.

Quickly, I sealed the ship. " Now—have you looked all over for him? "

" Sure, Bill, not a glimmer."

Geoff Alstone came in at that moment, heard the last remarks. He too was white, but his nose looked pinched and his right cheek was twitching. He held a little bundle in his hand. Clothes.

" I found these behind the main-lock door." Carefully, he sniffed them, sorting, examining. He nodded.

" Jan's."

There was rather a long silence. Explanations on strange planets have a habit of being fatal. Houtzen is—was?—Alstone's particular chum, and we felt embarrassed as well as shocked.

My thoughts were just getting into order when the alarm bells rang. We all jumped, and Barry Caberman instinctively reached for a gun from the rack on the wall.

The tell-tales said that someone was climbing the ladder to the hatch. "Woo" Willis sighed "what a relief—he's back," and leaned across me to release the main-lock switch. I slapped his hand away.

"Tut, tut, John. Jumping to conclusions, Let's look first."

Ling operated the viewers: there were five natives climbing solemnly up the ladder.

"Barry—get on a suit, quick, take a gas-gun, get down to that lock. We'll operate the doors from here, keeping the inner closed. Find out what they want."

"You're the boss," he said to me, and was off.

"Geoff, John—the guns."

I turned on all viewers, swung out the exterior flood-lights. Ling needed no orders, and set the audio and visual recorders running. Then we waited.

We heard and saw the leader of the natives make a short speech and hand something to Caberman, whereupon they all left. We relaxed.

Caberman stumbled onto the Bridge, looking puzzled. ". . . does that mean 'now' or 'for the present?' Hell, I must get my notes!" He dumped a rectangular box on the floor at our feet and hurried off.

"Was that what they gave him?" Alstone asked.

"Yeah" said Ling.

We looked at it distrustfully until Caberman returned.

"I'm sure of the translation now," he puffed "but it still does not make sense. They said 'Now you are five. You will be pleased as *anclooah* is restored. We are glad that you are well and of us truly. The present of the holy-five can now be made.' That's it," he waved at the box.

"Gug."

"What is 'anclooah'?" Willis demanded.

"What is the 'holy-five'?" asked Alstone.

"Come on Barry, you're the anthropologist and language expert—make sense." I felt terse. This was something new—the natives had never before sent a deputation to the ship or given us presents. And coming immediately after the disappearance of Houtzen, well!

Caberman replied hesitantly. "Well, 'anclooah' is a theological word, I think, having connotations of stability and rightness in relation to the five-grouping. The 'holy-five,' of course, refers to their national emblem—."

"You mean that stylised arrangement of five plants?" Willis asked eagerly.

"That's it."

"Let's open the box" Willis suggested.

We did. It contained a bedding of rich, black earth and, set in the soil, five little metal cups each containing a seed. "Why, the five plants!" enthused our botanist, Willis. "See, in order, the briar, poppy, celery, orchid and runner bean." He beamed. Of course those are our temporary names for them as they look like those equivalents.

"Now, what the devil is all this in aid of—and how does it relate to the disappearance of Houtzen?" Bringing the brains back to earth, that's my speciality. I'm Captain and Pilot, but the only non-specialist—the GP category, that is, General Purpose.

Brains started turning over.

"Five! Five all the time! Why?" Caberman exclaimed.

"We fit the pattern now—" Ling said idly, but stopped short, his jaw sagging. I got it.

"The 'holy-five.' 'Anclooah.' We were six—six. 'Now you are five.' This stinks like hell. The question is, is Houtzen alive or dead? Has he been incorporated in another 'five' or, like a cancer, been cut out, destroyed?"

"And no matter what has happened, why?" asked Caberman.

We, Planetary Exploration Team 593 (PET 593 for short), never operate by night on strange worlds. But we nearly broke that rule there and then. At dawn we had trouble over another rule. I almost forgot to detail a ship-guard, in fact did not remember until the five of us gathered at the lock, fully equipped.

"Who's guard?" asked Alstone.

Ling, Caberman and myself most certainly went; neither botanist nor biologist were essential, so Willis or Alstone? Then I had another thought that was over-ruling.

"You are, Alstone." I had to throw my authority as Captain to make him stay.

As we headed straight for the nearest town, Willis strode up alongside me.

"Why did you make him stay?" he sounded hostile. "You know he's Jan's buddy!" I glanced sadly at him.

"Sure, sure, but two reasons. The least is that there must be a ship-guard. But could any of us guarantee Geoff's reactions if we find a dead Houtzen?" Willis sobered, nodded, smiled icily. "Of course."

I thought of this planet—still nameless—and its inhabitants as we trudged on. Earth-like, but a greater proportion of land-mass to water: geologically, no great swings in any direction, and its life-rate seems to be equally steady. Fish, insects, negligible reptiles, the usual carnivores and herbivores, plus the four indeterminate species. Abundant, rich flora, strangely Earth-like. And the natives? Odd, very odd. They vary. Height anything from four to six feet, build from scraggy to brawny. Colour is brown—but ranges from very pale to almost black. Large, limpid green eyes, and all the other usual organs (subject to variability in shape and size) less any visible sexual features. And as far as we have been able to find out, they don't have sexes. Neuter.

No words for love, or mating. And to crown it, there aren't any children. We had debated immortality, but Ling pointed out that this was nonsense. He has detected signs of ageing and, at anyrate, natural accidents would exterminate an immortal race that did not reproduce. Still, Ling reckons that they are long-lived, perhaps a normal span of 400 years or so.

Their physiology is odd. Flesh much more rigid than ours. They do have skeletons, but they must differ from our hard bones. Ling suggests that their frame is made up of vegetable fibres: whatever it is, their limbs appear to have rotary joints, and at the same time are highly flexible where no joints exist.

Technology is advanced, at the pre-atomic level, yet they regard technology as something to be used and not as a stepping-stone to a higher level. So living is placid, slow, with much ceremonial centred around the 'holy-five.' Towns are small, there are none large enough to grace the name of city, and the primary occupations are pastoral or agricultural. In fact, the culture appears to be static—and it is planet-wide. But how the devil do they procreate?

At sunup we reached the town, and routed out our contacts among the natives. They were very pleased to see us, and we suffered endless repetitions of the speech made by the delegation the night before. It got rather tiring. Finally Willis could stand it no longer.

"Praise be to the five," he stammered in the native tongue. "The five who are anclooah, but, Sdenamal, where is the other man, the man we call Houtzen?"

Sdenamal, the head of the group of five we were conversing with, shook his head.

"We hoped that you would not mention that one."

"Easy," Caberman interjected in English. "The implication is that that 'one'—Houtzen—was no good. That's what they think, so be careful. Don't appear to be chummy with him."

I decided to step in.

"Oh Sdenamal, we are five (a standard local self-praise term) but though we did not need that one, we would like to see where he is."

Sdenamal smiled suddenly; his attendant four positively beamed upon us.

"You were right to accept our aid and to slough off the (native word meaning, roughly, 'evil surplus') and we are glad that you have accepted our help. You are restored to (corporate well-being?). That one is now with the soil, he is (??????????)."

I looked at Caberman—he shrugged his shoulders. That last word was utterly new to us. Caberman took a risk.

"Could we see where he is, so that we—who are five—could wish him success with (??????????)."

"An honour by five!" exclaimed Sdenamal, pleased, the tips of his concolute ears twitching. "We will lead you to the (xxxxxxx)."

"What does that mean?" I whispered to Caberman, but he was equally puzzled. "Very literally, 'nurse,' though it may mean 'protector' or 'guardian.'"

We went.

We went about four miles out to one of the thick, wide copses of natural, undisturbed vegetation that dotted the planet. Sdenamal and his team left us by a hut at the edge of the wood. It was not more than three miles from the ship. His formal good-bye, laced with ceremonial references to five, boiled down to "the Nurse (?) will be with you soon."

We shifted from foot to foot, looking into the matted vegetation of the wood, for about an hour. Finally a lone, aged native appeared. We went through the same greeting procedure that we had with Sdenamal. The Nurse (?) beamed. "It is not often that a five wish to see the bed of a late member—come with me." Ominous.

We went deep into the wood, perhaps a mile; it was full of movement and often we saw the three odd varieties of

herbivore. There were frequent open spaces, grassed, but more frequent were clumps of briar, thick, almost impenetrable. Our guide stopped abruptly in a small clearing, gestured proudly.

"We planted him well—deep in the nursery (?) and in the best soil. We wished to honour you five. Here there is no danger, and he should grow tall, strong and big." He beamed at us, looking for our approval.

Shocked, we gazed at a six-foot long mound of freshly turned earth, realising that Houtzen was surely dead. The Nurse (?) mistook our silence for something else.

"Oh, you are overwhelmed with the honour of the holy-five, shall I leave you? But such a good site, and I have particular instructions to guard this bed. Not that such instructions were necessary! The five from the stars will be recreated from this fine bed and from the seed that is in it! You will always be with us." He made the little, ceremonial obeisance, five fingers on his brow.

Caberman and I, in English, had a hard job to restrain the other two from violence there and then. "Don't you see," whispered Caberman "that they have done something normal to them? We dare not make a row about Jan's death. When in Rome—."

"How did they kill him?" Willis wondered, voice flat.

"I'll ask," Caberman replied then, switching to the local language. "Oh Nurse, by the holy-five blessed, could you show us all how this one was laid to rest? If it is permitted?"

"Yes, but sight is better than words. Come—a surplus one is due to be bedded." He led us to what we judged was the middle of the wood, where an old native waited. The usual wordy preliminaries took place between the two, then the Nurse (?) attached a cord to the old one's ankles, and directed him towards a briar thicket. More ceremonial at the edge of it.

"Look!" whispered Willis, pointing, "What's that?"

The thicket was about twenty feet across, all the outside being briar, but through its thorny tendrils we could see a clear space in the middle. In this bloomed poppy, celery, orchid and runner bean—the symbolic five. But from the centre grew a plant that we had never seen before. A thick, pallid stalk, perhaps two feet across, that swelled a few inches above the ground into a pumpkin-like sac four feet

across. This sac had a coronet of twenty-odd tulip-like excrescences. The whole thing was a waxy white, but a pink glow semed to come from the inside of the sac. It looked fragile, but alive.

Ceremonial finished, the aged native pushed aside briar tendrils and waded in towards the clear centre. He had only gone a few steps when the tulip-like excrescences nearest to him on that thing shivered, turned blindly towards him. He took another step closer. With audible pops, several of the 'tulips' deflated, throwing clouds of white gas into his face. He fell, as if pole-axed, and the Nurse (?) promptly hauled him out by the rope round his ankles. So that was how Houtzen had died.

"He's dead!" gasped Ling.

"Oh no," the Nurse (?) interjected. "Only stunned. You can't expect a dead seed-pod to grow. Oh no, what a silly idea!"

"My God! They buried him alive!" Caberman cried, fortunately in English, and was suddenly sick.

The Nurse (?) either did not notice or did not understand our horror; he babbled happily away as he dragged the inert body towards a freshly-dug grave. He was glad to have someone to talk to, someone who was interested in his job, someone who he could tell all about it to.

When we got back to the ship, we sealed it. Not that it was necessary now that we were Five. We had tested the grave to see if, by any chance, Houtzen was still alive but paralyzed, but putrefaction, even in such a short time, was well advanced. Caberman took Alstone aside and told him.

Wordless, we tried to relax. We all washed thoroughly, changed into fresh clothes, tacitly decided against any dinner, and instead lined up all our meagre stock of alcohol along the control panels on the Bridge and started drinking, morosely; the silence was broken only by toneless requests to pass a bottle, or the ice, or water. Alstone was very pale, and drank rapidly. We had been together for a long time and were a close-knit team. We had had many scrapes, many near-fatalities but now that the almost inevitable had happened we all felt like an amputated body. And the irony of it was that the amputation had been done with the best of intentions—for our own good.

This thought caused me to smile wryly, and to realise that I must break the gloom.

" John," I murmured, " I'm still vague about the whole sequence. Is it in your field—can it be called botany? "

" I don't know. Partly Geoff's domain. Suppose we'll have to found a new ' ology ' to cope with this damned place."

" They're plants," said Alstone drunkenly.

" Nonsense! How can you call a warm-blooded, mobile, omniverous, intelligent creature a plant? " Ling was quite indignant. They argued heatedly. Good.

" Break it up, break it up. I'll decide. But I'd still like a run-through of the sequence." They all looked at me. " John, you'd better start—from where a victim comes into the Nursery."

" Okay Bill. He's first stunned by that plant—' Mother-Five ' he called it didn't he? Yes? Then buried, preferably in the right kind of soil. In those conditions, the still-living body, or, seeds, or rather the five seeds that have always been in it are activated, sprout, and between them live off the body—hence the rapid first growth. At no time can death be said to occur. Right, Sam? "

" Right."

" I'm going to bed," said Alstone. He didn't stir.

" Then follows more steady growth, based on the surrounding soil. By this time, the five plants are quite separate, although their roots are intertwined. Then, at first maturity, and then only, each plant puts out a special root. These meet, meld under the surface, and give rise to the ' Mother-Five ' plant. This grows slowly until it reaches the size we saw. It's fragile, tender, but it protects itself with those gas-pods— "

" And that," Ling interrupted, " can kill all the non-five creatures, hence the three sizes of children shelter in the thickets under the protection of the ' Mother-Five ' but still, as we saw, it will attack and paralyze the adult! "

" Natural upbringing," murmured Caberman.

" Sammy, you'd better take over."

" Right. The ' Mother-Five ' takes about a year to grow to fruition, the embryo in its sac taking about four months. Then the sac splits and the first-stage child is born—what's it called Barry? "

" Shu-la."

" Thanks. Then the ' Mother-Five ' dies. The shu-la grows from its original rat-size in three years to about four times its size at birth, then it makes a deep burrow and hibernates, during which it metamorphoses into the next stage. Christ!

what a mixture—this changing is more like an insect than anything! From it the next quadruped stage emerges—the shu-bay-ana. By the way, Barry, what do these names mean? "

" Don't know for sure, as ' shu ' is new to me, but, roughly, ' baby-child ' and ' growing-child,' and the last stage, shu-sway, is ' big-child.' "

" The second stage also grows, being bigger than the first stage, then it in turn goes to burrow and produces the third stage. The same thing happens again, and finally the full adult emerges, leaves the Nursery and joins the community."

" What happens to the Mother-Five when it dies? "

" It dies for good," answered Willis, " and the five plants revert to normal. The Mother-Five only occurs at their first seeding-period. Odd, isn't it? After that the five flower and seed in the normal way. All the seeds are spread like dandelions, and there are plenty of them. The plants die after about three normal annual seedings."

" Ling raised the matter of natural increase before, as well as population replacement. As I see it, this burial-revival won't make any increase, let alone provide for accidental deaths."

" Sure, Bill, but you've missed natural seedings."

" Explain please, John."

" Well, all those seeds blowing around are bound to end up sooner or later in sufficiently close relationship for the five plants to get together and produce a new Mother-Five. Or they can be deliberately planted."

" Really," said Caberman dreamily, " their theology is reproduction. No wonder they were so reticent about it. Prudery in a plant! Well! "

" They're *not* plants! " snapped Ling.

" Now boys, I said that I'd make that decision, and I haven't made my mind up yet. But we must decide," I added more seriously, " what's to be done."

" Home," said Caberman without hesitation.

" Why? "

" These natives could be dangerous to anyone who lands."

" Does it matter if crews are less than five? "

Caberman frowned. " I'm not sure—and I wouldn't put any money on it. Thinking back, I can see that the natives seemed to regard any groups of less than five as slightly improper. There must be some sort of compulsion to group-

ing in five, but what form that compulsion might take I'd not like to guess."

"Then why did they take such drastic action with us, when we could have been regarded as a five and a one?" Ling exclaimed.

"We rotated our ship-board watch," I said quietly.

"So?"

"So our five was always altering—a sixth was, to the natives, trying to pass himself off as one of the five. See?"

"Oh—and it could have been any of us."

"Exactly."

I had been thinking about Caberman's remark about theology, which I didn't like. I reached for the rules book and checked.

"Look, we're not out of the murk yet. This book says a great deal about interfering with native religions."

"Hell, Bill, we haven't done that!"

"Oh no? Barry says their theology is reproduction, and of course the opposite is true. We've got in, accidentally, on the game."

"Houtzen?"

"Yes. He won't grow into the holy-five. Then what? My guess is nothing good. What will happen when the next ship sets down? If Houtzen doesn't grow, then our kind will obviously be atheists in the eyes of the natives—and has any such thing ever happened before on this planet? Not likely."

"Grave-robbery?"

"Ouch—no!"

"But he won't grow!"

"You know," said Willis softly, "he could grow."

"Don't be daft," we said in chorus.

"I'm not—you're the solid ones. What about the 'present of the holy-five?'"

Our eyes swung to the seed-box presented by the delegation.

"That's bright, John. Do it as soon as you can, will you? You know where Jan's grave is. And they better turn into the biggest, strongest plants the Nurse has ever seen."

"Easy. Maybe a bit late sprouting, but a few hormones and other things will make 'em grow enormously."

Alstone gave a little hiccup, and started to cry drunkenly.

"Flowers on the grave," said Ling sadly. "Pass the bottle, please."

*D. S. Stewart*

*Skarn of Telverlorn had left her native planet twelve light years before intending to return when she had seen the wonders of galaxy. What she didn't know was that she never could return.*

# STAR LIGHT, STAR BRIGHT

## by LAN WRIGHT

They found Skarn of Telverlorn dead in a darkened room. The golden skin was palid and icy to the touch; the long, slender limbs hung loose like the broken legs of a child's doll, and the large, violet eyes were closed against the world forever. Only a small needle hole in the side of the smooth, beautifully formed head, and the gun tight in one drooping hand, showed how death had come.

From Telverlorn Skarn had come to Kantor's World some twelve years before, there to live while her alien beauty faded, and her cat's eyes became a permanent mirror for the haunted longing in her heart. Men looked on her with awe and desire, for there was never beauty like hers in the Galaxy before. It was an alien beauty that tantalised and bewitched, but was never defiled, for a man cannot love that which is alien nor lust after that which is not of his flesh.

As with all mankind the authorities of Kantor's World needed explanations, for no one, human or alien, could die by their own hand without a desire for it, and the men of Kantor needed to keep the record straight and clean.

The hot, tiny hall sat and listened to those who had found her, and to those who had known her. Their stumbling stories told little save of a longing that was never explained, an

eternal fear, and a despair that was inconsolable. There were few who remembered her coming to Kantor, and none who recalled the reason for it; but all of them remembered Carlin —Robert Carlin—the big, dark, saturnine spaceman who was rough and unheeding with his fellow men, yet so tender and so gentle with Skarn.

The heads in the hall nodded knowingly as witness after witness told of Carlin and his cold eyes and colder smile; of his drinking and his violence in the bars and taverns of Kantor's one large town. But all were agreed on one fact—only Skarn could tame him. With her presence she could quench the fire within him; with her limpid eyes destroy the violence, and with her bell-like voice command his attention.

Carlin himself sat quiet and said nothing.

When he was called upon he answered the coroner's questions with a dull, heavy repetition of monosyllables that told little and inferred less. Even the admonitions of the coroner, Hugo Mendes, could not destroy his apathy nor evoke the knowledge that all knew he possessed.

And soon it was over. The verdict—suicide while of unsound mind.

Chance and a series of unhappy incidents had stranded David Orbell on Kantor's World with a minimum four weeks wait until the *Maid of Orleans* deigned to put in a long overdue appearance. His big story on Coraval had been finished, filed, and forgotten, and for a newsman like Orbell there was only a vacuum of inaction between assignments.

The *Maid of Orleans* had finally arrived three days after the death of Skarn, and two days before the inquest. The ship would not head for Centaurus for another ten days or so, and for Orbell the vacuum remained unfilled.

It was partly boredom and partly his unerring sense for a story that sent Orbell to the inquest. He sat quietly at the back of the hall in the shadows, his tiny recorder drinking in the voices while his pen and note pad recorded the scene as he saw it. The welding and the knitting of the final manuscript would come later—if it was worth doing. Even when the dull finalities were over he could not dismiss the affair as just another suicide that was made slightly more interesting because it concerned an alien. It was for that reason that, when it was all over, he followed the tall, hunched figure of Carlin from the building and through the back streets until at last

he came to rest in a slightly nauseous bar close to the space field.

The introduction was effected by way of a bottle which Orbell dumped unceremoniously on the table in front of Carlin before seating himself opposite the spaceman.

The dark, hooded eyes studied him sullenly for a moment, and then a large dark hand engulfed the bottle and splashed golden liquor into a glass.

"I recognise the drink, mister, but not the buyer," said Carlin coldly.

"Orbell—David Orbell," the newsman replied with unconscious egotism.

The dark eyes showed interest.

"There are maybe a score of men who are known throughout the Terran empire," commented Carlin. "You're the first I ever met."

Orbell bowed slightly.

"You see, I am a trusting man," Carlin grinned. "I do not ask for references."

"And I don't need to give them," snapped Orbell.

"True," conceded Carlin. "People will fall over themselves for the doubtful privilege of having their names mentioned in your articles. What do you want of me?"

Orbell studied the big man before him, wondering how best to handle what might be a very difficult subject. Like most of his calling Carlin looked—and probably was—a man given to sudden outbursts of violence. The very nature of their long journeys between the stars seemed to build tensions within the starmen that could only find release away from the confining discipline of their ships. Carlin's skin was burnt black by the rays of deep space, and a violent scar, probably of an undoctored burn, slit the flesh of his chin along the jaw line to his left ear.

"I was at the inquest," said Orbell abruptly.

"So?"

"I felt a sympathy with the affair that was not explained by the official proceedings—"

"And you smelled a story that could be plastered around the Galaxy with your name on it," rasped Carlin. He swallowed half the contents of his glass in an angry gesture. "You're wrong, little man, I have no story to meet the appetites of newshungry parasites. Skarn is dead—let her

rest in peace. She sought it for twelve years, and now she has found it."

Orbell sighed and prepared himself for the normal psychological needling that he used to extract details from reluctant interviewees.

"Why did she wait twelve years? " he asked with an almost complete lack of interest.

" She didn't wait," snapped Carlin, and then bit off the rest of the sentence. " If the *Maid of Orleans* had been six days earlier—no matter, what's past is lost."

" You would have been here," persisted Orbell, " and Skarn would have lived. Is that it? "

" Yes, she would have lived."

Orbell settled a trifle in his chair, well satisfied with the initial stages. The flood had started slowly but more easily than he had hoped.

" You knew her well? "

" Yes." Carlin smiled sadly. " Yes, too well for the good of either of us."

" When you weren't in space you lived together? "

" For a few weeks each year—yes."

Orbell took the bit between his teeth and waited for the storm to break about him as he said casually, " You were lovers—of course."

Carlin didn't move a muscle—only his eyes flamed momentarily and fixed icily on the slim, neat figure opposite him, regarding Orbell with a contempt that was more frightening in its coldness than any violence which the newsman might have expected.

" For a man of your position you are astonishingly ignorant. No, we were not lovers." Carlin swallowed another mouthful from his glass, grimacing slightly as the harsh fluid caught at his throat. " How do you love a hermaphrodite? There is no sex, no life as you and I know it—there is only beauty, a cold awesome beauty that is totally alien. Skarn's race was parthenogenetic. To call her ' she ' is merely to recognise her beauty, not her sex."

" I see."

" And that is all you will see," snapped Carlin. " You have the beginnings of your story, little man, and that is all you will get."

Orbell shrugged with calculated indifference as the moment for which he had been waiting came. With all interviews it was the same. The person being questioned would give so much and then try to shut a door which they didn't realise was already jammed wide open.

"It is enough," he said. "An alien beauty dying for the love of a Terran who could not love her."

For an instant he thought Carlin was going to crash the glass into his unprotected face, but the spasm passed, and Carlin said softly, "Yes, I think you would—I think you would do that even though you know it is not true." There was pain in the dark eyes that was incongruous in so strong a personality. "It won't bring Skarn back if you know these things. Why must you know? Is it merely for the sake of the story?"

Orbell shook his head. "No, not that. It is only by knowing all things that we can learn. There may be something in the story of Skarn of Telverlorn that will help someone else, sometime, somewhere. Even at the inquest I sensed a tragedy that may also hold a warning. I do not think even an alien would object to such a motive."

"No. Perhaps you are right. And yet, all the talk, and all the telling of the tale will not bring Skarn back. She is gone, and neither you nor I will see her like again."

Orbell said nothing, and a silence stretched away the dead minutes while the tavern life bubbled around their own private oasis.

"Do you know where Telverlorn is?" Carlin asked suddenly with surprising mildness.

"No, I have never heard of it."

"You are like all the others here, on Kantor. They have lived here for years, and yet they are so busy building their own lives that they hardly know the name of their nearest stellar neighbour. Telverlorn is the second planet of the star Beta Concord seventeen. It is the second nearest star to Kantor—not counting the parent sun—and it is twelve light years away."

"Go on."

"It was discovered just fifteen years ago—two decades after the first colonists set up house here on Kantor . . ."

I was aboard the third ship to visit Telverlorn, Carlin said, second bo'sun of the *Starfall*—one of Earth's explorer vessels

sent to follow up the initial contact and report on the fitness of the planet for colonisation. Skarn was one of the leaders who greeted us in our own tongue. She and others of her race had learned it from the two ships which had preceded us, and I think it was true to say that they were the most willing victims of terran colonialism that ever were.

Our exploration time was fixed at plus or minus one year terran, and even with that period of time at our disposal we had to work hard and long. Our ranger teams covered the planet, studying the climate and the conditions, classifying the flora and fauna, testing plant and animal life, insects, fish; seeking out bacteria and disease that might later prove to be troublesome. There were some bad moments but we sorted them out as any good contact team should. I was based on the *Starfall* in charge of local working parties, and because of this I saw a lot of Skarn—more than I should have done as time was soon to tell.

At the end of the long day's work we would meet for an hour or two on the edge of the compound that surrounded the ship, and we would talk of her world and my universe. Skarn knew nothing save that there were lights in the heavens at night, and a greater light during the day that warmed and comforted the race. Her race was harmless, yet intelligent and quick to learn. Our ecologists came to the conclusion that parthenogenesis is the ideal state for all races, since it precludes the greatest vice of Mankind—the desire to possess. Without that vice there is no conflict, there is no grasping after the possessions of others. Yet, as I talked to her, I could see growing in Skarn a longing after the knowledge and the wonders of which I spoke. It was kindled and fostered by my words.

I told her of the vastness of the galaxy, of the mighty empire that was growing beyond the bounds of Telverlorn's night sky. I told of the worlds I had seen and the wonders that abounded—and if I'd known then what I know now not one word would have passed my lips. I knew that she could picture the things of which I spoke, and her eagnerness loosened my tongue still further. The longing grew within her to leave Telverlorn, to see with her own eyes the wonders that I brought by word of mouth alone.

Our year's stay was cut to barely six months.

I remember the grim face of Ramirez, the chief officer, when he told me of the sudden change of plans that implemented the recall under emergency orders of all the ranger teams and scientific observers.

"They must be aboard within forty-eight hours ship time," he told me. "Every man jack of them, Carlin. We lift from Telverlorn at midday the twenty-seventh Galactic."

"It sounds panicky, Andre," I said.

"Sir, to you, Carlin," he snapped, and I knew then that the heavy hand of authority was at the back of him, for it was only then that rank counted with Ramirez. "The study is complete as far as you and every other crewman is concerned," he said more gently. "The ship lifts at the stated time, and anyone who isn't aboard gets left behind."

"Yes, sir. Any other information?"

Ramirez shook his head. "Top secret. You'll be told in good time—meanwhile there's strict censorship. Only the captain, senior officers, and heads of the scientific departments know what it's all about." He grinned tautly. "And I'm not telling."

"I'll get the orders posted, sir."

"At once. Oh, and one other thing. None of the natives are to be told anything about our intended departure."

"Yes, sir."

I saw Skarn that night as I had done for six months past, and I disobeyed that last order. It was easy to do—too easy. One word slipped in at the wrong time without even thinking about it, and she knew. In an instant she was begging that I take her with me; she pleaded to be smuggled aboard and hidden until we were far out in space and it was too late to turn back.

"Then I can see all the things you have spoken of, Carlin, and I can come back and tell my people of the wonders that abound."

"No," I told her. "Skarn, I have said too much already, and for that I can be punished. I have broken the orders of my commander that our departure should be kept secret. I beg of you to forget what I have said. Let me go in peace knowing that you will be here when I return with other men who will bring the wonders to you."

The violet eyes were sad and reproachful. "You have tempted me with your words, and now you deny them."

" No, I do not. These things are there to be seen, and soon they will be here, on Telverlorn. Be patient and we shall bring them to you."

I left her soon after, and I didn't see her again until we were three days out in space. The captain sent for me in his cabin below the main bridge control—and Skarn was there also.

" Carlin, we know that you have been friendly with the alien, Skarn," the captain said grimly. " Tell me how she comes to be aboard this ship? "

I could say nothing. I was stunned by the sight of her, glowing with an alien beauty beside the grey clad figures of the captain and three other officers.

Before I could answer Skarn herself replied, " I have told you, Carlin knew nothing of this. I hid myself away and waited for the ship to move."

" Yet you told her we were leaving." The captain's words were accusing.

" Yes, sir. I told her."

" Against my express orders." His eyes flamed with brief anger, and he sank down slowly into a chair before his office desk. The anger had gone and was replaced by an infinite sadness that bewildered me as much as did the presence of Skarn. " Carlin," he said softly, " you don't yet know what you have done, and in your blind ignorance you have committed an act that will haunt you for the rest of your life."

" Sir, I—I don't understand."

" No. No, I don't suppose you do—yet." To Skarn he said, gently, " Why did you leave your world? "

" Because I wanted to see your worlds and your cities. All the wonders that Carlin has spoken of these long days past are pictures in my mind—they are not reality. Of reality I can speak to my own people once I have seen, and my people will be ready when these things come to Telverlorn."

The captain nodded in slow understanding. He asked, " And what would you say if I told you that you can never return to your home? That you will never see your people again? "

I felt in my own being the horror that was mirrored in Skarn's eyes, and the bewilderment as well.

" Of course I shall return. Once I have seen all there is to see— "

"No, Skarn." There was a pain in his eyes that I had never believed could be as he shook his head. He looked at me and said, "Tell me, Carlin, how do you explain to an alien that Telverlorn has been destroyed by the light that brought warmth by day? What symbolism do you use to say that Beta Concordus seventeen has gone nova?"

I was stunned and petrified as a hundred idle questions of the past few days were answered in that one sentence, and before my mind flashed a picture painted by the few quiet words. Telverlorn was gone—was no more than a burnt cinder in a cosmic furnace. And Skarn—Skarn was the last of her race . . .

Carlin stirred slightly, and the movement broke the spell that had settled over Orbell.

"She lived here for almost twelve years," went on Carlin, softly, "and she never believed that such a thing could happen. She never understood what we tried to tell her aboard the *Starfall*, and she would go no further than Kantor's World for it was from here that she could see the light in the sky that was the sun of Telverlorn. Every night she would go out into the open and look up at it as it gleamed in the heavens, and when I was with her she would ask, 'Is that really the sun that shines so bright on Telverlorn?' and when I was away she would look at it just the same—but she would never believe."

"Didn't you show her the nova from the *Strafall?*" asked Orbell.

Carlin laughed. "Your memory is short, little man. What did you ever see from a starship in hyperspace?"

Orbell pursed his lips and recalled the dead, empty greyness that was all one could see through the portals of a ship that moved at many times the speed of light.

"And if we had stopped the ship in full flight how much more would she have seen?" asked Carlin. He shook his head. "No. She could not see what we knew was there, and so she did not believe."

"Then why now?" asked Orbell. "Why after twelve years should she do this thing? Was the waiting too much for her?"

Carlin gazed bleakly at the table top before him. "She did it because I was six days late in the *Maid of Orleans.*"

"I don't understand."

"Then I'll show you. Come, little man."

As they walked from the tavern Orbell had a dim premonition of what was to come, but even that didn't tell him why Carlin should take him out to the dark edge of the spacefield, away from the lights of the town and the glare of the field area.

They stopped and Carlin ordered, "Look there," pointing with his right hand upwards at an angle of sixty degrees into the darkened sky.

Orbell looked, and even without directions to guide his sight, his eyes lit at once upon the bright beadlike object that glistened like a tiny moon against the dark backdrop of the night. Other stars were there in profusion, but all were dimmed by the bright diamond hardness of that one brilliant light. It seemed as if, by reaching out with his hand, Orbell could have plucked a small, golden fruit from the branch of some giant tree.

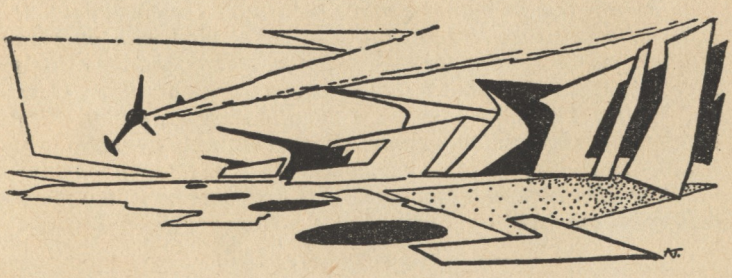
"For the first time Skarn believed what I told her," said Carlin quietly. "She stood and watched the tiny light that was her sun flare and brighten into madness, and in its brilliance grew her belief that what I said was true. And with the truth came horror and the knowledge that she was, in fact, the last of her race to see the light of day. Knowing, she died."

"And what is the truth?" asked Orbell. "No more than you had told her for twelve years past."

"Truth, yes. But until the light of that nova reached Kantor there was always hope that we were wrong," replied Carlin. "And when hope dies there is nothing left."

He turned away and left Orbell alone watching the death of a race that had happened so many years before.

*Lan Wright*



*Charlie Johns' travails in Ledom, the mysterious other world where humanity has developed on slightly different biological lines, now lead him to the Time machine through which he had arrived. Dare he return to his own time before he has completed his study of the Ledom ?*

# VENUS PLUS X

## by THEODORE STURGEON

**Part Three of Four Parts**

### Foreword

*Awareness slowly returns to CHARLIE JOHNS' conscious mind as he lies trapped in a pliable translucent silver-grey cocoon —somewhere. Frantically he thinks back over his former life to establish identity—to his childhood, his Mother, his girl friends and school days, but his last recollection is of climbing the stairs to his bedroom. Apparently he never reached the doorway of his room.*

*In desperation he pushes against the side of the cocoon and it splits asunder to pitch him into a strange room with an even stranger person waiting for him. Neither understand the other's speech but Charlie is shown that he is in a world far different to that of the Earth he knew. A breathtaking world of alien architecture and fashion, populated, it seems, only by males.*

*Later he meets four other people and is placed under a machine which teaches him their language. He finds that he is in a place called Ledom, still on Earth, but far removed from his own*

*civilisation. His mentors are PHILOS, whom he first met, SEACE, chief of Science One, GROCID and MIELWIS, heads of Medical One, and NASIVE. Despite his questioning he cannot find out exactly where he is in the future, how far away from his own time ; but he is promised a return to his original life if he will stay for a while among the Ledom, study their way of life and give them an unbiassed report on their ' superman ' way of life. Charlie eventually agrees.*

*While dressing suitably in Ledomese attire Charlie discovers that the inhabitants are neither male or female.*

*Later he discovers that their anatomical structure has been slightly altered so that they are both sexes combined. They are, in fact, the next biological advancement in the development of humankind.*

*Charlie goes to find Seace in the Science One and accidentally discovers the machine which brought him to Ledom. He memorises the combination which could return him to his own time but before he can do anything further Seace arrives. His education into the technical advances of the Ledom continues.*

*Throughout the narrative of Charlie Johns' adventures on Ledom are interspersed conversational pieces between two ordinary presentday American families—the Smith's and the Raile's—against whose speculations and philosophies the future civilisation of the Ledom are portrayed.*

" Getting the hang of it ?"

Charlie glanced thoughtfully at Philos, who had been waiting for him at the foot of the invisible lift, as always appearing as if he just happened to be there, as always with the alert dark eyes sparkling with some secret amusement . . . or perhaps just knowledge . . . or perhaps something quite different, like grief. " Seace," said Charlie, " has the darndest way of answering every question you ask, and leaving you with the feeling he's concealing something."

Philos laughed. As Charlie had noticed before, Philos had a good laugh. " I guess," said the Ledom, " you're ready for the main part of it. The Children's One."

Charlie looked across at the Medical One, and up at the Science One. " These are pretty ' main,' I'd say."

" No they're not," said Philos positively. " They're the parameters, if you like—the framework, the mechanical pulse, but for all that they're only the outer edge, and a thin one at that. The Children's One is the biggest of all."

Charlie looked up at the tilting bulk over him and marvelled. " It must be a long way from here."

" Why do you say that ?"

" Anything bigger than this—"

"—you'd see from here ? Well, there it is." Philos pointed—at a cottage. It lay in a fold of the hills, surrounded by that impeccable greensward, and up its white, low walls, flaming flowering vines grew. Its roof was pitched and gabled, brown with a dusting of green. There were flower-boxes at the windows, and at one end, the white wall yielded to the charm of fieldstone, tapering up to be a chimney, from which blue smoke drifted.

" Mind walking that far ?"

Charlie sniffed the warm bright air, and felt the green springiness under his feet. " Mind !"

They walked toward the distant cottage, taking a winding course through the gently rolling land. Once Charlie said, " Just that ?"

" You'll see," said Philos. He seemed taut with expectancy and delight. " Have you ever had any children ?"

" No," said Charlie, and thought immediately of Laura.

" If you had," said Philos, " would you love them ?"

" Well, I guess I would !"

" Why ?" Philos demanded. Then he stopped and with great gravity took Charlie's arm and turned him to face him, and said slowly, " Don't answer that question. Just think about it."

Startled, Charlie could think of no response except, at last, " All right," which Philos accepted. They walked on. The sense of expectancy somehow increased. It was Philos, of course ; the Ledom radiated something. . . . Charlie remembered having seen a movie once, a sort of travelogue. The camera was placed on an airplane which flew low over plains country, over houses and fields, with the near land rushing past, and the musical background was as expectant as this. The film gave you no warning of the absolute enormity that was to come ; for time and distance which seemed forever, there was only the flat country and the speed, and the occa-

sional road and farm, but the music grew in tension and suspense, until with an absolute explosion of colour and of perspective, you found yourself hurtling over the lip of the Grand Canyon of the Colorado.

" Look there," said Philos.

Charlie looked, and saw a young Ledom in a yellow silken tunic, leaning against a rocky outcropping in a steep bank not far ahead. As they approached, Charlie expected anything but what actually happened ; when one meets a fellow being, there is reaction, interaction of some kind, whether one is homo sap. or Ledom or beaver ; but here there was none. The Ledom in yellow stood on one leg, back against the rock, one foot against the other knee, both hands clasped under the raised thigh. The rather fine-drawn face was averted, turned neither directly toward them nor away, and the eyes were half-closed.

Charlie said in a low-voice, " What's—"

" Shh !" hissed Philos.

They walked unhurriedly past the standing figure. Philos veered close and, signalling to Charlie to be silent, passed a hand back and forth close to the half-closed eyes. There was no response.

Philos and Charlie walked on, Charlie turning frequently to look back. All the while they were in sight, there was no movement but the gentle shifting of the silken garment in the light breeze. When at last a turn put a shoulder of the hill between them and the entranced creature, Charlie said, " I thought you said the Ledom don't sleep."

" That isn't sleep."

" It'll do until the real thing comes along. Or is he sick ?"

" Oh no ! . . . I'm glad you saw that. You'll see it again, here and there. He's just—stopped."

" But what's the matter with him ?"

" Nothing, I tell you. It's a—well, call it a pause. It was not uncommon in your time. Your American Indians, the Plains Indians, could do it. So could some of the Atlas Mountain nomads. It isn't sleep. It's something that, doubtless, you do when you sleep. Did you ever study sleep ?"

" Not what you might call study."

" I have," said Philos. " One thing of special interest is that when you sleep, you dream. Actually, you hallucinate. Sleeping regularly as you do, you perform this hallucination

while you are sleeping, although sleep is here, as in many other ways, only a convenience; even you can do it without sleeping."

" Well, there's what we called daydreaming—"

" Whatever you call it, it's a phenomenon universal to the human mind, and perhaps I shouldn't limit it to humanity. Anyway, the fact remains that if the mind is inhibited, or prohibited, from performing the hallucinations, for example by being wakened each time it slips into this state, it breaks down."

" The mind breaks down ?"

" That's right."

" You mean if you had wakened that Ledom there, he'd have gone insane ?" Brutally, he demanded, " Are you all that delicately balanced ?"

Philos laughed away the brutality ; it was a sincere response to something ludicrous. " No ! Oh, never that ! I was talking about a laboratory situation, a constant and relentless interruption. I can assure you that he saw us ; he was aware. But his mind made a choice, and chose to pursue whatever it was that was going on his head. If I had persisted, or if something so unusual as the sound of *your* voice "—the emphasis was slight but meaningful; it occurred then to Charlie that his voice here was a baritone horn among flutes—" had snapped him out of it, he would have talked normally with us, forgiven us for the intrusion, waved us good-bye."

" But why do it ? What does he do it *for* ?"

" What do you do it for ? . . . It seems to be a mechanism by which the mind detaches itself from reality in order to compare and relate data which in reality cannot be associated. Your literature is full of hallucinatory images of the sort—pigs with wings, human freedom, fire-breathing dragons, the wisdom of the majority, the basilisk, the *golem*, and equality of the sexes."

" Now look—" Charlie cried angrily, and then checked himself. The likes of Philos could not be reached by rage ; he sensed that, and said bluntly, " You're playing with me, so it's a game. But you know the rules and I don't."

Disarmingly, Philos cut it out, then and there ; his sharp eyes softened and in complete sincerity, he apologized. " I'm previous," he added. " My turn comes after you've seen the rest of Ledom."

" Your turn ?"

" Yes—the history. What you think of Ledom is one thing; what you will think of Ledom plus its history is another ; what you will—but never mind that."

" You'd better go on."

" I was going to say, what you will think of Ledom plus its history plus *your* history is another matter altogether. But I won't say it," declared Philos engagingly, " because if I did I should only have to apologize again."

In spite of himself Charlie laughed with him, and they went on.

A few hundred yards from the cottage, Philos turned him sharp right and they climbed a rather steep slope to its crest, and followed it until they came to a knoll. Philos, in the lead, stopped and waved Charlie up beside him. " Let's watch them for a little while."

Charlie found himself looking down on the cottage. He could now see that it was at the brink of a wide valley, part wooded, (or was that orchard ? They *wouldn't* do anything in straight lines here !) and part cultivated fields. Around and between the fields and woods, the country was as parklike as it had been by the big buildings. Scattered throughout were more cottages, widely separated, each unique—timber, fieldstone, a sort of white stucco, plaster, even what looked like turf—and each widely separated from all the others, some by as much as half a mile. He could see more than twenty-five of the cottages from their vantage point, and there were probably more. Like scattered, diverse flower-petals, the bright garments of the people showed here and there through the woods and fields, on the green borders, and on the banks of the two small streams which wandered down the valley. The silver sky domed it all, falling to hills all about ; it seemed then to be a dish-shaped mesa, and higher than anything around it, for he could see nothing beyond the gentle ramparts of the valley itself.

" The Children's One," said Philos.

Charlie looked down past the growing thatch of the cottage below, to the yard and pond before it. He began to hear the singing, and he saw the children.

★

Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Raile are shopping for children's clothes in the dry-goods wing of an enormous highway supermarket. The children are outside in the car. It is hot out

there so they are hurrying. Herb pushes a supermarket shopping cart. Jeanette fans through the stacks of clothes on the counters.

" Oh, look ! Little T-shirts ! Just like the real thing." She takes three for Davy, size Five, and three for Karen, size Three, and drops them in the cart. " Now, pants."

She marches briskly off, with Herb and the shopping cart in her wake. He unthinkingly follows the international rules of the road : a vessel approaching from the right has the right of way : a vessel making a turn loses the right of way. He yields right of way twice on these principles and has to run to catch up. A wheel squeaks. When he runs it screams. Jeanette proceeds purposively right, straight ahead three aisles, and left two, and then stops dead. A little breathless, Herb and squeak regain her aura.

She demands, " Now where are pants ?"

He points. " Over there where it says PANTS." They had early passed within an aisle of it. Jeanette *tsks* in her haste and retraces her quick steps. Herb wheels and squeaks after her.

" Corduroy too hot. All the Graham kids in denim right now. You know Louie Graham didn't get his promotion," murmurs Jeanette like one in prayer, and passes up the denim " Khaki. Here we are. Size Five." She takes two pairs. " Size Three." She takes two pairs, and drops them into the cart, and hurries off. Herb squeaks, stops, screams, and squeaks after her. She takes two turns left, proceeds three aisles and stops. " Where are children's sandals ?"

" Over there where it says CHILDREN'S SANDALS," pants Herb, pointing. Jeanette *tsks*, and sprints to the sandals. By the time he overtakes her she has picked out two pairs of red sandals with yellow-white gum soles, and drops them into the cart.

" *Stop* !" gurgles Herb, almost laughing.

" What is it ?" she says in midstride.

" What do you want now ?"

" Bathing suits."

" Well look there then, where it says BATHING SUITS."

" Don't nag, dear," she says, moving off.

He manoeuvres a stretch in which, briefly, he can wheel beside her close enough to be heard over the squeaks, and says, " The difference between men and women is—"

" A dollar ninety-seven," she says, passing a counter.

"—that men read directions and women don't. I think it's a matter of sexual pride. Take some out-and-out-genius of a packager, he dreams up a box for you to pinch it, tear back to dotted line, and then gives you a string to pull open the inner liner."

" Leotards," she says, passing a counter.

" Nine engineers bust their brains on the packaging machinery. Sixteen buyers go out of their heads finding enough of the right materials. Twenty-three traffic men answer two a.m. phone calls moving seventy thousand tons of material. And when you get into your kitchen you open it with a ham slicer."

" Bathing suits," she says. " What did you say, honey ?"

" Nothing, honey."

She rapidly scatters the contents of a bin called *Size* 5. " Here we are." She holds up a small pair of trunks, navy with red piping.

" Looks like a diaper."

" It stretches," she says ; perhaps this is a *sequitor* but he does not investigate. He rummages through *Size* 3 and comes up with a similar pair of trunks, but about as large as his palm. " Here it is. Let's beat it before those kids fry out there."

" Oh *Herb* ! silly : that's a *boy's* bathing suit !"

" I think it would look cute as hell on Karen."

" But Herb ! It hasn't any *top* !" she cries, rummaging.

He holds up the little trunks and looks ruminatively at them. " What does Karen need a top for ? Three years old !"

" Here's one. Oh dear, it's the same as Dolly Graham's."

" Is there anybody in our neighbourhood who is going to be aroused at the sight of a three-year-old's tit ?"

" Herb, don't talk dirty."

" I don't like the implication."

" *Here* we are !" She displays her find, and giggles. " Oh, how very, very *sweet* !" She drops it into the shopping cart, and they squeak swiftly toward the checkout, with their six T-shirts, four khaki shorts, two pairs of red sandals with yellow-white gum soles, one size 5 navy swimming trunks, one size 3 perfect miniature bikini.

The children, more than a dozen of them, were in and around the pond, and as they played, they sang.

Charlie had never heard such singing. He had heard much worse, and, as singing goes, some better ; but he had never heard singing *like* this. It was something like the soft sound made by one of those tops which gives out an organ-toned chord, and then, slowing, shifts to another, related chord. Sometimes such toys are designed to issue a single constant note, which sounds as part of the two or even three chords as they modulate. These children, some in adolescence, some mere toddlers, sang that way ; and the extraordinary thing about it was that, of the fifteen or so voices which at one time or another involved themselves, never more than four, or very occasionally five, sang at once.

The chord of music hung over the group, sometimes bunched over a cluster of small brown bodies, then moving by degrees across the pond to the other side, then spreading itself out so that alto notes came from the left, soprano from the right. One could almost watch the chord as it condensed, rarefied, hovered, spread, leapt, changing its hues all the while in compelling sequences, tonic, then holding the keynote reinforced by two voices in unison while the background shifted to make it a dominant, one fell away to a seventh, and then, rather than drop back to the tonic, one voice would flat a halftone and the chord, turned blue, would float there as the relative minor. Then a fifth, a sixth, a ninth sweet discord and it would right itself as the tonic chord in another key—all so easy, so true and sweet.

Most of the children were naked ; all were straight-limbed, clear-eyed, firm-bodied. To Charlie's as yet uneducated eye they all looked like little girls. They seemed not to concentrate at all on their music ; they played, splashed, ran about, built with mud and sticks and coloured bricks ; three of them threw a ball amongst them. They spoke to each other in their dove-like language, called, squeaked as they ran and were almost caught, squealed too, and one cried like—well, like a child, when he fell (and was ever so quickly caught up by three others, comforted, kissed, given a toy, teased to laughter) but over it all hung that changing three-part, four-part, sometimes five-part chord, built by one and another in a pause, between breaths, in midair diving into the water, between spoken question and answer.

Charlie had heard something like this before, in the central court of the Medical One, but not so bright, so easy ; and he was to hear this chordal music wherever he went in Ledom, wherever the Ledom gathered in larger groups ; it hung over the Ledom as the fog of their body-heat hangs over the reindeer herds in the frigid Lapland plains.

" Why do they sing like that ?"

" They do everything together," said Philos, eyes shining " And when they're together, doing different things, they do that. They can be together, feel together, singing like that no matter what else they may be doing. They feel it, like the light of the sky on their backs, without thinking about it, just—loving it. They change it for the pleasure of it, the way that one walks from the cold water to the warm stones, for the feeling on his feet. They keep it in the air, they take it from the air around them and give it back. Here, let me show you something." Softly, but clearly, he sang three notes rapidly : *do, sol, mi* . . .

And as if the notes were bright play-bullets, shot to each of three children, three children picked them up—one child for each note, so that the notes come in as arpeggio and were held as chord ; then they were repeated, again as arpeggio and again held ; and now one child—Charlie saw which one, too ; it was one standing waist-deep in the pond—changed one note, so that the arpeggio was *do, fa mi* . . . and immediately afterward *re, fa mi*, and suddenly *fa, do la* . . . so it went, progressing, modulating, inverting ; augmented, with sixths added, with ninths added, with demanding sevenths asking the tonic but mischievously getting the related minor instead. At length the arpeggio was lost as an arpeggio, and the music eased itself back to a steady, constantly changing chord.

" That's . . . just beautiful," breathed Charlie, wishing he could say it as beautifully as the beauty he heard, and disliking himself for his inability.

Philos said, gladly, " There's Grocid !"

Grocid, a scarlet cloak ribboned about his throat, the rest of it airborne, had just emerged from the cottage. He turned and looked up, waved and sang the three notes Philos had sung (and again they were caught, braided, turned and tossed among the children) and laughed.

Philos said to Charlie, " He's saying that he knew who it was the instant he heard those notes." He called, " Grocid ! May we come ?"

Grocid gladly waved them in, and they plunged down the steep slope. Grocid snatched up a child and came to meet them. The child sat astride his shoulders, crowing with joy and batting at the billows of the cloak.

" Ah, Philos. You've brought Charlie Johns. Come down, come down ! It's good to see you."

To Charlie's astonishment, Grocid and Philos kissed. When Grocid approached him, Charlie stiffly stuck out his hand ; with instant understanding, Grocid took it, pressed it, let it go.

" This is Anaw," said Grocid, brushing the side of the child's cheek with his hair. The youngster laughed, buried its face in the thick mass, extricated a laughing eye, and with it peeped at Charlie. Charlie laughed back.

They went together into the house. Dilating bulkheads ? Concealed lighting ? Anti-gravity tea-trays ? Self-frosting breakfast food ? Automatic floors ?

No.

The room was near enough to being rectangular as it needed to be to satisfy eyes which had become, Charlie suddenly realized, hungry for a straight line. The ceiling was low and raftered, and it was cool there—not the antiseptic and unemotional kiss of conditioned air, but the coolness of vine-awninged windows, low ceilings, and thick walls ; it was the natural seepage of the earth itself's cool subcutaneous layers. And here were chairs—one of hand-rubbed wood, three of rustic design, with curves of tough liana and slats and spokes of whole or split tree-trunks.

The floor was flagstone, levelled and ground smooth and grouted with, of all things, a glazed purple cement, and brilliant hand-tied rag rugs set it off. On a low table was a gigantic wooden bowl, turned from a single piece of hardwood, and a graceful but very rugged beverage set—a pitcher and seven or eight earthenware mugs. In the bowl was a salad, beautifully arranged in an elaborate star-pattern, of fruits, nuts, and vegetables.

There were pictures on the walls, mostly in true-earth colours —greens, browns, orange, and the yellow-tinted reds and red-tinted blues of flowers and ripe fruit. Most were representational and pleasingly so ; some were abstract, a few impressionistic. One specially caught his eye ; a scene of two Ledom, with the observation angle strangely high and askew, so that you seemed to be looking down past the shoulder of the

standing figure to the reclining one below. The latter seemed to be broken in some unspecified way, ill and in pain ; the whole composition was oddly blurred, and its instant impact was of being seen through scalding tears.

" I'm very glad you could come." It was the other head of the Children's One, Nasive, standing by him and smiling. Charlie turned away from his contemplation of the picture and saw the Ledom, in a cloak exactly the same as Grocid's, extending his hand. Charlie shook it and let it slip away ; he said, " I am too. I like it here."

" We rather thought you would," said Nasive. " Not too different from what you're used to, I'll bet."

Charlie could have nodded and let it go, but in this place, with these people, he wanted to be honest. " Too different from most of what I've been used to," he said. " We had some of this, here and there. Not enough of it."

" Sit down. We'll have a bite now—just to keep us going. Leave some room, though ; we'll be in on a real feast shortly."

Grocid filled all-but-rimless earthenware plates and passed them around, while Nasive poured a golden liquid into the mugs. It was, Charlie discovered, a sharp but honey-flavoured beverage, probably a sort of mead, cool but not cold, with a spicy aftertaste and a late, gentle kick. The salad, which he ate with a satin-finished hardwood fork which had two short, narrow tines and one broad long one with a very adequate cutting edge, was eleven ways delicious (one for each variety of food it contained) and it strained his self-control to the utmost not to *a*) gobble and *b*) demand more.

They talked ; he did not join in very much, although aware of their courteous care to say that which might include or interest him, or at least not to launch into anything of length which might exclude him. Fredon had weevils over the hill there. Have you seen the new inlay process Dregg's doing ? Wood in ceramic ; you'd swear they'd been fireglazed together Nariah wanted to put in for biostatic treatment of a new milkweed fiber. Eriu's kid broke his silly leg. And meanwhile the children were in and out, miraculously never actually interrupting, but simply flashing in, receiving a nut or a piece of fruit, hovering breathlessly to ask a favour, a permission, or a fact : " Illew says a dragonfly is a kind of spider. Is it ?" (No ; none of the arachnids have wings). A flash of purple ribbon and yellow tunic, and the child is gone, to be replaced

instantly by a very small and coquettish naked creature which said clearly, " Grocid, you got a funny face." (You got a funny face too). Laughing, the mite was gone.

Charlie, eating with effortful slowness, watched Nasive, crouched on a nearby hassock, deftly prying a splinter out of his own hand. The hand, though graceful, was large and strong, and seeing the point of a needle-like probe excavating below the base of the middle finger, Charlie was struck by the sight of the callosities there. The flesh of the palm and the inside of the fingers seemed as tough as a stevedore's. Charlie found himself making an effort to square this with flowing scarlet garments and " art " furniture, and realized it wasn't his privilege, just now, to draw such balances. But he said, thumping the sturdy arm of the rustic chair, " Are these made here ?"

" *Right* here," said Nasive cheerfully. " Made it myself. Grocid and I did this whole place. With the kids, of course. Grocid made the plates and the mugs. Like em ?"

" I really do," said Charlie. They were brown and almost gold, swirled together. " Is it a lacquer on earthenware, or is that A-field of yours a kiln for you ?"

" Neither," said Nasive. " Would you like to see how we do it ?" He glanced at Charlie's empty plate. " Or would you like some—"

Regretfully, Charlie laid the plate aside. " I'd like to see that."

They rose and went toward a door at the back. A child half-hidden in the drapes at the back of the room darted mischievously at Nasive, who, without breaking stride, caught it up, turned it squealing upside down, very gently bumped its head on the floor, and set it on its feet again. Then grinning, he waved Charlie through the door.

" You're very fond of children," said Charlie.

" My God," said Nasive.

And here again the language was shaded so that a translation must lose substance. Charlie felt that what he meant when he said " My God " was a direct response to his remark, and in no sense an expletive. Was the child his God, then ? Or . . . was it the concept The Child ?

The room in which they stood was a little higher than the one they had left, and wider, but utterly different from the harmonious, casual, comfortable living space. This was a work-

shop—a real working worshop. The floor was brick, the walls were planed but otherwise unfinished planks, milled shiplap fashion. On wooden pegs hung tools, basic tools : sledge and wedges, hammers, adze, spoke-shave, awl, draw-knife, hatchet and axe, square, gauge, and levels, brace and a rack of bits, and a set of planes.

Against the walls, and here and there out on the floor, were—well, call them machine tools, but they were apparently hand-fashioned, sometimes massively, from wood ! A table-saw, for example, was powered from underneath by treadles, and by a crank and connecting-rod arrangement, caused a sort of sabresaw to oscillate up and down. A detachable, deep-throated frame was clamped to it, to guide the top end of the saw-blade, and was loaded with a *wooden* spring. There was a lathe, too, with clusters of wooden pulleys for speed adjustment and an immense flywheel—it must have weighed five hundred pounds—made of ceramic.

But it was the kiln which Nasive had brought him to see. It stood in the corner, a brick construction with a chimney above and a heavy metal door, which stood up on brick pilings. Underneath was a firepot on casters—" it's our forge, too," Nasive pointed out as, with a muscular tug, he rolled it out and back under again—and mounted on it, well to one side, was a treadle-operated bellows. The outlet from the bellows led to a great floppy object which looked like a deflated bladder, which in fact it was. Nasive pumped vigorously on the treadle and the wrinkled thing sighed, tiredly got up off its back, and wobbled upright. It then began to swell.

" I got the idea from a bagpipe one of the kids was learning to play," said Nasive, his face glowing. He stopped pumping and pulled a lever a little way toward him ; Charlie heard air hissing up through the grates. He pulled it a bit more, and the air roared.

" You have all the control you could possibly want and you don't have to tell some brawny adult to take a long trick at it ; all the kids in the place can come in and each does as much as he can, even the little ones. They love it."

" That's wonderful," said Charlie sincerely, " but—surely there's an easier way to do it."

" Oh, surely," said Nasive agreeably—and not by one word did he enlarge on it.

Charlie looked admiringly about him, at the neat stacks of lumber which had obviously been milled here, the sturdy bracing of the wooden machines, the— " Look here," said Nasive. He threw a clamp from the chuck end of the lathe ways and gave the ways a shove upward. Hinged at the tailstock end, it swung upright and latched into place—" A drill press !" cried Charlie, delighted.

He pointed to the flywheel. " That looks like ceramic. How did you ever fire anything that size ?"

Nasive nodded toward the kiln. " It'll take it. Just barely. Of course, it was in there for a while . . . we had to clear out the rest of the place and hold a feast and dancing until it was done."

" With the people dancing on the treadle," laughed Charlie.

" And everywhere else. It was quite a party," Nasive laughed back. " But you wanted to know why we made the flywheel of ceramic. Well, it's massive, and it was less work to cast it to run true than it would be true up a stone one."

" I don't doubt that," said Charlie, looking at the flywheel but thinking of invisible elevators, time machines, a fingertip device which, he had been told, could take large bites out of hillsides and transport what it bit wherever it was wanted. The fleeting thought occurred to him that perhaps these people out here didn't know what they had back at the big Ones. Then he recalled that it was at the Medical One he had first seen Grocid and Nasive. So then the thought came to him that, knowing what they had at the Ones, they were denied these things, and must plod from cottage to field, and work up those case-hardened callouses, while Seace and Mielwis magicked ice-cold breakfast fruits from holes in the wall by their beds. Ah well. Them as has, gits. " Anyway, that is really one large hunk of ceramic."

" Oh, not really," said Nasive. " Come and look.'"

He led the way to a door in the outside wall and they stepped through into a garden. Four or five of the children were tumbling about on the grass, and one was up a tree. They shouted, cooed, crowed at the sight of Nasive, flew to him and away ; while he talked he would tousle one, spin another around, answer a third with a wink and a tickle.

Charlie Johns saw the statue.

He thought, would you call this Madonna and Child ?

The adult figure, with some material that draped like fine linen thrown loosely half around it, knelt, looking upward. The figure of the child stood, also looking upward, with a transcendant, even ecstatic expression on its face. The child was nude, but its flesh tones were perfectly reproduced, as were the adult's, whose garment was shot through with all colours possible to a wood fire.

The two remarkable features about this sculpture were, first, that the figure of the adult was three feet high, and that of the child over *eleven feet* !; second, that the entire group was one monstrous single piece of perfectly glazed, faultlessly fired terra cotta.

Charlie had to ask Nasive to repeat himself, saying something about kilns, as he was swept with wonderment at the beauty of this work of art, its finish, but most of all its symbolism. The small adult kneeling in worship of the giant child, rapt face fixed on the huge standing figure ; and the child, in a rapture of its own, detached from the adult and aspiring upward . . . somewhere . . . higher in any case.

" *That* kiln I can't show you," Nasive was saying.

Charlie, still spellbound, scanned the great lovely work wondering if it had been fired in pieces and erected. But no, the glaze was flawless, without line or join from top to bottom. Why, even the base, made and coloured like a great mass of flowers, a regular mound of petals, was glazed !

Well then ! They did get a crack at that A-field magic after all !

Nasive said, " It was sculpted right where it stands, and fired there too. Grocid and I did most of it, except the flowers ; the children did the flowers. More than two hundred children screened all that clay, and worked it so it wouldn't fracture in the fire."

" Oh . . . and you built your kiln around it !"

" We built three kilns around it—one to dry it, which we tore down so we could paint it ; one to set the colour glazes, which we tore down to coat it, and one for the final glaze."

" Which you tore down and threw away."

" We didn't throw it away. We used the bricks for the new floor in the workshop. But even if we had thrown it away—it was worth it."

" It was worth it," said Charlie. " Nasive . . . what *is* it ? What does it mean ?"

" It's called The Maker," said Nasive. (In the language, that was *creator*, and also *the one who accomplishes. The doer*).

The adult adoring the child. The child in adoration of something . . . else. " The Maker ?"

" The parent makes the child. The child makes the parent."

" The child *what* ?"

Nasive laughed, that full, easy, not " at " kind of laugh which seemed to come so easily to these people. " Come now: whoever became a parent without a child to make him so ?"

Charlie laughed with him, but as they left, looked back over his shoulder at the gleaming terra cotta, he knew that Nasive might have said more. And indeed Nasive seemed to understand that, and his feelings about it, for he touched Charlie's elbow and said softly, " Come. I think that later, you will understand better."

Charlie wrenched himself away, but his eyes were full of that exquisite, devout pair shining in the garden. As they crossed the workshop, Charlie asked himself, But why is the child bigger than the parent ?

. . . And knew he had asked it aloud when Nasive, stepping into the living room, and incidentally snatching the same youngster they had seen before delightedly cowering in the drapes, and as before scooping it up, turning it over and bumping its little head on the floor until it hiccupped with laughter : " But—children are, you know."

Well . . . in this language, as in English, " bigger " could mean " greater " . . . oh, he'd think about it later. With shining eyes, he looked at the faces in the room, and then felt a very real pang of regret. One ought not to see such a thing, and then have no one new to show it to.

Philos understood, and said, " He's seen your statue, Grocid."

" Charlie Johns, thank you."

Charlie felt enormously pleased, but, not being able to see his own shining eyes, did not for the life of him know what he was being thanked for.

The Brute begins ominously, straddle-gaited, hunch-shouldered, to approach the bed against which She cowers in her negligee.

" Don't hurt me !" she cries in an Italian accent, whereupon the camera dollies in with the lurch of The Brute, becoming The Brute, and all the blood-and-flesh bugs within the steel-and-chrome beetles ranked up before the gargantuan screen of the drive-in theatre, bat their eyes and thrum with the blood in their flesh. The very neon-stained air around the popcorn machines is tumid with it ; hooded dead headlights in row upon row seem to bulge with it.

When the camera dollies in close enough to make it possible, for this season cleavage is " in " but the areola is " out," The Brute's big hand darts in from off-camera, smites her ivory cheek stingingly (the straddle-gaited lumbering music stings too) and drops below the frame of the picture, whereupon we hear silk ripping. Her face, still close up, forty-three tinted feet six inches from tangled hair to dimpled chin, is carried backward by the camera or The Brute and pressed to the satin pillow, whereupon the dark shadow of the Brute's head begins to cover her face with the implacable precision of the studio sound-man's hand on a volume knob.

" Don't hurt me ! Don't hurt me !'

Herb Raile, behind the wheel of his automobile, is at last made aware of a rythmic wrestling going on beside him. Although Karen is fast asleep on the back seat, Davy who at this hour is ordinarily dead to the world, is blaringly wide awake. Jeanette has a half-nelson on the boy and with her other hand is attempting to cover his eyes. Davy is chinning himself on her wrist as on a horizontal bar, and both of them are, in spite of and during this exercise, snatching what avid glances at the screen as they can.

Herb Raile, snatching what avid glances he can at the screen while analysing this activity, says without turning his head, " What's the *matter* ?"

" Nothing for a *child* to see," she hisses. She is a little out of breath from one or another of these stimuli.

" *Don't hurt me* !" screams shatteringly the She on the screen then spasms her face and closes her eyes : " Ah-h-h-h-h . . ." she moans, ". . . hurt me. Hurt me. Hurt me. Hurt me."

Davy rips down the blinding hand : " I wanna *see* !"

"You do as you're told or I'll—." Herb barks imperatively, watching the screen. Davy sharply nips his mother's forearm. She utters a small scream and says, " Hurt me !"

In not less than seventy feet of super-polychrome three-and-a-quarter-to-one-aspect-ratio tumble-sounded explication, the screen rapidly and succinctly explains that due to an early misunderstanding She and The Brute were actually really and truly married the whole time, and when She has finished broken in passion and in English as well explaining to The Brute that the clear source of their excesses is the legality of their loving, the screen dissolves in a blare of light and a blaze of trumpets, leaving the audience limp and blinking in the here and now.

"You shouldn't've let him see all that," says Herb accusingly.

" I didn't but he did. He bit me."

There is an interlude wherein it seems to dawn on Davy that he has done something punishable ; he need not know *what* to get it over with, which is done by weeping and being comforted by raspberry sherbet and a shrimp roll. The sherbet, initially on a stick, presents its own problem by leaving same ; after a moment of watching it enfold his numb but apparently hot fingertips while it drips exactly on the crease of his trousers, Herb solves the problem by putting it entire into his mouth, which makes the bridge of his nose ache and by which Davy allows he has been robbed. This is not a crisis after all because the lights dim and the screen flares up again for the second feature.

" Something for Davy after all," says Herb after the second minute. " Why don't they run the Western first and spare our kids looking at that kind of you know."

" Sit up on my knee, honey," Jeanette says. " Can you see all right ?"

Davy sees all right the fight at the cliff edge, the falling body, the old man lying broken at the foot of the cliff, the evil cowpoke bending over him, the gush of good bright red blood from the old man's mouth : " I'm . . . Chuck . . . Fritch . . . help me !"; the evil cowpoke's laughing, " You're Chuck Fritch are you ; that's all I want to know !"; his drawing of the .45, the roaring shots, the twitch of the old man's body as the slugs rip into him and his agonized grunts, the grin on the evil cowboy's face as he stomps the old man's face only they keep that specific off camera, but afterward you can watch him kick the body the rest of the way down into the canyon.

Flashback to a dirt street with duckboard sidewalks. Herb says thoughtfully, " Yeah, I'll call 'em tomorrow, that's what I'll do, ask 'em why they don't put the Westerns on first."

They went to Wombrew's house, the dooryard of which was surrounded by strong and intricate basketwork, which was essentially nothing more than poles driven into the ground and vines woven around them ; Wombrew, a hawk-nosed young adult, showed Charlie how this was not merely a fence, but was integral with the house, for the walls were built of it too, and then plastered with a clayey mud from the neighbourhood—the timeless mud-and-wattle construction—which when quite dry had been coated with a species of whitewash which was not white, but violet.

The roof was thatched and planted with the thick-matted, mowing grass found all through Ledom. The house was lovely, especially in its interior planning, for mud-and-wattle need make no compromise with standard lumber lengths, and the more curved the walls, the more stable they are, just as a curved piece of paper may be stood on edge. Grocid and Nasive and their children came along and helped show Charlie Wombrew's treasures.

They went to Aborp's house, which had been built of rammed earth, wooden forms having been set up and the moistened earth put between them and compacted by hand with the end of a heavy timber wielded by four strong Ledom standing on the top of the forms. Once it had dried, the forms could be removed. Like the wattle building, this too could be designed very flexibly. Grocid and Nasive and their children and Wombew's children and Wombrew came along.

They went to Obtre's house, which was made of cut stone, built up in square modules. Each module had its domed roof, which was made with great simplicity. You fill the four walls right to the top with earth, mound it to suit, and lay on plaster until it is nearly a foot thick. Once it is set, you then dig out all the earth. It is said that this kind of house, with this roof, will stand a thousand years. Obtre and Obtre's children joined them as they went on.

Edec had a moss-chinked log house, Viomor lived right inside a hill, part shored and panelled with hand-rubbed wood, part cut from the living rock. Piante had a fieldstone house with a sod roof, and all the walls were covered with splendid tapestries—not draped, but applied flat so their marvellous

pictures and designs could be read ; and in the back, Charlie saw the hand-made loom which had made them all, and for a while watched Piante and his mate work the loom, while two tiny children threw the shuttle. And Piante's children and Piante joined them, and his mate, and so did Viomor's family and Edec's ; and as they crossed the park areas, people in their bright garments, windblown children and leggy adolescents, came out of the fields and orchards, dropping hoes and mattocks, pruning knives and machetes at the borders, and came along.

As the crowd grew, so grew the music. It was never louder ; it grew larger instead.

So at last, visiting and gaining as it went, the multitude, and Charlie Johns, came to the place of worship.

★

Jeanette flings herself unhappily on the neat afternoon bed. *What makes me that way* ?

She has just turned away a home improvement services salesman. Which is all right in itself. Nobody asks these eager beavers to ring your doorbell and they have to take their chances. Nobody in her right mind is going to buy what she doesn't want, and nowadays you have to get it straight in your head what you don't want and stick to it, or they'll pull you down, bleed you.

It wasn't that ; it was the way she had brushed the man off. She had acted this way before and doubtless she would again, and that is what is making her feel so rotten.

Did she have to be *that* abrupt ?

Did she have to give the icy stare, the cold word, the not-quite-but-very-nearly slammed door ? None of that was *her*, was Jeanette. Could she have done it—get rid of him, that is —acting like Jeanette instead of like some moving-picture parody of the hard life of a travelling salesman ?

Sure she could have.

She sits up. Maybe this time she can think it through and it won't bother her ever again.

She *has* got rid of unwanted sales people, and got out of similar situations, many many times before by being Jeanette. A smile, a little lie, something about the baby's waking up or I think I hear the phone ; easy, and no harm done. My husband bought one just day before yesterday. Oh I wish you'd come

around last week ; I just won one in a contest. Who's to call her a liar ? They go away and nobody's hurt.

But then, once in a while, like this one just now, she curls her lip and spits an icicle. And like just now, she stands by the not-quite-slammed door and bites her long coral thumbnail, and then goes to peer unseen through the marquisette curtain, being careful not to move it or touch it, and she watches the way he walks away ; she can tell, by the way he walks down the path, that he's hurt. She's hurt and he's hurt, and who gets anything for it ?

She feels rotten.

Why especially him ? He wasn't offensive. Far from it. A nice-looking fellow with a good smile, strong teeth, neat clothes, and he wasn't about to shove his foot in the door. He treated her like a lady who might be helped by what he was selling ; he was selling that, and not himself.

You know, she tells herself, if he had been a real crumb, a winking, eyebrow-waggling creep who'd goggle at the bottom end of your bra strap and make a kissing noise, you'd have told him off in the nice way—a fast, light, harmless brush.

Well, then, she tells herself, appalled, that's the answer. You liked him ; that's why you threw the freeze.

She sits on the edge of the bed looking at that idea, and then she closes her eyes and lets her imagination get as foolish as it likes, imagining him coming in, touching her ; imagining him right here with her.

And that rings no bell. It really doesn't. What she liked about the man wasn't anything like that at all.

" Now how can you like a man without wanting him ?" she demands of herself aloud.

There is no answer. It is an article of faith with her. If you like a man, it has to be because you want him. Whoever heard of it any other way ?

People just don't go around liking people on sight *unless*. And if she can't feel that she wants him, it's one of those subconscious whatcha-ma-callits ; she's just not letting herself know it.

She doesn't want to want some other guy besides Herb, but she must. So she's rotten.

She falls back down on the bed and tells herself she ought to be hung up by the thumbs. She's rotten clear through.

The feast was on a mountain—at least, it was the highest hill Charlie had yet seen. Nearly a hundred Ledom were waiting there when Philos and Charlie and the great crowd arrived. In a grove of dark-leaved trees, on the faultless greensward, food was arrayed, laid out Hawaiian fashion on platters of woven fresh leaves and broad grasses. No Japanese flower-arranger ever did a more careful job than these gifted people with their food. Each platter and clever green basket was a construction in colour and form, contrast and harmony ; and the smells were symphonic.

" Help yourself," smiled Philos.

Charlie looked around him dazedly. The Ledom were coming from every direction, filtering through the trees, greeting each other with glad cries. There were frequent embraces, kisses.

" Where ?"

" Anywhere. It's all everybody's."

They stepped through the swirling crowd and seated themselves under a tree. Before them were lovely mounds of food, laid up in graspable, bite-sized portions, and so beautifully arranged that until Philos reached, and disturbed a symnetry, Charlie hadn't the heart to begin.

A pretty child came by with a tray balanced on its head, and a half-dozen mugs apparently designed for the purpose ; they were shaped like truncated cones with wide bases. Philos held out a hand and the child skipped toward them ; Philos took two mugs and kissed the child, who laughed and danced away. Charlie took a mug and sipped ; it was like cool applejuice with peach overtones. He began to eat with enthusiasm. The food tasted as good as it looked—a most extreme statement.

When he was able to slow down enough to look about again, he found the grove thick with a pleasant tension ; perhaps it was the cloud of music which hovered over the people that exemplified it most, for it lay in a wide chordal whisper, surging with a pulsation that seemed to become more regular by the moment. One thing that struck Charlie was the fact that a great many people seemed to be feeding each other rather than themselves. He asked about it.

" They're just sharing. If you experience something especially good, don't you feel the need to share it with someone ?"

Charlie recalled his odd touch of frustration in the realization that there had been, for him, no one to show the great terra-cotta statue to, and said, " I—guess so." He looked at his companion suddenly. " Look—don't let me keep you from uh—joining your friends if you want to."

A strange expression crossed Philos' face. " That is most kind of you," he said warmly. " But I—wouldn't in any case. Not just now." (Was that a slight rush of colour in his neck and cheeks ? And what was it ? Anger ? Charlie felt suddenly unwilling to pry).

" A lot of people," he commented after a while.

" All there are."

" What's the occasion ?"

" If you don't mind, I'd like you to tell me what you think, after it's over."

Puzzled, Charlie said, " Very well . . ."

They fell silent, listening. Softer and softer became the giant manifold music of the people, humming a series of close, and closely related chords. There crept into it a strange staccato, and looking about him, Charlie saw that some of them were gently tapping themselves, and sometimes their companion, on the base of the throat. It gave the voices a strange thrum, which at last took on a very definite rhythm, rapid but distinct. It seemed an eight-beat, with a slight emphasis on the first and fourth. On this was imposed a low four-tone melody, which cycled, cycled, cycled . . . everyone seemed to crouch, to lean forward a little, to tense . . .

Suddenly came the clarion of a powerful soprano voice, a very cascade of notes, bursting upward like a writhing firework from the drone of the bass melody, and subsiding. It was repeated either from far off in the grove, or from a small voice near by ; it was impossible to tell. Two tenors, by some magic striking in a major third apart, repeated the explosion of notes in harmony, and as it faded and fell, another strong voice, a blue-cloaked Ledom seated near Charlie, caught it up and blew it skyward again, this time stripping it of its accidentals and graces and all its *Glissandi*, giving it up in its purest form, six clear notes.

There was an excited rustle all about, as of appreciation, and a half-dozen scattered voices repeated the six-note theme in unison, then again repeated it. On the second of the six notes, someone else was inspired to start the theme right there ; it became fugal, and voice after voice took it up ; it burst and fell, burst and fell, interwoven and complex and thrilling. All the while the bass susurrus, with its throat-thumping irregular rhythm, lay under the music, swelling and sighing, swelling greater and drawing back.

Then with a movement as explosive as that first soprano statement, a nude figure came spinning down toward them, weaving in and out between the tree-trunks and among the people ; spinning so fast that the body contours were a blur, yet sure-footedly avoiding every obstacle. The spinning Ledom leapt high right by Philos, and came to earth kneeling, face and arms spread on the soft sward. Another came spinning, then another ; soon the dark wood was alive with movement, with the swirl of the cloaks and headdresses some wore, with the flash of bodies and blurring limbs.

Charlie saw Philos spring to his feet ; to his amazement he found himself standing, crouching, buffeted by the rising current of sound and motion. It became an effort not to fling himself into it as into a sea. He drew back finally and clung to the bole of a tree, gasping ; for he had an overriding fear that his unschooled feet would never stay under him in the whirling press ; that they would be as inadequate to shift and change as were his ears to contain all that was happening in the air about, as were his bewildered eyes to absorb the rush and patterning of those bodies.

It became, for him, a broken series of partial but sharply focussed pictures ; the swift turn of a torso ; the tense, ecstatic lifting of a fever-blinded head, with the silky hair falling away from the face, and the body trembling ; the shrill cry of a little child in transport, running straight through the pattern of the dance, arms outstretched and eyes closed, while the frantic performers, apparently unthinkingly, made way by hairsbreadth after hairsbreadth until a dancer swung about and caught up the infant, *threw* it, and it was plucked out of the air and whirled up again, and once more, to be set down gently at the edge of the dance.

At some point unnoted by him, the bass drone had become a roar, and the rhythm, instead of resulting from the subtle

tapping of the pharynx, had become a savage beat, furious fists on unnerved thorax and abdomen.

Charlie was shouting. . . .

Philos was gone. . . .

A wave of *something* was generated in the grove, and was released ; he could feel it rush him and dissipate ; it was as tangible as the radiation from an opened furnace door, but it was not heat. It was not anything he had ever felt, imagined, or experienced before . . . except perhaps by himself . . . oh never by himself ; it was with Laura. It was not sex ; it was a thing for which sex is one of the expressions. And at this its peak, the harmonious tumult altered in kind, though not at all in quality ; the interweaving flesh of the Ledom became a frame encircling the children— so many, many children—who had somehow formed themselves into a compact group ; they stood proud, even the tiniest ones, proud and knowing and deeply happy, while all about, the Ledom worshipped them, and sang.

They did not sing of the children. They did not sing to the children. It may be said in no other way but this : they sang the children.

Smitty has come out to chat over the back fence—actually, it is a low stone wall—with Herb. It happens that Smitty is sick furious with Tillie over something that does not matter really. Herb has been sitting on a lawn chair under a red and white umbrella with the afternoon paper, and he is furious also, but with somewhat less sickness and impersonally as well. Congress has not only passed a particularly stupid bill, but has underscored its particular stupidity by overriding a presidential veto. Seeing Smitty, he throws down the paper and strides to the back wall.

" How come," he says, meaning it purely as a preliminary remark, " the world is so full of dirty sons of bitches ?"

" That's easy," is the instant, dour remark. " Every one of 'em was born out of the dirtiest part of a woman."

Though in Ledom it never grew dark, it seemed darker with most of the people gone. Charlie sat on the cool green moss with his wrists on his kneecaps and his back against an olive tree, and bent his head to put his cheeks against the backs of his hands. His cheeks felt leathery, for there unaccountable tears had dried. At length he straightened up and looked at Philos, who waited patiently beside him.

Philos, as though to be sure not to utter a word lest it spoil something for his guest, acknowledged him with a soft smile and a peaking of his odd eyebrows.

" Is it over ?" Charlie asked.

Philos leaned back against the tree, and with a motion of his head indicated a group of Ledom, three adults and a half-dozen children, far down the grove, who were cheerfully picking up the mess. Over them, like an invisible swarm of magic bees, hung a cloud of music, at that moment triads, minor thirds, winging neatly upwards in formation, hovering, fading, winging upwards again. " It's never over," Philos said,

Charlie thought about that, and the statue call *The Maker*, and about as much as he dared to think about what had passed in the grove, and about the sound which dwelt about these people wherever they gathered.

Philos asked, quietly, " Do you want to ask me again what place this is ?"

Charlie shook his head and got to his feet. " I think I know," he said.

" Come, then," said Philos.

They walked to the fields, and through and by the fields and cottages, back towards the Ones, and they talked :

" Why do you worship children ?"

Philos laughed. It was pleasure, mostly. " First of all, I suppose it's because religion—and just to preclude argument, I'll define religion for this purpose as the supra-rational, or mystic experience—it's because religion seems to be a necessity to the species—but it would seem as well that the experience is not possible without an object. There is nothing more tragic than a person or a culture who, feeling the need to worship, has no object for it."

" For the sake of no argument, as you say, I'll buy that," said Charlie, aware of how quaint that sounded in Ledom. The word for " buy " was " interpenetrate "—a derivation of " exchange "—but surprisingly, shy as he might from its

overtones in this place, his meaning emerged. " But why children ?"

" We worship the future, not the past. We worship what is to come, not what has been. We aspire to the consequences of our own acts. We keep before us the image of that which is malleable and growing—of that which we have the power to improve. We worship that very power in ourselves, and the sense of responsibility which lives with it. A child is all of these things. Also . . ." and he stopped.

" Go on."

" It's something which you need a good deal of adjustment to absorb, Charlie. I don't think you can do it."

" Try me."

Philos shrugged. " You asked for it : We worship the child because it is inconceivable that we would ever obey one."

They walked in silence for a long time.

" What's the matter with obeying the God you worship ?"

" In theory, nothing, I suppose, especially when along with the obedience goes the belief in a living—that is, current, and contemporaneously knowledgeable God." Philos paused, choosing words. " But in practice, more often than not, the hand of God in human affairs is a dead hand. His dictates are couched in the interpretations of Elders of one kind and another—past-drenched folk with their memories impaired, their eyes blinded, and all the love in them dried up." He looked at Charlie, and his dark strange eyes were full of compassion. " Haven't you been able to see yet that the very essence of the Ledom is—passage ?"

" Passage ?"

" Movement, growth, change, catabolism. Could music exist without passage, without progression, or poetry ; could you speak a word and call it a rhyme without speaking more words ? Could life exist . . . why, passage is very nearly a definition for life ! A living thing changes by the moment and by each portion of each part of a moment ; even when it sickens, even when it decays, it changes, and when it stops changing, it's—oh, it could be many things ; lumber, like a dead tree ; food, like a killed fruit ; but it's not life any more . . . The architecture of a culture is supposed to express its state of mind, if not its very faith ; what do the shapes of the Medical One and the Science One say to you ?"

Charlie snickered ; it was the laugh of unease, like embarrassment. " *Tim . . . ber* !" he cried in an imitation bellow, in English. Then he explained, " That's what the loggers used to shout when they'd cut through a tree-trunk and it was about to fall : get out of the way !"

Philos laughed appreciatively and without rancour. " Have you ever seen a picture of a man running ? Or even walking ? He is off balance, or would be if he were as frozen as the picture is. He could hardly run or walk if he weren't imbalanced. That is how you progress from any place to any other place—by beginning, over and over again, to fall."

" And then it turns out they're propped up on invisible crutches."

Philos twinkled, " All symbols are, Charlie."

Again, Charlie was forced to laugh. " ' There's only one Philos.' " He said it with unconscious mimicry. And again, he saw Philos flush darkly. Anger—for that matter, even mild irritation—was so rare here that it was more shocking than profanity. " What's the matter ? Did I—"

"Who said that ? Mielwis, wasn't it ?" Philos shot him a sharp glance, and read the answer from Charlie's face. He apparently read also the necessity for the end of anger, for with an obvious effort he put his down, and pleaded : " Don't feel you've said anything wrong, Charlie. It isn't you at all. Mielwis . . ." He drew and released a deep breath. "Mielwis occasionally indulges in a private joke."

Abruptly and, with evident purpose, changing the subject, he demanded, " But about the architecture—don't you quarrel with the concept of dynamic imbalance in the face of these ?" He swept his hand to indicate the cottages—mud-and-wattle, rammed earth, log and plaster and stone and hewn planks.

" Nothing tottery about that," agreed Charlie, nodding toward the one they were passing—the Italian square-module one with the domed plaster roofs over each square.

" So they're not symbols. Or not in the sense that the big Ones are. They're the concrete results of our profound conviction that the Ledom will never separate themselves from the land—and I mean that in its widest possible sense. Civilizations have a pernicious way of breeding whole classes and generations of people who make their livings once removed—twice, ten, fifty times removed from the techniques of the hand. Men could be born, live, and die, and never move a spade of

earth, or true a timber, or weave a swatch, or even see spade, adze or loom. Isn't that so, Charlie ? Wasn't it so with you ?"

Charlie nodded thoughtfully. He had had the same thought himself—he really had, one day when, city-bred as he was, he hired out to pick beans once when he needed the money and there was an ad in the paper. He had hated it, living in barracks with a filthy herd of human misfits, and working all day in cramping, crouching, baking, soaking labour for which he was untrained and in which—even in the matter of picking beans—he was unskilled.

Yet it had come to him that just this once, when once he actually ate a bean, that he himself was taking from the womb of the soil that which it bore and which could in turn sustain him. He was putting his two naked hands to the naked earth, and between him and it was no complex of interchange, status, substitution, or intricate many-layered system of barter between goods and services.

And it had come to him again more than once since, when the intimate, earthy matter of filling his belly was taken care of by making marks on paper, by scraping and stacking restaurant plates and scrubbing pots, by pulling steering clutches on a bulldozer or pushing buttons on an adding machine.

" Such men have an extremely limited survival value," Philos was saying. " They have, like good survival creatures, adapted to their environment—but that environment is a large and elaborate machine ; there is very little about it which is as basic as the simple act of plucking a fruit or finding and cooking the proper grass. Should the machine be smashed, or should even some small but integral part of it stop working, everyone in it will become a hopeless dependant in precisely the length of time it take his stomach to empty itself.

"*All* the Ledom—every single one of us—though we might find ourselves with one or two real skills, have a working knowledge of agriculture and basic construction, weaving, cooking, and waste disposal, and how to make fire and find water. Skilled or no—and no one is skilled in everything—an unskilled person with a working knowledge of necessities is better able to survive than a man who could, say, control a sheet-metal mill better than anyone else in the world but does not know how to join a rafter or save seed-corn or dig a latrine."

" Oh-h-h," said Charlie in tones of revelation.

" What is it ?"

" I'm beginning to see something here . . . I couldn't square all that push-button living in the Medical One with all the hand-made crockery. I thought it was a matter of privilege."

" Those who work in the Ones eat out here as a privilege !" (Actually, the word " privilege " here is not exact ; it translated " favour " or " treat.") " The Ones are first of all working places, and the only places where the work from time to time is so exacting and must be done with such precision that it is efficient to save time. Out here it is efficient to use time ; we we have so much of it. We do not sleep, and no matter how carefully you build or cultivate, the work keeps getting finished."

" How much time do the children spend in school ?"

" School—oh. Oh, I see what you mean. No, we don't have schools."

" No schools ? But . . . oh, that is good enough for people who only want to know how to plant and build do-it-yourself housing . . . is that what you mean ? But—what about your technologists—you don't live forever, do you ? What happens when one needs replacing ? And what about books . . . and music manuscript . . . and—oh, all the thing that people learn to read and write for ? Mathematics—reference books—"

" We don't need them. We have the cerebrostyle."

" Seace mentioned it. I can't say I understand it.

" I can't say that either," said Philos. " But I can assure you it works."

" And you use it for teaching, instead of schools."

" No. Yes."

Charlie laughed at him.

Philos laughed too, and said, " I wasn't as confused as I sounded. The ' no ' was for your statement, we use the cerebrostyle for teaching. We don't *teach* our children the ' book ' kind of learning, we implant it with the cerebrostyle. It's quick—it's only a matter of selecting the right information block and throwing a switch. The (he here used a technical term for " unused and available memory cells ") and the synaptic paths to them are located and the information ' printed ' on the mind in a matter of seconds—one and a half, I think. Then the block is ready for the next person.

But *teaching*, now ; well, if there is any teaching done with this implanted information, you do it yourself, either by consciously thinking it through—much faster than reading, by the way—while you're working in the fields, or during a ' pause '—remember the Ledom we saw standing alone just before we got to Grocid's house ? . . . But even that process you can't call teaching.

" Teaching is an art that can be learned ; learning from a teacher is an art that can be learned ; anyone who tries—and we all try—can gain a certain competence in teaching ; but a *real* teacher, now—he has a talent. He has a gift like a fine artist or musician or sculptor. Oh, we think highly of teachers, and of teaching. Teaching is part of loving, you know," he added.

Charlie thought of cold, repellent, dying Miss Moran and understood in a great warm flash. He thought of Laura.

"We use the cerebrostyle," said Philos, " as we use the A-field; we don't depend on it. We don't, therefore, *need* it. We learn reading and writing, and we have a great many books ; any Ledom who cares to may read them, although we generally like to have him put on the cerebrostyle ' setter ' while he reads, and make a new block."

" These blocks—they can hold a whole book ?"

Philos held up two thumbnails, side by side. " In about that much space. . . . And we know how to make paper and manufacture books, and if we ever had to, we would. You must understand that about us ; we shall never, never be the slaves of our conveniences."

" That's good," said Charlie, thinking of many, many past things which were not good ; thinking of whole industries crippled when the elevator operators went on strike in a central office building, thinking of the plight of a city apartment dweller during a power failure, without water, refrigeration, lights, radio, television ; unable to cook, wash, or be amused. But . . . " Even so," he mused, " there's something about it I don't like. If you can do that you can select a block and implant a whole set of beliefs and loyalties ; you could arrange a slavery that would make any of ours look like a practice hop in a sack race."

" No we *can't* !" Philos said forcefully. " To say nothing of the fact that we wouldn't. You don't love, nor gain love, by imprisonment or command, or by treachery and lies."

" You don't ?" asked Charlie.

" The parts of the mind are now clearly defined. The cerebrostyle is an information transfer device. The only way you could implant false doctrines would be to simultaneously shut off all other memory plus all the senses ; because I assure you that whatever the cerebrostyle gives you is subject to review against everything you already know plus everything you experience. We could not teach inconsistencies if we tried."

" Do you ever withhold information ?"

Philos chuckled. " You do hunt for flaws, now, don't you?"

" Well," said Charlie, " do you ever withhold information?"

The chuckle clicked off. Philos said soberly, " Of course we do. We wouldn't tell a child how to prepare fuming nitric acid. We wouldn't tell a Ledom how his mate screamed under a rock-fall."

" Oh." They walked a while in silence. . . . a Ledom and his mate . . . " You do marry, then ?"

" Oh yes. To be lovers is a happy thing. But to be married —that is happiness on a totally different level. It is a solemn thing among us, and we take it very seriously. You know Grocid and Nasive."

A light dawned in Charlie's mind. " They dress alike."

" They do everything alike, or if not alike, then together. Yes, they're married."

" Do you . . . do the people . . . uh . . ."

Philos clapped him on the shoulder. " I know about your preoccupation in the matter of sex," he said. " Go on—ask me. You're among friends."

" I'm *not* preoccupied with it !"

They walked on, Charlie sullenly, Philos humming softly, suddenly, in harmony with a distant melody that drifted down to them from some children in the fields. Hearing it, Charlie's sullenness abruptly lifted. He realised that these things are, after all, comparative ; the Ledom genuinely were less preoccupied with sexual matters than he was, just as he was less preoccupied than, say, a Victorian housewife who would refer to the " limbs " of a piano, and who would not put a book by a male author on a shelf next to one by a female author unless the two authors happened to be married.

And he was prepared to accept, as well, Philos' statement that he was among friends.

As conversationally as possible, he asked, " What about children ?"

" What about children ?"

" Suppose one—ah—gets born and the—ah—parent isn't married ?'

" Most of them are born that way."

" And it makes no difference ?"

" Not to the child. Not to the parent, either, as far as anyone else is concerned."

" Then what's the point of getting married ?"

" The point, Charlie, is that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts."

" Oh."

" The greatest occasion of sexual expression is a mutual orgasm, wouldn't you say ?"

" Yes," said Charlie as clinically as he could.

" And procreation is a high expression of love ?"

" Oh yes."

" Then if a Ledom and his mate mutually conceive, and each

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bears twins, does not that appear to be a fairly transcendant experience ?"

" F-fairly," said Charlie in a faint voice, overwhelmed. He put the transcendance away in the back of his mind, kneeing it down until it stopped making quite so large a lump. When he could, he asked, " What about the other kind of sex ?"

" *Other* kind ?" Philos wrinkled his brow, and apparently went through some sort of mental card-file. " Oh—you mean just ordinary expressive sex."

" I suppose that's what I mean."

" Well, it happens, that's all. Anything which is an expression of love can happen here, sex, or helping put on a roof, or singing." Glancing at Charlie's face, he nodded to his invisible card-file and went on : " I think I know what's perplexing you. You come from a place where certain acts and expressions were held in a bad light—frowned upon, even punished. Is that it?"

" I guess."

" Then apparently this is what you want to know : There is no opprobrium connected with it here. It isn't regulated in any way. It can only happen when it's an expression of mutual affection, and if there isn't mutual affection, it doesn't happen."

" What about the young ?"

" What *about* the young ?"

" I mean . . . kids, you know. Experimenting and all that."

Philos laughed his easy laugh. " Question : When are they old enough to do it ? Answer : When they are old enough to do it. As for experimentation, why experiment with anything that's almost as commonly seen as the greeting kiss ?"

Charlie gulped. Put this where he may, it still made a lump. Almost plaintively, he said, " But—what about unwanted children ?"

Philos stopped dead, turned, and looked at him, his dark face showing an almost comic succession of changes : shock, amazement, disbelief, question (Are you kidding ? Do you mean what you just said?); and at length, of all things, apology. " I'm sorry, Charlie. I didn't think you could shock me, but you did. I thought that after the amount of research I've done, I was proof against it, but I guess I never expected to stand here in the middle of Ledom and try to engage my mind with the concept of an *unwanted* child."

" I'm sorry, Philos. I didn't mean to shock anybody."

" *I'm* sorry. I am surprised that I was shocked, and sorry that I showed it."

Then, through an orchard, Grocid hailed them, and Philos asked, " You thirsty ?" and they struck off toward the white cottage. It was good, for a while, to be able to get their attention away from one another. It was good to be able to go out and look at the terra cotta again.

Herb stands in the moonstruck dark looking down at his daughter. He has slipped out of bed and come here because, on other occasions, he has found it a good place to be for the distraught, the confused, the hurt and puzzled mind. It is not easy to contain feelings of violence and unrest while, breathless, one leans close to examine by moonlight the meeting of the eyelids of a sleeping child.

His malaise began three days ago, when his neighbour Smith, in bitter casualness, tossed a remark over the back wall. The statement itself had seemed, at the time, to go by him like a bad odour ; he had chatted about a political matter and the talk had then dwindled away to inconsequence. Yet since then he found he had taken the remark away with him ; it was as if Smitty, having been plagued by some festering growth, had been able to drive it into his, Herb's flesh.

It is with him now and he cannot put it by.

*Men are born out of the dirtiest part of a woman.*

Herb dissociates the remark from Smith, a man who has his troubles and his especial background, for neither of which he is completely accountable. What is troubling Herb Raile is an issue far larger ; he is wondering what it is about humanity, since it first came out of the trees, in all the many different things it has been and done, which makes it possible for even one man to say once a thing as filthy as that.

Or was it more than an obscene joke . . . is it true, or nearly true ?

Is that what is meant by the inescapable taint of Original Sin ? Is it men's disgust of women that makes so many of them treat women with such contempt ? Is it that which makes it so easy to point out that the Don Juans and the Lotharios, for all their hunger for women, are often merely trying to see how many women they can punish ? Is this the realisation which makes a man, having like a good Freudian child passed into a period of mother-fixation, find a turning point and begin to hate his mother ?

When did men begin to find womanhood despicable—when did they decree the menses unclean, and even to this day practice in their houses of worship the ritual known as "churching of women"—the old post-natal purification ceremony?

Because I don't feel that way, he says silently and devoutly. I love Jeanette because she is a woman, and I love her all over.

Happily, Karen sighs in her sleep. The anger and terror and outrage of his thoughts tumble away, and he smiles over Karen, yearns over her.

Nobody, he thinks, ever wrote anything about father-love. Mother-love is supposed to be a magic expression of the hand of God or something, or maybe the activity of certain ductless glands; it depends on who's talking. But father-love . . . an awful funny thing, father-love. He's seen an otherwise mild and civilized man go clean berserk because "somebody did something to my kid." He knows from his own experience that after a while this father-love begins to spread out; you begin to feel that way, a little, toward all kids. Now where's that come from? The kids never inhabits the abdomen, doesn't pull on and feed off the body, as with women; mother love makes sense, it figures; a baby grows on and of the mother's flesh like a nose. But the father? Why, it takes some pretty special circumstances to make a father even remember the particular two- or three-second spasm that did the job.

Why wouldn't it ever occur to anyone to say humanity was full of sons of bitches because it issued from the filthiest part of a man? It wouldn't, you know; not ever.

Because, it says here, man is superior. Man—mankind (and oh yes, women have learned this trick!) mankind has in it a crushing need to feel superior. This doesn't have to bother the very small minority who actually are superior, but it sure troubles the controlling majority who are not.

If you can't be really good at anything, then the only way to be able to prove you are superior is to make someone else inferior. It is this rampaging need in humanity which has, since pre-history, driven a man to stand on the neck of his neighbour, a nation to enslave another, a race to tread on a race. But it is also what men have always done to women.

Did they actually find them inferior to begin with, and learn from that to try to feel superior to other things outside—other races, religions, nationalities, occupations?

Or was it the other way around : did men make women inferior for the same reason they tried to dominate the outsider? Which is cause, which effect ?

And—isn't it just self-preservation ? Wouldn't women dominate men if they had the chance ?

Aren't they trying it right now ?

Haven't they already done it, here on Begonia Drive ?

He looks down at Karen's hand in the moonlight. He saw it first when it was an hour old, and was thunderstruck by the perfection of the fingernails, of all things ; so tiny ! so tiny ! so perfect ! And is this little hand to take hold of reins, Karen, or pull strings, Karen ? Are you come into a world where down deep the world despises you, Karen ?

The father-love suffuses him, and unmoving, yet he sees in a transported moment himself standing like a warrior between the slime-born sons of bitches and his child.

★

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" Nasive . . ."

The Ledom, glowing with pleasure, stood before the terra-cotta group with Charlie, smiled and answered, " Yes ?"

" Can I ask you something ?"

" Anything."

" Confidential, Nasive. Is it wrong to ask you that ?"

" I don't think so."

" And if I step out of bounds in asking, you won't take it poorly ? I'm a stranger here."

" Ask me."

" It's about Philos."

" Oh."

" Why is everyone here so hard on Philos ? Let me take that back," he amended quickly. " That puts it too strongly. It's just that everyone seems to sort of . . . disapprove. Not so much of him, but of something about him."

" Oh," said Nasive, " I don't think it's anything that matters very much."

" You're not going to tell me, then." There was a stiff silence. Then Charlie said, " I'm supposed to be learning all I can about Ledom. Do you or do you not think I would gain some kind of insight by knowing something that was wrong in Ledom ? Or am I supposed to judge you only by—" he nodded at the statue—" what you like best about yourselves?"

As he had seen Philos do before, Charlie watched a Ledom instantly and completely disarmed. The impact of truth on these folk was, apparently, enormous.

" You couldn't be more right, Charlie Johns, and I shouldn't have hesitated. But—in all fairness to Philos, I must in turn ask *your* confidence. The matter is, after all, Philos' business and not mine nor yours."

" I won't let him know I know."

" Very well, then. Philos stands a little apart from the rest of us. For one thing, he has a secretiveness about him—which in a way is useful ; he is given access to a great many things which the rest of us are better off without. But one feels that he . . . prefers it that way, while to the normal Ledom, that sort of thing might be a duty, but it would be an enormous one."

" That doesn't seem reason enough to—"

" Oh, it isn't the prime discomfort he generates ! The other thing about him—perhaps it is part of the same thing—is that he won't marry."

" A person doesn't *have* to marry, does he ?"

"Oh no indeed." Nasive moistened his full lips and frowned. " But Philos behaves as if he is still married."

" *Still* married ?"

" He was married to Froure. They were to have children. One day they walked out to the edge of the sky—" (Charlie comprehended the odd phrase)—" and there was an accident. A rock-slide. They were buried for days. Froure was killed. Philos lost the unborn children."

Charlie recalled that Philos had used " screaming in a rock-slide " as a figure of speech.

" Philos grieved . . . well, we can all understand that. We love a great deal, we love many ways ; our mates we love deeply indeed, and so we understand the nature of grief. But as basic with us as love itself is the necessity to love the living, not the dead It makes us feel . . . uncomfortable . . . to have someone around who holds himself aloof from loving freely, to be faithful to someone who is gone. It's . . . pathological."

" Maybe he'll get over it."

" It happened many years ago," said Nasive, shaking his head.

" If it's pathological, can't you treat it ?"

" With his agreement, we could. And since his particular quirk presents nothing worse than a mild discomfort for a few of us, he is free to remain the way he is if that's what he wishes."

" Now I understand that little joke of Mielwis."

" What was that ?"

" He said, ' There's only one like him !' but he said it as a joke."

" That was hardly worthy of Mielwis," said Nasive sternly.

" Whatever it was, it's confidential."

" Of course. . . . And now do you feel you know us any better ?"

" I don't, ' said Charlie, " but I feel I will."

They exchanged smiles and returned to the house to join the others. Philos was deep in conversation with Grocid, and Charlie was certain they were talking about him. Grocid confirmed this by saying, " Philos tells me you're almost ready to pass judgment on us."

" Not exactly that," laughed Philos. " It's just that I've given you almost all I have. How long it takes you to draw your conclusions is up to you."

" I hope it's a long time," said Grocid. " You're very welcome here, you know. Nasive likes you."

It was the kind of remark which in Charlie's day might be made out of the subject's presence, but not in it. Charlie glanced swiftly at Nasive, only to find him nodding. " Yes, I do," said Nasive warmly.

" Well, thanks," said Charlie. " I like it here too."

" Smith is a swine."

Herb Raile, preoccupied, hears these words from Jeanette as she comes in the back door after a visit with Tillie, and he starts violently. He has shared none of his recent thoughts about Smith with her nor with anyone, though he feels a great need to unburden himself. He has checked over all possible recipients for his pressures—one of the girls, maybe, who hung around after the League of Women Voters meetings, or some of the folks at the Great Books gatherings, or the P.T.A., although as the father of a five-year-old he was only peripherally involved there as yet, likewise the local School Board Association. But he is afraid. Swine or no, Smith's advice was sound : A new account—that's serious. Anything else, kicks.

He is not getting any kicks at all out of this thing ; it's too large for him and it is not crystallised. Surprised as he is over the confluence of Jeanette's remark to his thoughts, he is not even sure yet whether he thinks Smith is a swine. A pig among people is a pig, he tells himself, but a pig among pigs is people.

" What's he done ?"

" You go over there, that's all. He'll show it to you. Tillie's just wild."

" I wish I knew what you are talking about, honey."

" I'm sorry, honey. It's a sign thing, a sort of plaque in the rumpus room."

" Something like those urinary-type labels for the liquor bottles ?"

" Much worse. You'll see."

" What's next, Philos ?"

" A good hard look at yourself," said Philos, and then turned and took the edge off the words with a warm smile. " A categorical ' yourself,' I mean. You wouldn't want to evaluate Ledom in a vacuum. Much better to be able to set it up against the other culture for contrast."

" I already can, I think. In the first place—" but Philos was interrupting :

" You can ?" he said, with such meaning that Charlie shut up.

They were walking the final mile between the Children's One and the Science One. A little petulantly, Charlie said, " I know enough about my own people, I think, to—"

Again Philos sardonically interrupted, and said, " You do ?"

" Well, if you don't think so," said Charlie with some heat, " Go ahead !"

" Go ahead and what ?"

" Set me straight."

" I am," said Philos, taking no offense and, strangely, giving none. " We're going to do it with the cerebrostyle. Quicker, easier, much more detailed, and," he grinned, " inarguable and uninterruptible."

" I wouldn't interrupt and argue."

" You would ; you must. There is literally no subject ever encountered in the history of mankind so unsusceptible to objective study as that of sex. Countless volumes have been written about history and historical motivations with never a mention of sex. Entire generations, and scores of successive generations, of students have pored over them and taken them for the truth and the whole truth, and some have gone on to teach the same things in the same way—even when the importance of sex motivations to the individual had been revealed, even when the individual, in his daily life, was interpreting his whole world with them, filling his thoughts and his language with sex referents.

"Somehow history remained to a great majority of people a series of anecdotes about some strangers who performed acts and fulfilled desires strangely separated from the sexual behaviour of their times—behaviour which was at once the result and the cause of their acts. Behaviour which produced

both history and the blind historian . . . and I suppose, his blindness as well. But I should be saying these things after you're through the course, and not before."

" I think," said Charlie a little stiffly, " we'd better get to it."

They walked round the Science One and took the subway to the Medical One, and Philos led Charlie through the now-familiar horizontal catacombs and vertiginous flights of the huge building. Once they passed through a good-sized hall, rather like a railroad waiting room ; it was full of the Ledom chordal hum and the soft cooing of their voices ; Charlie was particularly struck by the tableau of two identically cloaked Ledom, each with a sleeping child on the knees, each nursing another . . ." What are they all waiting for ?"

" I think I told you—everyone comes here each twenty-eight days for a checkup."

" Why ?"

" Why not ? Ledom is small, you know—we haven't eight hundred people yet—and no one lives more than two hours' walk away. We have all the facilities, so—why not ?"

" How thorough is the checkup ?"

" *Very*."

Near the top of the building Philos stopped in front of a doorslit. " Palm it—there."

Charlie did so, and nothing happened. Then Philos palmed it and it opened. " My private preserve," said Philos. " The nearest thing to a lock you will find in all Ledom."

" Why lock anything ?" Charlie had noticed the absence of locks, especially throughout the Children's One.

Philos waved Charlie in, and the door snapped shut. " We have very few taboos in Ledom," he said, " but one of them is against leaving highly contagious material around." He was half-joking, Charlie knew ; yet there was a strong serious element in what he said.

" Actually," Philos explained, " few Ledom would bother with this," and he waved a hand carelessly at a half-dozen floor-to-ceiling bookshelves and a wall-rack of small stacked transparent cubes. " We're infinitely more concerned with the future, and none of this matters much any more. Still . . . ' man, know thyself ' . . . It might make some folks pretty unhappy to know themselves this well."

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He went to the rack of cubes, consulted an index, and took down a cube. In purple, it bore a small line of numbers ; he checked this against the index and then went to a low couch and, from one of the magically-appearing wall niches, drew a piece of apparatus. It was a bowl-shaped helmet supported by a jointed arm. " The cerebrostyle," he said. He tipped it up so Charlie could look inside the bowl. It showed nothing but a dozen or so rubbery nubbins, set into its crown. " No electrodes, no probes. And it doesn't hurt a bit."

He took his small numbered cube, opened a chamber near the top of the helmet, dropped the cube in, closed and clamped the lid. Then he lay on the couch, drew the helmet down and pressed it against his head. The instrument seemed to tilt a bit, forward and back, finding purchase, orienting.

It ceased to move, and Philos relaxed. He smiled up at Charlie, and said, " Now excuse me a couple of seconds." He closed his eyes, reached up and touched a stud at the edge of the helmet. The stud remained depressed ; his hand fell limply away.

There was a deep silence.

The stud clicked, and instantly Philos opened his eyes. He pushed away the helmet and sat up. There was no sign of fatigue or strain. " That didn't take long, did it ?"

" What did you do ?"

Philos pointed to the little hatchway into which he had dropped the cube. " That's a little dissertation I prepared on certain aspects of homo sap.," he said. " It needed a little . . . editing. There are certain facts you say you do not wish to know, and besides, I wanted it to come to you from me, like a letter, rather than impersonally, like a textbook."

" You mean you can alter these records, just like that ?"

" It takes a little practice, and a deal of concentration, but—yes. Well—go ahead." When Charlie looked at the helmet and hesitated, Philos laughed at him. " Go on. It won't hurt, and it'll bring you that much closer to home."

Boldly, then, Charlie Johns lay down. Philos swung the helmet over him and helped him place it over his head. Charlie felt the blunt little fingers inside touch his scalp, cling. The helmet moved, and then was still. Philos took his hand and guided it to the stud. " Push this yourself, when you're ready. Nothing will happen until you do." He stepped back. " Relax."

Charlie looked up at him. There was no spite or slyness in the strange dark eyes ; only warm encouragement.

He pressed the stud.

Herb crosses the back yard, wondering how to ask Smitty about the plaque, or whatever it was, that had steamed Jeanette up so, without actually informing him that Jeanette is angry.

Smitty is poking at a border of marigolds, and when he sees Herb, he gets up, dusts off his knees, and solves the problem :

" Hi. Come on over ; I want to show you something. Think you'll get a charge out of it."

Herb vaults the low wall and goes with Smith into the house and down the steps. Smith has a nice rumpus room. The heater looks like a hi-fi-set and the hi-fi set looks like a radiator. The washer-dryer looks like a television, the television looks like a coffee table, the bar looks like a bar, and the whole business is in knotty pine.

Over the bar in front-and-centre position, well framed and glazed, in large gothic or black-letter script, so you have to read it slowly and it's all the funnier for that, is a quotation which declares itself (down at the end in fine print) vaguely as the work of " a Middle Ages Philosopher ":

**A Good Woman (as an old Philosopher observeth) is but like one Ele put in a bagge amongst 500 Snakes, and if a man should have the luck to grope out that one Ele from all the Snakes, yet he hath at best but a wet Ele by the Taile.**

Herb is prepared to join Jeanette in indignation, sight unseen, but the plaque takes him deliciously by surprise, and he roars, while Smitty chuckles in the background. Then Herb asks how Tillie likes it.

" Women," Smitty pontificates, " are squares."

**To be concluded**


**Paperback—American**

Frederik Pohl's **Drunkard's Walk** (Ballantine Books, 35 cents) just crept in under the wire to be included in the 1960 publications and added to my private rating of the Year's Best science fiction novels (new not reprint, although a short version of the Pohl did appear in *Galaxy* during the year). Only five titles stand out in my mind as verdant oases in a vast desert of ground down corn—30-*Day-Wonder* by Richard Wilson (Ballantine—reviewed in No. 102) ; *Death World* by Harry Harrison (Bantam) ; *Venus Plus X* by Theodore Sturgeon (Pyramid) ; *Drunkard's Walk* ; and, my vote for the outstanding novel of the year—or the past five years—Walter M. Miller's *A Canticle For Leibowitz* (Lippincott, New York ; Weidenfeld & Nicholson, London).

A lot of people will undoubtedly disagree over the choice of the Miller book (a) it wasn't science fiction, but neither was Orwell's **1984** or a lot of other books, and (b) the Lippincott edition had a 1959 copyright date. However, the book didn't appear on the short list of titles voted on at the World s-f Convention in Pittsburgh last year (Robert Heinlein's *Starship Troopers* was voted the best novel of 1959 and incidentally will be coming as a British paperback from Four Square shortly) and, in any case, I read the British edition which had a 1960 copyright.

A limited few titles were better than average, of which John Wyndham's *Trouble With Lichen* certainly rates an honourable mention (Michael Joseph, London ; Ballantine, New York—reviewed in No. 99). The majority of new novels, however, both hard cover and paperback, were well below standard but my nomination for Rubbish Novel of the year with black crepe trimmings goes to Poul Anderson's *The High Crusade* (Doubleday). Publisher and editors concerned should hang their heads in shame at foisting this one off as modern science fiction. I am the more irritated because this one came out of the Street and

Smith *Astounding S-F* stable, who also published *Death World*, and one doesn't expect stinkers from this source or from Anderson.

**Drunkard's Walk** is labelled " bitingly funny " and " sharply satirical." I found it neither and am forced to the conclusion that the blurb writer saw it from a different angle to myself. It is, however, a deeply thought-provoking future-society novel of the type now being made famous by Fred Pohl and previously with his collaborations with Cyril Kornbluth—*The Space Merchants*, *Gladiator-at-Law*, *Wolfbane* (coming shortly from Victor Gollancz Ltd.) et al.

Pohl's premise this time is that the educationally elite live out their lives in vast university cities supported in the outside world by the masses, whose main job is to produce food somehow for the overpopulated land areas. So overcrowded are the continents that Pohl envisages vast cities built on pylons over the sea, housing fishermen in the main. Hope is offered these slaves of education by a series of examinations which may eventually enrol them into a university city ; professors and teachers have mass audiences on television, are virtually groomed to TV stardom, and do little else except teach and pursue pure research.

One such is Cornut, born in 2166, a mathematician who teaches the Mnemonics of Numbers, and seems to be developing a suicidal tendency during half-waking periods. So much so that he evolves elaborate precautions to prevent death by his own volition. It transpires that the suicide rate amongst University teachers is high and increasing. Accidental death from outside sources also begins to play an important part in Cornut's attempt to live and he eventually has the longest survival record in the university, despite two enforced trips away from the campus, during one of which he travels by air with the University President and a field expedition to Tahiti to pick up some aboriginals for studying. They turn out to be a ' lost tribe ' of the Japanese Imperial Army—with telepathic tendencies—and that is where the plot really thickens, and all I intend to give away. Which hasn't been very much but plot synopses always spoil a book in advance for me—I assume you feel the same.

*Drunkard's Walk* is an excellent example of the wordsmith's art—a fine, understandable, futuristic setting, good dialogue and characterisation, and an intense plot. One can forgive

Mr. Pohl for a slight weakness in the ending in view of what goes before.

A novel that failed to make an impression with me was Robert Sheckley's **The Status Civilization** (Signet, 35c), which the copyright by-line says, was published as " Omega " in *Amazing S-F.* I have learned not to expect dull thuds from either Sheckley or Signet but this one fell right apart at the seams and halfway through developed into a galactic adventure story, well written but no better in plot than a score of others produced during the year. Which was a great pity because Sheckley has brilliantly drawn a future society based upon a penal world where each prisoner must conform to the status civilisation of a ruthless way of life—where the killer is king and a peculiar form of idolatry in drugs and the Black Arts is the main form of worship (compulsory).

To compensate for this, perhaps (and you may well like *The Status Civilization*) Signet have re-issued that hardy perennial **Beyond This Horizon** by Robert Heinlein, which was born back in 1942 and comes out again to thrill a new generation of science fiction readers.

Best buy in recent months in the collection field is **Six Great Short Science Fiction Novels** edited by Groff Conklin (Dell, 50c) and one might well hang the " great " tag on most of Groff's many selections over the years. Contains : " Galley Slave," Isaac Asimov ; " Project Nursemaid," Judith Merrill ; " Final Gentleman," Clifford Simak ; " Chain Reaction," Algys Budrys ; " Rule Golden," Damon Knight ; and " Incommunicado," Katherine MacLean.

*John Carnell*