

# Science Fantasy



**No. 39**  
**VOLUME 13**

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**THE  
SOUND-SWEEP**

**J. G. Ballard**

**THE SHIP  
FROM HOME**

**J. T. McIntosh**

*Short Stories*

**NOT A SPARROW  
FALLS**

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# Science Fantasy

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*Eighteen months ago in the April issue of New Worlds, Jim Ballard had a delightful short story entitled "Track 12" which opened up the possibilities of sonics as a plot theme. Here, in this long novelette, he has extended his ideas into a high level and most unusual story.*

# THE SOUND-SWEEP

BY J. G. BALLARD

---

o n e

By midnight Madame Gioconda's headache had become intense. All day the derelict walls and ceiling of the sound stage had reverberated with the endless din of traffic accelerating across the mid-town flyover which arched fifty feet above the studio's roof, a frenzied hypomaniac babel of jostling horns, shrilling tyres, plunging brakes and engines that hammered down the empty corridors and stairways to the sound stage on the second floor, making the faded air feel leaden and angry.

Exhausting but at least impersonal, these sounds Madame Gioconda could bear. At dusk, however, when the flyover quietened, they were overlaid by the mysterious clapping of her phantoms, the sourceless applause that rustled down onto

the stage from the darkness around her, at first a few scattered ripples from the front rows that soon spread to the entire auditorium, mounting to a tumultuous ovation in which she suddenly detected a note of sarcasm, a single shout of derision that drove a spear of pain through her forehead, followed by an uproar of boos and catcalls that filled the tortured air, driving her away towards her couch where she lay gasping helplessly until Mangon arrived at midnight, hurrying onto the stage with his sonovac.

Understanding her, he first concentrated on sweeping the walls and ceiling clean, draining away the heavy depressing underlayer of traffic noises. Carefully he ran the long snout of the sonovac over the ancient scenic flats (relics of her previous roles at the Metropolitan Opera House) which screened in Madame Gioconda's make-shift home—the great collapsing Byzantine bed (*Othello*) mounted against the microphone turret ; the huge framed mirrors with their peeling silver-screen (*Orpheus*) stacked in one corner by the bandstand ; the stove (*Travatore*) set up on the programme director's podium ; the gilt-trimmed dressing table and wardrobe (*Figaro*) stuffed with newspaper and magazine cuttings. He swept them methodically, moving the sonovac's nozzle in long strokes, drawing out the dead residues of sound that had accumulated during the day.

By the time he finished the air was clear again, the atmosphere lightened, its overtones of fatigue and irritation dissipated. Gradually Madame Gioconda recovered. Sitting up weakly, she smiled wanly at Mangon. Mangon grinned back encouragingly, slipped the kettle onto the stove for Russian tea, sweetened by the usual phenobarbitone chaser, switched off the sonovac and indicated to her that he was going outside to empty it.

Down in the alley behind the studio he clipped the sonovac onto the intake manifold of the sound truck. The vacuum drained in a few seconds, but he waited a discretionary two or three minutes before returning, keeping up the pretence that Madame Gioconda's phantom audience was real. Of course the cylinder was always empty, containing only the usual daily detritus—the sounds of a door slam, a partition collapsing somewhere or the kettle whistling, a grunt or two, and later, when the headaches began, Madame Gioconda's pitiful moanings. The riotous applause, that would have lifted the

roof off the Met, let alone a small radio station, the jeers and hoots of derision were, he knew, quite imaginary, figments of Madame Gioconda's world of fantasy, phantoms from the past of a once great prima donna who had been dropped by her public and had retreated into her imagination, each evening conjuring up a blissful dream of being once again applauded by a full house at the Metropolitan, a dream that guilt and resentment turned sour by midnight, inverting it into a nightmare of fiasco and failure.

Why she should torment herself was difficult to understand, but at least the nightmare kept Madame Gioconda just this side of sanity and Mangon, who revered and loved Madame Gioconda, would have been the last person in the world to disillusion her. Each evening, when he finished his calls for the day, he would drive his sound truck all the way over from the West Side to the abandoned radio station under the flyover at the deserted end of F Street, go through the pretence of sweeping Madame Gioconda's apartment on the stage of studio 2, charging no fee, make tea and listen to her reminiscences and plans for revenge, then see her asleep and tiptoe out, a wry but pleased smile on his youthful face.

He had been calling on Madame Gioconda for nearly a year, but what his precise role was in relation to her he had not yet decided. Oddly enough, although he was more or less indispensable now to the effective operation of her fantasy world she showed little personal interest or affection for Mangon, but he assumed that this indifference was merely part of the autocratic personality of a world-famous prima donna, particularly one very conscious of the tradition, now alas meaningless, Melba—Callas—Gioconda. To serve at all was the privilege. In time, perhaps, Madame Gioconda might accord him some sign of favour.

Without him, certainly, her prognosis would have been poor. Lately the headaches had become more menacing, as she insisted that the applause was growing stormier, the boos and and catcalls more vicious. Whatever the psychic mechanism generating the fantasy system, Mangon realized that ultimately she would need him at the studio all day, holding back the enveloping tides of nightmare and insanity with dummy passes of the sonovac. Then, perhaps, when the dream crumbled, he would regret having helped her to delude herself. With luck though she might achieve her ambition of making a comeback. She had told him something of her scheme—a

serpentine mixture of blackmail and bribery—and privately Mangon hoped to launch a plot of his own to return her to popularity. By now she had unfortunately reached the point where success alone could save her from disaster.

She was sitting up when he returned, propped back on an enormous gold lamee cushion, the single lamp at the foot of the couch throwing a semicircle of light onto the great flats which divided the sound stage from the auditorium. These were all from her last operatic role—*The Medium*—and represented a complete interior of the old spiritualist's seance chamber, the one coherent feature in Madame Gioconda's present existence. surrounded by fragments from a dozen roles, even Madame Gioconda herself, Mangon reflected, seemed compounded of several separate identities. A tall regal figure, with full shapely shoulders and massive rib-cage, she had a large handsome face topped by a magnificent coiffure of rich blue-black hair—the exact prototype of the classical diva. She must have been almost fifty, yet her soft creamy complexion and small features were those of a child. The eyes, however, belied her. Large and watchful, slashed with mascara, they regarded the world around her balefully, narrowing even as Mangon approached. Here teeth too were bad, stained by tobacco and cheap cocaine. When she was roused, and her full violet lips curled with rage, revealing the blackened hulks of her dentures and the acid flickering tongue, her mouth looked like a very vent of hell. Altogether she was a formidable woman.

As Mangon brought her tea she heaved herself up and made room for him by her feet among the debris of beads, loose diary pages, horoscopes and jewelled address books that littered the couch. Mangon sat down, surreptitiously noting the time (his first calls were at 9.30 the next morning and loss of sleep deadened his acute hearing), and prepared himself to listen to her for half an hour.

Suddenly she flinched, shrank back into the cushion and gestured agitatedly in the direction of the darkened bandstand.

"They're still clapping!" she shrieked, "for God's sake sweep them away, they're driving me insane. Oooohh . . ." she rasped theatrically, "over there, quickly . . .!"

Mangon leapt to his feet. He hurried over to the bandstand and carefully focussed his ears on the tiers of seats and plywood music stands. They were all immaculately clean, well below the threshold at which embedded sounds began to radiate

detectable echoes. He turned to the corner walls and ceiling. Listening very carefully he could just hear seven muted pads, the dull echoes of his footsteps across the floor. They faded and vanished, followed by a low threshing noise like blurred radio static—in fact Madame Gioconda's present tantrum. Mangon could almost distinguish the individual words, but repetition muffled them.

Madame Gioconda was still writhing about on the couch, evidently not to be easily placated, so Mangon climbed down off the stage and made his way through the auditorium to where he had left his sonovac by the door. The power lead was outside in the truck but he was sure Madame Gioconda would fail to notice.

For five minutes he worked away industriously, pretending to sweep the bandstand again, then put down the sonovac and returned to the couch.

Madame Gioconda emerged from the cushion, sounded the air carefully with two or three slow turns of the head, and smiled at him.

"Thank you, Mangon," she said silkily, her eyes watching him thoughtfully. "You've saved me again from my assassins. They've become so cunning recently, they can even hide from you."

Mangon smiled ruefully to himself at this last remark. So he had been a little too perfunctory earlier on; Madame Gioconda was keeping him up to the mark.

However, she seemed genuinely grateful. "Mangon, my dear," she reflected as she remade her face in the mirror of an enormous compact, painting on magnificent green eyes like a cobra's, "what would I do without you? How can I ever repay you for looking after me?"

The questions, whatever their sinister undertones (had he detected them, Mangon would have been deeply shocked) were purely rhetorical, and all their conversations for that matter entirely one-sided. For Mangon was a mute. From the age of three, when his mother had savagely punched him in the throat to stop him crying, he had been stone dumb, his vocal chords irreparably damaged. In all their endless exchanges of midnight confidences, Mangon had contributed not a single spoken word.

His muteness, naturally, was part of the attraction he felt for Madame Gioconda. Both of them in a sense had lost their



voices, he to a cruel mother, she to a fickle and unfaithful public. This bound them together, gave them a shared sense of life's injustice, though Mangon, like all innocents, viewed his misfortune without rancour. Both, too, were social outcasts. Rescued from his degenerate parents when he was four, Mangon had been brought up in a succession of state institutions, a solitary wounded child. His one talent had been his remarkable auditory powers, and at fourteen he was apprenticed to the Metropolitan Sonic Disposal Service. Regarded as little better than garbage collectors, the sound-sweeps were an outcast group of illiterates, mutes (the city authorities preferred these—their discretion could be relied upon) and social cripples who lived in a chain of isolated shacks on the edge of an old explosives plant in the sand dunes to the north of the city which served as the sonic dump.

Mangon had made no friends among the sound-sweeps, and Madame Gioconda was the first person in his life with whom he had been intimately involved. Apart from the pleasure of being able to help her, a considerable factor in Mangon's devotion was that until her decline she had represented (as to all mutes) the most painful possible reminder of his own voiceless condition, and that now he could at last come to terms with years of unconscious resentment.

This soon done, he devoted himself wholeheartedly to serving Madame Gioconda.

Inhaling moodily on a black cigarette clamped into a long jade holder, she was outlining her plans for a comeback. These had been maturing for several months and involved nothing less than persuading Hector LeGrande, chairman-in-chief of Video City, the huge corporation that transmitted a dozen TV and radio channels, into providing her with a complete series of television spectaculars. Built around Madame Gioconda and lavishly dressed and orchestrated, they would spearhead the international revival of classical opera that was her unfading dream.

"La Scala, Covent Garden, the Met—what are they now?" she demanded angrily. "Bowling alleys! Can you believe, Mangon, that in those immortal theatres where I created my Tosca, my Butterfly, my Brunehilde, they now have—" she spat out a gust of smoke—"beer and skittles!"

Mangon shook his head sympathetically. He pulled a pencil from his breast pocket and on the wrist-pad stitched to his left sleeve wrote :

*Mr. LeGrande ?*

Madame Gioconda read the note, let it fall to the floor.

"Hector ? Those lawyers poison him. He's surrounded by them, I think they steal all my telegrams to him. Of course Hector had a complete breakdown on the spectaculars. Imagine, Mangon, what a scoop for him, a sensation ! 'The great Gioconda will appear on television !' Not just some moronic bubblegum girl, but the Gioconda in person."

Exhausted by this vision Madame Gioconda sank back into her cushion, blowing smoke limply through the holder.

Mangon wrote :

*Contract ?*

Madame Gioconda frowned at the note, then pierced it with the glowing end of her cigarette.

"I am having a new contract drawn up. Not for the mere 300,000 I was prepared to take at first, not even 500,000. For each show I shall now demand precisely *one million* dollars. Nothing less ! Hector will have to pay for ignoring me. Anyway, think of the publicity value of such a figure. Only a star could think of such vulgar extravagance. If he's short of cash he can sack all those lawyers. Or devalue the dollar, I don't mind."

Madame Gioconda hooted with pleasure at the prospect. Mangon nodded, then scribbled another message.

*Be practical*

Madame Gioconda ground out her cigarette. "You think I'm raving, don't you, Mangon ? 'Fantastic dreams, million-dollar contracts, poor old fool.' But let me assure you that Hector will be only too eager to sign the contract. And I don't intend to rely solely on his good judgment as an impresario." She smirked archly to herself.

*What else ?*

Madame Gioconda peered round the darkened stage, then lowered her eyes.

"You see, Mangon, Hector and I are very old friends. You know what I mean, of course ?" She waited for Mangon, who had swept out a thousand honeymoon hotel suites, to nod and then continued : "How well I remember that first season at Bayreuth, when Hector and I . . ."

Mangon stared unhappily at his feet as Madame Gioconda outlined this latest venture into blackmail. Certainly she and LeGrande had been intimate friends—the cuttings scattered around the stage testified frankly to this. In fact, were it not

for the small monthly cheque which LeGrande sent Madame Gioconda she would long previously have disintegrated. To turn on him and threaten ancient scandal (LeGrandè was shortly to enter politics) was not only grotesque but extremely dangerous, for LeGrande was ruthless and unsentimental. Years earlier he had used Madame Gioconda as a stepping stone, reaping all the publicity he could from their affair, then abruptly kicking her away.

Mangon fretted. A solution to her predicament was hard to find. Brought about through no fault of her own, Madame Gioconda's decline was all the harder to bear. Since the introduction a few years earlier of ultrasonic music, the human voice—indeed, audible music of any type—had gone completely out of fashion. Ultrasonic music, employing a vastly greater range of octaves, chords and chromatic scales than perceptible to the human ear, provided a direct neural link between the sound stream and the auditory lobes, generating an apparently sourceless sensation of harmony, rhythm, cadence and melody uncontaminated by the noise and vibration of audible music. The re-scoring of the classical repertoire allowed the ultrasonic audience the best of both worlds. The majestic rhythms of Beethoven, the popular melodies of Tchaikovsky, the complex fugal elaborations of Bach, the abstract images of Schoenberg—all these were raised in frequency above the threshold of conscious audibility. Not only did they become inaudible, but the original works were re-scored for the much wider range of the ultrasonic orchestra, became richer in texture, more profound in theme, more sensitive, tender or lyrical as the ultrasonic arranger chose.

The first casualty in this change-over was the human voice. This alone of all instruments could not be re-scored, because its sounds were produced by non-mechanical means which the neurophonic engineer could never hope, or bother, to duplicate.

The earliest ultrasonic recordings had met with resistance, even ridicule. Radio programmes consisting of nothing but silence interrupted at half-hour intervals by commercial breaks seemed absurd. But gradually the public discovered that the silence was golden, that after leaving the radio switched to an ultrasonic channel for an hour or so a pleasant atmosphere of rhythm and melody seemed to generate itself spontaneously

around them. When an announcer suddenly stated that an ultrasonic version of Mozart's Jupiter Symphony or Tchaikovsky's Pathetique had just been played the listener identified the real source.

A second advantage of ultrasonic music was that its frequencies were so high they left no resonating residues in solid structures, and consequently there was no need to call in the sound-sweep. After an audible performance of most symphonic music, walls and furniture throbbed for days with disintegrating residues that made the air seem leaden and tumid, an entire room virtually uninhabitable.

An immediate result was the swift collapse of all but a few symphony orchestras and opera companies. Concert halls and opera houses closed overnight. In the age of noise the tranquilising balms of silence began to be re-discovered.

But the final triumph of ultrasonic music had come with a second development—the short-playing record, spinning at 900 r.p.m., which condensed the 45 minutes of a Beethoven symphony to 20 seconds of playing time, the three hours of a Wagner opera to little more than two minutes. Compact and cheap, SP records sacrificed nothing to brevity. One 30-second SP record delivered as much neurophonic pleasure as a natural length recording, but with deeper penetration, greater total impact.

Ultrasonic SP records swept all others off the market. Sonic LP records became museum pieces—only a crank would choose to listen to an audible full-length version of *Siegfried* or the *Barber of Seville* when he could have both wrapped up inaudibly inside the same five-minute package and appreciate their full musical value.

The heyday of Madame Gioconda was over. Unceremoniously left on the shelf, she had managed to survive for a few months vocalising on radio commercials. Soon these too went ultrasonic. In a despairing act of revenge she bought out the radio station which fired her and made her home on one of the sound stages. Over the years the station became derelict and forgotten, its windows smashed, neon portico collapsing, aerials rusting. The huge eight-lane flyover built across it sealed it conclusively into the past.

Now Madame Gioconda proposed to win her way back at stiletto-point.

Mangon watched her impassively as she ranted on nastily in a cloud of purple cigarette smoke, a large seedy witch. The phenobarbitone was making her drowsy and her threats and ultimatum were becoming disjointed.

“. . . memoires too, don't forget, Hector. Frank exposure, no holes barred. I mean . . . damn, have to get a ghost. Hotel de Paris at Monte, lots of pictures. Oh yes, I kept the photographs.” She grubbed about on the couch, came up with a crumpled soap coupon and a supermarket pay slip. “Wait till those lawyers see them. Hector—” Suddenly she broke off, stared glassily at Mangon and sagged back.

Mangon waited until she was finally asleep, stood up and peered closely at her. She looked forlorn and desperate. He watched her reverently for a moment, then tiptoed to the rheostat mounted on the control panel behind the couch, damped down the lamp at Madame Gioconda's feet and left the stage.

He sealed the auditorium doors behind him, made his way down to the foyer and stepped out, sad but at the same time oddly exhilarated, into the cool midnight air. At last he accepted that he would have to act swiftly if he was to save Madame Gioconda.

## t w o

Driving his sound truck into the city shortly after nine the next morning, Mangon decided to postpone his first call—the weird Neo-Corbusier Episcopalian Oratory sandwiched among the office blocks in the down-town financial sector—and instead turned west on Mainway and across the park towards the white-faced apartment batteries which reared up above the trees and lakes along the north side.

The Oratory was a difficult and laborious job that would take him three hours of concentrated effort. The Dean had recently imported some rare 13th Century pediments from the Church of St. Francis at Assisi, beautiful sonic matrices rich with seven centuries of Gregorian chant, overlaid by the timeless tolling of the angelus. Mounted into the altar they emanated an atmosphere resonant with litany and devotion, a mellow, deeply textured hymn that silently evoked the most sublime images of prayer and meditation.

But at 50,000 dollars each they also represented a terrifying hazard to the clumsy sound-sweep. Only two years earlier the

entire north transept of Rheims Cathedral, rose window intact, purchased for a record 1,000,000 dollars and re-erected in the new Cathedral of St. Joseph at San Diego, had been drained of its priceless heritage of tonal inlays by a squad of illiterate sound-sweeps who had mis-read their instructions and accidentally swept the wrong wall.

Even the most conscientious sound-sweep was limited by his skill, and Mangon, with his auditory super-sensitivity, was greatly in demand for his ability to sweep selectively, draining from the walls of the Oratory all extraneous and discordant noises—coughing, crying, the clatter of coins and mumble of prayer—leaving behind the chorales and liturgical chants which enhanced their devotional overtones. His skill alone would lengthen the life of the Assisi pediments by twenty years; without him they would soon become contaminated by the miscellaneous traffic of the congregation. Consequently he had no fears that the Dean would complain if he failed to appear as usual that morning.

Half-way along the north side of the park he swung off into the forecourt of a huge forty-storey apartment block, a glittering white cliff ribbed by jutting balconies. Most of the apartments were Superlux duplexes occupied by show business people. No one was about, but as Mangon entered the hall-way, sonovac in one hand, the marble walls and columns buzzed softly with the echoing chatter of guests leaving parties four or five hours earlier.

In the elevator the residues were clearer—confident male tones, the sharp wheedling of querulous wives, soft negatives of amatory blondes, punctuated by countless repetitions of 'dahling.' Mangon ignored the echoes, which were almost inaudible, a dim insect hum. He grinned to himself as he rode up to the penthouse apartment; if Madame Gioconda had known his destination she would have strangled him on the spot.

Ray Alto, doyen of the ultrasonic composers and the man more than any other responsible for Madame Gioconda's decline, was one of Mangon's regular calls. Usually Mangon swept his apartment once a week, calling at three in the afternoon. Today, however, he wanted to make sure of finding Alto before he left for Video City, where he was a director of programme music.

The houseboy let him in. He crossed the hall and made his way down the black glass staircase into the sunken lounge. Wide studio windows revealed an elegant panorama of park and mid-town skyscrapers.

A white-slacked young man sitting on one of the long slab sofas—Paul Merrill, Alto's arranger—waved him back.

"Mangon, hold on to your dive breaks. I'm really on re-heat this morning." He twirled the ultrasonic trumpet he was playing, a tangle of stops and valves from which half a dozen leads trailed off across the cushions to a cathode tube and tone generator at the other end of the sofa.

Mangon sat down quietly and Merrill clamped the mouth-piece to his lips. Watching the ray tube intently, where he could check the shape of the ultrasonic notes, he launched into a brisk *allegretto* sequence, then quickened and flicked out a series of brilliant arpeggios, stripping off high P and Q notes that danced across the cathode screen like frantic eels, fantastic glissandos that raced up twenty octaves in as many seconds, each note distinct and symmetrically exact, tripping off the tone generator in turn so that escalators of electronic chords interweaved the original scale, a multi-channel melodic stream that crowded the cathode screen with exquisite, flickering patterns. The whole thing was inaudible, but the air around Mangon felt vibrant and accelerated, charged with gaiety and sparkle, and he applauded generously when Merrill threw off a final dashing riff.

"*Flight of the Bumble Bee*," Merrill told him. He tossed the trumpet aside and switched off the cathode tube. He lay back and savoured the glistening air for a moment. "Well, how are things?"

Just then the door from one of the bedrooms opened and Ray Alto appeared, a tall, thoughtful man of about forty, with thinning blonde hair, wearing pale blue sunglasses over cool eyes.

"Hello, Mangon," he said, running a hand over Mangon's head. "You're early today. Full programme?" Mangon nodded. "Don't let it get you down." Alto picked a dictaphone off one of the end tables, carried it over to an armchair. "Noise, noise, noise—the greatest single disease-vector of civilisation. The whole world's rotting with it, yet all they can afford is a few people like Mangon fooling around with sonovacs. It's hard to believe that only a few years ago people completely failed to realize that sound left any residues."

"Are we any better?" Merrill asked. "This month's *Transonics* claims that eventually unswept sonic resonances will build up to a critical point where they'll literally start shaking buildings apart. The entire city will come down like Jericho."

"Babel," Alto corrected. "Okay, now, let's shut up. We'll be gone soon, Mangon. Buy him a drink would you, Paul."

Merrill brought Mangon a coke from the bar, then wandered off. Alto flipped on the dictaphone, began to speak steadily into it. "Memo 7: Betty, when does the copyright on Stravinsky lapse? Memo 8: Betty, file melody for projected nocturne: L, L sharp, BB, Y flat, Q, VT, L, L sharp. Memo 9: Paul, the bottom three octaves of the ultra-tuba are within the audible spectrum of the canine ear—congrats on that SP of the *Anvil Chorus* last night; about three million dogs thought the roof had fallen in on them. Memo 10: Betty—" He broke off, put down the microphone. "Mangon, you look worried."

Mangon, who had been lost in reverie, pulled himself together and shook his head.

"Working too hard?" Alto pressed. He scrutinised Mangon suspiciously. "Are you still sitting up all night with that Gioconda woman?"

Embarrassed, Mangon lowered his eyes. His relationship with Alto was, obliquely, almost as close as that with Madame Gioconda. Although Alto was brusque and often irritable with Mangon, he took a sincere interest in his welfare. Possibly Mangon's muteness reminded him of the misanthropic motives behind his hatred of noise, made him feel indirectly responsible for the act of violence Mangon's mother had committed. Also, one artist to another, he respected Mangon's phenomenal auditory sensitivity.

"She'll exhaust you, Mangon, believe me." Alto knew how much the personal contact meant to Mangon and hesitated to be over-critical. "There's nothing you can do for her. Offering her sympathy merely fans her hopes for a come-back. She hasn't a chance."

Mangon frowned, wrote quickly on his wrist-pad:

*She WILL sing again!*

Alto read the note pensively. Then, in a harder voice, he said: "She's using you for her own purposes, Mangon. At present you satisfy one whim of her's—the neurotic headaches



and fantasy applause. God forbid what the next whim might be."

*She is a great artist.*

"She was," Alto pointed out. "No more, though, sad as it is. I'm afraid that the times change."

Annoyed by this, Mangon gritted his teeth and tore off another sheet.

*Entertainment, perhaps. Art, No !*

Alto accepted the rebuke silently ; he reproved himself as much as Mangon did for selling out to Video City. In his four years there his output of original ultrasonic music consisted of little more than one nearly finished symphony—aptly titled *Opus Zero*—shortly to receive its first performance, a few nocturnes and one quartet. Most of his energies went into programme music, prestige numbers for spectaculars and a mass of straight transcriptions of the classical repertoire. The last he particularly despised, fit work for Paul Merrill, but not for a responsible composer.

He added the sheet to the two in his left hand and asked : "Have you ever heard Madame Gioconda sing ?"

Mangon's answer came back scornfully :

*No ! But you have. Please describe*

Alto laughed shortly, tore up the sheets and walked across to the window.

"All right, Mangon, you've made your point. You're carrying a torch for art, doing your duty to one of the few perfect things the world has ever produced. I hope you're equal to the responsibility. La Gioconda might be quite a handful. Do you know that at one time the doors of Covent Garden, La Scala and the Met were closed to her ? They said Callas had temperament, but she was a girl guide compared with Gioconda. Tell me, how is she ? Eating enough ?"

Mangon held up his coke bottle.

"Snow ? That's tough. But how does she afford it ?" He glanced at his watch. "Dammit, I've got to leave. Clean this place out thoroughly, will you. It gives me a headache just listening to myself think."

He started to pick up the dictaphone but Mangon was scribbling rapidly on his pad.

*Give Madame Gioconda a job*

Alto read the note, then gave it back to Mangon, puzzled. "Where ? In this apartment ?" Mangon shook his head.

"Do you mean at V.C.? *Singing?*" When Mangon began to nod vigorously he looked up at the ceiling with a despairing groan. "For heaven's sake, Mangon, the last vocalist sang at Video City over ten years ago. No audience would stand for it. If I even suggested such an idea they'd tear my contract into a thousand pieces." He shuddered, only half-playfully. "I don't know about you, Mangon, but I've got my ulcer to support."

He made his way to the staircase, but Mangon intercepted him, pencil flashing across the wrist-pad.

*Please. Madame Gioconda will start blackmail soon. She is desperate. Must sing again. Could arrange make-believe programme in research studios. Closed circuit.*

Alto folded the note carefully, left the dictaphone on the staircase and walked slowly back to the window.

"This blackmail. Are you absolutely sure? Who, though, do you know?" Mangon nodded, but looked away. "Okay, I won't press you. LeGrande, probably, eh?" Mangon turned round in surprise, then gave an elaborate parody of a shrug.

"Hector LeGrande. Obvious guess. But there are no secrets there, it's all on open file. I suppose she's just threatening to make enough of an exhibition of herself to block his governorship." Alto pursed his lips. He loathed LeGrande, not merely for having bribed him into a way of life he could never renounce, but also because, once having exploited his weakness, LeGrande never hesitated to remind Alto of it, treating him and his music with contempt. If Madame Gioconda's blackmail had the slightest hope of success he would have been only too happy, but he knew LeGrande would destroy her, probably take Mangon too.

Suddenly he felt a paradoxical sense of loyalty for Madame Gioconda. He looked at Mangon, waiting patiently, big spaniel eyes wide with hope.

"The idea of a closed circuit programme is insane. Even if we went to all the trouble of staging it she wouldn't be satisfied. She doesn't want to sing, she wants to be a *star*. It's the trappings of stardom she misses—the cheering galleries, the piles of bouquets, the green room parties. I could arrange a half-hour session on closed circuit with some trainee technicians—a few straight selections from *Tosca* and *Butterfly*,

say, with even a sonic piano accompaniment, I'd be glad to play it myself—but I can't provide the gossip columns and theatre reviews. What would happen when she found out?"

*She wants to SING*

Alto reached out and patted Mangon on the shoulder. "Good for you. All right, then, I'll think about it. God knows how we'd arrange it. We'd have to tell her that she'll be making a surprise guest appearance on one of the big shows—that'll explain the absence of any programme announcement and we'll be able to keep her in an isolated studio. Stress the importance of surprise, to prevent her from contacting the newspapers . . . Where are you going?"

Mangon reached the staircase, picked up the dictaphone and returned to Alto with it. He grinned happily, his jaw working wildly as he struggled to speak. Strangled sounds quavered in his throat.

Touched, Alto turned away from him and sat down. "Okay, Mangon," he snapped brusquely, "you can get on with your job. Remember, I haven't promised anything." He flicked on the dictaphone, then began: "Memo 11: Ray . . ."

### t h r e e

It was just after four o'clock when Mangon braked the sound truck in the alley behind the derelict station. Overhead the traffic hammered along the flyover, dinning down onto the cobbled walls. He had been trying to finish his rounds early enough to bring Madame Gioconda the big news before her headaches began. He had swept out the Oratory in an hour, whirled through a couple of movie theatres, the Museum of Abstract Art, and a dozen private calls in half his usual time, driven by his almost overwhelming joy at having won a promise of help from Ray Alto.

He ran through the foyer, already fumbling at his wrist-pad. For the first time in many years he really regretted his muteness, his inability to tell Madame Gioconda orally of his triumph that morning.

Studio 2 was in darkness, the rows of seats and litter of old programmes and ice cream cartons reflected dimly in the single light masked by the tall flats. His feet slipped in some shattered plaster fallen from the ceiling and he was out of

breath when he clambered up onto the stage and swung round the nearest flat.

Madame Gioconda had gone !

The stage was deserted, the couch a rumpled mess, a clutter of cold saucepans on the stove. The wardrobe door was open, dresses wrenched outwards off their hangars.

For a moment Mangon panicked, unable to visualise why she should have left, immediately assuming that she had discovered his plot with Alto.

Then he realized that never before had he visited the studio until midnight at the earliest, and that Madame Gioconda had merely gone out to the supermarket. He smiled at his own stupidity and sat down on the couch to wait for her, sighing with relief.

*Suddenly the words struck him like the blows of a pole-axe !*

As vivid as if they had been daubed in letters ten feet deep, they leapt out from the walls, nearly deafening him with their force.

*“ You grotesque old witch, you must be insane ! You ever threaten me again and I’ll have you destroyed ! LISTEN, you pathetic—”*

Mangon spun round helplessly, trying to screen his ears. The words must have been hurled out in a paroxysm of abuse, they were only an hour old, vicious sonic scars slashed across the immaculately swept walls.

His first thought was to rush out for the sonovac and sweep the walls clear before Madame Gioconda returned. Then it dawned on him that she had already heard the original of the echoes—in the background he could just detect the muffled rhythms and intonations of her voice.

All too exactly, he could identify the man’s voice.

He had heard it many times before, raging in the same ruthless tirades, when, deputising for one of the sound-sweeps, he had swept out the main board room at Video City.

Hector LeGrande ! So Madame Gioconda had been more desperate than he thought.

The bottom drawer of the dressing table lay on the floor, its contents upended. Propped against the mirror was an old silver portrait frame, dull and verdigrised, some cotton wool and a tin of cleansing fluid next to it. The photograph was one of LeGrande, taken twenty years earlier. She must have

known LeGrande was coming and had searched out the old portrait, probably regretting the threat of blackmail.

But the sentiment had not been shared.

Mangon walked round the stage, his heart knotting with rage, filling his ears with LeGrande's taunts. He picked up the portrait, pressed it between his palms, and suddenly smashed it across the edge of the dressing table.

"Mangon!"

The cry rivetted him to the air. He dropped what was left of the frame, saw Madame Gioconda step quietly from behind one of the flats.

"Mangon, please," she protested gently. "You frighten me." She sidled past him towards the bed, dismantling an enormous purple hat. "And do clean up all that glass, or I shall cut my feet."

She spoke drowsily and moved in a relaxed, sluggish way that Mangon first assumed indicated acute shock. Then she drew from her handbag six white vials and lined them up carefully on the bedside table. These were her favourite confectionary—so LeGrande had sweetened the pill with another cheque. Mangon began to scoop the glass together with his feet, at the same time trying to collect his wits. The sounds of LeGrande's abuse dinned the air, and he broke away and ran off to fetch the sonovac.

Madame Gioconda was sitting on the edge of the bed when he returned, dreamily dusting a small bottle of bourbon which had followed the cocaine vials out of the handbag. She hummed to herself melodically and stroked one of the feathers in her hat.

"Mangon," she called when he had almost finished. "Come here."

Mangon put down the sonovac and went across to her.

She looked up at him, her eyes suddenly very steady. "Mangon, why did you break Hector's picture?" She held up a piece of the frame. "Tell me."

Mangon hesitated, then scribbled on his pad:

*I am sorry. I adore you very much. He said such  
foul things to you*

Madame Gioconda glanced at the note, then gazed back thoughtfully at Mangon. "Were you hiding here when Hector came?"

Mangon shook his head categorically. He started to write on his pad but Madame Gioconda restrained him.

"That's all right, dear. I thought not." She looked around the stage for a moment, listening carefully. "Mangon, when you came in could you hear what Mr. LeGrande said?"

Mangon nodded. His eyes flickered to the obscene phrases on the walls and he began to frown. He still felt LeGrande's presence and his attempt to humiliate Madame Gioconda.

Madame Gioconda pointed around them. "And you can actually hear what he said even now? How remarkable. Mangon, you have a wondrous talent."

*I am sorry you have to suffer so much*

Madame Gioconda smiled at this. "We all have our crosses to bear. I have a feeling you may be able to lighten mine considerably." She patted the bed beside her. "Do sit down, you must be tired." When he was settled she went on. "I'm very interested, Mangon. Do you mean you can distinguish entire phrases and sentences in the sounds you sweep? You can hear complete conversations hours after they have taken place?"

Something about Madame Gioconda's curiosity made Mangon hesitate. His talent, so far as he knew, was unique, and he was not so naive as to fail to appreciate its potentialities. It had developed in his late adolescence and so far he had resisted any temptation to abuse it. He had never revealed the talent to anyone, knowing that if he did his days as a sound-sweep would be over.

Madame Gioconda was watching him, an expectant smile on her lips. Her thoughts, of course, were solely of revenge. Mangon listened again to the walls, focused on the abuse screaming out into the air.

*Not complete conversations. Long fragments, up to twenty syllables. Depending on resonances and matrix. Tell no one. I will help you have revenge on LeGrande.*

Madame Gioconda squeezed Mangon's hand. She was about to reach for the bourbon bottle when Mangon suddenly remembered the point of his visit. He leapt off the bed and started frantically scribbling on his wrist-pad.

He tore off the first sheet and pressed it into her startled hands, then filled three more, describing his encounter with the musical director at V.C., the latter's interest in Madame Gioconda and the conditional promise to arrange her guest appearance. In view of LeGrande's hostility he stressed the need for absolute secrecy.

He waited happily while Madame Gioconda read quickly through the notes, tracing out Mangon's child-like script with a long scarlet finger-nail. When she finished he nodded his head rapidly and gestured, triumphantly in the air.

Bemused, Madame Gioconda gazed uncomprehendingly at the notes. Then she reached out and pulled Mangon to her, taking his big faun-like head in her jewelled hands and pressing it to her lap.

"My dear child, how much I need you. You must never leave me now."

As she stroked Mangon's hair her eyes roved questingly around the walls.

The miracle happened shortly before eleven o'clock the next morning.

After breakfast, sprawled across Madame Gioconda's bed with her scrapbooks, an old gramophone salvaged by Mangon from one of the studios playing operatic selections, they had decided to drive out to the stockades—the sound sweeps left for the city at nine and they would be able to examine the sonic dumps unmolested. Having spent so much time with Madame Gioconda and immersed himself so deeply in her world, Mangon was eager now to introduce Madame Gioconda to his. The stockades, bleak though they might be, were all he had to show her.

For Mangon, Madame Gioconda had now become the entire universe, a source of certainty and wonder as potent as the sun. Behind him his past life fell away like the discarded chrysalis of a brilliant butterfly, the grey years of his childhood at the orphanage dissolving into the magical kaleidoscope that revolved around him. As she talked and murmured affectionately to him, the drab flats and props in the studio seemed as brightly coloured and meaningful as the landscape of a mescaline fantasy, the air tingling with a thousand vivid echoes of her voice.

They set off down F Street at ten, soon left behind the dingy warehouses and abandoned tenements that had enclosed Madame Gioconda for so long. Squeezed together in the driving cab of the sound truck they looked an incongruous pair—the gangling Mangon, in zip-fronted yellow plastic jacket and yellow peaked cap, at the wheel, dwarfed by the vast flamboyant Madame Gioconda, wearing a parrot-green cartwheel hat and veil, her huge creamy breast glittering with

pearls, gold stars and jewelled crescents, a small selection of the orders that had showered upon her in her heyday.

She had breakfasted well, on one of the vials and a tooth glass of bourbon. As they left the city she gazed out amiably at the fields stretching away from the highway, and trilled out a light recitative from *Figaro*.

Mangon listened to her happily, glad to see her in such good form. Determined to spend every possible minute with Madame Gioconda, he had decided to abandon his calls for the day, if not for the next week and month. With her he at last felt completely secure. The pressure of her hand and the warm swell of her shoulder made him feel confident and invigorated, all the more proud that he was able to help her back to fame.

He tapped on the windshield as they swung off the highway onto the narrow dirt track that led towards the stockades. Here and there among the dunes they could see the low ruined out-buildings of the old explosives plant, the white galvanised iron roof of one of the sound-sweeps' cabins. Desolate and unfrequented, the dunes ran on for miles. They passed the remains of a gateway that had collapsed to one side of the road ; originally a continuous fence ringed the stockade, but no one had any reason for wanting to penetrate it. A place of strange echoes and festering silences, overhung by a gloomy miasma of a million compacted sounds, it remained remote and haunted, the graveyard of countless private babels.

The first of the sonic dumps appeared two or three hundred yards away on their right. This was reserved for aircraft sounds swept from the city's streets and municipal buildings, and was a tightly packed collection of sound-absorbent baffles covering several acres. The baffles were slightly larger than those in the other stockades ; twenty feet high and fifteen wide, each supported by heavy wooden props, they faced each other in a random labyrinth of alleyways, like a store lot of advertisement hoardings. Only the top two or three feet were visible above the dunes, but the changed air hit Mangon like a hammer, a pounding niagara of airliners blaring down the glideway, the piercing whistle of jets jockeying at take-off, the ceaseless mind-sapping roar that hangs like a vast umbrella over any metropolitan complex.

All around, odd sounds shaken loose from the stockades were beginning to reach them. Over the entire area, fed from the dumps below, hung an unbroken phonic high, invisible but



nonetheless as tangible and menacing as an enormous black thundercloud. Occasionally, when super-saturation was reached after one of the summer holiday periods, the sonic pressure fields would split and discharge, venting back into the stockades a nightmarish cataract of noise, raining onto the sound-sweeps not only the howling of cats and dogs, but the multi-lunged tumult of cars, express trains, fairgrounds and aircraft, the cacophonous musique concrete of civilisation.

To Mangon the sounds reaching them, though scaled higher in the register, were still distinct, but Madame Gioconda could hear nothing and felt only an overpowering sense of depression and irritation. The air seemed to grate and rasp. Mangon noticed her beginning to frown and hold her hand to her forehead. He wound up his window and indicated to her to do the same. He switched on the sonovac mounted under the dashboard and let it drain the discordancies out of the sealed cabin.

Madame Gioconda relaxed in the sudden blissful silence. A little further on, when they passed another stockade set closer to the road, she turned to Mangon and began to say something to him.

Suddenly she jerked violently in alarm, her hat toppling. Her voice had frozen ! Her mouth and lips moved frantically, but no sounds emerged. For a moment she was paralysed. Clutching her throat desperately, she filled her lungs and screamed.

A faint squeak piped out of her cavernous throat, and Mangon swung round in alarm to see her gibbering apoplectically, pointing helplessly to her throat.

He stared at her bewildered, then doubled over the wheel in a convulsion of silent laughter, slapping his thigh and thumping the dashboard. He pointed to the sonovac, then reached down and turned up the volume.

“. . . aaaaauuoooh,” Madame Gioconda heard herself groan. She grasped her hat and secured it. “Mangon, what a dirty trick, you should have warned me.”

Mangon grinned. The discordant sounds coming from the stockades began to fill the cabin again, and he turned down the volume. Gleefully, he scribbled on his wrist-pad :

*Now you know what it is like !*

Madame Gioconda opened her mouth to reply, then stopped in time, hiccupped and took his arm affectionately.

## four

Mangon slowed down as they approached a side road. Two hundred yards away on their left a small pink-washed cabin stood on a dune overlooking one of the stockades. They drove up to it, turned into a circular concrete apron below the cabin and backed up against one of the unloading bays, a battery of red-painted hydrants equipped with manifold gauges and release pipes running off into the stockade. This was only twenty feet away at its nearest point, a forest of door-shaped baffles facing each other in winding corridors, like a set from a surrealist film.

As she climbed down from the truck Madame Gioconda expected the same massive wave of depression and overload that she had felt from the stockade of aircraft noises, but instead the air seemed brittle and frenetic, darting with sudden flashes of tension and exhilaration.

As they walked up to the cabin Mangon explained :

*Party noises—company for me*

The twenty or thirty baffles nearest the cabin he reserved for these screening him from the miscellaneous chatter that filled the rest of the stockade. When he woke in the mornings he would listen to the laughter and small talk, enjoy the gossip and wisecracks as much as if he had been at the parties himself.

The cabin was a single room with a large window overlooking the stockade, well insulated from the hubbub below. Madame Gioconda showed only a cursory interest in Mangon's meagre belongings, and after a few general remarks came to the point and went over to the window. She opened it slightly, listened experimentally to the stream of atmospheric shifts that crowded past her.

She pointed to the cabin on the far side of the stockade. "Mangon, who's is that?"

*Gallagher's. My partner. He sweeps City Hall, University, V.C., big mansions on 5th and A. Working now.*

Madame Gioconda nodded and surveyed the stockade with interest. "How fascinating. It's like a zoo. All that talk, talk, talk. And *you* can hear it all." She snapped back her bracelets with swift decisive flicks of the wrist.

Mangon sat down on the bed. The cabin seemed small and dingy, and he was saddened by Madame Gioconda's disinterest. Having brought her all the way out to the dumps he

wondered how he was going to keep her amused. Fortunately the stockade intrigued her. When she suggested a stroll through it he was only too glad to oblige.

Down at the unloading bay he demonstrated how he emptied the tanker, clipping the exhaust leads to the hydrant, regulating the pressure through the manifold and then pumping the sound away into the stockade.

Most of the stockade was in a continuous state of uproar, sounding something like a crowd in a football stadium, and as he led her out among the baffles he picked their way carefully through the quieter aisles. Around them voices chattered and whined fretfully, fragments of conversation drifted aimlessly over the air. Somewhere a woman pleaded in thin nervous tones, a man grumbled to himself, another swore angrily, a baby bellowed. Behind it all was the steady background murmur of countless TV programmes, the easy patter of announcers, the endless monotones of race-track commentators, the shrieking audiences of quiz shows, all pitched an octave up the scale so that they sounded an eerie parody of themselves.

A shot rang out in the next aisle, followed by screams and shouting. Although she heard nothing, the pressure pulse made Madame Gioconda stop.

"Mangon, wait. Don't be in so much of hurry. Tell me what they're saying."

Mangon selected a baffle and listened carefully. The sounds appeared to come from an apartment over a launderette. A battery of washing machines chuntered to themselves, a cash register slammed interminably, there was a dim almost sub-threshold echo of 60-cycle hum from an SP record player.

He shook his head, waved Madame Gioconda on.

"Mangon, what did they say?" she pestered him. He stopped again, sharpened his ears and waited. This time he was more lucky, an over-emotional female voice was gasping ". . . but if he finds you here he'll kill you, he'll kill us both, what shall we do . . ." He started to scribble down this outpouring, Madame Gioconda craning breathlessly over his shoulder, then recognised its source and screwed up the note.

"Mangon, for heaven's sake, what was it? Don't throw it away! Tell me!" She tried to climb under the wooden superstructure of the baffle to recover the note, but Mangon restrained her and quickly scribbled another message.

*Adam and Eve. Sorry.*

"What, the film? Oh, how ridiculous! Well, come on, try again."

Eager to make amends, Mangon picked the next baffle, one of a group serving the staff married quarters of the University. Always a difficult job to keep clean, he struck paydirt almost at once.

". . . my God, there's Bartok all over the place, that damned Steiner woman, I'll swear she's sleeping with her . . ."

Mangon took it all down, passing the sheets to Madame Gioconda as soon as he covered them. Squinting hard at his crabbed handwriting, she gobbled them eagerly, disappointed when, after half a dozen, he lost the thread and stopped.

"Go on, Mangon, what's the matter?" She let the notes fall to the ground. "Difficult, isn't it. We'll have to teach you shorthand."

They reached the baffles Mangon had just filed from the previous day's rounds. Listening carefully he heard Paul Merrill's voice: ". . . month's *Transonics* claims that . . . the entire city will come down like Jericho."

He wondered if he could persuade Madame Gioconda to wait for fifteen minutes, when he would be able to repeat a few carefully edited fragments from Alto's promise to arrange her guest appearance, but she seemed eager to move deeper into the stockade.

"You said your friend Gallagher sweeps out Video City, Mangon. Where would that be?"

Hector LeGrande. Of course, Mangon realized, why had he been so obtuse. This was the chance to pay the man back.

He pointed to an area a few aisles away. They climbed between the baffles, Mangon helping Madame Gioconda over the beams and props, steering her full skirt and wide hat brim away from splinters and rusted metalwork.

The task of finding LeGrande was simple. Even before the baffles were in sight Mangon could hear the hard unyielding bite of the tycoon's voice, dominating every other sound from the Video City area. Gallagher in fact swept only the senior dozen or so executive suites at V.C., chiefly to relieve their occupants of the distasteful echoes of LeGrande's voice.

Mangon steered their way among these, searching for LeGrande's master suite, where anything of a really confidential nature took place.

There were about twenty baffles, throwing off an unending chorus of "Yes, H.L.," "Thanks, H.L.," "Brilliant, H.L." Two or three seemed strangely quiet, and he drew Madame Gioconda over to them.

This was LeGrande with his personal secretary and PA. He took out his pencil and focussed carefully.

". . . of Third National Bank, transfer two million to private holding and threatened claim for stock depreciation . . . redraft escape clauses, including non-liability purchase benefits . . ."

Madame Gioconda tapped his arm but he gestured her away. Most of the baffle appeared to be taken up by dubious financial dealings, but nothing that would really hurt LeGrande if revealed.

Then he heard—

". . . Bermuda Hilton. Private Island, with anchorage, have the beach cleaned up, last time the water was full of fish . . . I don't care, poison them, hang some nets out . . . Imogene will fly in from Idlewild as Mrs. Edna Burgess, warn customs to stay away . . ."

". . . call Cartiers, something for the Comtessa, 17 carats say, ceiling of ten thousand. No, make it eight thousand . . ."

". . . hat-check girl at the Tropicabana. Usual dossier . . ."

Mangon scribbled furiously, but LeGrande was speaking at rapid dictation speed and he could get down only a few fragments. Madame Gioconda barely deciphered his handwriting, and became more and more frustrated as her appetite was whetted. Finally she flung away the notes in a fury of exasperation.

"This is absurd, you're missing everything!" she cried. She pounded on one of the baffles, then broke down and began to sob angrily. "Oh God, God, *God*, how ridiculous! Help me, I'm going insane . . ."

Mangon hurried across to her, put his arms round her shoulders to support her. She pushed him away irritably, railing at herself to discharge her impatience. "It's useless, Mangon, it's stupid of me, I was a fool—"

"STOP!"

The cry split the air like the blade of a guillotine.

They both straightened, stared at each other blankly. Mangon put his fingers slowly to his lips, then reached out tremulously and put his hands in Madame Gioconda's. Somewhere within him a tremendous tension had begun to dissolve.

“ Stop,” he said again in a rough but quiet voice. “ Don’t cry. I’ll help you.”

Madame Gioconda gaped at him with amazement. Then she let out a tremendous whoop of triumph.

“ Mangon, you can talk ! You’ve got your voice back ! It’s absolutely astounding ! Say something, quickly, for heaven’s sake !”

Mangon felt his mouth again, ran his fingers rapidly over his throat. He began to tremble with excitement, his face brightened, he jumped up and down like a child.

“ I can talk,” he repeated wonderingly. His voice was gruff, then seesawed into a treble. “ I can talk,” he said louder, controlling its pitch. “ I can talk, I can talk, *I can talk* !” He flung his head back, let out an ear-shattering shout. “ I CAN TALK ! HEAR ME !” He ripped the wrist-pad off his sleeve, hurled it away over the baffles.

Madame Gioconda backed away, laughing agreeably. “ We can hear you, Mangon. Dear me, how sweet.” She watched Mangon thoughtfully as he cavorted happily in the narrow interval between the aisles. “ Now don’t tire yourself out or you’ll lose it again.”

Mangon danced over to her, seized her shoulders and squeezed them tightly. He suddenly realized that he knew no diminutive or christian name for her.

“ Madame Gioconda,” he said earnestly, stumbling over the syllables, the words that were so simple yet so enormously complex to pronounce. “ You gave me back my voice. Anything you want—” He broke off, stuttering happily, laughing through his tears. Suddenly he buried his head in her shoulder, exhausted by his discovery, and cried gratefully, “ It’s a *wonderful* voice.”

Madame Gioconda steadied him maternally. “ Yes, Mangon,” she said, her eyes on the discarded notes lying in the dust. “ You’ve got a wonderful voice, all right.” Sotto voce, she added : “ But your hearing is even more wonderful.”

Paul Merrill switched off the SP player, sat down on the arm of the sofa and watched Mangon quizzically.

“ Strange. You know, my guess is that it was psychosomatic.”

Mangon grinned. “ Psychosemantic,” he repeated, garbling the word half-deliberately. “ Clever. You can do amazing things with words. They help to crystallise the truth.”

Merrill groaned playfully. "God, you sit there, you drink your coke, you philosophise. Don't you realize you're supposed to stand quietly in a corner, positively dumb with gratitude? Now you're even ramming your puns down my throat. Never mind, tell me again how it happened."

"Once a pun a time—" Mangon ducked the magazine Merrill flung at him, let out a loud "Olee!"

For the last two weeks he had been en fete.

Every day he and Madame Gioconda followed the same routine; after breakfast at the studio they drove out to the stockade, spent two or three hours compiling their confidential file on LeGrande, lunched at the cabin and then drove back to the city, Mangon going off on his rounds while Madame Gioconda slept until he returned shortly before midnight. For Mangon their existence was idyllic; not only was he re-discovering himself in terms of the complex spectra and patterns of speech—a completely new category of existence—but at the same time his relationship with Madame Gioconda revealed areas of sympathy, affection and understanding that he had never previously seen. If he sometimes felt that he was too preoccupied with his side of their relationship and the extraordinary benefits it had brought him, at least Madame Gioconda had been equally well served. Her headaches and mysterious phantoms had gone, she had cleaned up the studio and begun to salvage a little dignity and self-confidence, which made her single-minded sense of ambition seem less obsessive. Psychologically, she needed Mangon less now than he needed her, and he was sensible to restrain his high spirits and give her plenty of attention. During the first week Mangon's incessant chatter had been rather wearing, and once, on their way to the stockade, she had switched on the sonovac in the driving cab and left Mangon mouthing silently at the air like a stranded fish. He had taken the hint.

"What about the sound-sweeping?" Merrill asked. "Will you give it up?"

Mangon shrugged. "It's my talent, but living at the stockade, let in at back doors, cleaning up the verbal garbage—it's a degraded job. I want to help Madame Gioconda. She will need a secretary when she starts to go on tour."

Merrill shook his head warily. "You're awfully sure there's going to be a sonic revival, Mangon. Every sign is against it."

"They have not heard Madame Gioconda sing. Believe me, I know the power and wonder of the human voice. Ultrasonic

music is great for atmosphere, but it has no content. It can't express ideas, only emotions."

"What happened to that closed circuit programme you and Ray were going to put on for her?"

"It—fell through," Mangon lied. The circuits Madame Gioconda would perform on would be open to the world. He had told them nothing of the visits to the stockade, of his power to read the baffles, of the accumulating file on LeGrande. Soon Madame Gioconda would strike.

Above them in the hallway a door slammed, someone stormed through into the apartment in a tempest, kicking a chair against a wall. It was Alto. He raced down the staircase into the lounge, jaw tense, fingers flexing angrily.

"Paul, don't interrupt me until I've finished," he snapped, racing past without looking at them. "You'll be out of a job, but I warn you, if you don't back me up one hundred per cent. I'll shoot you. That goes for you too, Mangon, I need you in on this." He whirled over to the window, bolted out the traffic noises below, then swung back and watched them steadily, feet planted firmly in the carpet. For the first time in the three years Mangon had known him he looked aggressive and confident.

"Headline," he announced. "The Gioconda is to sing again! Incredible and terrifying though the prospect may seem, exactly two weeks from now the live uncensored voice of the Gioconda will go out coast to coast on all three V.C. radio channels. Surprised, Mangon? It's no secret, they're printing the bills right now. Eight-thirty to nine-thirty, right up on the peak, even if they have to give the time away."

Merrill sat forward. "Bully for her. If LeGrande wants to drive the whole ship into the ground, why worry?"

Alto punched the sofa viciously. "Because you and I are going to be on board! Didn't you hear me? Eight-thirty, a fortnight today! *We* have a programme on then. Well, guess who our guest star is?"

Merrill struggled to make sense of this. "Wait a minute, Ray. You mean she's actually going to appear—she's going to *sing*—in the middle of *Opus Zero*?" Alto nodded grimly. Merrill threw up his hands and slumped back. "It's crazy, she can't. Who says she will?"

"Who do you think? The great LeGrande." Alto turned to Mangon. "She must have raked up some real dirt to frighten him into this this. I can hardly believe it."



“ But why on *Opus Zero* ?” Merrill pressed. “ Let’s switch the premiere to the week after.”

“ Paul, you’re missing the point. Let me fill you in. Some-time yesterday Madame Gioconda paid a private call on LeGrande. Something she told him persuaded him that it would be absolutely wonderful for her to have a whole hour to herself on one of the feature music programmes, singing a few old-fashioned songs from the old-fashioned shows, with a full-scale ultrasonic backing. Eager to give her a completely free hand he even asked her which of the regular programmes she’d like. Well, as the last show she appeared on ten years ago was cancelled to make way for Ray Alto’s *Total Symphony* you can guess which one she picked.”

Merrill nodded. “ It all fits together. We’re broadcasting from the concert studio. A single ultrasonic symphony, no station breaks, not even a commentary. Your first world premiere in three years. There’ll be a big invited audience. White tie, something like the old days. Revenge is sweet.” He shook his head sadly. “ Hell, all that work.”

Alto snapped : “ Don’t worry, it won’t be wasted. Why should we pay the bill for LeGrande ? This symphony is the one piece of serious music I’ve written since I joined V.C. and it isn’t going to be ruined.” He went over to Mangon, sat down next to him. “ This afternoon I went down to the rehearsal studios. They’d found an ancient sonic grand somewhere and one of the old-timers was accompanying her. Mangon, it’s ten years since she sang last. If she’d practised for two or three hours a day she might have preserved her voice, but you sweep her radio station, you know she hasn’t sung a note. She’s an old woman now. What time alone hasn’t done to her, cocaine and self-pity have.” He paused, watching Mangon searchingly. “ I hate to say it, Mangon, but it sounded like a cat being strangled.”

*You lie*, Mangon thought icily. *You are simply so ignorant, your taste in music is so debased, that you are unable to recognise real genius when you see it.* He looked at Alto with contempt, sorry for the man, with his absurd silent symphonies. He felt like shouting : *I know what silence is ! The voice of the Gioconda is a stream of gold, molten and pure, she will find it again as I found mine.* However, something about Alto’s manner warned him to wait.

He said : “ I understand.” Then : “ What do you want me to do ?”

Alto patted him on the shoulder. "Good boy. Believe me, you'll be helping her in the long run. What I propose will save all of us from looking foolish. We've got to stand up to LeGrande, even if it means a one-way ticket out of V.C. Okay, Paul?" Merrill nodded firmly and he went on: "Orchestra will continue as scheduled. According to the programme Madame Gioconda will be singing to an accompaniment by *Opus Zero*, but that means nothing and there'll be no connection at any point. In fact she won't turn up until the night itself. She'll stand well down-stage on a special platform, and the only microphone will be an aerial about twenty feet diagonally above her. It will be live—but *her voice will never reach it*. Because you, Mangon, will be in the cue-box directly in front of her, with the most powerful sonovac we can lay our hands on. As soon as she opens her mouth you'll let her have it. She'll be at least ten feet away from you so she'll hear herself and won't suspect what is happening."

"What about the audience?" Merrill asked.

"They'll be listening to my symphony, enjoying a neurophonic experience of sufficient beauty and power, I hope, to distract them from the sight of a blowzy prima donna gesturing to herself in a cocaine fog. They'll probably think she's conducting. Remember, they may be expecting her to sing but how many people still know what the word really means? Most of them will assume its ultrasonic."

"And LeGrande?"

"He'll be in Bermuda. Business conference."

## five

Madame Gioconda was sitting before her dressing table mirror, painting on a face like a halloween mask. Beside her the gramophone played scratchy sonic selections from *Traviata*. The stage was still a disorganised jumble, but there was now an air of purpose about it.

Making his way through the flats, Mangon walked up to her quietly and kissed her bare shoulder. She stood up with a flourish, an enormous monument of a woman in a magnificent black silk dress sparkling with thousands of sequins.

"Thank you, Mangon," she sang out when he complimented her. She swirled off to a hat-box on the bed, pulled out a huge peacock feather and stabbed it into her hair.

Mangon had come round at six, several hours before usual ; over the past two days he had felt increasingly uneasy. He was convinced that Alto was in error, and yet logic was firmly on his side. Could Madame Gioconda's voice have preserved itself ? Her spoken voice, unless she was being particularly sweet, was harsh and uneven, recently even more so. He assumed that with only a week to her performance nervousness was making her irritable.

Again she was going out, as she had done almost every night. With whom, she never explained ; probably to the theatre restaurants, to renew contacts with agents and managers. He would like to have gone with her, but he felt out of place on this plane of Madame Gioconda's existence.

"Mangon, I won't be back until very late," she warned him. "You look rather tired and pasty. You'd better go home and get some sleep."

Mangon noticed he was still wearing his yellow peaked cap. Unconsciously he must already have known he would not be spending the night there.

"Do you want to go to the stockade tomorrow ?" he asked.

"Hmmmh . . . I don't think so. It gives me rather a headache. Let's leave it for a day or two."

She turned on him with a tremendous smile, her eyes glittering with sudden affection.

"Goodbye, Mangon, it's been wonderful to see you." She bent down and pressed her cheek maternally to his, engulfing him in a heady wave of powder and perfume. In an instant all his doubts and worries evaporated, he looked forward to seeing her the next day, certain that they would spend the future together.

For half an hour after she had gone he wandered around the deserted sound stage, going through his memories. Then he made his way out to the alley and drove back to the stockade.

As the day of Madame Gioconda's performance drew closer Mangon's anxieties mounted. Twice he had been down to the concert studio at Video City, had rehearsed with Alto his entry beneath the stage to the cue box, a small compartment off the corridor used by the electronics engineers. They had checked the power points, borrowed a sonovac from the services section—a heavy duty model used for shielding VIP's and commentators at airports—and mounted its nozzle in the cue hood.

Alto stood on the platform erected for Madame Gioconda, shouted at the top of his voice at Merrill sitting in the third row of the stalls.

“Hear anything?” He called afterwards.

Merrill shook his head. “Nothing, no vibration at all.”

Down below Mangon flicked the release toggle, vented a long drawn-out “Fiiivvveeee! . . . Foouuurrr! . . . Threeeee! . . . Twooooo! . . . Onnnnee. . .!”

“Good enough,” Alto decided. Chicago-style, they hid the sonovac in a triple-bass case, stored it in Alto’s office.

“Do you want to hear her sing, Mangon?” Alto asked. “She should be rehearsing now.”

Mangon hesitated, then declined.

“It’s tragic that she’s unable to realize the truth herself,” Alto commented. “Her mind must be fixed fifteen or twenty years in the past, when she sang her greatest roles at La Scala. That’s the voice she hears, the voice she’ll probably always hear.”

Mangon pondered this. Once he tried to ask Madame Gioconda how her practice sessions were going, but she was moving into a different zone and answered with some grandiose remark. He was seeing less and less of her, whenever he visited the station she was either about to go out or else tired and eager to be rid of him. Their trips to the stockade had ceased. All this he accepted as inevitable; after the performance, he assured himself, after her triumph, she would come back to him.

He noticed, however, that he was beginning to stutter.

On the final afternoon, a few hours before the performance that evening, Mangon drove down to F Street for what was to be the last time. He had not seen Madame Gioconda the previous day and he wanted to be with her and give her any encouragement she needed.

As he turned into the alley he was surprised to see two large removal vans parked outside the station entrance. Four or five men were carrying out pieces of furniture and the great scenic flats from the sound stage.

Mangon ran over to them. One of the vans was full; he recognised all Madame Gioconda’s possessions—the rococo wardrobe and dressing table, the couch, the huge Desdemona bed, up-ended and wrapped in corrugated paper—as he looked at it he felt that a section of himself had been torn from him

and rammed away callously. In the bright daylight the peeling threadbare flats had lost all illusion of reality ; with them Mangon's whole relationship with Madame Gioconda seemed to have been dismantled.

The last of the workmen came out with a gold cushion under his arm, tossed it into the second van. The foreman sealed the doors and waved on the driver.

"W . . wh . . where are you going ?" Mangon asked him urgently.

The foreman looked him up and down. "You're the sweeper, are you ?" He jerked a thumb towards the station. "The old girl said there was a message for you in there. Couldn't see one myself."

Mangon left him and ran into the foyer and up the stairway towards Studio 2. The removers had torn down the blinds and a grey light was flooding into the dusty auditorium. Without the flats the stage looked exposed and derelict.

He raced down the aisle, wondering why Madame Gioconda had decided to leave without telling him.

The stage had been stripped. The music stands had been kicked over, the stove lay on its side with two or three old pans around it, underfoot there was a miscellaneous litter of paper, ash and empty vials.

Mangon searched around for the message, probably pinned to one of the partitions.

Then he heard it screaming at him from the walls, violent and concise.

*"GO AWAY YOU UGLY CHILD ! NEVER TRY TO SEE ME AGAIN !"*

He shrank back, involuntarily tried to shout as the walls seemed to fall in on him, but his throat had frozen.

As he entered the corridor below the stage shortly before eight-twenty, Mangon could hear the sounds of the audience arriving and making their way to their seats. The studio was almost full, a hubbub of well-heeled chatter. Lights flashed on and off in the corridor, and oblique atmospheric shifts cut through the air as the players on the stage tuned their instruments.

Mangon slid past the technicians manning the neurophonic rigs which supplied the orchestra, trying to make the enormous triple-bass case as inconspicuous as possible. They were all

busy checking the relays and circuits, and he reached the cue-box and slipped through the door unnoticed.

The box was almost in darkness, a few rays of coloured light filtering through the pink and white petals of the chrysanthemums stacked over the hood. He bolted the door, then opened the case, lifted out the sonovac and clipped the snout into the cannister. Leaning forward, with his hands he pushed a small aperture among the flowers.

Directly in front of him he could see a velvet-lined platform, equipped with a white metal rail to the centre of which a large floral ribbon had been tied. Beyond was the orchestra, disposed in a semicircle, each of the twenty members sitting at a small box-like desk on which rested his instrument, tone generator and cathode tube. They were all present, and the light reflected from the ray screens threw a vivid phosphorescent glow onto the silver wall behind them.

Mangon propped the nozzle of the sonovac into the aperture, bent down, plugged in the lead and switched on.

Just before eight-twenty-five someone stepped across the platform and paused in front of the cue-hood. Mangon crouched back, watching the patent leather shoes and black trousers move near the nozzle.

"Mangon!" he heard Alto snap. He craned forward, saw Alto eyeing him. Mangon waved to him and Alto nodded slowly, at the same time smiling to someone in the audience, then turned on his heel and took his place in the orchestra.

At eight-thirty a sequence of red and green lights signalled the start of the programme. The audience quietened, waiting while an announcer in an off-stage booth introduced the programme.

A compere appeared on stage, standing behind the cue-hood, and addressed the audience. Mangon sat quietly on the small wooden seat fastened to the wall, staring blankly at the cannister of the sonovac. There was a round of applause, and a steady green light shone downwards through the flowers. The air in the cue-box began to sweeten, a cool motionless breeze eddied vertically around him as a rhythmic ultrasonic pressure wave pulsed past. It relaxed the confined dimensions of the box, and had a strange mesmeric tug that held his attention. Somewhere in his mind he realized that the symphony had started, but he was too distracted to pull himself together and listen to it consciously.

Suddenly, through the gap between the flowers and the sonovac nozzle, he saw a large white mass shifting about on the platform. He slipped off the seat and peered up.

Madame Gioconda had taken her place on the platform. Seen from below she seemed enormous, a towering cataract of glistening white satin that swept down to her feet. Her arms were folded loosely in front of her, fingers flashing with blue and white stones. He could only just glimpse her face, the terrifying witch-like mask turned in profile as she waited for some off-stage signal.

Mangon mobilised himself, slid his hand down to the trigger of the sonovac. He waited, feeling the steady subliminal music of Alto's symphony swell massively within him, its tempo accelerating. Presumably Madame Gioconda's arranger was waiting for a climax at which to introduce her first aria.

Abruptly Madame Gioconda looked forward at the audience and took a short step to the rail. Her hands parted and opened palms upward, her head moved back, her bare shoulders swelled.

The wave front pulsing through the cue-box stopped, then soared off in a continuous unbroken crescendo. At the same time Madame Gioconda thrust her head out, her throat muscles contracted powerfully.

As the sound burst from her throat Mangon's finger locked rigidly against the trigger guard. An instant later, before he could think, a shattering blast of sound ripped through his ears, followed by a slightly higher note that appeared to strike a hidden ridge halfway along its path, wavered slightly, then recovered and sped on, like an express train crossing lines.

Mangon listened to her numbly, hands gripping the barrel of the sonovac. The voice exploded in his brain, flooding every nexus of cells with its violence. It was grotesque, an insane parody of a classical soprano. Harmony, purity, cadence had gone. Rough and cracked, it jerked sharply from one high note to a lower, its breath intervals uncontrolled, sudden precipices of gasping silence which plunged through the volcanic torrent, dividing it into a loosely connected sequence of bravura passages.

He barely recognised what she was singing : the Toreador song from *Carmen*. Why she had picked this he could not imagine. Unable to reach its higher notes she fell back on the swinging rhythm of the refrain, hammering out the rolling

phrases with tosses of her head. After a dozen bars her pace slackened, she slipped into an extempore humming, then broke out of this into a final climatic assault.

Appalled, Mangon watched as two or three members of the orchestra stood up and disappeared into the wings. The others had stopped playing, were switching off their instruments and conferring with each other. The audience was obviously restive ; Mangon could hear individual voices in the intervals when Madame Gioconda refilled her lungs.

Behind him someone hammered on the door. Startled, Mangon nearly tripped across the sonovac. Then he bent down and wrenched the plug out of its socket. Snapping open the two catches beneath the chassis of the sonovac, he pulled off the cannister to reveal the valves, amplifier and generator. He slipped his fingers carefully through the leads and coils, seized them as firmly as he could and ripped them out with a single motion. Tearing his nails, he stripped the printed circuit off the bottom of the chassis and crushed it between his hands.

Satisfied, he dropped the sonovac to the floor, listened for a moment to the caterwauling above, which was now being drowned by the mounting vocal opposition of the audience, then unlatched the door.

Paul Merrill, his bow tie askew, burst in. He gaped blankly at Mangon, at the blood dripping from his fingers and the smashed sonovac on the floor.

He seized Mangon by the shoulders, shook him roughly. "Mangon, are you crazy? What are you trying to do?"

Mangon attempted to say something, but his voice had died. He pulled himself away from Merrill, pushed past into the corridor.

Merrill shouted after him. "Mangon, help me fix this! Where are you going?" He got down on his knees, started trying to piece the sonovac together.

From the wings Mangon briefly watched the scene on the stage.

Madame Gioconda was still singing, her voice completely inaudible in the uproar from the auditorium. Half the audience were on their feet, shouting towards the stage and apparently remonstrating with the studio officials. All but a few members of the orchestra had left their instruments, these sitting on their desks and watching Madame Gioconda in amazement.



The programme director, Alto and one of the compères stood in front of her, banging on the rail and trying to attract her attention. But Madame Gioconda failed to notice them. Head back, eyes on the brilliant ceiling lights, hands gesturing majestically, she soared along the private causeways of sound that poured unrelentingly from her throat, a great white angel of discord on her homeward flight.

Mangon watched her sadly, then slipped away through the stage-hands pressing around him. As he left the theatre by the stage door a small crowd was gathering by the main entrance. He flicked away the blood from his fingers, then bound his handkerchief round them.

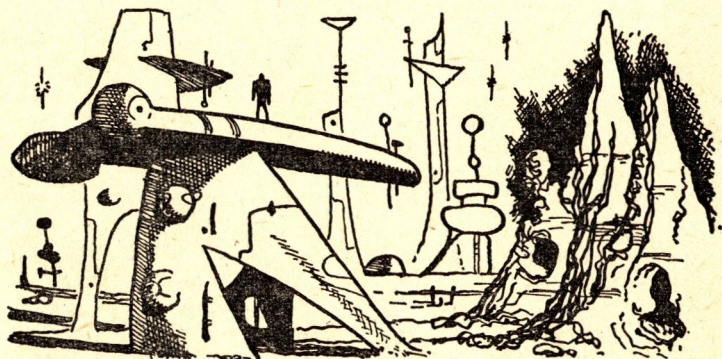
He walked down the side street to where the sound truck was parked, climbed into the cab and sat still for a few minutes, looking out at the bright evening lights in the bars and shop-fronts.

Opening the dashboard locker, he hunted through it and pulled out an old wrist-pad, clipped it into his sleeve.

In his ears the sounds of Madame Gioconda singing echoed like an insane banshee.

He switched on the sonovac under the dashboard, turned it full on, then started the engine and drove off into the night.

—J. G. Ballard



*Mutation on a colonial world will be inevitable for no other planet will ever quite be the same as Earth in make-up. Therefore, in a stellar development scheme all Earth humans will vary from the norm—the problem will be to decide which is the true species.*

# THE SHIP FROM HOME

BY J. T. McINTOSH

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## o n e

Honey Hart was up a ladder cleaning windows when she saw the ship. "Dick, look!" she screamed, and pointed.

It was lucky for her that he didn't. Knowing his wife's talent for accidents, Dick had been watching her uneasily since she got near the ladder, and when she started devoting her attention to something other than being up a ladder, he wisely devoted all his attention to her.

"Dick, it's the Ship!" Honey yelled. "The Ship they said would come one day. Look, it's silver and shining and beautiful, just like a—"

Dick caught her as she fell.

"Thanks, darling," she said, unperturbed, patting her hair back in place and pulling down her skirt. "I don't know how I lived long enough to marry you. But look, the ship . . ."

Relieved of his anxiety about her—for even Honey could come to very little harm standing on the gravel path round their little green house—Dick did look at last. He gasped in excitement.

No doubt about it, it was *the* Ship. The ship which had been expected for generations.

“She’s going to land down the valley,” he said. “Let’s run, Honey. We could get there in time to meet her.”

“Don’t be silly,” said Honey, who was nothing if not feminine. “How can I go in this old dress?”

“Never mind your old dress. Come on, darling.”

They ran.

Down in the valley, little round Eddie Marks saw the ship when he came out, blinking in the sunshine, to hang a notice outside Marks’ General Store. He squeaked excitedly and pointed, and the people in the dusty main street of Marxtown looked and gasped and shouted and ran.

Eddie was the only one who didn’t run towards the ship. Thinking how terrible it would be if Paula missed this wonderful moment, he ran through the store and the house behind it and out on the back green where his daughter was lazily sunbathing under a huge, floppy hat.

“Paula, puss,” he gasped with what breath he could spare, which wasn’t much. “Puss, it’s the Ship.”

“The what?” asked the girl sleepily.

“The ship, puss, the Ship! She’s landing in the valley. Everybody’s running. Hurry up, we don’t want to miss—”

“I can’t come,” wailed Paula, who was also feminine. “I’m not dressed.”

“It doesn’t matter, puss. Hurry, this will be something to tell your grandchildren. The day the ship landed—”

Paula delayed no longer. Through the garden, house and store they ran, little round Eddie and little curvy Paula, along the street and a track and a path finally over the fields. Eddie puffed and lagged behind. Paula ran no more gracefully than most girls, but with all the energy and leggy provocativeness of her sixteen years, leaving her father, who had waited behind so that she wouldn’t miss this great moment, trailing ever further and further behind her.

Even Eddie wasn’t the last. Hesketh Hart saw all the people running, but a clump of assala trees hid his view of the slowly descending ship and he refused to run without knowing

why. He owed something to his position as Mayor of Marxtown. Imagine the Mayor running like a school kid. It wouldn't do. It wouldn't do at all.

Only when Sidney Simon, running like the rest, yelled: "Spaceship—landing down the valley!" did Hesketh decide he'd better go too, even if there had been no formal announcement. Sidney was a sound man, apart from his habit of taking unnecessary trump finesses, and if he said a thing there was a good chance of it being true.

As Hesketh's tall, thin, ungainly figure passed the school, hurrying straight-legged like a man on stilts, Benson Marx popped his head out of one of the classrooms and said incredulously: "Mr. Hart, I can hardly believe that you of all people—"

"Spaceship," gasped Hesketh. "Landing in the valley."

The boys and girls heard that, and erupted from the school in a bisexual flood, screaming and yelling at the very considerable tops of their voices. Though late starters, they soon passed the stragglers like Hesketh and Eddie, jumping fences like greyhounds and scrambling through ditches and bushes.

Only Sherman Kistner, cutting his hedge, decided not to go at all. It seemed to him that since Marxtown had waited four or five generations for the Ship to come, it wouldn't do any real harm for him to wait till the others got back and told him about it. He briefly considered making a round of the empty houses and stores and seeing what he could pick up, but regretfully abandoned the idea. For one thing, Sherman wasn't really dishonest and never stole anything unless there was no other way to get it. For another, if anything went missing people would immediately think he'd taken it, which showed what suspicious natures people had.

So Sherman carried on cutting the hedge, even when he heard the scream of tortured air that meant the ship was braking hard on her jets to land. "It seems to me," he said to himself, for Sherman sometimes did that when he was quite sure he was alone, "that even if I run with the rest, this here hedge will still want cutting when I get back. So if I run, I accomplish nothing."

Pleased with this philosophical conclusion, he looked along the line of the hedge critically to see if it was straight.

Honey and Dick arrived first, not having quite as far to go as the people from Marxtown. Honey would have run right

under the jets of the great silver ship, but Dick, used to looking after her, restrained her absently without taking his eyes off the ship.

"Are we near enough?" asked Honey dutifully. She implicitly believed that Dick was always right, with good reason. When she would have done one thing and Dick made her do another, Dick *was* always right.

"Unless you want all your hair burned off, we are, darling," said Dick.

"Oh, will it frizzle my hair?" Honey asked anxiously. Though not vain, she knew she was pretty, and liked to be pretty, and was horrified at the thought of being anything else. "Hadn't we better move back a bit?"

Dick laughed. "We're all right where we are, darling."

"And is it all right for the ship to land here? It won't get broken, like the *Young Dream*?"

"It won't get broken," Dick assured her.

Various miscellaneous people arrived panting and joined them. Dick Hart's common sense and practicality were well enough known for others to decide that where he elected to stand was close enough and not too close.

The red flame of the jets became white and the tall, slim ship came down gently. She was obviously man-made. Somehow everybody took it for granted that if any other intelligent species managed to construct a spaceship it would be clear at a glance that it hadn't been made by *people*.

And anyway, this one was quite like the pictures of the *Young Dream*. Nobody now alive had seen the *Young Dream*—what was left of her had been cut to pieces long ago and all her metal used for other purposes. But everybody knew what she had looked like, and this ship was very similar.

She was the Ship they'd been waiting for, all right.

Paula Marks came racing up, her provocative young breasts dancing and bouncing half out of the halter which was too small for them in the first place, and nobody even looked at her. She stopped, breathless, surprised and hurt. In a fraction of a second she passed from nervousness over being stared at in her sunsuit to indignation over not being stared at. She began to think very poorly of the Ship. If it distracted the boys' attention so much they didn't even bother to look at her, she wished the silly old spaceship hadn't bothered to come.

Hesketh came up stiffly behind them all, groaning with the effort. Naturally he would have to make a speech of welcome. But where was he to find the breath ?

His eye lighted on Paula Marks, and at last her sunsuit had some effect.

“Woman !” he gasped. “Girl ! Creature ! Hide behind the others, for goodness sake, in case the visitors see you.”

Paula ignored him, turning her nose in the air for that purpose.

The ship landed gently, and the little crowd took an involuntary step back as they felt the furnace heat of the jets. However, almost at once the jets ceased hissing, and there was sudden silence.

A port in the ship's side opened, and the silence was broken as the crowd cheered.

The cheer faltered a little as they saw the man descending, for he was at least eight feet tall and impossibly, grotesquely thin, and his head was of a queer shape. However, it was only to be expected that different environmental conditions would produce physical changes, and after the momentary check they cheered twice as loudly, in case the visitor would think they'd noticed anything peculiar about him.

He reached the ground and turned. The tallest Marxtionians only came up to his chest, yet the thinnest of them were broader than he was. He was dressed all in black, which added to the disturbing, rather spine-chilling effect he made.

As they saw his face the cheers died altogether. For though his features were human, they were most peculiar. There was nothing noticeably wrong with his face, unless it was the size of his nose ; yet suddenly and frighteningly everybody realized they were facing a man of another race.

Undeterred, Hesketh Hart stepped forward, and people who had thought that Hesketh was thin and awkward and angular observed with some surprise how ordinary and familiar and downright natural he looked beside the stranger.

“Welcome to Marxtown,” said Hesketh breathlessly. “As Mayor of Marxtown I welcome you. We have waited a long time for this moment. Ever since—”

“Let's get one thing clear from the start,” said the stranger. “Whose side are you on ?”

His words were strange but comprehensible, his voice not unpleasant. The question, however, meant nothing to the villagers.

"My name is Hesketh Hart," said the Mayor firmly, getting some of his breath back.

"You can call me Wallis. What's the name of this place?"

"Marxtown."

"I mean the planet, the world."

"Why, it's just the world," said Hesketh, irritated because he couldn't remember the name. He looked round and saw Dick, his nephew. "Richard, what's the name of this world?"

"Megoris," said Dick.

Hesketh turned back to Wallis. "Megoris," he said triumphantly.

"Never heard of it," said Wallis. "Let's get this straight. Are you Trues or Newmen? Guess you must be Newmen, with shapes like that." He looked down at Hesketh, and the Mayor reddened.

"I'm afraid I don't understand you," Hesketh said stiffly. The great meeting for which they'd waited so long was getting out of hand. Nothing seemed to be going right. Nevertheless, he forced himself to go back to his speech of welcome. "Ever since our ship was damaged too badly to be repaired, we have waited for another ship to come and—"

"Keep back, will you?" Wallis interrupted sharply as the crowd pressed closer. His hand went to his belt, where he wore a long black gun.

"Really, Mr. Wallis," said Hesketh with dignity, "your attitude is quite incomprehensible. We are here to welcome you. We have waited for generations for another ship from Earth—"

"Earth!" exclaimed Wallis, and snatched out his gun.

There was a moment of horror and shock. Hesketh took a step back as the tall black stranger pointed his gun, and at the back of the crowd a woman screamed.

This wasn't how things were supposed to go at this great moment.

"Now I get it," said Wallis. "This settlement was founded by one of the early ships a century ago—"

"That's right," said Hesketh. "Please put away your gun, Mr. Wallis. One of the early ships, yes. And to this day we have waited—"

"I'm getting fed to the teeth of hearing how you've waited," said Wallis. However, to the relief of the Marxtonians, he did put his gun away. "I see I've got a lot to tell you," he went on. "Time you knew what's been going on in the galaxy. How many of you are there?"

"Over five hundred," said Hesketh proudly.

"Hell, is that all? Hell of a lot of difference you'll make." He spoke into a small box fastened to his black suit, and the townspeople realized for the first time that the men in the ship had been listening to all that was going on.

"These people are safe, I guess," he said. "Milli and Jobin can come down. Be ready for take-off, though. We don't want to be caught with our trousers down."

Sherman Kistner was just putting the finishing touches to his hedge as the procession returned. In the lead were Hesketh Hart and three of the queerest creatures Sherman had ever seen, all thin as a rake, so thin that though the shortest of them was two feet taller than Hesketh, who until then had been regarded as a tall thin man, she couldn't weigh any more.

It was a she all right, you could tell that from the two little bumps high on the beanpole body. But when you compared her with Paula Marks or Honey Hart . . . well, you just couldn't, and who would want to try?

Honey and Dick were lagging far behind the others, looking thoughtful. Sherman called to them, and they came over.

"What's this all about, Dick?" Sherman inquired.

Honey picked up Sherman's shears, and Dick finally took them away from her. "Seems they come from a place called Blackside," he said, "and they're Newmen, and at war with Earth. Seems also they think we should be at war with Earth too, and will be soon."

"Was that what it was all about?" asked Honey, astonished.

Sherman shook his head slowly. "I always thought we took it too much for granted we'd be glad when the Ship came."

Dick had no difficulty in understanding him. "Well, it looks as if you were right," he said.

Honey looked startled. "But . . . but . . ." she said. Then suddenly she began to cry. This didn't seem at all like the wonderful day it had always been supposed to be.

Dick patted her on the shoulder tenderly and made an expressive face at Sherman. He and Sherman had nothing in common except that most uncommon thing, common sense.

Sherman fixed a suddenly penetrating gaze on him. "You're on the Council," he said. "Shouldn't you be around to listen to all the words of wisdom the great gods from space care to drop?"

"I want to think about this," said Dick.



Sherman made a derisive noise. "That's no way to go about things," he sneered. "Act first. Think afterwards."

Honey looked up indignantly. "Don't you talk to my Dick like that," she said vehemently.

"He wasn't really arguing with me, darling," said Dick mildly.

"Well, it sounded like it."

"I spend my life being misunderstood," Sherman sighed. "Every time something gets lost . . ."

Dick and Honey went on up the hill, Honey trying to make Dick reassure her that this was the great day they'd always believed it was going to be.

## t w o

"No, I won't," said Paula, scandalized.

The tall Blacksider whose name was Jons—they all looked the same to the Marxtonians—seemed surprised. He glanced down at her. "Wouldn't have thought it made much difference," he said.

Paula blushed. "Of course it does. What kind of a girl do you think I am?"

Jons looked at Billy Kistner. "How about you?" he asked.

Billy shrugged. "I don't mind, so long as you take Paula away."

Before the three Blacksidiers and the crowd of Marxtonians left the ship to go into the town, Wallis had suggested—though to some people it might have sounded like an order—that two or three Marxtonians might like to go on board the ship while he and Milli and Jobin went with the others. It seemed a reasonable suggestion to the villagers, and when Wallis asked for typical specimens of young manhood and womanhood they cheated a little and pushed forward Paula Marks and Billy Kistner—much as a proud farmer, asked for a dozen large eggs, might have sent ostrich eggs and said Sorry, he'd already sent all the big eggs to market.

Paula wasn't keen at first and neither was Eddie, but then she realized how she'd be able to boast about what she'd seen inside the Ship. Besides, maybe this was an honour, and when she came to think of it, if Honey Hart of Shirley Kistner had been asked she'd have felt she was missing something and wondered why anybody picked Honey or Shirley, for goodness' sake.

So Paula and Billy climbed into the great silver ship while the Blacksidiers went into Marxtown.

Dazed and disappointed, Paula didn't think much of the marvels she was shown. This wasn't at all like what she'd expected. She had always imagined that when the ship come, it would be peopled by handsome, godlike men (she didn't care about the women, if any, and certainly didn't want them to be fabulously beautiful goddesses). She had taken it for granted that there would be laughing and singing and dancing, and that the celebrations would go on for days, with a festival king and queen picked by popular acclamation. The king would be one of the handsome, godlike strangers, and the queen would naturally be Paula Marks.

Now reality imposed itself on the dream, as reality had a habit of doing. Handsome, godlike men indeed . . . She shuddered particularly at the romantic part of the dream in which she'd been carried away in the night by one of the fabulous visitors. Why, she'd rather be carried away by Hesketh Hart or that dirty old Sherman Kistner, to say nothing of somebody like Billy, or Jim Marcks, or Quinn Hart.

They'd had a quick look round the ship, which, though no doubt very marvellous, didn't appeal at all to Paula, being stark and antiseptic and full of terrible weapons. Now she and Billy were in a bare white clinic and Jons wanted to examine them and take photographs of them and make casts of them.

Paula's scandalized refusal came when Jons asked her to take off all her clothes.

When Billy agreed to being examined, Paula was led into a tiny room and left there alone, to her extreme indignation. Paula couldn't bear not being the centre of attraction. It was mean of Billy to agree to being examined.

In the clinic, Billy was asking ; " What do you want to do this for ? "

" To record the physical characteristics of humans on Megoris. To find your physical differences from us and from the norm. "

" What's the norm ? " Billy asked. He was sixteen and not very bright. He still had the childish habit of asking about every word he didn't know, instead of acting like a sensible adult and pretending he did know.

" The norm, " said Jons with distaste, " is the physical type of the planet Earth. No use arguing about that—it's so. "

Billy could see no reason why he should argue about that. However, a startling fact was implicit in what Jons said.

"You mean," said Billy, "we're different? Different from the people of Earth?"

"Different? Of course. Look at that." His long finger traced Billy's taut rib cavity, waist, abdomen. "Even more marked in that girl," Jons observed. "I wish she'd let us take casts."

"She might," Billy grinned, "if you went about it the right way—"

He was interrupted by the loudest, shrillest, most unpleasant alarm bell he had ever heard. At once there was furious activity on the ship. Higher in the nose of the vessel a siren howled like a soul in agony.

The three Blacksiders were at the city hall when the siren blared. They jumped up immediately and ran from the building, completely ignoring the protests and questions of the people about them.

Never had such a sound been heard in Marxtown. It wailed and blared like the screams of a million bereaved mothers. It forced its way in everywhere, and nobody who heard it had any difficulty in understanding its message: fear, alarm, danger, desperate haste.

The tall thin Blacksiders could run far faster than any Marxtonian. As they reached the ship, Paula and Billy were being hustled down her side.

"Stand clear of the jets!" Wallis shouted as he leapt for the ladder.

Billy and Paula had barely time to stand clear before the jets spat, flaring red and then white.

And the ship which had landed less than an hour before was climbing into the sky again.

"I think they're all nuts," said Billy.

"Billy," said Paula impulsively, "you can kiss me if you like."

He stared at her. "What for?" he asked.

"Because you're normal," said Paula thankfully.

It seemed a queer reason to Billy. Previously Paula had never been exactly prodigal with her kisses, as if she considered herself too good for ordinary folk. He complied enthusiastically.

In Marxtown, poor little Eddie Marks had a bad time when he saw and heard the ship blast off. He thought Paula was still inside. When he saw her and Billy returning across the fields he was so relieved his legs gave way and he sat down suddenly in the dust.

Hesketh Hart couldn't understand it at all. "Why should they run away like that?" he demanded of nobody in particular.

But in the little green house Dick Hart seemed to understand the whole situation well enough. He was patiently explaining it to Honey.

"When you go and live on another planet," he said, "you naturally become a little different physically. The air you breathe isn't likely to be exactly the same, the food you eat can't be quite the same, even the water is liable to have different deposits and bacteria and all the rest of it. The body changes because it lives on different things. Though a fire is a fire, a coal fire isn't the same as an oil fire, a wood fire, a gas fire, an electric heater."

"Of course not," said Honey. "Everybody knows that."

"Right. When there's two different kinds of people around, they usually fight. Even if they're exactly the same size and shape but just happen to have a slightly different colour, they nearly always fight. It seems there's just such a fight going on right now between the Trues, who haven't changed, and the Newmen, who have."

"That's silly," said Honey. "Why should people fight just because they're different?"

"Well, it's as good a thing to fight about as anything else," said Dick fairly. "Anyway, the Trues and the Newmen are fighting, and our friends who just left were Newmen. They seemed to think we must be Newmen too, and automatically on their side."

"But that would mean . . . that would mean we've changed. That would mean we're different from Earth people."

Dick nodded, pleased at this evidence of intelligence.

"But we're not!" Honey insisted. "We haven't become . . . I mean, we haven't got green skin, or three legs, or—"

"If there was any change, sweet," Dick said, "we wouldn't notice it. Never mind, I still think you look gorgeous."

Though that was undoubtedly the most important thing, Honey remained concerned. She didn't like to think of herself as a strange, bizarre, mutated creature.

Earth was home. The people of Earth were her people.

It had been inevitable that the Marxtonians should come to regard Earth as a sort of paradise. Forty men and women had landed on Megoris a long, long time ago and had been prepared to make the best of it.

It was a time in human expansion when scores of ships were going out into the galaxy on similar brave, hopeful journeys. Few of the people who went out would ever see Earth again, and they knew it.

Later, after years of pioneering work, they'd be joined by others from Earth. Other ships would come.

Only in the case of Marxtown, generations had passed, no ship had come, and most people had only the vaguest of ideas what the situation in the galaxy could be now.

But Earth was home.

Marxtown was home too, and if a chance to go back to Earth had been offered, most Marxtonians would have taken it for granted they'd come back eventually. Yet this idea that Earth was cut off from them somehow, that Earth wasn't home any more, was disturbing, frightening.

"Let's find out," said Honey suddenly, jumping up.

"Find out what, sweet?"

"Whether we're different. Let's go to the library."

"I doubt if it'll help," said Dick. "But there's no harm in looking."

As they walked into town, Honey asked: "Why do you think the ship left so suddenly?"

"Well, that was an alarm of some kind. That could only mean that an enemy ship was approaching."

Honey stood still. "Another ship?"

"What else could it be?"

"But . . . but . . ." She tried and failed to grasp the possibilities.

In town they met Billy and Paula, who were by no means unwilling to talk about what they'd seen and heard on board the ship. Dick listened patiently, and was particularly interested in what Jons had said.

"And he wanted me to take off my clothes," said Paula indignantly. "As if I'd do a thing like that."

Dick raised his eyebrows. "You couldn't," he agreed, "unless you put them on first."

"Dick Hart, you're as bad as he is. He wanted me to take all my clothes off and let him take pictures and plaster casts of me."

"I'm sure his interest was entirely scientific."

"That makes it a thousand times worse!" said Paula vehemently.

Honey nodded, having no difficulty in appreciating that point of view.

"From what he said," Billy remarked, "it's here that we're different." He sketched a rough oval under his rib cage and round his groin. "Jons said it was more marked in Paula, whatever it was."

Dick looked at Paula. "No you don't," said Honey. "If you want to take a good look at a female torso, Mr. Hart, make sure it's mine."

"What's your waist measurement, Paula?" Dick asked.

"Thirteen."

He nodded, and he and Honey went on to the library. "Mine's only fourteen," said Honey with the merest trace of jealousy, "and I'm three inches taller than she is. Maybe four."

Dick said nothing.

When forty people set out to tame a new planet, there wasn't much time for reading and writing. Their children were taught to read, and their children, and eventually a small printing press was set up and various new publications produced. However, even now nobody wore out his eyes with too much reading.

The *Young Dream's* library had necessarily been small. *Little Women*, *The Adventure of Tom Sawyer*, an encyclopedia, a dictionary, books on carpentry, housebuilding, botany, medicine, geology, history (Terran), psychology and other broad topics. About twenty-five novels in all, a few poetry anthologies, Shakespeare's plays, and for the rest a severely practical collection of useful books.

There were also dozens of boxes of microfilm which hardly anyone ever bothered to look at, for people will curl up with a good book when they won't sit hunched over a scanner. Anyway, the material on microfilm was largely useless. If you wanted detailed information on conditions at Earth's South Pole, it was probably there somewhere. But Megoris having no icecaps, such information seemed to be of little importance.

Setting out to find exactly what people used to look like, Dick and Honey found it astonishingly difficult to get any

precise information. Most books for humans are written on the assumption that humans know what humans look like and only special features need to be described.

There was nothing strange about any of the pictures. The people in the pictures looked very like the people Dick and Honey knew.

"Here's something about a girl with a 19-inch waist," said Honey. "She must have been terribly fat."

"Perhaps not," said Dick. "Perhaps you're terribly thin, darling."

Honey looked hurt. Before she could reply however, the ground shook, lightning flashed and a sound that wasn't a sound made them jump convulsively.

Without speaking they rushed outside. And there in the bright sky was a new star, a star so bright that it seared the eyes to look at it.

"Dick, what is it?" Honey exclaimed.

"That's a ship," said Dick grimly, "either the one that was just here or the one that came after it."

"But how could it get as bright as that? Why, it must be millions of miles away, and it's so bright we . . ."

As she spoke the bright star burned out and there was nothing left.

"That's war," said Dick bitterly. "A lot of men and women have just died—because they were different. Or because they weren't."

"But . . . how could a ship be destroyed like that—in space?"

"Easily enough. Probably here in the microfilm we could find out how, if we wanted to. And no doubt we could build such a weapon—if we wanted to."

Honey was silent for a moment, awed. "Maybe everybody was transferred before the ship was destroyed," she said hopefully. The idea of scores of men and women being snuffed out in an instant, even the not entirely attractive Blacksiders, was so horrible she sought escape from believing it.

"Maybe," Dick said. "But I doubt it."

"And we'll never know . . ."

"Oh yes. We'll know all about it very soon."

"Huh? If the whole ship was destroyed—"

"There's another ship up there," said Dick. "And it'll land very soon."

It was Sherman who saw it first this time. He didn't rush anywhere. He merely surveyed it with misgiving.

It was impossible to say whether she was the same ship or not. The fact that she'd obviously seen Marxtown only after looking around for quite a while suggested that this was a different ship. On the other hand, Megoris was very large and Marxtown very small, and Wallis's ship might easily have had great difficulty in finding the place where she'd been before.

Everybody was watching as the ship descended in the last light of evening. There was one very puzzling thing. Why was she landing so far away?

There was no doubt that she'd seen Marxtown and was landing because of Marxtown. Yet she seemed to be coming down at least twenty miles away, over the hills. Perhaps more. Indeed, the way she dropped behind the hills and the sounds they heard echoing for a long time afterwards in the still air suggested that she was doing her best to conceal the place where she had landed.

Billy Kistner wanted to drive out immediately and look for her. But this time the general feeling was different. Nobody was in any passionate hurry to go to the ship. Anyway, it was evening now. Tomorrow would do. Besides . . .

In a few short hours the people of Marxtown had turned from passionate joy at sight of a stranger ship to puzzled mistrust.

It was ninety-five per cent certain, for one thing, that this ship had just destroyed the other and that forty or fifty men and women had been coldly murdered.

On the whole the Marxtonians would rather not have anything to do with anybody who had been involved in such an act.

But they knew they had no choice.

"Unless," Sherman mused, "she happened to land on crystal rock like the *Young Dream*."

Four or five people heard him, but nobody said anything. They were thinking. And though nobody said anything, they all came to the conclusion that it might not be a bad thing after all if the same thing happened to this ship as had happened to the *Young Dream*.



## t h r e e

Old Miss Kitty Hart, Hesketh's aunt, poisoned herself that night. Nobody attached too much significance to that—Miss Kitty had been queer for years.

Nearly everybody could understand why Miss Kitty had elected to take the long sleep. Next to the day of the landing on Megoris, the previous day had been easily the most important in Marxtonian history. One era had ended, and another had begun.

Many people still insisted stoutly that the coming of the ship was a great and glorious thing, and that now Marxtown could take her rightful place in the human commonwealth again. That was all very well, but nobody was quite sure what Marxtown's rightful place in the human commonwealth was, and it would have been nice to find that out first and then be able to take it or leave it.

Anyway, in the morning nothing had happened except that Miss Kitty had poisoned herself, and it was still necessary to go and look for the ship. It was impossible, after all, just to forget all about it.

Hesketh Hart organized a party, going round personally and inviting all the people he felt ought to go along, because he was a fair man. Though he believed it didn't really matter who else went as long as he did, it was only right that others should be given the chance.

A surprising number of people refused it, their attitude now rather similar to Sherman's the day before. They'd find out soon enough about the new development. Meantime, they had work to do.

As Sherman himself said : " Spaceships are ten a penny, Hesketh. Can't get any sleep for them landing and blasting off."

This seemed unnecessarily frivolous, especially as Hesketh had been decidedly magnanimous in inviting Sherman at all, and he marched away in high dudgeon.

Naturally he called on Dick Hart, since Dick was on the Council. The little green house on the hill seemed unusually cold and deserted, however.

Puzzled, Hesketh took a walk round the gravel path. And at the back he found a pane of glass neatly cut out.

In five minutes it was all over the village : Dick and Honey Hart had been kidnapped in the night.

And though the Marxtonians were a peaceful lot, this roused them to fury. There wasn't a nicer, more inoffensive couple than the young Harts. What kind of people could it be who bore off captives when anybody they asked would have gone with them willingly?

The Party already formed became a rescue party, armed with old, little-used guns. Sherman leaned on his spade and said: "Oh my, look at the army. Folks, don't you realize these people just blew up a ship in space? Can any of your little guns do that?"

Hesketh had all his trouble for nothing, for in the end the rescue party never left the town. While they were completing their preparations for a cross-country hunt, the silence of the morning was shattered and over the hills they saw the ship blasting off. She went straight up.

A few men did go looking in case Dick and Honey had been put aground before the ship left, as Billy and Paula had been.

It was a forlorn hope, and it didn't pay off. Dick and Honey had been carried away as captives, and even Sherman, who was commonly believed to care for nothing and nobody, felt black rage in his heart whenever he thought of the raiders from space.

Dick and Honey had been drugged; the ship was in space by the time they recovered consciousness.

As Dick fought his way out of thick, swirling grey mists, he heard a voice say: "They're coming to. Go and tell Captain Stalk—he wants to talk to them himself."

The voice was at least as odd as the Blacksidiers' had been, but it wasn't the voice of a Blacksider. So Wallis and his ship were gone. He was about to see their murderers.

Dick would have delayed admitting he was conscious in order to gather his wits, but gasps and a whispered "Where's Dick?" told him Honey was with him and regaining consciousness too. He opened his eyes so that he could take charge of things as far as possible and shield her in any way he could.

In that first glance he noticed nothing of his surroundings. He didn't even look at Honey. His attention was claimed by what was obviously the physical difference between Trues and Marxtonians.

The man watching him was young and fair. One would have known from his face that he was no Marxtonian, without being sure why. There were no notable differences. His skin

colour was pinker than Dick's light brown. He looked harder, tougher, stronger than any Marxtonian. His eyes were sharp and intelligent—those eyes had seen a lot, and no longer bothered to do more than report impartially what they saw.

It was the man's lower body which interested Dick. Though clad in a long white coat, it was obviously straight all the way down. The hollow under the ribs was no hollow, it was flat. The waist was barely slimmer than the hips. The belly was flat instead of concave.

"Hi," said the man. "Now don't get alarmed. You're all right, and so is your wife. Drink this and you'll feel a hundred per cent in about five minutes."

Dick took the glass and drank. Honey lay beside him, dressed in a strange short tunic, like a blouse and shorts in one—quite neat except at the waist, where the belt she wore couldn't conceal the fact that the garment was made for somebody twice as thick as Honey. Dick himself wore the same kind of tunic except that instead of shorts he had long pants.

Honey didn't ask "Where am I?" She saw Dick and sat up to throw herself in his arms.

"Give her this," said the man in the white coat.

Honey looked at him, startled, stared at his midriff, and then turned to Dick again, alarm flaring in her eyes. There was no sensation of motion but they knew somehow that they were in space.

"Dick," she said. "Dick, where are we?" Her voice rose to a scream in four words.

Dick handed her the glass. "Just wait till I know myself," he said soothingly, "then I'll tell you all about it."

He persuaded her not to talk while the stimulant, if it was a stimulant, was taking effect. In such circumstances, the less Honey said the better.

Being equable in temperament, he was not particularly angry at being kidnapped, at any rate not until he found out exactly what their captors intended. He had no doubt that while he and Honey had been unconscious they had been X-rayed and examined and tabulated in every possible way. This Dick didn't mind in the least; if they were now returned to Marxtown unharmed he would hold nothing against the people in the ship.

Not having a name for them was inconvenient. "What are you?" he asked. "Earthmen?"

The doctor hesitated, wondering whether he was permitted to give them any information before Captain Stalk arrived. He decided it couldn't do much harm. "Trues," he said, "but not Earthmen. We come from Musca. I'm Tom Walker."

"We're Honey and Dick Hart," said Dick absently. So not all Trues were Earthmen, though presumably all Earthmen were Trues. This complicated matters. It appeared that conditions on some worlds were so similar to those of Earth that no significant mutation occurred.

"Pleased to meet you," said Walker.

"I'm not pleased to meet you," said Honey indignantly. "I hate you. Dragging us from our—"

"Honey!" said Dick sharply, and she recoiled, a hurt look in her eyes. He *never* spoke to her like that.

Dick's idea was simply that there was no point in antagonizing the Muscans more than necessary.

The captain arrived before the hurt look had faded from Honey's eyes. "Stalk," he said bluntly. "Walker, can they walk?"

The way his words fell into a ridiculous jingle made Honey giggle, Dick's harsh tone forgotten. Stalk stared at her.

He was a barrel of a man, of only average height but so thick that Honey couldn't help goggling at him. She realized now that Walker was slim as Muscans went. She became very anxious to see a Muscan woman.

As the captain took them to his cabin a little later she did. The girl they saw was about Honey's age, wore the same kind of garment, was reasonably pretty and could probably be taken as representing Muscans as fairly as Honey represented Marxtonians.

Honey thought she looked awful. Her waist must be all of twenty-four inches and she had a bulging tummy. It wasn't even flat like Walker's, if anything it swelled slightly.

If that girl was a True, Honey was glad she wasn't. Then she thought of the queer, beanpole Blacksiders and wasn't so sure.

"I'm going to be quite frank," said the captain. His tone made it clear he was going to be that at least. He just didn't like Newmen. "Walker's report indicates you're Newmen beyond all doubt. I know you've had nothing to do with the

Racial War and probably don't wish to have anything to do with it. Nevertheless, I'd be perfectly justified in executing you both."

"For being Newmen?" asked Dick.

"Exactly."

"That wouldn't be a very nice thing to do."

"This isn't a very nice war," the captain snapped. "It's the biggest, bitterest and most inhuman war that was ever fought."

"I can believe that," said Dick quietly. "The complete annihilation of the Blackside ship was pretty inhuman."

Stalk stared at him in astonishment rather than anger. "An enemy ship that was trying to destroy us? You don't understand, Hart."

"Evidently not."

"And stop being insolent."

"Yes, sir."

The captain breathed hard, but controlled himself. "I haven't decided what to do about you or the rest of your people. I propose to wait here in orbit round Megoris for three weeks."

Dick was relieved to hear this. At least they weren't being taken untold light-years away from Marxtown. "And after that?" he said.

"I can say no more meantime. I should warn you, however, that the best your people can hope for is to be placed under protective custody for the duration."

"Of what?"

"The war."

"What does protective custody mean?"

"In plain words, that you'll be prisoners."

Honey was staring at him in horror. "You're going to take everybody away from Marxtown?"

"I can't," Stalk said sourly.

"If that's the best we can hope for," said Dick, "what's the worst?"

The captain shrugged. "You'll know my decision in three weeks. All our tests and surveys of your planet will be complete by then. But please remember that in no circumstances can any of your people be allowed to leave Megoris."

Dick was puzzled. "I told you," he said. "Our ship is gone and we're nowhere near the technological level to build another one. How could we leave Megoris?"

Stalk's face flushed red. "Kindly don't argue with me. Your technological level is neither here nor there. It is my duty to make sure you remain prisoners of war for the duration."

"But if neither you nor the Blacksiders had ever come here we'd have been prisoners anyway—for at least two hundred years, I'd say."

Stalk was going purple with rage. Yet Dick wasn't trying to annoy him. "You still seem unaware," Stalk shouted, "that as captain of this ship I have power of life and death over you, If that's the line you're going to take, I can make you wish you'd never been born."

Dick was intelligent, even-tempered, and a good husband. But he was by no means faultless. He frequently committed the infuriating crime of being calmly reasonable when a less intelligent person could have seen that calmness and reasonableness were like red rags to a bull.

"All I'm saying is," Dick observed mildly, "that it should be an easy job you've taken on yourself. We're not going anywhere. We can't."

With a howl of rage Stalk flung himself at a bellpush in one wall of the cabin and two men came in. "Put them both in the cooler," he snapped. "Separately."

Dick went quietly. At least Wallis hadn't been mad. They were worse off with Stalk, a mad True, than with Wallis, an unprepossessing alien but not unreasonable Newman.

The two guards seemed quite friendly, and to Dick's surprise were very respectful and courteous towards Honey. And as they were escorted through the ship they saw a lot of men, women and children who seemed no less friendly. The children, inevitably, stared rudely. The adults grinned and waved and one or two of the men whistled as Honey passed.

"Is he always like that?" Dick asked, not really expecting an answer.

"Like what?"

"Mad as a hatter."

The two men looked at each other. "No," said one. "He must have something on his mind—what to do with you people, I guess. He's only like that when he knows he's got to do something and hates the idea."

"Oh," said Dick.

There was nothing friendly about the two steel cells in which they were locked. And Dick's thoughts were not rapturous as he considered what he had learned.

When Stalk said the best thing that the Marxtonians could hope for was to be taken prisoner, it wasn't really necessary to ask about the worst. Yet Dick could hardly believe the captain meant it.

They were in the cells for less than half an hour. Soon the guards were back and Dick and Honey were once more escorted through the ship to the captain's cabin.

"I guess you couldn't be expected to understand," he said, his tone a mixture of patience and exasperation. "You've been left alone so long, you couldn't know . . . Sit down."

They sat down.

"There was a Blackside ship here," he said bluntly. "We destroyed it. We don't know why it was here, but where the Newmen came once they may come again. I can't take you all back to Musca. I don't want to destroy you. So for a while, anyway, I'm staying here to make sure you don't join the Newmen."

That made a little more sense—not much, but some.

"Look, Captain Stalk," said Dick. "I think I can speak for Marxtown in this. We've no wish to take part in this Racial War, and we'd like to be friends with both sides. If that isn't possible, can't we be neutral?"

"No," said Stalk. "Everybody's in this. People are Trues or Newmen and that means they're on one side or the other. And it was your lot that started the whole thing."

Dick nodded. "I can understand that. But . . . I'm not trying to annoy you again, Captain—isn't the whole affair pretty senseless?"

Stalk didn't explode this time. "Wars usually are," he said drily.

"True. But not as senseless as this one. Because when it's over, the Trues will still be Trues and the Newmen will still be Newmen."

The captain nodded. "Your lot should have thought of that when they started it."

"Isn't it rather unfair to class us with people we never heard of until yesterday?"

"I don't class you. Nature has done that. You're Newmen."

"How is that decided? I mean, surely doctors could determine that you Muscans weren't native Terrans?"

For a moment it looked as if Stalk would flare up at that, but in the end he decided not to.

"There are certain standards," he said. "A certain leeway is allowed. I don't say you've mutated much. Considering you're fifth-generation Megorians, your planet must be very nearly safe for Trues. But that's not the point. Once a mutation starts, it goes on. Twentieth-generation Megorians will vary as much from the norm as Blacksidiers. In the fiftieth generation you'll be like six-foot bees."

"Mutation always goes on?" Dick said sharply.

"Of course. It must, once started. Unless you go back to Earth. Then you might mutate back. That's one of the issues in the war. The Newmen want territory on Earth."

"And why can't they have it?"

Stalk was going red with anger again. He jumped up and Dick thought he was going to buzz for the guards again. Instead, he paced the room as if he were trying to wear out the carpet and get a new one.

Suddenly he spun round and glared at Dick. "Do you know the present population of Earth?" he demanded. "Well neither do I. Since we left Musca it's probably gone up another couple of billion. Every square inch on every True planet is taken. We can't spare land for agriculture, we have to live out of tanks."

"I see," said Dick. He saw particularly that there was far more to this Racial War than he could have guessed. He wanted to think about what he knew already. "Thank you for explaining things, Captain. Especially when you hate us so much."

Honey, who had been listening patiently, wisely leaving all the talking to Dick, looked startled at this.

"Why do you hate us?" Dick asked, when there was no explosion.

The captain rang again and the two guards appeared. "Take them away and look after them," he said.

"Cooler again, sir?"

"No!" Stalk shouted. "Take them and . . . oh, do your best for them. They can go anywhere but the control rooms."



## five

There was one small telescope in Marxtown. It had come from the *Young Dream*, like all the watches in the town, most of the engines and motors, a good deal of the wire, and all the weapons. Starting to manufacture complicated things in a small, closed community is a long business.

More by chance than anything else, Harry Simon saw a small, fast-moving star one night, and after it had been picked up two or three times the Marxtonians realized there was a ship orbiting up there.

What were they doing to Honey and Dick Hart? everybody wanted to know.

"If you ask me," said Hesketh Hart with the air of a man making a momentous discovery, "I think it would have been a damned good thing if we'd been left in peace and no ships had ever come here at all."

Sherman looked at him sardonically. "Dick Hart said that to me five minutes after the first ship landed."

Nearly everybody was related to either Dick or Honey, who had been Honey Simon before she married Dick. There had only been twenty men in the first place, of whom three hadn't had children. Inevitably two or three more strains and names died out—while the children of old Samuel Marx became so numerous that the separate branches of the family spelled their names Marx, Marks and Marcks to distinguish themselves.

It was horrible to think of Dick and Honey being prisoners up there. It was taken for granted now that the Blacksiders' ship had been the one which was destroyed—the Blacksiders had landed openly once before, and if they had been victorious in the battle in space there was no reason why they shouldn't have returned.

So the little speck that was a ship was hated not only on account of Dick and Honey, but because of the murder of the Blacksiders, who, after all, were people, even if they didn't look like it.

Most concerned of all was Paula Marks, which was strange. Paula had grown up being told she was nearly as pretty as Honey Hart. Privately she thought that now she was a big girl she was quite as pretty as Honey, if not prettier. But Honey remained a rival, easily Paula's most serious rival. Shirley Kistner—didn't really count.

Paula had often thought how nice it would be if Honey wasn't around. She didn't want her killed or anything like that. She just wanted her out of the way somehow.

Now that Honey was out of the way, Paula felt it was her fault. Paula wasn't a bad kid—a little selfish, liable to regard herself as the most important thing in the galaxy, but in this she differed little from most spoiled glamour girls of her age.

Nobody wanted Honey back more than Paula did.

Dick and Honey were treated well among the Muscans and soon found that life on a spaceship had its compensations.

Dick gradually found most of the answers he was looking for. They were well treated largely because the Muscans liked them. Wasp-waisted or not, Honey and Dick were cute, it seemed. Blacksidiers weren't cute. They were horrible.

In other words, the Marxtonians only just missed being Trues. After a day or two Dick himself began to notice how little the physical differences between Megorians and Muscans mattered. He found himself admiring the prettier Muscan girls, despite their twenty-four-inch waistlines. Of course, he still vastly preferred Honey's figure, but . . . well . . .

It's a well-known fact that worm-eaten apples in the next garden always look better than the fat, rosy apples in one's own.

And the Muscan girls certainly weren't moth-eaten.

Dick knew now why warships like this one and the Blackside ship had men, women and children aboard. Galactic travel would always be a matter of months and years, over distances so great that radio communication was useless, too slow even if enough power was used to punch messages across the vast distances involved. This meant that in common humanity it was impossible to send men into space for years at a time, leaving their wives and children to wait, all too often, for the rest of their lives never knowing what had happened to the man of the family, and where it had happened.

Consequently, all ships were self-contained. Mothers and fathers had to be left behind, but that was an accepted human situation. A man would go with his wife and children, his brother and his wife, his wife's sister and her husband.

Discipline was easy except in emergencies. And the Muscans couldn't share Honey's horror at the death of so many children if the ship was destroyed. "No different from an air raid," they said. "Ever since the first airship dropped the first bomb, women and children have been in the front line."

Nobody was desperate to return to Musca. "No room," Dick was told. "When your wife breathes in, you have to breathe out."

They weren't taken before Stalk again, except once when Dick saw him alone. The captain sent for him and when Dick saw his black brow he knew the thunder wasn't far off.

"You've been asking why I hate the Newmen," Stalk said.

Dick saw no reason to deny it. "Yes."

"And suggesting that because I hate them I'm biased and my decisions suspect."

"Not exactly," said Dick carefully. "I know you try to be fair, Captain Stalk. You showed that the last time we spoke."

Stalk's thick brows jumped in surprise. "I did?"

"I could see you were on edge when we were in the room. But you tried not to let it affect you. All the same, it's bound to affect you. *Why* do you hate us?"

The captain sat down heavily. "I was in a Newmen prisoner camp for two years before we were rescued," he said. "My wife, two daughters and son were there too. My son and one daughter died."

"I see," said Dick.

"It wasn't the killing that got me," Stalk said almost defensively. "My son killed a guard trying to escape. I . . . I knew he had to die when he was recaptured. It wasn't that. It was the hate, the disgusting cruelty. They hated us because we were different, because we were Trues. They did everything they could to degrade us. Not beatings—nothing so simple. We had to stand on our hands to urinate. The women were made to sweep the floors with their hair. Our bodies were painted with crude signs. Four guards played poker all night with my daughter's naked belly as a table. When my wife dropped a bottle of ketchup she had to lick every drop off the floor with her tongue. And though they never interfered with our women, any man and any woman they nominated among us had to put on a public exhibition for their amusement."

As he looked at Dick, Dick saw the wondering, hurt horror still in his eyes. "The things they did to us," Stalk said, "were a lot easier to live with than the knowledge that such hate could exist."

Now Dick understood. Stalk had had to explain away the behaviour of those Newmen guards somehow. He had done so by telling himself that they were no longer men—they were Newmen.

"Captain Stalk," said Dick earnestly, "we've been on board a week now. We haven't seen much of you, but you seem to have been getting pretty complete reports about us. Honestly, do you believe Megorians could act like the people you've been talking about?"

"No," said the captain. "But I didn't believe *they* could."

Dick was silent for a moment, thinking. Then he said: "You're an honest man, Captain. Wasn't what I said correct? That because you hate Newmen you're biased and your decisions suspect?"

Stalk jumped up. "If you only knew!" he said in a strangled voice. "If you only knew!"

The three weeks were up. Dick had wondered often what the purpose of the delay was, what was supposed to happen after three weeks, whether he and Honey were to be returned to Marxtown. But Stalk hadn't told him, and everybody else simply didn't know.

Dick had become very friendly with Tom Walker, the doctor, just as Honey had become fond of Glynnis, Walker's wife.

"No, he's not mad," Walker said of the captain. "But things are pretty tough for him, Dick, apart from what he's been through. Any ship, big or little, has to be run by a dictator—it's the only way that works. And think what it's like in a war—no possible way of communicating with HQ, other than going back and asking them. Nobody to pass the buck to. No way out of taking a decision, right or wrong, and being feted as a hero if it's right and probably shot if it isn't. And you people are a tough problem."

"How?" asked Dick. "We didn't ask you to come here."

"No, but we're here now, and what's the Old Man to do? He can't take you all back to Musca—we could take about twenty and that's the limit. He can't go away and forget you. He can't leave you to be co-opted by the Newmen. He can't stay here forever and guard you."

"Look," said Dick, "what are the chances—"

Walker's bell buzzed. Stalk's voice said: "Walker, is Dick Hart with you? Send him to me."

Walker switched off. "Now you'll find out," he said.

Dick found Stalk sunk in his chair, looking old, and knew that he had reached what he believed to be the right decision, and hated it.

But first Stalk said: "What do *you* think I should do?"

“ Put Honey and me down, go away and forget all about us,” said Dick promptly.

“ I can’t.”

“ Why not ?”

“ The Blacksiders found you. Another Newman ship could find you.”

“ We waited five generations for a ship,” Dick reminded him. “ You only found us because you were tailing the Blackside ship. They only found us by chance.”

“ I know. But if I left you, if you joined the Newmen—”

“ We won’t. I told you, we’re neutral.”

“ And I told you, nobody’s neutral. What would you do if the Newmen landed and said either you’d fight or they’d cut your wife’s legs off ?”

“ Captain,” said Dick earnestly. “ We hate this war, Honey and I, all the Marxtonians. But I know we don’t hate it as much as you do.”

“ That’s true,” said Stalk. “ What do you suggest I do—resign ?”

“ Well, you could do that.”

Stalk looked at him incredulously. “ Are you crazy ?”

“ No. You could resign. Suppose you landed near Marxtown. Suppose something went wrong with your ship so that you couldn’t take off again. Muscans and Megorians can get along, that’s obvious. We wouldn’t be found again for a hundred years, and surely by that time the war would be over—”

Stalk flushed red, but his voice was tired rather than angry as he said : “ That’s the kind of thing one of your people would suggest. I won’t explain why it’s impossible. I’m just telling you.”

“ It’s not impossible,” said Dick, deliberately misunderstanding him. “ It’s quite easy. All you’ve got to do is forget what I’m just about to say. Vast tracts of the surface of Megoris consist of a kind of hard crystal rock. You can land on it quite easily, as our great-great-grandfathers did in the *Young Dream*. About eight hours later most of them were out of the ship, which was lucky. That crystal rock fuses very hard with the heat of jets. Eight hours later it has cooled enough to contract, to have to contract. It shatters like glass and the ship drops about twenty-five feet. That made enough of a mess of the *Young Dream’s* fins to make it quite impossible for us to repair her. It could happen to you too. And it would be nobody’s fault.”

He could see that Stalk was reluctantly considering the possibility, knowing he had no right to consider it for a moment. Just before he spoke, Dick went on: "Your personnel is self-contained. Megoris is a wonderful, empty world. Your people would be all for it—if the decision was taken out of their hands."

"Dick," said Stalk abruptly, "*I'm going to destroy Marxtown and everybody in it.*"

Dick couldn't speak, though this was no surprise.

"It's the only thing to do," said Stalk defensively. "I knew it from the first. I've waited three weeks hoping something would happen. A Newman ship might have appeared, we might have chased it, we might have finished up too far from here to bother about Megoris. But nothing has happened. I've got to do it. I can't stay here forever."

Dick forced his feelings under, tried to argue coolly with his mind. "And you say the thing I suggested is impossible? It's a million times better than this, and you know it."

Stalk shook his head. "You're Newmen," he said. "We can't get past that. If we stayed on Megoris, our children would be Newmen," he shuddered. "I'm sorry, Dick. You and Honey will stay with us. Marxtown will be destroyed in an instant, with everything and everybody in it. No one will ever know—"

"Captain," said Dick, jumping up. "Please send for Dr. Walker and for my wife."

Stalk shook his head, but Dick insisted.

"I know it's no good saying I'm sorry," said Stalk. "You must know that. I like you and your wife. I'd like your people. But they're Newmen, and I can't leave them, and—"

"Please," said Dick. "Send for my wife and Dr. Walker."

Stalk did so. "It isn't going to work," he said, "so I may as well tell you something else I had in my mind. I thought you might have had some sort of weapon in your pocket, maybe a knife. I thought when I told you what I just did, maybe you'd kill me, and then I wouldn't have to—"

Dick looked down at him with compassion. "Captain," he said, "you've been captain too long. Time you stepped down and became just one of the crowd."

"I thought of that too," said Stalk listlessly. "A captain can always be relieved if he's insane of course. But Leadbetter would replace me, and he'd have to do exactly the same. It wouldn't do any good. There's only one decision, and I've made it."

"I wish I could get you to see," Dick muttered, "that it doesn't matter whether we're Newmen or not."

A pale smile appeared on Stalk's face. "You'll never get me to see that."

"No, I guess not. Pity. If only—" He stopped as the door opened and Honey came in.

"Mrs. Hart," said Stalk heavily, "I've just been telling your husband—"

"There's no need to tell her," said Dick quickly. "Honey, stand here."

Obediently Honey stood in front of the captain. Dick moved behind her.

"Something's been worrying my poor wife," he said. "And like all women she tried to pretend it wasn't so."

He loosened the belt that was cutting Honey in two. Honey couldn't help breathing deeply in relief.

"Now let her move around for a couple of minutes," said Dick, "and I'll put it on again. *I'll* put it on. I won't let her do it. I think we'll find she has a waistline of fully sixteen inches maybe seventeen."

"Are you trying to tell me—" Stalk began incredulously.

Walker came in. Dick turned to him. "Tom, the captain wants to execute the lot of us because we're Newmen."

Walker jumped, not sure for a moment whether Dick was joking or not. "Sir, I wouldn't do anything precipitate," he said. "When these two came on board they were—well, let's say malformed. Their internal organs were shrunken and misshapen. Their metabolism was not conventional and there were peculiarities about the composition of their blood-stream, their endocrine glands and other things. They quite definitely rated as Newmen. But now—"

"Are you trying to tell me they're not Newmen at all?"

"Well, classification is difficult, sir. On their own world they're definitely Newmen. No question of that. Yet the mutation they have undergone is such that in three weeks on a ship—not a True planet, I'd like to point out—breathing normal True-type air, eating True-type food, they have developed, or are in course of developing—"

"Are they Trues or Newmen?" Stalk shouted. "Give me a straight answer, damn you!"

"That's just what I can't do," said Walker, unmoved. "Captain, you know as well as I do that all sorts of variations are possible. Most Newmen would mutate back to True type eventually, on Earth—in a few generations. Some wouldn't."

These people, though strictly Newmen, seem to change back in . . . say six months or a year. That's not mutation, it's simple adaptation. It looks as if a new classification will have to be created specially for Megorians."

"Trues or Newmen?" demanded the captain.

Walker looked pained. "Since you press me, I'd make them a sub-classification of Trues."

Stalk subsided, shaking. "And I nearly destroyed them," he whispered.

"Captain," said Dick firmly, "can't you see that isn't the point? It makes no difference to us whether you call us Trues or Newmen—"

"It makes a big difference to me."

Dick started to speak again, then shrugged and surrendered. He was the captain's friend now, because he was a True. Like all men of principle, Dick hated to win for the wrong reason. However, perhaps on the whole it was better than losing for the wrong reason.

"You Megorians will, of course, be co-opted," said Captain Stalk.

"Will we?" asked Dick grimly. "By force?"

The captain shrugged. "If necessary. I've no choice, Dick."

Dick took a deep breath, nearer losing his temper with this mule of a man than he had ever been before.

Honey and Dick were in the control room with the captain and half a dozen officers. Never till Walker said they were Trues had Honey or Dick been allowed near the control room. Now it was all right. Now they were the Muscans' friends.

Dick, however, wasn't feeling particularly friendly. Why couldn't Stalk see that he had no obligation to either side in a crazy war?

Stalk was surveying the ground below. They had already picked out Marxtown. "Where should we land?" he asked casually.

Dick started so violently that Honey, standing behind him, put her arms round him quickly, thinking he had had a sudden spasm.

In an unsteady voice Dick said: "There's a good spot south of the town. About three miles south."

He was rigid, suspicious, wondering whether Stalk had asked him in order to avoid the spot he suggested. But Stalk gave the order to land three miles south of the town.



"Captain . . ." Dick said.

Stalk turned to him stiffly, forbidding him to go on with what was in his mind. Dick took the hint.

"But Captain," said Honey, puzzled, "if you land there you'll have to be careful—"

"Darling, there's no use trying to hide it," said Dick chidingly. "Besides, we're guests and our friends like you much better this way."

He let her belt out three inches, and though she sighed with relief she protested: "When I think of what Paula Marks will say—"

"Paula Marks is going to get a lot of the shine taken out of her when some of the pretty Muscan girls on board start wandering around Marxtown."

"But the captain's only landing to put us off. None of the girls on board will—"

"Honey, darling," said Dick affectionately, "will you kindly shut up?"

The ship landed neatly in the centre of a large area of crystal rock.

"There's no need to set a guard, is there, Captain?" said Dick.

Stalk frowned. "I know my own business, young man," he snapped. "Kindly speak to me when you're spoken to, and not a moment before."

"You're right, Captain," said Dick. "Of course you're right."

They left the spaceship, every last one of them, and started out to walk to Marxtown. Honey kept casting puzzled looks back at the ship as they went, the Muscans staring about them as every party of people does when it lands on a new planet, the children scampering ahead excitedly and having to be called back.

"Dick," she murmured, "shouldn't we tell them . . .?"

"You see," Dick said, "Paula Marks *is* going to see the Muscan girls. They could hardly blast off without dropping in for a cup of tea, could they?"

"But if they leave the ship there—"

"There's a smut on your nose."

To his relief, after removing the non-existent smut Honey forgot about the ship.

The Muscans were going to be in Megoris for a long time.

*New author W. T. Webb presents an advertiser's Utopia—and a consumer's nightmare. At the present rate of development in advertising gimmicks, the world of the future will be a more horrible place than Orwell's political extrapolation in "1984."*

# NOT A SPARROW FALLS

BY W. T. WEBB

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An advertisement for after-shave lotion defaced the top of the dressing-table mirror ; so that Mr. Johnson had to bend forward to see the whole of his head and shoulders. What he saw was not particularly re-assuring ; and the face that gazed back at him under the gold lettering wore a look of somewhat uncomfortable acceptance.

Mr. Persil Johnson had never been handsome. He never would be now. He was forty, with narrow shoulders, decreasing hair, increasing girth, and a complexion like uncooked pastry. One would hardly consider him a likely candidate for an executive post in the Hurry-Sell Agency where he now worked as a copy-writer. But appearances are misleading.

He rose from the table ; put on his jacket ; and paused at the door to catch his reflection in the wardrobe mirror. The mirror bore a toothpaste advert, which was quite irrelevant so far as Mr. Johnson was concerned.

For some reason the wardrobe, this morning, reminded him of a coffin ; but he put the notion quickly out of his mind, and, squaring his shoulders and drawing in his chin, he eyed himself for a few seconds with critical approval. Then he left the bedroom and strode briskly across the landing.

Instead of finding his breakfast ready when he got downstairs, however, he found Daz, his wife, in her komfycoat sitting in the kitchen and gaping astigmatically at the Phillips giveaway teapot and at the yellow packet of tea beside it on the table. Two fat tears were rolling down her cheeks. Behind her on the stove the kettle was hissing and bubbling, and the steam-driven disc below the spout was churning out its jingle.

In her sentimental moods Mrs. Johnson had a habit of asking her husband if he still loved her ; and he always said he did. But he often confessed to himself that he did not love her and never had done. And yet he had to admit she was necessary to him : she was somebody to work for ; she was somebody to come home to ; and she was somebody to give his ambition to succeed at work the necessary impetus.

Like this, tearful and flabby in the sour light of morning, she was at her least loveable.

“Whatever’s gone wrong, darling?” he asked cautiously. She sniffed and flapped a hand over the table. “I bought this tea in the supermarket yesterday afternoon, and now I can’t get it into the pot.”

Perse snatched the singing kettle off the stove and waited for it to choke into a frustrated silence. Then he reached over to the table and picked up the yellow packet of tea. After a quick glance he thumped it down again.

“Can’t you read the label ? Plain as daylight—Crankshaw’s Choiceblend Tea ! How do you expect to get that into a Phillips giveaway teapot ? Surely you know by now that this pot only takes Phillips Patent Teabags ! There’s an interlock . . .”

“I know that, Perse,” Daz said unhappily.

“Then what on earth made you buy this Crankshaw rubbish ?”

"I don't know, Perse. I just don't know what came over me. I went to the counter to buy a packet of Phillips Patent Teabags and came away with that."

"It's those Woman's Hour Subliminals again," Perse said, with an accusing glance at the kitchen six-foot screen. "Never mind ; I suppose we'd better use this tea now that you've paid out for it ; I'll have to try and get it down through the spout."

Which was easier said than done, because the spout was fitted with a perforated disc ; but eventually he judged he had got enough tea inside the pot to make a drinkable brew.

"Eat Jones' Beans and Pork . . ." the kettle warbled over his shoulder.

While Perse brewed the tea, Daz fried eggs and bacon on the stove ; but they had hardly settled down to their meal when the clock on the sideboard gave a ping and gloated : "Time for work, sir ! And Peter's Petrol will get you there quicker. Always fill up with . . ."

"Hell !" Perse said. He gulped his breakfast ; swallowed his watery tea, and rushed out to the garage.

"Humbolt's Sparking Plugs !" said the garage door as he opened it. He eased the car into the drive, watching the light above his gatepost ; luckily it was green, which meant that the road outside was free of traffic. The green light glowed steadily and spelt out the words :—"All clear ahead with Treadgold's Plasticois Tyres."

Dexterously Perse Johnson backed into the lane and then speeded into town and parked his car in the rack behind the Hurry-Sell Building.

He was only a few minutes late ; but he was unused to such hurrying ; and when he sat down at his desk his heart was pounding and his breakfast was lodged like a knotted dishrag between his oesophagus and duodenum.

He swallowed a dispep and was about to open a folder on his desk when the inter-office visi pinged and the blonde-haloed face of Camay Phipps glittered in the screen.

"Goodmorning Mr. Johnson," she said with infuriating cheerfulness. "You've to report to Mr. Mulligan's office immediately."

"Mulligan's office ? What for ?"

But the screen had already gone pearly.

He gulped another dispep and gazed unseeingly at the Saxi-Cola girl painted on the ceiling over his head. Mulligan was

the Hurry-Sell manager. A visit to his office was always an ordeal to Perse ; and as he made his way through the poster-hung corridors he wondered if his present summons meant promotion or the sack.

When he got there he found Omo Burke and Camay Phipps also waiting in the anteroom ; but before he could ask what it was all about, the inner door opened and Mr. Mulligan's bear-growl invited them to enter.

Inside was sumptuously furnished and blatantly free of adverts ; the clock merely told the time, the walls were blank—devoid of slogans. Same with the mirror, the pictures, the lampshades. And when the door opened it didn't tell you to buy this that or the other. Naturally employees felt awed in such surroundings.

These days only the rich and the V.I.Ps., could forego the fifty percent advert-discount offered on everything from confectionery to interior decoration ; and Persil Johnson dreamed of the time when he'd be able to work in an office like this ; maybe even live in a house without adverts on the walls. It was a dream worth struggling for.

As it was he was proud that his position enabled him to wear clothes with no adverts on them ; and the main fear of losing his job was that it would mean that both he and his wife might have to go round in giveaway clothes plastered with slogans and pictures like a couple of ambulating comic supplements.

"I've got some bad news for you," Milktray Mulligan said. His voice was deep and sad, like a stage mortician's. He avoided the eyes of his three head copywriters and gazed down at his desk. "It has just come to my notice that Mr. Lyons Sparrow has passed away."

The three Hurry-Sell hacks in front of their boss's desk fidgetted uneasily. Persil hated himself ; but he had to admit he felt relieved. The death of the boss of Sparrow Limited was a sad affair ; the day of his funeral would no doubt be observed as a day of national mourning. But so far as he, Persil Johnson, was concerned, the news could have been much worse.

It was Burke, as usual, who was first to find his tongue. Burke, a fleshy man in his early thirties, with dark hair and a commercial smile, was Johnson's chief rival for the exec post that would soon fall vacant.

"It certainly is bad to hear that, Mr. Mulligan!" Burke's wide mouth sagged at the corners. "Mr. Lyons Sparrow was a great man."

"One of the greatest men of the age," Mr. Mulligan said, thrusting his bald head forward and glaring at Perse Johnson.

"One of the greatest!" Persil mumbled dutifully, suffering from indigestion and from a feeling of inadequacy. Desparately he tried to think up some memorable epitaph for the great man; but his mind shut tight.

"Of this or any other age," Camay Phipps put in; and Perse was relieved when Mulligan shifted his gaze from him to the dumpy blonde beside him.

"Yes indeed!" Mulligan cleared his throat. "Mr. Lyons Sparrow will go down in history as the leading light of this century, the Century of Liberated Advertising; as an Elder Statesman of Free-enterprise Britain."

"The sell-fair state," thought Persil Johnson.

Mulligan jerked a flabby hand at the three chairs in front of his desk. "Please be seated!" Before sitting down himself he gave them each a cigarette, and when they were all smoking he continued: "Back in eighty-four, the government of the day, by the abolition of all private advertising, inaugurated what has come to be known as the Dark Decade."

He looked across the desk at them, and Perse, falling into sympathy with his boss's sentiments, thought dismally of the Dark Decade.

"But little did the government realise what it was doing," Mulligan told them. "The politicians in power lacked the foresight to see the results of their barbarism. Of course every schoolboy knows what happened."

"The advertisers went underground," Burke put in quickly as though there was a prize for the first one to come up with the correct answer. Mulligan ignored him.

"There was a countrywide movement promoted by the leading advertisers of the day, and a new political party, the "Freedom to Sell" Party, came into being; and in one short decade grew into the greatest political force in the land. Freedom to advertise became the supreme national issue. In the spring of 1994 the "Freedom to Sell" Party swept the polls, and from that time advertisement has steadily advanced. Today the advertiser has complete freedom to ply his trade however and wherever he wishes; children are named after

widely advertised commodities of the past ; and without a doubt Advertising has become the greatest industry in the country, employing more labour and turning over more capital than the rest of industry put together."

"Hear, hear !" said Omo Burke emotionally ; and Camay Phipps and Persil Johnson hastily nodded their approval.

"But it hasn't all been plain sailing," Mulligan went on. "Diehard anti-advertisement cranks struggled to the last ditch. They fought tooth and nail to prevent us from appending advertisements to the pictures in the National Gallery ; they demonstrated in their thousands when we placed our hoardings in such profitable tourist spots as the Lake District and the National Trust areas ; and they even got a certain amount of trade union support when we introduced the regular subliminal advertising on the television networks.

"But advertising is a force that cannot be beaten. No popular movement against Advertising can ever be successfully organised, because in the nature of things a movement must be advertised before it can become popular.

"And in every campaign to advance the cause of Advertising, Lyons Sparrow, the great industrialist and business magnate, was in the forefront ; and his passing will be a great loss to the nation."

In the pause that followed, the birds could be heard singing outside, and in the background, together with the hum of the traffic, sounded the tinkle and twitter of a million commercial jingles.

"And now," Milktray Mulligan said. "I've got some important news that concerns us in Hurry-Sell ; that concerns primarily my three head copywriters."

Perse Johnson who had grown a trifle bored with the monologue looked at his boss with renewed interest.

"We in Hurry-Sell have had the honour to be entrusted with the advertising campaign to put across to the public yet another product of Sparrow Limited." Mulligan flopped back in his chair complacently and the three copywriters watched him in eager silence.

"The product concerned," Mulligan announced. "Is Sparrow's Tinned Asparagus. It's a brand new line, and we've got to make it sell ; and I'm asking you here and now for suggestions."

The three copywriters began simultaneously to look around the room for inspiration. Persil had forgotten his indigestion. But now the pain came back. He felt that Milktray Mulligan had played a dirty trick. Just like him to dish out a fatherly talk on the history of modern advertising and then suddenly spring on them a demand for ideas !

Alas, his mind was as devoid of ideas as the walls were devoid of adverts. He wished he was back in his own office, where he often got inspiration from gazing on the Saxe-Cola girl painted on the ceiling over his desk. He glanced at Camay; but the ideas she gave him were not original ones.

It was Omo Burke, of course, who broke the silence.

"Well boss ; we'll have to give it the whole works : placards, television space, door to door canvassers, a full page in all the national and provincial papers . . ."

"That's enough, Burke !" Mulligan snapped. "I asked for ideas ; *new* ideas ; not just the routine rigmarole." He thumped his desk. "I want a new idea to sell Sparrow's Tinned Asparagus."

"To begin with," Camay Phipps said, colouring slightly. "We need a catchy slogan."

"Such as—?"

For a few seconds Camay stared at her boss like a peasant at a T.V. screen. "Well—" she gulped. "Whenever you think of asparagus think of Sparrow's !"

Mulligan closed his eyes and groaned.

Omo Burke clicked his fingers. "How about this—When you see a sparrow think of Sparrow's Asparagus ! Get the idea ? There's always plenty of sparrows . . ."

The boss groaned again and Persil remarked, "Not a sparrow falls to earth." Mulligan looked at him furiously.

"What kind of slogan d'you call that ?"

"It's out of the Bible."

"Well it won't sell asparagus ; so we don't want it." Mulligan took another cigarette. This time he did not hand them round. He got to his feet and began to punch one hand into the other like a prizefighter waiting for the gong.

"What I want is something new ! That's what you draw your pay for : new ideas. I don't have to remind you that there's an executive vacancy coming up shortly ; and that vacancy goes to the one who gives me the best ideas for selling Sparrow's Tinned Asparagus."



He flung himself back in his chair and began to swab his dome with a handkerchief.

"Advertising, like everything else," he told them, "must either advance or decay. Once, we were allowed only fifteen minutes in every hour of television time. We gradually advanced until we can advertise for sixty minutes in every hour if we want to. We make our commercials good and people watch 'em. Our T.V. adverts are first class entertainment ; but to get people watching T.V. isn't enough. Art for Art's sake went out with the Third Programme. We've got to get them buying the goods we want them to buy. And to do that we've got to use shock tactics from time to time."

"How about subliminal advertising?" Burke asked.

Mulligan took a paper from his desk.

"I've got here some statistics on Subliminal technique ; and it's obvious from these figures that the customer quickly builds up defences against it. As we all know, Subliminal advertising consists of slogans and instructions which are flashed on the screen too rapidly to be noticed in the normal way, but which never-the-less register and make a dynamic impression on the mind of the viewer."

"Too true," Persil murmured, thinking of Daz and the teapot.

"But although Subliminal suggestion, by getting unobserved past the defences of the consumer, breaks down sales resistance, its effect is often short-lived because the suggestion goes into the subconscious mind and becomes lost there among a million and one other suggestions and impressions." Mulligan paused and glanced at the paper.

"Subliminal advertising is only fifty per cent effective by itself. To achieve a hundred per cent efficiency the Subliminal has to be coupled with something else in the same way that the conventional T.V. advert has to be coupled with something else. We all know it's not enough to advertise a new thing on T.V. and then hope the public will buy it. We have to display it in the supermarket under a banner which reads—'As advertised on T.V.'"

"That's true Mr. Mulligan," Omo Burke said. "And we'll have to do the same with Sparrow's . . ."

Mulligan silenced him with a glare.

"Subliminal suggestion registers on the subconscious mind ; as such it is only fifty per cent effective ; to make it one hundred per cent effective it must be coupled with something that

registers on the conscious mind. It is as simple as that. And what I want from you is a new idea to impress Sparrow's Tinned Asparagus upon the conscious mind of the consumer."

Persil Johnson sat in his office chain-smoking and gazing up at the Saxi-Cola girl. Work piled up. He ignored it and concentrated on the one task—to think up a new idea for selling Sparrow Limited's latest product.

The trouble, in this late day and age, was that everything had been thought of ; a hundred years and more of super-advertising had exhausted the possibilities : the bottom of the barrel had been scraped clean—gnawed clean in the toughest rat-race under the stars.

The city was a solid mass of slogans ; giveaway clothes with adverts on them filled the streets with a thousand Illustrated Men. Projectors lit messages on cliffs, clouds, beaches, seas. Fantastically elongated posters glowed on the vaults of the underground railway. Chemists, it was said, were working on a sleeping-pill that would introduce commercials into dreams—as if that was necessary—as if nightmare pots of jam foaming with detergent suds, and belching clouds of deoderants, babyfoods, nail varnish, hair-removers, skinfoods, shampoos, talcum powders, and custard powders, didn't pursue every woman every night through a swaying supermarket with mile high, toppling shelves.

Persil spat out a smoke-ring and watched it contort itself into something that looked like a gigantic ear ; and for a while he toyed with the crazy idea of designing a cigarette that would issue smoke in the form of lettering. Angrily he stubbed his cigarette in the ashtray and told the ashtray to go to hell when it exhorted him to smoke Blanchard's Filter Tipped.

He went out for a drink.

He spent the evening in his study at home, drinking cup after cup of coffee, chain smoking cigarettes, and doodling with a pencil on a scribble-pad.

In the course of the evening he wrote down hundreds of slogans ; but none of them gave him any satisfaction. In any case, he kept telling himself, it wasn't only a slogan he needed ; what he really sought was an idea for putting the slogan across. The slogan itself was not important ; because for one thing a clever one would be over the heads of the mass of people it was necessary to reach out to ; and for another thing almost any

slogan would serve provided he could think up an original way of bludgeoning it into the consciousness of the masses.

He must select a simple slogan ; bring it forcibly into the mind of the consumer ; and from then on subliminal suggestion would continue the ghostly work and he would get a better paid position.

The rat-race.

Outside the window the evening shadows were piling up. The sixty-four-sheet posters across the street were losing their daytime colours and were beginning to shine with a blue phosphorescence. A black cloud beyond the housetops reflected a silver advertisement for McTavish's Highland Whisky.

Daz was watching T.V. in the lounge and stuffing her face from a large box of chocolates.

"Just going round for a drink," he told her from the door.

"But it's Monday," she protested. "You don't usually go out for a drink on Monday evening."

"Guess the subliminals are working on me now," he said.

His intention had been to go to the pub and try and forget Sparrow's Tinned Asparagus for a while. He realised that he had got too close to the job ; and perhaps a quiet drink and a yarn or two with the boys would clear his head a little. But as soon as he ordered his first double Mac he discovered that the death of Lyons Sparrow was the main topic of talk in the saloon bar.

"He's getting buried in Westminster Abbey," someone said importantly. And Persil noticed that several of the men were wearing black ties.

He nodded curtly to one or two acquaintances and took his drink over to an empty table as far away from the bar and the T.V. screen as he could get.

Gloomily the evening ebbed away. He drank several more doubles and then walked home unsteadily between luminous posters under a night sky on which hundreds of searchlights daubed their blurbs—brilliant fingers of red, yellow, orange, green and blue, scrawled their obscene graffitti on the firmament that once was hung with stars.

When he got home Daz was curled up in front of the T.V. screen like a devotee of some enslaving religion ; and he left her there and went to bed alone. He often got some of his best ideas in bed ; but tonight his head seemed like a giant washing-

machine stuffed with coloured streamers on which innumerable slogans were printed ; and when he closed his eyes the streamers whirled round and round and round.

And round.

He woke up with a king-size hangover. The alarm-clock was jingling and gibbering about Vince's Bacon. Perse sat up and silenced it and squinted at his own cadaverous reflection in the long wardrobe mirror. His eyes were dull like old coins ; without his dentures his cheeks were sunken and his cheek-bones prominent ; and his complexion was like that of an old man long overdue for the boneyard.

It was then his idea came to him. And this hangover didn't matter any more. It was a joke. Life and death were jokes ; and God was an old clown who told funny stories. When Daz heard Perse singing in the bathroom she thought that the roundsman had been in to change the record that the cistern played after the toilet was flushed.

As Persil Johnson had anticipated, the day of the funeral of Lyons Sparrow was observed throughout the land as a day of national mourning. The flags over the big city houses were flown at half-mast ; services were held in all the cathedrals ; children were given a holiday from school ; and all works except the essential services were closed down for the day.

The television channels relayed solemn music during the breaks in commercials ; and at ten thirty the service in Westminster Abbey was mirrored on every television set.

Like all his neighbours Persil had put on a black tie for the occasion ; and when the funeral service began he was sitting with Daz in the lounge gazing reverently at the six-foot screen.

The funeral service was moving in its dignity ; and towards the end of it Daz burst into tears and Persil put his arm round her plump shoulder to comfort her.

The coffin containing the mortal remains of Lyons Sparrow was covered by a Union Jack and borne by six solemn-faced men to its final resting place in the Abbey crypt.

Behind the coffin walked Sparrow's widow, a frail old woman who kept dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief, and who looked as though she was going to break down at any moment.

" How brave the old woman is ! " Daz remarked with a sob in her voice.

" She certainly is," Perse agreed.

The strains of the Dead March reverberated in the loud-speaker ; and then, when the coffin came close to the tomb, the music stopped. For an age-long minute all was silent and still. The picture on the screen was without sound or movement like a photograph in an old album, or a poster on a wall.

The Johnsons watched breathlessly ; as did fifty million other T.V. viewers. Britain was gripped in respectful silence from Lands End to John O' Groats.

Then the muffled drums began to murmur. The pall-bearers lowered the coffin onto a pedestal, bowed in unison and walked quietly away.

The cameras and the eyes of Britain were on the widow now. They watched her walk up to the coffin and pull a tiny cord which drew aside the Union Jack like a curtain.

The coffin itself was seen now for the first time. It was a casquet of highly polished black wood ; and on it in large letters of white enamel were written the words : " Even the worm will turn : turn today to Sparrow's Tinned Asparagus !" And then, unsuspected by fifty million viewers, the Subliminal suggestions began.

—W. T. Webb

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# SUSPECT HALO

BY CLIFFORD C. REED

---

The new director of Pridwin Weapon Research Station wondered if he were going mad. This just could not be true. This sort of thing only happened in nightmares. This wasn't the sort of problem to present to a scientist. Not on his first day ! He opened his mouth to protest, to insist that he was not interested. But Miss Jonson ignored him. Much as a fowl suddenly dowsed with a hosepipe would have insisted on voicing her indignation. Her tongue continued to sear the air-conditioned room.

"As a typist she's no better than average. She can't spell. She isn't accurate. She doesn't come anywhere near the standard I've laid down."

Dr. William Abbey surrendered to the inevitable. "If she's that bad," he enquired, "why have you not had her moved before ?"

Miss Jonson's pale eyes bulged an extra millimetre. "There is, I am informed, a shortage of typists." She stiffened. "But,

after *this*, shortage or no shortage, you will agree that this is no place for her." She glared at the bespectacled man on the new director's right. "Halo, indeed! On *that* hussy!"

He had not been able to avoid hearing Miss Jonson. It was only fair to listen to another opinion. "What do you feel, Doctor Cooper?"

The glasses came off, were wiped, went back. "Intriguing," Cooper answered. "Equally intriguing, why is Miss Jonson so agitated? Jealousy? Fear?"

Too late Dr. William Abbey remembered Cooper had a reputation for saying the wrong thing. Hurriedly, before an affronted Miss Jonson could do more than breathe in, he interposed. "I think it will be best if I see this girl," he said. He stood up. "I'll do that immediately. By myself." He looked at Cooper. "You will take me to her," he ordered. He held the door open for Miss Jonson, silently compelled her to go out, to march away, flat footed, stiff backed, exuding disapproval. "Which office is she in?" he asked.

"Place of her own," Cooper told him as they walked down the corridor. "Contractor's mistake. They put a window in a built-in cupboard. Had to make an office of it." He halted. "Down there, the last on the right." He turned away. "Intriguing," he repeated, and went off briskly.

Moodily, Dr. William Abbey set off. What was a halo doing in a weapons establishment? What was he going to do about it? What *did* one do to persons who developed haloes?

He was almost at the door, which was ajar. He heard a scuffling. "No!" an exasperated voice exclaimed. "No, Doctor Humphrey. Please!"

He came level with the door, and stopped. Looking with irritation at the fat back of Dr. Humphrey, and the female shape twisting up from her chair, eluding the man's plump hands.

"Never kissed a saint," the enthusiast declared throatily.

Over Humphrey's shoulder he could see a shimmering, close-fitting ring around the girl's head. It was true, right enough. She did have a halo. Then his eyes moved to her hands, reaching out for a metal bar lying on the desk. Was she going to brain the pest? He took one urgent step forward. Then froze. As the girl, holding the metal bar with both hands, moved up towards the ceiling where she hung, looking down.

She had excellent legs he noted, before he averted his eyes, and reached out for her tormentor.

"Reprimands should be conveyed through the channels set down," he reflected as his foot swung, and Humphreys dived out into the corridor. Was kicking a proper channel? It was a very good one. Not that this shabby wolf would agree. He considered his subordinate scrambling up, "Well?" he grated.

But Humphreys, recognising him, hurried away round the bend, and Dr. William Abbey, still scowling, closed the door, and turned, looking up. Then looked down. She had descended while he was busy, and the metal bar had come down with her. Had her weight dragged it down, or was it she who had levitated?

"I don't know," she answered.

Not a trained observer, unfortunately. Now they must take time to determine which was the agent. They must know that. A halo was an embarrassment. But something which overcame the laws of gravity might have very practical value. There could not be any thought of sending the girl away. Not until they knew. What was her name? Jennie Temper.

"How long have you felt the difference in yourself, Miss Temper?"

She shook her head. "It just happened," she corrected. "Yesterday there was nothing, and to-day—!" She lifted her hand, touching the aura.

"To-day," he repeated. "When? What time?"

No one lived in the establishment. How had she travelled through the streets like this without causing a riot?

"My hat hid it," she explained. "Nobody on the bus saw."

She couldn't wear a hat all the while they were carrying out tests. Equally, she couldn't go round flaunting her halo.

"A wig?" she suggested. "Except that they're very expensive."

She wasn't as brainless as Miss Jonson had made out. She was quite bright really. The wig, now? Wigs were fashionable, so she was probably right about them being expensive. Still, be fair to the girl. With that face it would be criminal to think only of the cost. Think of it as equipment, essential experimental equipment. That took care of the cost. With her colouring—? "Red?" he ventured.

She nodded vigorously.



“Right.” He strode to the telephone. “Ask Doctor Cooper to come here, please.” He looked at Jennie Temper. “You will go with Doctor Cooper, and buy your wig,” he instructed. “You will not attract attention. Particularly not reporters. You will come back here. Agreed?”

“Yes, Doctor Abbey.”

Cooper came, bustling, was informed of what was wanted.

“Outside our scope,” he commented. But his eyes were bright, and he made no further objections.

Other people were not so easy. But Miss Jonson could be reminded that it was the director who was responsible for internal policy. The chief accountant could be placated with the promise of departmental sanction to come (not even a director could intimidate an accountant), and paid out cheerfully. Lastly, there was a call to an, at first, incredulous Permanent Under Secretary.

“No, Sir George, I don’t consider it should go to the psychical research people. It’s either the girl or the metal, but it is logical to believe it is emanation based. Yes. I agree entirely. Definitely no publicity. Thank you, Sir George.”

Then, all the hurdles of the first lap successfully taken—what? His first day as director, confronted with something manifestly impossible, and he’d coped. Grounds for satisfaction there. Particularly about having kept it in his own department. If he could come up with the right answer, better still. But, how to achieve that? What did one do next?

He leaned back with a hastily assumed air of confidence when his secretary came in. An air which disappeared when the man spoke.

“Temper,” Dr. William Abbey growled. “Her uncle’s an electrician in this place, and nobody thought to tell me that. What sort of man is he?”

“I understand, Doctor Abbey, that he’s highly regarded”.

“Morally?”

“In his work, Doctor Abbey. I have heard the word ‘brilliant.’ But, he has ideas outside his work.”

“Politics?”

“Oh, no!” The secretary was shocked. “Not here, doctor. No. He invents things. Fantastic things. Impractical things.”

Abruptly William Abbey sat up. “Fantastic—?” He licked his lips. “I’ll see him,” he snapped.

The first thing, clearly, was to make sure that Thomas Temper realised that this was not a fantasy. That this was under serious test. Impress on him that his niece had been transferred to special duty.

And observe how the exuberant Mr. Temper changed at the word "security." Became sullen. What was he saying? About fear chopping up the ladder which humanity would otherwise climb to gain a higher level. A level where gravity meant nothing.

"Someone," William Abbey said ominously, "has talked. How do you know about this?"

"From where I was working," Temper told him, "I could see through Jennie's window. I saw that bar lift her."

Was Mr. Temper a trained observer? The director had also seen the girl hanging from the bar. But—that left out the halo. Could one ignore the halo? Wasn't it also reasonable that a person endowed with a halo would have special qualities?

Carefully, tactfully, he eased Mr. Temper out, returned to his thoughts. Just what experiments *were* they going to initiate?

The block of metal lay on his desk. He stood looking down at it. A length rather like an overgrown ruler, its batch serial number in plain sight. There had been, so the records stated, nothing unusual about that batch. Nothing new, or dangerous. The various members of that batch had gone a hundred, different, innocent ways. Including being used, as Jennie Temper had done, as a paper weight.

He picked it up. It was heavy. Too heavy for a paper weight; too clumsy. What had made her select it for that purpose? He would have to ask her that.

But when she returned, with a beaming Dr. Cooper, and stood before him, he forgot to ask. Instead, he walked round her, head forward, hands clasped behind his back.

"It *was* expensive," she said nervously.

"Can't see the halo," Cooper grinned. "Justifies the cost."

William Abbey started. He'd forgotten it was to hide the aura that they had bought the wig. He had been too taken with the effect of the flaming red mass setting off Jennie's face. What was the matter with him? "You've done very well," he praised hurriedly.

"Do you like it?" Jennie asked.

William Abbey smiled. "Yes," he said. "Never thought I would. But—on you—!" He stopped. What *had* got into him?

But the others did not seem to have noticed any lapse. The girl beamed, and Dr. Cooper looked over his glasses, and nodded.

There was a rap on the door. It opened. Two men came in. "Doctor Abbey? Security." They flashed passes. "Is this Miss Temper?" Two pairs of empty eyes probed Jennie with suspicion. "There's no sign of a halo."

She put up her hands, lifted off the wig. The newcomers took a pace back. Then, three rapid steps forward. Carefully, in perfect step, they walked round her.

"Is it," one phrased the question carefully, "that you are a good girl?"

"A very good girl?" the second added.

Jennie considered this. Shook her head. "I can't say," she answered. "I've not taken any openings, if that counts," she added with a judicious air.

Dubiously they retreated to the window, consulted in undertones. The three members of the establishment waited. Dr. Cooper with an air of sardonic interest, Bill Abbey patient. Until his eye wandered to Jennie, outwardly demure, but, unless he was crazy, bubbling inside. He felt his brain wobble, its cylinders firing unevenly. He had been thinking of her as a person caught up in something tremendous, out of this world, awesome. Whereas the minx was enjoying herself. If that was the case—?

But the security men were coming back. "What steps are you taking, Doctor Abbey?" they demanded. They looked at the red wig in the girl's fingers, nodded together. "That was a good idea," they approved. "Very quick."

"Hers," Cooper told them.

"Excellent. Good service outlook," they chimed. Almost the three could see the commendation written on Jennie's dossier. "What follows, Doctor Abbey?"

Bill Abbey's wits came back. "We shall use two teams," he told them. "One, headed by myself, to investigate this halo effect. With Miss Temper's assistance."

"Good."

"While Doctor Cooper's team will concentrate on the metal."

"As few people as possible," number one stipulated.

"Consistent with efficiency," number two warned.

They stood, shoulder to shoulder, to enunciate their farewell. "This may have a profound effect on strategy. A special

committee has been set up. Early results will be appreciated." They moved to the door. "We have a complete list of all who have knowledge of this. We shall now see each one of those persons." The door closed behind them.

"Strategy," Jennie said unsteadily. Her hands were up at her head. "This. Oh, no!"

"Well established custom," Cooper assured her. "Blessing one's weapons. If it's your halo, it'll be a built-in blessing. Hallowed be our missiles."

"Is that supposed to be witty?" The girl was close to tears.

"Astringent." Cooper shrugged. "Even mordant. But symptomatic. Be prepared for that outlook." He turned to the director. "You mentioned teams."

"You know whom you want," William Abbey answered.

"Do I?" Cooper shook his head. "Wrong. I don't. Except that they mustn't have a normal, logical brain."

"Would uncle do?" Jennie asked. "He certainly hasn't got that."

Bill Abbey opened his mouth. Then—closed it.

Surprisingly, Cooper took her seriously. "We don't know it's not electrical," he said. "Yes. Could do worse." He grinned. "Keep it in the family, eh?"

It was lunch time. Bill Abbey pushed his tray aside. Between the telephone, and the couriers, and the heads of departments there was no chance to eat. A pattern was gradually taking shape. Not, he reflected, a comfortable shape. There was a sharp edge to it, and he was astride that edge. Because, too quickly, he had committed himself. Instead of denying what he had seen with his own eyes, he had let it carry him away. His mood darkened. Somewhere there was a catch.

He was going to look the world's biggest fool when the truth finally came out, and there was no one to blame for that but himself.

"Coffee," a friendly voice urged. "If you won't eat you may as well drink. I've asked the policeman outside to keep everyone out for five minutes."

He twisted to look at her. She had removed her disguise, and the pale loop around her hair shone mistily. It was a trick, of course, but how was it done? He stood up. "I suppose I'm the only one who hasn't had a proper look at it," he said.

"Is it still showing?" Jennie asked.

"It's there all right," he growled. "What gets me is, why?"

"Uncle Tom says it's electrical," Jennie told him. She sipped from her own cup, smiled at the frowning scientist. "It's all right to touch it," she assured him. "Everyone has."

He scowled at the thought of all those foreign fingers with their impertinent prying. Felt himself. Did he feel anything? Nothing. He stepped back.

"Well, doctor?"

"I don't know," he confessed. He stood, looming over her. "If it's personal to you, then that will mean knowing more about you." A pleasurable excitement touched him, not at all connected with science. His eyes narrowed. She was very pretty. "If that's the case—!"

She turned away, suddenly uneasy. "You might not like that," she muttered over her shoulder.

"Suppose I did like it," Bill Abbey suggested.

But she went to the door, opened it, spoke to the man outside. Turned, her back to the wall. "They're waiting to see you," she defied him.

She had escaped for the moment. Hiding behind the arrival of the sub-committee, the air marshal, the admiral, the general. Three eager sceptics, insistent that if the report was true, it must take priority over everything else. "Tea-tray," the general proclaimed. "Operation Tea-tray. A launching platform in space. Independent of gravity."

There was to be no leaving the station for the members of the teams. Already prefabricated sections were going up. Everything needed was being brought in. At this moment vehicles were swinging up to the main gates, being vetted, being hurried through. Builder's trucks, pantechincons, delivery vans. Inside the station perimeter a second compound was coming into being—apartments for the teams.

"Desert island stuff," Cooper murmured. "Marooned. Launchers instead of palms, and concrete for beaches."

"Why not call it a prison, Doctor Cooper?" Temper asked. "That's a scientific description because it's exact."

Bill's eyes stayed on the electrician. Temper was the least happy of them all. Why? Because, unbelievable as it might seem, Temper himself had something at stake? Because *he* knew what had caused this phenomenon? Was perhaps, responsible for it? Bill's stomach tightened. If that was the answer—! That, he, Dr. William Abbey, had fallen for a fantasy dreamed up by a maniac, then his career truly was finished. Unhappily he accepted Cooper's invitation to see

what had already been done. Moodily surveyed the switchboards, the dials, the coils. Left Jennie watching the second team testing their equipment; went off to the room assigned to him.

Alone, he ran over the events of the day. Item by item. Putting each under the microscope of his suspicion. Growing steadily angrier.

When Jennie brought in a tray he shot out of his chair. "You and I," he said, "have got some talking to do." He put himself between her and the door.

"Now?" she asked.

"Now," he snapped. He took her wrist firmly. His free hand went up, whipping off her wig. "That," he growled. "How's the trick worked?" His eyes were hard. "I want the truth. Before this farce goes any further. If I have to shake it out of you."

He released her wrist, put his hands on her shoulders, gripped.

He cried out as he found himself flying through the air. Then he hit the floor. It hurt. He twisted his head, saw two ankles, lifted his eyes higher. And higher. Until they met hers, looking down at him without kindness. Heard her voice, stinging and cool. "Next time you want to show a girl how tough you are, doctor, pick one who hasn't gone in for judo."

She stooped for her wig, went over to the mirror with insolent carelessness, put it on. Walked towards the door. "I hope it won't spoil your dinner if I admit that I *did* cook that."

The door closed as he scrambled up. He reached it in two furious strides, then stopped. On the face of it, from the way she had reacted, she was genuine.

But, if she could handle him so easily, why had she not given Humphreys the brush off? Why rise?

Still puzzling, he sat down at the table, began to eat. Half way through he realised that he was enjoying the meal. She could cook, he reflected. She was attractive. No. That wasn't good enough. Decorative, highly decorative. And spirit. Able to look after herself. Not insipid like so many girls were.

He jumped when he woke up to the trend of his thoughts. Towards infatuation. Falling for a cheat. A swindler. Someone who, probably with that bounding uncle of hers, had come up with an idea which was going to bring down a whole lot of trouble on Dr. William Abbey. Unless he did something about it very smartly.

He went out, down the passage, out into the floodlit space between their prison and the new barbed wire entanglements. There should be some evidence in that rabbit hutch of an office she had occupied. It could not have been cleared away. If he tore the place apart. It shouldn't take long.

Except that the guards on the wire shook their heads. "Sorry. Nobody nor nothing in or out. Not after dark. No matter who you say you are."

Baffled, he withdrew. This was ridiculous. Who was the fool who'd arranged this?

He had not noticed the others until Cooper spoke. "Not a concentration camp type, eh, doctor?"

Bill lifted his head. "I don't remember them mentioning these restrictions."

"They did, though," the girl confirmed. "I expect, being busy, you didn't take it in."

"Absent minded professor," Cooper twitted. But his eyes, Bill observed, were serious, and there were lines on his forehead. Cooper, it appeared, wasn't comfortable either. Bill's glance shifted to Temper. How was the electrician taking it?

What was the man saying? "As I've always maintained. This trifling incident is a perfect example. The professional is too narrow. His training is too rigid. It excludes everything outside his own experience." He flung out a supercilious hand. "Progress," he enunciated, "does not spring from the minds of the professionals."

Was Temper claiming that he had had prior knowledge of this business? Or merely sounding off on his pet theory? If he did know, then why not admit it? Claim it, rather. Should he challenge Temper? Or wait? It might be wiser to wait.

Meanwhile Cooper was answering. "Concede amateurs make discoveries. But needs professionals to develop them. Which is perhaps what we're supposed to be doing now." He turned back, and perforce Temper must go with him.

Which left the girl with Bill. And where, he asked himself, did that get him? Nowhere.

But she surprised him. "Oughtn't *we* to be doing something? For your report."

He stared down at her. "I thought—"

"—that I was petty minded." She smiled sweetly at his confusion. "No. Provided you confine yourself to research, you can rely on my co-operation."

And that was him put firmly in his place. But, it could be that this attractive hell-cat had under-estimated him. True, he

might find himself on his back again, but he would risk that. If he moved fast, at the right time—!

He let her lead the way back to the building. Walked behind her down the passage. Noticed how her halo seemed to be growing brighter. Was that illusion? From the far end of the passage, where the second team had their room, came the hum of their equipment, growing louder.

He went past her, threw open the door of their quarters, stood back to let her enter. As she went by he moved, grabbing her wrists, imprisoned them behind her.

She did not resist. Even when he bent his head down. "Your uncle can't have wired this place, Jennie Temper," Bill said. "So let's see if you do a Humphreys act on me when I kiss you." His mouth touched hers.

"Team work," Cooper commented from the doorway. "Confirming your data, eh?"

Furious, Bill released the girl, swung round to blast Cooper. Checked when he saw the man's face change, saw Temper's staring eyes over Cooper's shoulder. Turned back.

From three feet above them Jennie looked down at them. Uncertain and frightened. "Down," she whispered. "Please."

His hands shot up, seized hers, drew on them. She came lightly enough. He let go, waited ready to grab. But was not called upon.

"I think it's all right," Jennie ventured.

He stared at her. "I should apologise," he said. "I was wrong."

"That's all right," she answered.

It seemed she spoke automatically. Until he realised that she was still frightened. With her eyes rivetted on her uncle, silently questioning him. But without avail. For if ever a man looked shocked it was the exuberant Mr. Temper. The, at this moment, not so exuberant Mr. Temper.

Cooper had seen it also. He put a hand on the electrician's arm, drew him out into the passage. "We'll come back later," he said, and closed the door.

"I think," Bill said slowly, "that the time has come to talk. If you feel up to it, that is."

"I'm all right," Jennie answered.

"Good." Bill paced slowly across the room, came back to her. "The first time, with Humphreys, you weren't surprised. This time you were. That first time then—?"

"Yes," Jennie admitted.



“Your uncle fixed it?”

She nodded. “But, and you’ve got to believe this, it’s not just a put-up job. There *is* something.”

“What?”

“I don’t know. I can’t say how much uncle knows. He hasn’t told me. All I know is that he asked me to help. Because he wasn’t a recognised scientist. Because he said people wouldn’t listen to him. He said he’d have to shock them into paying attention. I said I would. He ground some of the metal down to dust, powdered my hair with it, passed a current through it.”

He nodded. “Then, in your office—?” he prompted.

“Yes,” she said. “He laid that on. Because Doctor Humphreys was always pestering me. Making excuses to come in. Like this time that you saw. So uncle fixed my desk. He put two contacts in the top, wired up. The bar lay across them.”

How could he have missed seeing, Bill wondered? Then, recollecting the scene, saw again the papers lying beside the typewriter swept across the surface of the desk by Humphreys’ elbow, covering everything. “Go on,” he said.

“Uncle told me what to do. I was to grab the bar, and hold on. Whatever happened.”

“That’s all you know?”

“Yes.”

She would not need to know more, he reflected. Temper had probably concealed magnets in the ceiling. They’d have to be powerful, but the man could probably fix it.

And there it was. A hoax. For which he would be held responsible. For having initiated Operation Tea-tray irresponsibly. Giving those in authority the impression the thing was factual. Not sifting the evidence first. Letting himself be taken in by a palpable piece of impertinent manipulation.

He moved towards the door. “You’d better get some sleep,” he advised. “In the morning, when the committee comes, you’ll have to repeat this to them.”

“Including,” the girl asked, “your kissing me?”

He stopped.

“Yes,” Jennie said. “You kissed me. Then I lifted.”

He swallowed.

“That wasn’t faked,” she reminded him. “Uncle didn’t fix this place up.”

“So there *is* something,” Bill muttered. “Unless—?”

"Unless," Jennie repeated.

"Unless it's you. Because of what a halo means. In spite of it being a made one."

"No," Jennie denied.

"You can't be sure," Bill argued.

"Can't I?" Jennie challenged. She came close, put her arms round his neck. After an interval, "Well?" Jennie demanded.

He smiled back. Nodded. "You put up a good case," he admitted. His expression changed, becoming more serious. "In fact," he said, "it could be—" He stopped.

"Go on," she smiled.

"Maybe, given time—"

"Not rushing things."

"Would you like that?" he asked. "Going steady?"

"That's the only way I would like," she answered. "My family is allergic to shotguns."

They both jumped when the phone exploded its strident summons. Bill snatched it up. "Abbey," he barked.

"Tea-tray. Report received someone tried to get out. Why?"

"I did want to go out," Bill admitted. "It doesn't matter now. The point is cleared up."

"So you've made progress. Excellent. We'll be over."

"Hey!" Bill protested. But the phone was dead.

"Live wires," he complained. "Talk about jumping to conclusions." He shook his head. "If they're on their way uncle's got to talk," he told Jennie. "Fast."

But, before they reached the door, it opened. Cooper came in. A worried Cooper. "Temper's quit," he announced. "Pulled out. This being an immoral project." He looked questioningly at Jennie.

"It could be," she said slowly. "He has got high principles. If he said that, it'd be because he believed it."

"Sympathise," Cooper returned. "Still sane myself. All the same—!"

"You've got to find the answer," Jennie finished. She nodded. "I can see that. But, if uncle won't play—!"

"Maybe," Bill said slowly, "maybe we don't need uncle." The two blinked. "Maybe it's been under our noses all the time."

"Darling!" Jennie's eyes shone. "You've worked it out."

"If I'm right," Bill qualified. "Tell me," he asked Cooper, "you've been putting charges though your specimens. I'll bet it was the highest voltage you could lay on."

Cooper nodded, looked thoughtful. "You suggest that that was wrong?"

"If it needed power," Bill replied, "What about Jennie? When she was lifted holding that bar."

Cooper grunted. "That's fantastic," he objected. "To speed up atoms, you apply heat. The greater the heat, the faster they move. To step them up to escape velocity, so that they're moving fast enough to offset gravity—" He stopped, staring at Bill. "If my argument was right, Jennie's bar would have to have been impossibly hot."

"Suppose we go try," Bill suggested.

They hurried. Inside the test room Temper ignored their entry. Until Cooper bent to the specimens, unclipped the connections. Then the electrician drew nearer. Watched. As Cooper brought up batteries, low voltage batteries, began connecting them to the plates on the bench, Temper cleared his throat.

"So we're on the right track now," Bill said mildly.

"Yes." Temper joined Cooper in the work. "Seeing you've worked it out it's not my responsibility now. I may as well help."

"Thank you," Bill told him. Jennie searched his face. Then, when she was sure he had not been sarcastic, squeezed his hand. He grinned back at her warmly.

"Not wanting to be obstreperous," Temper rumbled, "But, what'll be the difference? Our having used high voltage first."

Cooper paused.

But Bill's ears had caught the sound from outside. "We'll have to chance it," he said. "No time now to use a fresh set. If it doesn't work—" He shrugged.

The last clamp was fixed. Cooper and Temper stepped back. "Tea-tray," a voice snapped.

The general, the admiral, the air marshal. Attendant minions and supporters. Crowding in, raking the room with hard eyes. "Well, Doctor Abbey?"

The committee advanced closer. Up to the bench. Stared at the metal plates and the wires to the batteries. The low voltage batteries. "Well, Doctor Abbey?" they repeated.

There was a dazzling flash. There was a clap like thunder. Fragments showered the room. The lights dimmed, flickered, recovered only slowly. Terribly the admiral, the general, and

the air marshal, and all their myrmidons considered Bill Abbey and the girl held protectively in his arms. Over her halo, burning gloriously now, their indignant eyes demanded an explanation. And threatened to reject it, whatever it was. "Well, Doctor Abbey?" they grated.

But Bill was not looking at them. He was looking at Cooper. Jennie was twisted to look at Cooper. So, the admiral, the air marshal, the general, and their staff turned also. To see the scientist, one hand digging Temper in the ribs, the other pointing to the ceiling. Their eyes lifted to the imperious finger.

"Tea-tray!" the committee breathed, in tones reverent as prayer.

The explosion had not been electrical only. Some of it had been where certain metal plates, flying up, had torn a hole through the roof. A hole through which all could see the stars.

"Well?" Bill was the first to find his voice. "Well, gentlemen?"

It was still night when they were at last able to ease out of the crush. Away from the service technicians peremptorily summoned from their beds to map every detail of the set-up, trace every lead, note every connection, and attempt to follow the revolutionary theory of Dr. Cooper regarding the interplay of maximum and minimum transmission of energy.

"Piccadilly Circus," Bill snarled, scowling at the ant-hill comings and goings of the hordes, "No place private at all."

"There's one place," Jennie announced thoughtfully. She pointed ahead to where a launching ramp loomed up black in the darkness. "Up top."

"Climb *that*!" He stopped, struck by the positive blaze of her halo. "Oh!"

"Put your arms round me," She directed.

He did so. The ground slid away from them. The girders came down past them, section by section. Until Jennie reached out, gripped one, and drew them both in. Their feet touched solid metal, and they drew a combined breath, compounded of relief, excitement, and a sense of mischief.

"You can let me go now," Jennie said.

"Somehow," Bill argued, "I don't think I'm going to want to let you go. Ever."

"Oh!" she commented. Then, after a while, "That will be nice," she answered.

## STUDIES IN SCIENCE FICTION

*Our apologies for having to make a last-minute change in this series of articles on the early science fiction and fantasy masters. The Abraham Merritt article, already listed for this issue, proved overlong. Rather than edit it down we have substituted a shorter one in the series which is equally as fascinating.*

### 5. **Cyrano de Bergerac**

By **Sam Moskowitz**

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*Physicist and dreamer . . . these,  
Rhymer, musician, fighter an it please,  
And sailor of aerial seas  
Swordsman whose parry was attack  
Lover, lacking all love's keys ;  
Here he lies, this Hercules  
Savien Cyrano Bergerac,  
All and nothing. Rest in Peace.  
—Edmond Rostand*

Cyrano de Bergerac collapses only minutes after he has revealed to the beautiful Roxane that it was he and not Christian who had written those inspired love letters to her. The secret that has eaten like a slow malignancy at his happiness and well-being for more than fourteen years is at last known.

The fact that Roxane now realizes that she really loved the great spirit who had combined his wit and facile pen with the

handsome figure of Christian, to win vicariously, the love of a woman whom he dared not woo, fearing that the ugliness of his gigantic nose would lead to a rebuff, provides small comfort to Cyrano, for he knows he is dying. His oldest and dearest friend, Henry Le Bret, arrives at the nunnery garden, prompted by a premonition that Cyrano has met with foul play.

Tenderly as a mother, Le Bret bends over the prone figure of Cyrano, and then, indicating the moonlight filtering through the branches of a tree, sobs : " *Thy other love !* "

Cyrano, smiling and addressing the moon, says : " Welcome, fair friend above ! " Then, ignoring Roxane's lament, " I loved but once and twice I lose my love, " he whispers to Le Bret, " I'll journey to that moonland opaline, unhampered—eh, Le Bret ?—by a machine. "

" What are you saying ? " Roxane asks, thinking Cyrano is delirious.

He replies : " I shall have one prize. They'll let me have the moon for paradise. In yonder sphere, we shall hold converse high, Galileo, and Socrates and I. "

The quoted lines are from Edmond Rostand's masterpiece, *Cyrano de Bergerac*, written in 1897, a play that has charmed and thrilled millions on the stage and in the cinema. Of that play, Jay B. Hubbell, and John O. Beaty, in their book, *An Introduction To Drama* say : " On the stage the sharp contrast between extreme ugliness and greatness of soul is startlingly effective. Cyrano, however, is, for all his charm, a bundle of fine points for the actor rather than a living man like Hamlet or Falstaff. And yet on the stage the play is so effective that we are swept off our feet and our critical faculties are paralyzed. *Cyrano*, if not a great tragedy, is, in spite of its faults, one of the best of contemporary plays. "

Yet the irony of it is that Hamlet and Falstaff were fictional characters, woven out of whole cloth by their authors, but Cyrano was real. *Cyrano de Bergerac* really lived ! Making allowances for the justifiable poetic license exercised by Rostand, the play is essentially built on fact.

*Cyrano de Bergerac* was a very famous man indeed. He was not only the greatest fencer of his time, but a poet, playwright, philosopher and an acolyte of science. And he was endowed with a nose virtually as monstrous—although naturally not quite as large—as the one in the play and was inordinately sensitive about it. While the audience may have, between their sniffings, regarded the quoted references to the moon from

Rostand's play as a bit of colourful trimming to adorn a romance, *they were in reality an acknowledgement of de Bergerac's role as the greatest science fiction writer of his century !*

His most famous work, *A Voyage to the Moon*, went into nine editions in France and two translations into English between the years 1650 and 1687. Previous to its publication it was extensively circulated in manuscript form, and read by many of his more distinguished contemporaries.

Unlike other romancers, utopians and satirists of the period, who wrote occasional works of primitive science fiction as a convenient means of forwarding a particular political or social concept, de Bergerac persisted in his literary endeavours and wrote a sequel to *A Voyage to the Moon* entitled *A Voyage to the Sun*. The story, though apparently incomplete, was no mere fragment, for it exceeded in length *A Voyage to the Moon*. A third science fiction novel, *The Story of the Spark*, is referred to in contemporary writings, but the actual manuscript was stolen and has never been found.

The nature of Cyrano de Bergerac's life was so truly fabulous that it must be offered as a prelude to a discussion of his works of science fiction, if they are to be effectively understood and appreciated.

Cyrano de Bergerac was baptized Savinien de Cyrano II, March 6, 1619. He was the fifth of six children sired by Abel de Cyrano, and was born on his father's estate near Paris. Though his father was an educated man and moderately well off, he was not of noble birth. On the contrary, Cyrano's grandfather had made his fortune as a fish merchant !

At a country private school, Cyrano met Henry Le Bret, who was to become his lifelong friend and who is included as a character in Rostand's play. Personality conflicts with his instructor resulted in Cyrano's transfer to the College de Beauvais in Paris. This was literally jumping from the frying pan into the fire since the headmaster at Paris proved even more insufferable to a boy of Cyrano's precocious temperament than the rural private-school tutor who, like his predecessor, believed that the rod was a more effective road to learning than reason. What was worse, he quite brutally exercised that conviction.

Cyrano completed his studies at Beauvais in 1637 and one year later, at the age of nineteen, entered the Gascon guard,

which was commanded by M. de Carbon de Casteljaloux. The Gascon guard was famous for the large number of noblemen in its ranks and Cyrano's membership in that select corps gave the erroneous impression that he was born to honour, a misconception which Cyrano did nothing to discourage. Actually, it was his remarkable ability as a swordsman that caused the unit to overlook his background and accept him on merit.

The truth about Cyrano's swordsmanship is more fantastic than the legend which is presented in Rostand's play. On one occasion a poet friend, Chevalier de Lignieres, came running to Cyrano pleading for help. It seemed that Lignieres had spread some off-colour talk concerning a ranking lord of the area. Learning that the lord had hired a group of men to waylay and teach him the error of his ways, he dared not go home. De Bergerac courageously decided to see his friend safely to his door. They were jumped by one hundred swordsmen. The battle raged furiously while Lignieres cowered in a doorway. In what must surely be one of the great sword battles of all times, Cyrano killed two of the attackers, wounded seven and routed the rest. Then he nonchalantly escorted his friend home.

Such a story would normally be dismissed as a fantastic exaggeration, were it not for the fact that it was substantiated by two witnesses of such reliability that historians have accepted it without question. The witnesses were M. de Cuigy, son of an Advocate of the Parliament of Paris and Mestre de Camp of the Prince de Conti's regiment.

We find, then, that the young Cyrano was truly as lion-hearted an individual and as skilled a swordsman as the most imaginative writer would have dared to invent. Certainly no author of a work of fiction would consider investing his hero with the ability to single-handedly defeat that number of swordsmen and no reader would believe it if he did. But in the case of Cyrano, truth is stranger than fiction.

Equally in conformity with the historical record was the fact that Cyrano fought dozens of duels at real and imagined slights to his nose. There is no question that Cyrano had a proboscis of truly unique proportions. Though not as grotesque as the one utilized by Jose Ferrer in the moving picture version of the play, the four known portraits of Cyrano reveal it as being incontestably an immense beak and this despite the fact that



the portrait painters must certainly have made some attempt to minimize and streamline its proportions.

Cyrano himself said of his olfactory organ : " This veridic nose arrives everywhere a quarter of an hour before its master. Ten shoemakers, good round fat ones too, go and sit down to work under it out of the rain."

Cyrano could say such things about himself and have it construed as wit, but woe betide the unwary acquaintance who even as much as *looked* too hard at his nose. Duels inspired by his nose were responsible for Cyrano killing at least ten people and undoubtedly wounding many more.

Not only humans, but at least one poor ape died as a result of de Bergerac's nose. Timed for a performance just previous to his arrival, an ape was dressed like Cyrano, and given a sword and an artificial nose of heroic size by Brioche, a man who ran a marionette theatre near Point-Neuf. The ape was ordinarily used as a means of attracting attention to Brioche's show, and was billed under the name of Fagotin. When Cyrano appeared and viewed this parody of himself, he unsheathed his sword and, driving the crowd right and left, lunged at the poor ape and ran him through.

The owner of the marionette show sued Cyrano for damages.

Regaling the authorities with the dubious logic that since all of this happened within the theatre, the realm of art, Cyrano succeeded in getting the case dropped by offering to pay in the " coin of the realm," and proceeded to write a poem immortalizing the unfortunate ape. At least, so the story goes.

That Cyrano could be a bully as well as a gallant is best illustrated by his feud with Montfleury, an exceedingly fat actor of the period who was also a playwright. On one occasion, Cyrano forced Montfleury to cease acting in a play half way through the performance and forbade him to appear again for a month on pain of death. When the actor did appear two days later, Cyrano once again drove him from the stage. The booing and hissing of the audience resulted in Cyrano challenging all present to a duel. No one took him up.

It was only after Cyrano had been severely wounded in military combat several times that he turned seriously to the arts. He was wounded once when a musket-ball passed through his body and again when his throat was cut by a sword.

His period of serious writing commences from the year 1643. Ironically, it is the relatively quieter period from this date to 1653 which is the least known portion of his fantastic life. While he bombastically and colourfully flaunted his swordsmanship, there always seemed to have been someone to record his achievements, but when he settled down to serious writing, only his works remain to speak for him and some of these were post-humously mutilated.

*A Voyage to the Moon* is the work for which he is best known today, but one of his plays, the poetic tragedy *Agrippina* still has substantial support as an outstanding work of the French theatre. Curtis Hidden Page says of *The Death of Agrippina* that it "is worthy not only to be ranked with the best dramas of his contemporaries except Corneille, but even to be at least compared with Corneille's better work (except perhaps for *The Cid* and *Polyeucte*)."

Richard Aldington, another student of Cyrano de Bergerac, substantiates Page when he says: "*The Death of Agrippina* has been compared favourably with Corneille's minor tragedies . . . The play is well written and impressive."

This establishes that even if de Bergerac had not written his famous interplanetary stories, he would have earned a minor place in the classical drama of France, and that basically his stylistic quality was far above that of Lucian, Francis Godwin, Johannes Kepler and other writers of the interplanetary voyage who preceded him.

*A Voyage to the Moon* and *A Voyage to the Sun* occupy a special place in the history of science fiction, even though they are not the first interplanetaries ever written, the first in which a machine is constructed to carry its passengers to another world, or the first to use science fiction as a medium for contemporary satire.

True, they blend all of these qualities and in so doing display just how rich an ore it is possible to mine in the writing of science fiction. But their real importance lies in their prodigious effort to free science fiction from its previous burden of utopianism and superstition. Cyrano wrestles with the unknown wherever he encounters it. He attempts to sidestep nothing. Cyrano avers there is a logical reason for everything, and he tries to give it.

Cyrano's personal struggle as expressed in *A Voyage to the Moon*, is the struggle of his times. Not too long out of the

Dark Ages, the world was slowly freeing itself from an appalling concretion of superstition and ignorance. With the mystical as well as theological truths of his age literally whipped into him during the educational period of his youth, de Bergerac now swung to the other extreme, became a free thinker and attempted to make reason prevail.

There are places where Cyrano obviously is unaware that he has substituted mythology for fact. There are times when his careful scientific explanations fall apart on close examination, and he lapses into the prejudices and misconceptions of the masses. But for the most part his instincts were correct and he frequently arrived at the right answers, despite the gaps in his knowledge or the error of his method.

When the final history of space travel is written, Cyrano de Bergerac will have to be enshrined as *the first man to think of rockets as a propellant medium for a space vehicle*. In *A Voyage to the Moon*, de Bergerac's hero spends weeks experimenting on a space ship, several models failing to get off the ground. Success crowns his efforts when some Canadians tie rockets to his space shell and he is fired aloft.

High in the atmosphere, the rockets give out, but fortunately Cyrano had rubbed himself with bone marrow, to ease the bruises of a previously unsuccessful flight. Since it was popularly believed in Cyrano's time that the sun sucked up bone marrow, our hero was carried by this method through space, ultimately to land on the moon.

The moon turns out to be inhabited by humanoid creatures that go about on all fours. However, it is interesting to note that Cyrano makes a point of stressing the light gravitational pull of the moon, by relating how the inhabitants are able to 'fan' themselves through the air.

In his two novels, Cyrano makes seven different suggestions for defying gravity to reach the moon and *all seven* are incorporated in Rostand's play !

In addition to the detailed descriptions of the methods of rocketry and the sun's affinity to bone marrow we have the following :

"One way was to stand naked in the sunshine, in a harness thickly studded with glass phials, each filled with morning dew. The sun in drawing up the dew, you see, could not have helped drawing me up too !"

“Or else, mechanic as well as artificer, I could have fashioned a giant grasshopper, with steel joints, which, impelled by successive explosions of saltpetre, would have hopped with me to the azure meadows where graze the starry flocks.” This comes fairly close to the actual employment of an internal combustion engine.

“Since smoke by its nature ascends, I could have blown into an appropriate globe a sufficient quantity to ascend with me.”

“Or else, I could have placed myself upon an iron plate, have taken a magnet of suitable size, and thrown it in the air ! That way is a very good one ! The magnet flies upward, the iron instantly after ; the magnet no sooner overtaken than you fling it up again . . . the rest is clear ! You can go upward indefinitely.” In descending upon the moon, Cyrano would occasionally throw the magnet up to break the speed of descent. He had its problems well thought out !

“Draw wind into a vacuum—keep it tight—rarefy them, by glowing mirrors, pressed Isosahedron-wise within a chest.” This method Cyrano used to go to the sun, forcing the expanded air out in a ramjet principle.

After reaching the moon, Cyrano very clearly and definitely establishes the fact that the earth and the other planets revolve around the sun and that the sun is the centre of the solar system. Lest this be regarded as a rather elementary observation, *it should be noted that only sixteen years before Cyrano made this statement, Galileo, on his knees before the Inquisition, recanted the “heresy” that his telescope had confirmed.*

Cyrano observes that the fixed stars are other suns with planets about them and offers the opinion that the universe is infinite. This view, of course, is no longer held by the majority of modern astrophysicists.

Earth was created, as were the other planets, by fragments thrown off from the sun as it cooled, thought Cyrano. It even seemed likely that the sun spots were new planets in formation.

In one of his experiments, Cyrano uses a parachute to safely descend to earth, possibly obtaining this idea from Leonardo da Vinci.

On the moon, Cyrano meets creatures that are able to alter their forms at will, a device tremendously popular in science fiction in recent years. These moon-dwellers visited Earth in prehistoric ages and gave rise to the stories of mythological monsters and pagan gods that have been passed down to us.

He discovers that these people are actually from the sun and are capable of living thousands of years by transferring their intelligencies to new bodies when the old ones wear out.

On the moon, the people eat by inhaling the vapours of food. They have embraced the concept—previously unheard of in Cyrano's time—of going to doctors to *keep well* and taking preventive medicine, instead of waiting until they are ill.

Certainly the most advanced and astonishing theories in his book are those concerning atoms. Cyrano at great length and with prophetic insight insists that the entire world is composed of infinitesimal bits of matter called 'atoms' and that these make up all known elements. He points out that earth, water, fire and air are merely different arrangements and densities of the same atomic matter.

The formation of life on our planet was a matter of chance, Cyrano felt. In his opinion, in the vastness of the universe, infinite combinations of conditions were capable of occurring and on this planet, the chemical and climatic conditions formed a blend that accidentally created life forms here.

Previous to the appearance of de Bergerac's moon story, a volume entitled *The Man in the Moon: or a Discourse of a Voyage Thither*, by Domingo Gonsales, was published in 1638. The book was written by Frances Godwin and as part of the story, his hero, Domingo Gonsales, travels to the moon with birds serving as the motive power for a contraption he has built. Cyrano meets Gonsales on the moon, thereby inadvertently acknowledging his imaginative debt to the earlier writer.

Of course, Cyrano de Bergerac's wide reading was the source of most of the ideas he expounds and he quite honestly gives credit where credit is due in the text of his work. He praises Girolamo Cardan, Italian mathematician who gained a great reputation during the 16th century; Johannes Kepler, scientist whose moon story *Somnium* appeared first in 1638; Tommaso Campanella, author of the classic utopia, *City of the Sun*, who is actually used as one of the characters in de Bergerac's *A Voyage to the Sun*; Gasendi, who deplored the concepts of Aristotle and Descartes—there is a story extant that Cyrano forced his way into the lectures of this man at swordpoint. so anxious was he to absorb his theories—and literally dozens of others including Lucian, Sorel, Pythagoras, Epicurus, Democritus, Copernicus, Rabelais, Rehaul, Tritheim and Nostradamus.

The ideas of all these men and many more profoundly influenced Cyrano's thinking and references to them abound in such profusion in his two interplanetary novels that it is small wonder that Marjorie Nicholson in her scholarly work, *Voyages to the Moon*, appraises Cyrano's works as "the most brilliant of all seventeenth century parodies of the cosmic voyage."

Cyrano's careful description of a machine on the moon that records and plays back voices, written in 1648, greatly impressed anthologists Marjorie Fischer and Rolfe Humphries, so much so, in fact, that they included the excerpt in their book, *Strange to Tell*, published by Julian Messner in 1946. Similarly, Cyrano's prediction of radiant bulbs providing artificial light on the moon, belongs in the category of first-rate prognostication.

Because of the numerous and carefully worked out scientific opinions, theories and extrapolations included in Cyrano's *Voyages*, we are sometimes inclined to lose sight of the fact that they are also biting satires, appraising the beliefs, customs and laws of mankind as well as the possibility of future invention.

Cyrano de Bergerac was opposed to organized religion, believing that it was responsible for more evils than it cured. Strangely for a man himself a firebrand and master swordsman, he did not believe that physical force in itself proved anything and he scoffed at the concept of courage, attributing it to men too brutal and ignorant to understand the danger or consequences of their acts. Cyrano deplored 'Momism' centuries before Philip Wylie thought of the term in *Generation of Vipers* and caustically castigates the mothers and fathers who established an emotional despotism over their children, making selfish demands merely because they sired and begat them.

De Bergerac was firmly convinced that a great many illnesses were psychosomatic, laying stress on the fact that witch doctors were often able to effect cures in cases which had baffled the greatest of medical practitioners.

Amidst all this philosophy, the scientific marvels never ceased to come and the cities of the moon had some houses on wheels which by a combination of bellows and sails were moved at will about Earth's satellite to take advantage of climatic changes. The homes that were stationary rested on giant screws and in the winter dropped into immense underground cellars, protected from the harsh weather above. *A Voyage*

*to the Moon*, despite its many flaws, was the most soundly scientific science fiction story of the period.

In narrative flow it is episodic and uneven, chopped into segments of action, science, philosophy, sociology. But it contains at least one pastoral description that is as beautiful and poetic a writing achievement as anything in 17th century literature.

*A Voyage to the Moon* depends for its effects upon the presentation of ideas, which must have been real shockers in the 17th century. It is in every sense of the term the first 'thought-variant' science fiction tale in history. It is intended to instruct, but above all else, it demands that the reader think for himself.

The sequel, *A Voyage to the Sun*, begins as a straight action adventure on earth, where Cyrano evades chastisement for the views in his first book. About one third of the way through the story, Cyrano carefully constructs a space ship from a six-by-three-foot box "closed so exactly that not a single grain of air could slip in except through two openings." The box has a globe on its summit, formed of crystal. "The vessel was expressly made with several angles, in the shape of an icosahedron, so that as each facet was convex and concave my globe produced the effect of a burning mirror . . . I have told you that the sun beat vigorously upon my concave mirrors, and uniting its rays in the middle of the globe drove out with ardour through the upper vent the air inside; the globe became a vacuum and, since Nature abhors a vacuum, she made it draw up air through the lower opening to fill itself . . . I should continue to rise, because the ether became wind through the furious speed with which it rushed through to prevent a vacuum and consequently was bound to force up my machine continually." For steering his vessel, Cyrano attached a sail!

Out in space, Cyrano calls attention to the difficulty of telling the difference between 'up' and 'down' in the interplanetary void, an observation extraordinary for his period.

He dwells ingeniously on possible life-tolerating variations in solar temperature and actually lands on one of the sun-spots which turns out to be a cooled area, much like our Earth.

On the sun, Cyrano indulges in some of his most savage satire, comparing human beings in a most unfavourable light to birds and to animals.

*A Voyage to the Sun*, initially published in 1662 as *The Comic History of the States and Empires of the Sun*, some years after Cyrano's death, is never brought to a finish, but breaks off abruptly. On whether or not the break was intentional there are two schools of thought. The outstanding de Bergerac scholar Richard Aldington, who was responsible for the first complete English translation of the unexpurgated manuscript of *A Voyage to the Moon*, raises strong doubts as to whether Cyrano de Bergerac deliberately closed the manuscript in that manner.

Other scholars point to the first authorized edition of the book, published in 1656, a year after Cyrano's death—an edition was published without permission in 1650—where Cyrano has apparently added an addenda which does not appear in the manuscript. It reads: "But foreseeing, that it will put an end to all my Studies, and Travels; that I may be as good as my word to the Council of the World; I have begg'd of Monsieur Le Bret, my dearest and most constant Friend, that he would publish them with the *History of the Republick of the Sun*, that of the *Spark*, and some other Pieces of my Composing if those who have Stolen them from us restore them to him, as I earnestly adjure them to do."

The addenda, translated by A. Lovell, A.M. in 1687—whose edition was the best in English until Richard Aldington's in 1922, and the first in English to also include *A Voyage to the Sun*—indicates that Cyrano refers to the *Sun* as a completed work. It is possible that the ending to it may be discovered with *The Story of the Spark*, the third of Cyrano's science fiction satires, if the stolen manuscript is ever located.

Ironically, though Cyrano's best friend was Henry le Bret and though he made him his literary executor, le Bret, a staunch pillar of the church, dared not publish the Cosmic Voyages in their original form, containing as they did atheistic matter as well as scientific speculation contrary to theological dogma. He therefore hacked away some of Cyrano's most brilliant literary ripostes and toned down others until they made no sense.

Many contemporaries referred to Cyrano as a 'madman' because the Cosmic Voyages often appeared so disjointed, never dreaming that censorship was the culprit. Fortunately, the original manuscript of *A Voyage to the Moon* survived, but this is not the case with its sequel, *A Voyage to the Sun*, and we



have no way of telling what was excised from that work unless the original manuscript is someday uncovered.

As it was, Cyrano's influence was monumental. Scores of authors imitated him. Tom d'Urfy's work, *Wonders in the Sun or the Kingdom of the Birds*, published in London 1706 and used as the basis of an opera, is a direct steal from Cyrano, even to the use of his characters. But the most important author influenced by Cyrano de Bergerac is unquestionably Jonathan Swift, author of *Gulliver's Travels*.

Swift's biographers have never attempted to side-step his debt to Cyrano de Bergerac. As early as 1754, Samuel Derrick dedicated a new translation into English of *A Voyage to the Moon . . . A Comical Romance* to Earl of Orrery, author of *Remarks on the Life and Writings of Jonathan Swift*, and gives as his reason "your Lordship's mentioning this work in your *Life of Swift*" as the inspiration for *Gulliver's Travels*.

Literally dozens of instances of borrowing from Cyrano can be detected in *Gulliver's Travels* but some of the most obvious are the "Houyhnhnms," in which men are put in a very poor light by comparing them to birds and beasts and a passage in chapter 6 of *Voyage to Lilliput*, beginning with ; "Their notions relating to the duties of parents and children differ extremely from ours, and when they come to the age of twenty moons they are supposed to have some rudiments of docility," and ending with ". . . when they come to the age of twenty moons, at which time they are supposed to have some rudiments of docility," constitutes a direct rephrasing of Cyrano's views on 'Momism' and the relationship of children to their parents.

In brief sections, the slashing satire contained in de Bergerac's works is every bit as powerful and effective as Swift's, but the quality is not sustained. Nevertheless, had Swift not arrived on the scene, completely eclipsing Cyrano with his satirical genius and evenness of style, the latter might be more commonly read and referred to today.

Commenting upon the manner in which a great French playwright, Moliere, adapted material from Cyrano's play, *The Pedant Outwitted*, for the two best scenes of *Fourberies de Scapin*, Curtis Hidden Page concluded : "Real genius is finally, the essential thing, which Cyrano once more just missed attaining—missed just by the lack of that simplicity, perhaps. But exaggeration, sometimes carried to the burlesque, is the

essential trait which makes him what he is ; and we cannot wish it away."

It seems almost as if it were not genius which Cyrano lacked, but the discipline essential to its full germination. His emotional temperament combined with his fierce independence stood in the way.

He died at the age of 35, possibly as the result of injuries received from a beam dropped on his head by his enemies. During the latter years of his life, he was sustained by the patronage of Duc d'Arpajon, but lost favour when the heretical nature of the material in his play, *The Death of Agrippina*, became the scandal of Paris. Ailing from his 'accident,' he was cared for at the home of Regnault des Bois-Clairs, a friend of le Bret, where three sisters from a convent laboured ceaselessly to restore his faith in religion. They ultimately claimed success and de Bergerac was buried as a Christian.

To the world of science fiction Cyrano de Bergerac exercised a pioneering influence which preceded that of Jules Verne and H. G. Wells and the policies of Hugo Gernsback in the nineteen twenties.

The works and even the life of Cyrano de Bergerac might have been permanently relegated to scholarly obscurity had it not been for Edmond Rostand's play. Its first showing in 1897 created an instantaneous revival of interest. Not only did new editions of Cyrano's works appear in both France and England shortly thereafter but works of fiction such as *Captain Satan*, by Louis Gallet, based factually on the life of the great-nosed gallant, gained popular favour.

Through Rostand's play, the world added to its gallery of legendary heroes the heroically pathetic figure of Cyrano de Bergerac. Cyrano of the ready wit, the poetic phrase, the flashing sword, the titanic nose and the crushingly hopeless love. Audiences revel in the drama, never knowing that such a man truly lived and breathed. Never knowing the prophetic role he played in man's coming conquest of space.

His epitaph is simply and poetically framed beneath a 17th century engraving of an original portrait of Cyrano by Zacharie Heince :

*All weary with the earth too soon  
I took my flight into the skies,  
Beholding there the sun and moon  
Where now the Gods confront my eyes.*

—Sam Moskowitz

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