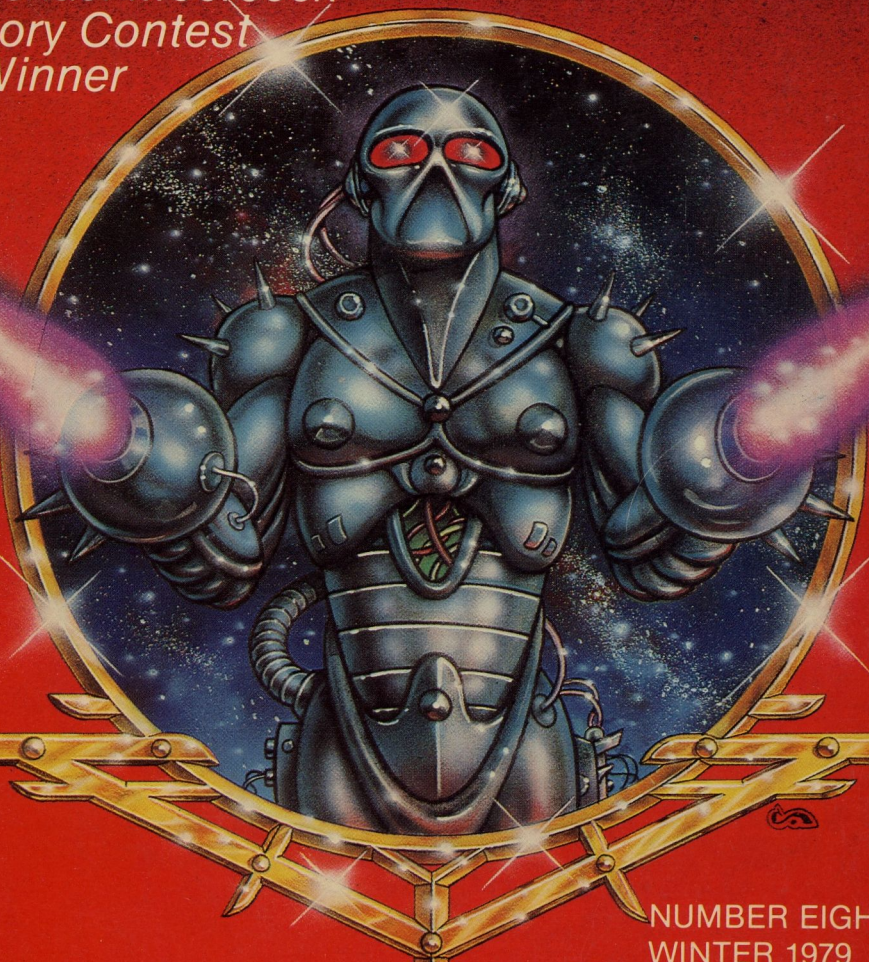


SECOND ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

UNEARTH

THE MAGAZINE OF SCIENCE FICTION DISCOVERIES

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Story Contest
Winner



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Put two big candles on the cake, *mon vieux*, and make sure every reader gets a nice, big slice. At long last we're celebrating *Unearth's* second anniversary of publication.

As you've no doubt noticed, this is our third issue of 1978. We're not happy about having had to skip an issue this year, but we can say with certainty that it won't happen again. In fact, we anticipate going bimonthly by the time our third anniversary rolls around. (This felicitous event is reflected, incidentally, in our new subscription rates, which are based on a minimum term of six issues.)

The new publishing schedule is just one of many changes that will be occurring here over the next twelve months. One of them, a cosmetic alteration, is already evident: the streamlined logo that heralds the other innovations to come. One of these is the *Unearth* Special, a regular department that will premiere in our next issue.

The Special represents the first time we will have offered original fiction by established writers. Ideally, these stories will be somewhat less conservative and traditional than current standard magazine fare; almost a dozen years after *Dangerous Visions*, formula and convention are still too often the rule.

The initial Special will be a Mich  el Moorcock story which has never before been published in the United States, and which we hope

EDITORIAL

Jonathan
Ostrowsky-
Lantz

will be the first of many contributions from him.

Returning to this issue, you will find the winning entry in the first category of our Story Contest. Judging this part posed a problem for us, in that we had committed ourselves to naming and publishing three winners. While several of the over fifty entries stood out from the rest, we finally concluded that only one was of sufficiently high quality to merit publication. Designating other stories as winners would, we felt, have compromised the standards we've set for *Unearth*.

Almost four times as many writers chose to submit story beginnings to be finished by Harlan Ellison. Seventy-five of these entries are still with Mr. Ellison, who will attend to the business of choosing winners as soon as his schedule permits.

On a less upbeat note, we're sorry to announce that the regular cover price of *Unearth* will have to be raised from \$1.25. This is dictated by several factors: sky-high postal rates, for one (the recent first-class increase was nothing compared to rate hikes in lower classes); higher paper prices (caused, at least in part, by strikes in Western paper mills); and regrettably, our own relatively small circulation. Because our press runs are still much smaller than those of other magazines in the field, we pay a much higher price to print

each issue.

Back issue prices have also gone up, due to heavy sales this year. Our stock — not large to begin with — is now very low; supply and demand dictates that we charge more for what issues are left to us.

(One of the fastest-selling issues, we're happy to report, has been #6 — the all-Clyde Caldwell art issue. As noted in our "Update" section, Clyde has become one of the most sought-after of all sf artists; you'll be seeing his exciting, distinctive work on dozens of major sf and fantasy books over the next few years, as well as on *Heavy Metal* covers, posters, and calendars.)

One administrative change should be noted: the *Unearth* office has moved across the river to the *real* Hub of the Universe, Cambridge. Our new mailing address is PO Box 779, Cambridge, MA 02139; telephone 617-876-0064.

With all this going on, you can count on one thing *not* changing: our commitment to work with new writers. Our goal all along has been to make their showplace — *Unearth* — one of the very best magazines in the field, in every way. We think we've come a long way toward meeting that challenge in our first two years, and we're looking forward to making giant strides toward it in 1979. Drop us a line, and let us know how you think we're doing. ●

Secrets: the death of an artist, a dying planet, the heart of a lover...

Kreutzer, Owen. b.7/4/2204
Sileni, Vistorn; d.5/9/2295
Paris, France, Earth. Developer
and leading exponent of psycho-
art, Kreutzer was perhaps the
most influential and innovative
artist of the twenty-third cen-
tury...

By 2230, however, he had
become dissatisfied with this
miniaturist representational

THE EARTHWORK

by Richard Bowker

work and with the then-current
styles. It was at this point he was
introduced to Desmond's work
in developing the technology of
controlled psychological trans-
formation, in which the illusion
of actual moods and sensations
could be produced in the subject
by stimulation of proper areas
of the brain. After two years of
intensive study and work with
Desmond, he became convinced
of the artistic possibilities of

psychological transformation. He also became convinced of his own ability to unite this new art-form with the established ones to produce artworks more powerful than any yet experienced. The result of these considerations was the famous Objective — Eclecticist Manifesto of 2233, in which he renounced his previous work and propounded a new artform, one which would combine “the wonders of science, the genius of the artist, and the spirit of the people” into one massive affirmation of life.

At its publication the Manifesto was widely derided as the product of an immature young man with delusions of grandeur. Then, in an astonishing series of artistic triumphs, Kreutzer demonstrated that the Manifesto was nothing less than a blueprint for the rest of his creative life.

His first commission was on Stagevo

— “Owen Kreutzer”
*The Faraday Encyclopedia
of Art (2342 Edition)*

I.

On the interstellar. Holodramas shown nightly on Level One, the Casino never closes (Monte Carlo Room, Level Four), Grandmothers’ Sherry Party at 14:00 in the Asteroid Room (bring picture cubes, prizes for the cutest)... What was I doing here? I kept asking myself, cursing my fate, and Martin Ngoma.

I brought a lot of work to do. I had my article on the Faraday Neo-Objectivist School to complete, my mass of lecture notes on Art and the Mind to decipher, a hundred letters to answer; but they just lay there in my room staring reproachfully at me as I frittered away the days trying to figure out just what it was that was bothering me so much.

Ngoma, of course. No one likes to be manipulated, and Ngoma is the master manipulator. I like the man, certainly, and our dealings in the past have always been mutually profitable, but still, his liquid brown eyes, his syrupy voice... “Ever been to Earth, Laurence?” — as soon as I had sunk deep enough into one of his plush chairs.

“No. And I have no wish to go.”

“Ah. And why not, Laurence?”

"No need to get into that. If the assignment involves going to Earth, Martin, I don't want it."

"Well, just hear me out. Please, Laurence."

Hear him out, I thought. That had been my mistake. Suddenly I had felt the entire weight of Galactic Communications Incorporated bearing down on me, and inside of half an hour I was once again in its employ.

Ngoma really wasn't the problem, though, just a symptom. Usually I don't mind very much being a well-paid puppet on his string. What I minded this time was going to Earth. My response to Ngoma's first question had been unthinking, instinctive; my attitude was already present and deeply felt. But why?

Pseudo-day followed pseudo-night. After a few too many inane dinner-table conversations I took my meals in my room. I sampled the ship's well-stocked library (it even contained one of my books). I spent more than the required time in the gravity conditioning program. Earth came ever closer, and my uneasiness grew. Why?

The tourists, of course. With their garish silver cloaks and their oversized diamonds stuck in and on every conceivable extremity and their complacent *nouveau riche* self-satisfaction. On Earth I would be one of them, in effect, and I would have to share the contempt they evoked.

But so what? I wouldn't be there more than a few days, would be dealing in a business capacity with a few natives and then returning immediately. I had enough self-esteem to tolerate a waiter's sneer.

I ran a couple of history books

through the viewer, and I thought: the poverty, the squalor, the crime. Who wants to see such things, to worry about them? Who wants to confront the dregs of once-proud Earth? And the revivalists: they didn't want us there, they wanted no part of our Galactic Federation. Who would want to be in a land they govern?

All right, but thousands of outworlders put up with such things every day in order to see Earth's ancient glories. Why should I be different?

Too many questions, too much time on my hands. Finally I gave in to temptation and called up my own book, just for the thrill of seeing it existing so far from home. I skimmed it with a contemptible feeling of satisfaction and then, suddenly, stopped, stared at the viewer, felt understanding flood me.

Kreutzer.

Kreutzer was the cause. Incredible *hubris*, and rather silly besides, but I knew it was true. Kreutzer was too large a part of my consciousness. When other people think of Earth, they think of their ancestors, or the poverty, or the political situation. I think: this is the planet that killed Kreutzer, that destroyed his masterpiece. So irrationally I wondered: would it destroy me as well?

Irrational. But I am not talking about reason. I began sitting in the observation room, watching the dot grow on the screen in the lulls between tachyon jumps (the dot was their sun, of course, but no matter). And I began to realize that it wasn't simply an unwillingness to visit the "mother planet" that I felt, but a kind of fear, not just fear of robbery and insults, but the vague, half-formed fear that a

child has for its brooding, unpredictable parent.

I should have stayed where I was, I thought. I have no wish to be punished.

* * *

Conditions on Earth paradoxically worsened as the outworld colonies started to grow and prosper. More and more of the best scientists and engineers emigrated with the prospect of better conditions and more satisfying challenges. The technostucture once again faltered and, in some areas, collapsed.

This problem was not resolved until the revivalists gained power in enough countries to force the United Nations to withdraw from the Galactic Federation. One of the first acts of the reconstituted U.N. was to forbid emigration. Unfortunately this action may have come too late to remedy the situation, and the withdrawal from the G.F. has brought further economic hardships. It remains to be seen whether the revivalists can keep Earth from total collapse without the aid and cooperation of the outworlds.

— “Earth: Post-colonization
Period”

The Galactic Encyclopedia

2.

We lumbered into the space station, finally, and I found my way to the shuttle for Paris. The planet outside filled my sight now as it filled my

mind, and its milky blue radiance was disquietingly lovely.

“Look at that,” someone behind me said. “Let’s get a holopic of that.”

Real flight, for a change: streaking through clouds, watching the details of the ground shift and enlarge and reach out to us. And soon we were there, setting foot on the soil that was all our ancestors ever knew.

What was different? I kept asking myself. Too much for easy cataloguing, but some things stood out. The bilingual signs at the spaceport, for instance. The revivalists couldn’t get by without standard English, but French was official here, and if we didn’t like it, we could take the next shuttle back. The size of the spaceport. Not much need for a bigger one, I suppose. The transit system — generation-old vehicles with broken windows and ripped seats, lurching noisily through amber-lighted tunnels, stopping interminably and inexplicably whenever we seemed to be making progress. Run by hand, someone told me. The computers were gone, and people needed the jobs.

The people. Sweeping the floors at the port, checking luggage at customs, sitting on the train. There was a certain grimness about them I guess I had expected. Many of the faces I saw were scarred and pock-marked with disease, their skin sagging, their teeth rotten. Even their clothes were grim — their tunics and trousers cut more severely than ours, the cloth coarser, the colors darker.

I had also expected the disdain, but experiencing it was still a shock. Behind the grimness was an almost palpable sense of superiority to us gaudy outworlders, which made me shiver even as I scoffed at it. They

didn't look me in the eye, but when by chance I met their gaze, the message was clear: "We are poor, but we are better. We suffer you here because we need to. We will not always need to."

I was exhausted by the time I reached my hotel. Luckily it catered to outworlders; its rooms were blandly modern, its staff rigidly formal. If they hated us, it was impossible to tell. I took a warm bath and rested for a while. When I awoke it was twilight; time, I figured, to start on my errand.

I took a taxi this time (with a human driver, who smilingly pretended ignorance of English). We communicated somehow, and made our way through crooked streets lined with ancient brick and stone buildings to my destination.

At first I thought there had been a mistake: the building was too small, too nondescript for GCI, which never had less than the best. Then it occurred to me: I was supposed to see their stringer here, which meant that this wasn't even their building. Paris wasn't important enough for GCI.

It turned out to be a congeries of offices: small magazine publishers, ad agencies, outworld networks. GCI's door was locked. I enquired at the next office, and a man with a thin mustache and a thick accent said the stringer was out, wait if you like, and tossed me the key.

I tried to imagine someone leaving the key for the GCI Faraday building with the fellow next door. Wasn't the same. What was? I let myself in, and waited.

It took only a few moments to exhaust the possibilities of the office. There was the usual equipment: a terminal, a viewer, a tach-transmitter.

The phone looked like an antique. A bulletin board was covered with press releases and messages scrawled in French. The desk was clear except for a small picture cube of a family sitting stiffly in front of what appeared to be a farmhouse. The father was burly and stern, the mother large but attractive, the children teenaged, uncomfortable-looking. Dull.

I sat back at the desk and closed my eyes, wishing I were back on Faraday. It all seemed so pointless, without Ngoma to provide the enthusiasm. I went over the meeting again, trying to rekindle some of that enthusiasm.

"Now Laurence, you are the Galaxy's greatest expert on Owen Kreutzer, are you not?"

"That's what the Faraday Encyclopedia people seem to think. You might get some disagreement."

He waves the disagreement away — too trivial for a man of his importance. "You are the person we must turn to then, as we have turned to you before."

"If you have another series planned, I'll be glad to advise, but I don't see what this has to do with Earth."

A reproachful look from his large, liquid brown eyes. "*Please* hear me out, Laurence." A small smile. He leans back. "Almost fifty standard years ago, Owen Kreutzer comes to Earth with his most challenging commission. 'Give us an Earth-work' the old U.N. asks. 'Help the outworlders understand us before it is too late, for them and for us.' But it is too late. The revivalists on Earth are incensed that an outworlder should be given such a commission. 'Why should *he* interpret

us?" they demand. "Isn't it enough that we must beg food from the outworlds? Now, it seems, we must beg our art from them as well." So Kreutzer works for years on the thing, and on the eve of its completion the building he is working in explodes, killing him and destroying all traces of the Earth-work. The revenge of the revivalists. In the ensuing chaos they manage to seize power on Earth. Am I accurate so far, Laurence?"

"We don't know what his widow has," I point out. "And it's never been proven that the revivalists set off the explosion. They never claimed they did."

"Yes, yes, but Diana Finesta isn't talking, and who else but the revivalists would blow up a building using dynamite? The point is, the Earth-work is Kreutzer's lost masterpiece, the stuff of which legends are made. The outworlds are fascinated by the Earth-work. And if they are, so is GCI."

"You're not telling me anything I don't already —"

He waves me silent. "Yes, all right. We are contacted recently by out stringer in Paris. Someone claims he has a preliminary version of the Earth-work. He wants to sell it to GCI."

I sigh. Is that all? "There are as many phony Earth-works floating around the Galaxy as there are wealthy art collectors. I could make a pretty good living just advising collectors not to buy them."

"But you don't."

"I have better things to do."

Ngoma smiles. "So have I. Frankly, GCI gets these offers rather frequently also."

"Then why haul me in on this one?"

The smile broadens. "Have you heard of Henri Plessier?"

"Of course. A French holographer. He worked with Kreutzer on the 3-D effects in the Earth-work. Died a couple of years ago."

"Yes. The seller is Plessier's son."

I consider, then dismiss the idea. "All the more reason to be skeptical. He's probably a second-rate artist who thinks he can make a score with his father's reputation. Oh, he may have his father's memories or a few notes to base the thing on. But he hasn't got the real thing. We'd have heard of it by now."

"Perhaps. But here is something else. He will only hand his Earth-work over to you. He wants to be sure it's properly taken care of and so on, and he says you are the only person he would trust. So we can only get it if we hire you."

I laugh. "A pretty meaningless condition. If he has any brains he knows you'll hire me anyway. He knows he has to get it past me, so why not get credit for demanding that I inspect it?"

Ngoma spreads his hands, palms up, on his desk, and grins, yielding my point, all my points. "It is an investment, Laurence. We send you to Earth. If it is a fake, we lose our investment. If you authenticate it, we win."

"But what do you win?" I persist, exasperated. "If it's the real thing, then I'm sure it belongs to Kreutzer's widow. You'd never be able to display it or transmit it. What's the point?"

His brown eyes twinkle, his tone is at its sweetest. "Laurence. Suppose the thing is genuine. Suppose a certain prominent art critic who has written

glowingly of Kreutzer's work should bring it to his widow, who has lived all these years in seclusion, with probably only the memory of her husband's masterpiece as solace. Suppose you were to say to her, 'Madame Finesta, Galactic Communications Incorporated gladly — humbly — presents you with this preliminary version of the Earth-work, saved only by chance from the tragic explosion which killed your husband.' And after she has expressed her gratitude, suppose you were to say, 'You know, it's a shame that the outworlds — and also the people of Earth — have never had a chance to experience this masterpiece. Perhaps you would consider, through the facilities of — ' "

I feel myself falling under his spell, but have enough strength left to object. "She'd never allow you to make a profit from it. And besides, it undoubtedly uses psychological transformation sequences, which would make telecast ludicrous."

"Oh, perhaps, but that hardly exhausts the possibilities, you see. You ask her for an interview. She feels an obligation to us, and reluctantly agrees, although she hasn't spoken to a reporter in half a century. Finesta speaks! We schedule it for the fiftieth anniversary of Kreutzer's death. We cancel all regular programs on all the worlds. First a rehash of his remarkable life and mysterious death, then your respectful but probing interview with his widow, then a presentation of all his works that have been licensed for omnisensual holographic transmission. It's an investment, Laurence. But you are the key. You are the person we need."

I can think of nothing to say. He

reaches into his desk drawer and takes out an envelope, which he slides across to me. "Contents," he intones. "One roundtrip ticket to Earth, return via Kepler. One certified check made out for five hundred thousand French francs to Yves Plessier. I have no idea how much that is in real money. One check made out to Laurence Mallory. No amount has been entered. Fill it out after the trip and notify our accounting department. The interstellar leaves day after tomorrow. Report to the Paris GCI office, 12 Boulevard St. Germain, and make arrangements with the stringer to meet Plessier. Any questions, Laurence?"

Plenty, but they hadn't occurred to me till after the handshake, and then I was committed to the awful trip, to the godforsaken planet. The only revenge, I decided, was to sock GCI for plenty when I got back. I smiled at the thought, and opened my eyes. And blinked.

No dream. Hair the color of a Van Gogh wheatfield. Eyes the deep violet of a Faraday twilight. Slim but delightful body whose shape the severe business suit couldn't mask.

I looked for the Earth attitude behind the beauty, for the grimness and the disdain. It was important to me, because my first glance had made breathing difficult, and I had to know if I could know her, or if, instead, I faced indifference, superciliousness, strictly business, thank you very much.

Impossible to say. There was nothing as blatant as the transit riders' sneers. But I felt something, I think, in that first moment, an indefinable distance, a gap that would have to be

leaped blindly. I had already started to fall.

At any rate, I had begun in a poor position. Who knows how long she had been staring at me, mulling over the strength of my chin, the few gray hairs starting to fleck my sideburns? She was in control as I struggled to breathe. "Professor Mallory, perhaps?" Soft timbre, trace of an accent.

"Yes, hello, the man next door —"

"Yes of course. My name is Danielle Goncourt. I am the Paris stringer for GCI."

She walked across the room and I arose. Her hand was cold, dry, and strong. She stared me frankly in the eyes. "Call me Laurence," I said. "Not much activity here for GCI, it seems," I added stupidly.

She nodded and gestured for me to sit. She leaned casually against the tach-transmitter. "Not much goes on in Paris of interest to the outworlds any more. Until now, perhaps."

"You are the one who's spoken with Plessier?"

"That is right."

"What's your opinion of him?"

She paused to consider. "I have only spoken to him over the phone," she replied carefully, "but I like him. He may be mistaken, but I don't think he is trying to deceive us."

My interest in the job picked up a notch, for no good reason. She liked him. He must be someone special. Absurd. And absurdly, I was jealous of him. "Martin Ngoma said you'd take care of getting me to see whatever Plessier has."

"Yes of course." And then a sudden delightful burst of girlish enthusiasm. "It is so amazing to meet someone who

actually knows Martin Ngoma. To us so far away he seems so—so ... ethereal?"

The word was offered tentatively. I nodded my acceptance of it, though it wasn't the one I would have chosen. "He is certainly somewhat larger than life, even to people who know him."

A pause, then quickly back to business. "Plessier lives in a village about a hundred kilometers south of here. I told him you would be out to see him tomorrow. I will drive you. We could go tonight, I suppose, but it is rather dangerous to travel outside the city after dark."

I had a vision of being set upon by crazed, starving peasants — a vision perhaps not too far from the truth. "Tomorrow will be fine."

"Good. Let me call and confirm it with Plessier." She reached over for the old-fashioned phone next to me. It took her a couple of minutes and a couple of tries to make the connection, and then a grainy black and white image appeared on the small screen. Despite the poor quality I was surprised by what I saw. Plessier was older than I had expected, and looked more like a farmer than an artist: short hair, sleepy eyes, stolid, unexpressive face. I instinctively agreed with Danielle's judgment. He didn't look like an art forger.

The two of them spoke rapidly together in French for a few moments. Danielle seemed to be noting down directions. Then she looked over at me. "He would like to speak with you," she said.

I leaned in front of the screen. "I wish to thank you for coming to Earth to see me, Professor Mallory," he said haltingly in English. "My father

spoke very highly of your work on Kreutzer."

"Well, thank you. I look forward to our meeting with interest."

"You will not be disappointed, sir. I promise you."

"That's very good to know."

We stared at each other awkwardly for a moment, then Danielle murmured in French to him again and the connection was broken.

It is settled, then," she said to me. "Tomorrow you view the Earth-work."

"Very good. Suddenly I'm rather excited. I've seen many fake Earth-works in my time. Perhaps tomorrow it will be different."

"Let us hope so."

We discussed travel arrangements briefly, and then it was our turn to stare awkwardly at one another. Business had been completed, thank you very much. Anything more would require an effort. My effort. I don't like the risk of rejection in such matters, but gazing at her I realized I had no choice.

...His first commission was on Stagevo. It was very simple compared to his later work: a large rainbow arch of beautifully blended Stagevine materials. As one passes beneath the arch there is a sudden sense of unease, followed quickly by a pure, intense feeling of liberation. This was the first use of psychological transformation in art, and in its limited way it was completely successful. Critics admired the clarity of the emotions and the meaningful way in which they were integrated into the complete artwork. Native

Stagevines were moved by what they felt was a profound statement about themselves and their planet.

Similar comments could be made about all his succeeding works. Kreutzer maintained a level of both critical and popular acclaim perhaps unequaled in the history of art.

The critical acclaim came for obvious reasons. Kreutzer was a consummate craftsman. Every detail of his works was uncompromisingly perfect, even in the complex technical designs of his middle period. While some critics continued to feel that psychological transformation was gratuitous and unartistic, most were quickly converted to the belief that Kreutzer had simply expanded our perception of what is artistic.

The popular acclaim resulted in part from Kreutzer's feeling, expressed in the Manifesto, that the artist should "take meaning from the people, transform it, and transmit it back to the people." More directly it resulted from Kreutzer's own psychological make-up. Like most artists he scored above average (although not outstandingly high) on the psi scale. But his psychic ability was of a unique kind. He had the ability to perceive, intuitively but clearly, the collective urges, preoccupations, and symbols of a particular planet or race. (That such collective psychological traits are real and meaningful was proven by the work of Arthur

Carlsen, q.v.) Kreutzer's ability to "transform and transmit" this unique collective unconscious of a particular group ensured their enthusiastic response to his creation. An example is the Chang-work of 2264. . .

As Kreutzer grew older he began to concentrate more on the psychological aspects. Some people found this disturbing, but Kreutzer maintained it was a natural development of his style. In the eighties he began creating purely sequential works of psychoart which have become recognized as among his finest achievements. . .

Kreutzer's acceptance, in 2293, of a commission offered by the United Nations of Earth, was an event of interplanetary significance, both artistically and politically. It was also an act of considerable personal courage for a man nearing ninety, since the commission provoked bitter and often violent criticism from isolationist groups on Earth.

Unfortunately his courage was ill-advised, since a bomb, presumably planted by one of these groups, killed him and destroyed his Earth-work on the eve of its completion. It was an ironic end for a man who had spent his life apart from politics, striving to understand and to produce art for all of humanity. . .

— "Owen Kreutzer"

*The Faraday Encyclopedia
of Art*

"You know, I have never been to Earth before," I said. "I wonder if I

could take you out to dinner and find out more about Earth, and Paris. And you."

The last just slipped out. I could feel myself flushing. Her violet eyes remained distant, impenetrable. "I do have an assignment," she said guardedly. "I work free-lance for local magazines in addition to GCI. The government is rebuilding Les Halles — a market district, gone for centuries. I'm supposed to —"

I was too eager, she was too alien. I couldn't interpret the signals she was sending. "There's a story here too," I broke in. "First visit of famed art critic to Paris. An exclusive."

Her eyes turned icy. "If I go with you, it will be because I want to," she said evenly.

My flush deepened. "I'm sorry," I replied. "Please come." And I could think of nothing else to add.

We were silent, and for the first time I thought I could spot something going on beneath her composed surface — a hint of conflict, worry, uncertainty; much more, too complicated for me to make out. Then she smiled, and let me breathe. "Let us go then, famed art critic. It will be an exclusive for me alone."

* * *

3.

So I discovered the glories of Earth cuisine and Earth wine, neither of which, it seems, is transportable through the rigors of hyperspace. We dined in a little restaurant with red checkered tablecloths and casually dressed waiters. I let Danielle order for me, and just enjoyed.

The meal was wonderful, but the

conversation with Danielle was somewhat less satisfying. I wanted to know her, to understand all about her; she seemed to want to talk about anything but herself. I got a complete history of Paris from ancient times, an analysis of the current Earth governments, a great deal of information about wine and vegetables, but only a few grudging facts about her.

Looking back on it, I think I understand how ill-at-ease she must have been, how hard my questions were to answer. At the time, though, she seemed totally in control of our nascent relationship, and her obvious attempts to keep the conversation superficial were frustrating and depressing.

"Was that a picture of your family I noticed on your desk?" I asked her.

Pause. "They are . . . people I know."

"Does your family live in Paris?"

Pause. "No." And then a paragraph on population shifts in France.

"Have you lived in Paris long?"

"Oh, several years."

"Do you like it?"

"There are worse places on Earth, I am sure. The food certainly is good."

Finally I felt silly and embarrassed and gave it up. And as the evening wore on and the bottles emptied (thanks mainly to my efforts), I found myself talking more and more about *me*, as if the dreary facts of my own existence could somehow light a spark in her. Perhaps they did; more than one woman has been impressed by the places I have been, the people I have known. Certainly Danielle perked up considerably while I had the spotlight. But I left the restaurant feeling dissatisfied — and dizzy. This wasn't what I had in mind at all.

The cold night air staggered me a bit, and my dissatisfaction became acute. Is this what Earth did to people, tempted them and denied them, took their thoughts away and left them groping in the dark for their sanity and their happiness? I thought of Kreutzer and what Earth had done to him, and again the nameless fear came over me. Give it a name, my drunken brain suggested, confront the fear.

I looked at Danielle. "Can you take me to where Kreutzer died?" I asked her.

"There is not much to see."

"Still. Please."

She hesitated for a moment, then signaled for a taxi.

We got out at a broad plaza marred by a hideous oversized tower. "The Tour Eiffel," Danielle said, leaning back to view its top.

"Kreutzer worked next to that monstrosity?" I asked incredulously.

"Actually, no. It was put up by the revivalists after Kreutzer's death. It is a copy, you see. The original was destroyed in the Revolution of 2089. Another example of the greatness of our past."

"Do you really think that thing is great?"

She shrugged. "I am no art critic. It is a symbol. A cultural symbol. That is its value."

She hadn't answered my question, of course, but I had gotten used to that. I merely nodded and began walking purposelessly around the plaza. Danielle was right, there was not much to see. No stone, no plaque, no sign to tell you: here stood the nondescript building, here the dynamite was placed, here was the rubble, and the cinders, and the charred remains. Here

marks the end of the fragile alliance between Earth and its children.

I picked a spot, and imagined the building there. Imagined Kreutzer shuffling through the rooms stuffed with drawings and notes and equipment, his bright blue eyes alive with some new insight, gesturing impatiently for his wife to come and help him capture it before it fades . . . "What is greater than a life in art?" he asked once. And I suddenly remembered my solemn awe as my parents brought me forward to experience the Chang-work. "Bit young, don't you think?" "May not mean much to you now, son, but someday . . ." Trembling too much to listen, visions and colors and half-understood feelings whirling in my mind, nodding absently, knowing I had found my life . . .

But Kreutzer was gone now. He had stood here once, but now the revivalists were in power and feeble, enervated Earth went its way alone. Only Kreutzer could have shown Earth the good in the new, the outworlds the good in the old. But he was gone now. A tower stood in his place.

Angry, I whirled to look for Danielle. She stood a few meters behind me, waiting patiently. I gazed at her, and my anger turned to puzzlement and longing. "Why?" I asked her. "Why are you afraid to tell me who you are?"

She smiled, but I could see quite clearly that she was troubled. "I'm not afraid of anything, Laurence."

"Is it because I'm an outworlder?"

"We are all humans. There is no difference."

We gazed at each other, in the darkness, in the long shadow of the tower, and we both knew that this was not

true, and that the gap remained between us.

I remember little of the rest of the evening. We walked, and talked about wheat production and such matters, and the wine surged through my blood. We stood on an ancient bridge, I recall, and looked down at the river (whose name I never learned) flowing beneath us. And I tried to imagine the countless generations who had lived by this river, generations who had never dreamed of Faraday, or Chang, or Kepler, who were as dead and gone now as Kreutzer — more so, because no matter how hard the revivalists tried, they couldn't erect monuments for them that would equal what Kreutzer had erected for himself. I remember almost pitching forward into the cold, swirling waters, and Danielle holding onto my arm, pulling me back to reality. Back to my hotel.

I had wanted other things, but I didn't have the strength to fight my destiny. Danielle deposited me in my room, and the next thing I knew it was daylight and she had returned to drive me to Plessier.

* * *

Plessier, Henri. b. 9/4/2260 Remy, France, Earth; d. 1/18/2340 Remy. French holographer, noted for his exquisite omnisensual nature studies in the miniaturist tradition. His best work dates from the 80s and 90s, when he was a leading member of the French school of holography. Plessier worked with Owen Kreutzer (q.v.) on his Earth-work in 2294-95. After Kreutzer's death Plessier pro-

duced comparatively little. This was influenced by a feeling of depression brought on by Kreutzer's death and the political situation on Earth. A more immediate cause, however, was the lack of sophisticated technical equipment and material caused by Earth's secession from the Galactic Federation. In 2307 Plessier retired to his native village in the south of France, and lived there quietly until his death.

— "Henri Plessier"

*The Faraday Encyclopedia
of Art*

4.

Another trip, this one bumpier but more scenic than my journey across the Galaxy. The ancient rented jetcar was hardly an ideal means of transportation, and my stomach was not in the best possible condition, but still I enjoyed the ride.

Mostly this was because of Danielle. Daylight seemed to have wrought a change in her. Perhaps she had done some thinking the night before; perhaps my drunken behavior had somehow charmed her. Perhaps it had simply been an artificial attitude which she found difficult to maintain. At any rate she was perceptibly more open about herself and her opinions. Her clothing had also changed, along with her attitude — the subdued business suit of the day before had given way to free-flowing pants and a low-cut blouse. So I looked and listened with delight as she drove and chatted and let slip a few facts about herself.

She was twenty-four, she told me, and had grown up on a farm in the

north. (I wondered again about the picture on her desk, but didn't ask.) She had won a scholarship to the University and had worked for a variety of publications since graduation. It was a tough, demanding existence. "Only an outfit like GCI can afford to pay well, and they haven't enough interest in Paris to hire anyone full time. But I do all right. Better than ninety percent of Parisians."

"Have you thought of trying a different occupation?"

She studied the road for a moment. "They have asked me, you know, for modeling and so on. But I have refused."

"Why?"

She sighed, and I thought I detected pain in her sigh. "I don't know. I'm just stupid, I guess." And then she seemed to withdraw into herself until she turned down a narrow rutted lane and came to a stop. "This is Plessier's, I think," she said, and my thoughts turned to the job that had brought me here.

It was a small stone farmhouse. Smoke curled from the chimney into the dazzling blue sky. There was a vegetable garden to one side, and yellow flowers (nameless to an outworlder) lined the front walk. Children in pigtailed and overalls were playing on the lawn. "Picturesque," I murmured.

Danielle said nothing.

The children stopped their playing when they spied us. One of them ran headlong into the house and returned with Plessier and his wife.

Plessier looked even more like a peasant in person than he had over the phone. I hadn't seen his brawny physique, of course, and only received a

hint of his stolid demeanor on the tiny screen. His wife was thin and small, by contrast, and fidgeted nervously.

"I am Danielle Goncourt, and this is Professor Laurence Mallory," Danielle said slowly, in English, as we met them on the front walk.

Plessier nodded and silently reached out to shake my hand. "We are honored to have you here," his wife said, her hands moving impulsively to her hair and over her faded dress. Her English was much better than her husband's. "Won't you come inside?"

"We would be delighted," I replied.

The interior was rather unusual. The furniture seemed quite old and drably utilitarian. A lot of it had the look of poor people making do. The power system was obviously ancient, product of a bygone (and gladly forgotten) era. The house as a whole had a pleasant, lived-in atmosphere, if one could get past the depressing feeling that life was a struggle for this family.

But here was the oddity: on a rough-hewn sidetable stood a marvelous Sandman miniaturist grouping; next to the worn-out imitation-leather chair was a Kandiffe light-sculpture; on the mantel over the fireplace was a single, exquisite Plessier rose.

"You have your father's collection?" I asked Plessier.

He nodded. "Some of it. They are very nice, yes?"

"Very nice indeed. You are fortunate to possess such beauty."

He kept nodding. I got the impression that he didn't know or care much about art, and he was proud of these works just because they were part of his family. Or perhaps it was just his difficulty with the language. He exchanged a few quick sentences with his

wife, whose hands fluttered with a life of their own. Then his wife turned to me. "We would be honored if you would look upon another work before you view Kreutzer's masterpiece."

"Of course. That would be fine."

They led the way towards the rear of the house. I looked over at Danielle to make sure she was coming. She was still gazing around her at the strange room; her eyes were troubled. Something was bothering her, but I didn't have time to find out what. I grabbed her hand and pulled her along with me.

We went past the kitchen to a large room that was clearly an addition to the main house. It was empty now, but the modern power system and the glass ceiling showed that this had been the elder Plessier's studio. The wife took out a key and unlocked what appeared to be a closet door, and we were staring at a small but serviceable view-chamber.

"Please go in," Plessier said. There was just enough room for Danielle and me. We sat down. Plessier reached inside and inserted a cassette in the slot by the door. He flipped a couple of switches, and I felt the hum of the machinery that always quickened my pulse. The door closed. The room darkened. Then the center of it glowed, dimmed, and clarified.

It was a 3-D portrait of a woman, naked, thirtyish, red hair cascading over white shoulders. She was in the act of walking towards us, her hand outstretched, her eyes alive with joy and satisfaction. Behind her was darkness except for a rectangle of yellow light through an open door. It was several moments before I could take my eyes off the woman long enough to

take notice of our side of the scene: an open window behind us, gray predawn light, a slight breeze, rustle of leaves, solitary chirping of a far-off bird. Beneath us, around us, an unmade bed waiting for the woman.

It was miniaturist but more: the apotheosis of miniaturism. Capture the essence of one thing, one moment — a rose, a smile, an instant of loving — and the larger truths will take care of themselves. The artist, waking up, sees this woman walking towards him, from the bathroom, I suppose. She gestures, smiles, filled with their love-making and their love. He too is filled with them — and with the desire to recreate, to immortalize her and them. He has succeeded.

The door behind us opened and the picture faded. "My mother," Plessier said. "Five years ago she died." I looked at Danielle. She too was deeply moved.

"This is a masterpiece," I said.

Plessier nodded.

"Why has it never been displayed?"

He looked behind him to his wife for help, then decided to try to answer himself. "My father did not want to show it. It was very . . . personal to him."

"I understand," I murmured. "Thank you for showing it to us."

Plessier smiled. He was pleased.

We were all silent for a moment, still wrapped up in our experience. Finally Plessier asked, "Would you like to see the Earth-work now?"

Simple words, but they almost overwhelmed me. This man was no con artist. How could it not be the real thing? Ever since I had known about Kreutzer the destruction of the Earth-work had been a personal loss, like the

death of a brother before you had a chance to know him. Now I was about to experience it. "Certainly," I replied.

"You will need headsets. Let me put them in."

Headsets meant psychoart, transmitted by cassette. Not quite "real" psychoart, but close enough. Plessier attached two of them to the control panel by the door. His hands were fast and sure for a big man — a gift from his father, undoubtedly. When he had finished he signaled to his wife and took his place in the doorway. She was holding a cassette. "This is a recording of almost the final version of Owen Kreutzer's Earth-work," she declared. "The changes made after this were small, according to Yves' father. So you see, this will be what Kreutzer intended."

"How," I asked her, "did Monsieur Plessier manage to get this cassette? Kreutzer kept strict secrecy in his projects."

She relayed the question to Plessier in French. It appeared to make her apprehensive. "It seems that he stole it," she replied, translating her husband's words. "Kreutzer was old and couldn't enforce his rules. But Henri Plessier was an honest man. He would not have stolen it unless he had to."

"I don't understand. Why did he have to steal it?"

She relayed the question and answer as before. She seemed to be on the verge of tears. Did she think I would arrest her? "We do not know," she replied. "This is what he said to Yves: 'I would not have stolen it unless I had to.' That is all he would say."

I shrugged and gave it up. I was an art critic, not a detective. My job was

to judge what they had, not how they had gotten it. I reached for the headsets and passed one to Danielle. "It is sequential," the wife said, making the word sound very foreign. "It lasts about fifteen minutes."

We put our headsets on, she inserted the cassette, and it began.

Sudden utter darkness, stretching on for minutes. I am cold, perplexed, uncertain, afraid. There is a dot now visible. It grows, becomes a blue and white beacon in the night. My heart lifts, the coldness turns slowly to warmth, but the uncertainty remains. The beacon grows, and there is speed — a beautiful sensation as the planet and I rush together. It is — we are — a blur. I am excited. And afraid.

The blur clarifies, clarifies, almost-recognizable shapes shift and fade, it is all around me but far away, I reach out for it — and it is a river.

I am part of the river, cold, wet, flowing headlong. I am apprehensive but not uncomfortable. Where am I flowing to? I want to know. But there are no answers. It is dark in the water, and I am assaulted by smells, sounds, sensations that I can't understand. They are overpowering, and terribly alien. Drums pounding rhythmically, threateningly. A saw remorselessly cutting through a dead tree — the smell of rotten wood, the quick glimpse of maggots. Two men arguing in a strange language (through the darkness the glint of a knife). The scream of an unfed baby, the choked sobs of parting lovers, firelight flickering and fading . . .

The assault on my senses eventually diminishes, the river slows and stops, and I am alone in wet darkness. The

fear remains. Ages go by. I begin to feel very old. My hands tremble, my bones ache, my memories become confused, then disappear altogether, leaving me nothing but the unbearable weight of my senility. I cannot breathe.

Slowly the darkness lifts. I am sitting on the ground, in the plaza I visited last night. There is no tower. A bird squawks past, in the distance street vendors cry in their native tongue. I am old and totally alone, stripped of everything but my perplexity, and my fear

The scene dissolved. There was light, and Plessier was standing in the doorway. I took off my headset and handed it to him. I turned to Danielle. She was still staring dully into the emptiness in front of her. I gently removed her headset. "It's over," I whispered.

She shivered and looked at me. "It doesn't seem . . ." she began, then stopped and tried again. "Was that it, Laurence? The Earth-work?"

I hesitated, knowing that, although the answer was obvious, it was an answer that entailed certain consequences which had to be thought through. But I could feel Plessier's eyes on me, and I realized that those consequences were my problem, not his. I would have to consider them later. "Yes, that was the Earth-work, of course," I said, and I reached into my wallet for the check.

My stomach was in no mood for it, but I couldn't refuse to stay for lunch and help them celebrate their new-found wealth. My stomach soon stopped complaining, however: the

food was delicious.

For a meal of celebration, no one seemed particularly happy. Plessier and his wife looked more relieved than anything else. Danielle seemed distracted, apprehensive. And I — I was still traveling down the river, still sitting, old and alone, on the plaza, still perplexed.

Danielle, the reporter, finally asked the obvious question. "What are you going to do with all that money, Monsieur Plessier?"

The couple exchanged glances. "You will not write about any of this, will you?" the wife asked.

"Not at all. It is strictly secret."

Another glance, then Plessier shrugged expressively. "We are leaving," he said.

"France?"

"Earth."

There was a pause. "Earth," Danielle repeated softly, as if judging whether the word sounded different on her own lips. "How?"

"Anything can be done with money," the wife explained. "People can be bribed. We get business visas, and simply do not return. The out-worlds will let us stay. They want people like us. It is done all the time."

"But why do you want to leave?" I asked. "Your life here seems —"

"Our life here is over," she interrupted emphatically. "All we can do here is farm or work for the tourists, and neither is enough to keep our family alive."

"But your home is so pleasant."

"It is pleasant because Henri Plessier was a great artist, and had friends who were great artists. We have lived by selling off their work. We do not want our children to live like that."

Plessier touched his wife's arm consolingly. "I have no talent," he said to us. "I can work hard, that is all. But that is not enough, in this place. I would like to stay, but . . ."

"I understand," I said, although we all knew that I didn't, I couldn't, because I was an alien, and the gap was light-years wide between us. Danielle's head was turned away from me. Her cheek was wet. "Where will you go?" I asked Plessier.

"Where we can. To Faraday, I hope. My father had friends at the Art Institute."

I nodded. "I'm also at the Art Institute. Look me up when you arrive. I'll give you whatever help I can."

"You are very kind."

Nothing was said for a while, until two grimy children rushed in, squabbling over the rights to a toy. By the time the dispute had been adjudicated Danielle's cheek was dry, and the conversation shifted to less painful subjects. It was early afternoon before we departed for Paris with the cassette.

* * *

After the storm created by his Manifesto, Kreutzer grew to mistrust words. They were not his medium, and they often seemed to give him difficulty. This difficulty becomes a difficulty for the art historian who strives to understand and interpret his work. What are we to make of his definitions of art, for example? From the Manifesto on this definition seemed

to be infinitely malleable, changing every time he considered the subject. Was his thinking fuzzy, or his means of expression inadequate, or can a progression, a development be discerned? When we examine these varying definitions chronologically we find, I believe, a gradual lessening of dogmatism, a widening of his understanding of what constitutes art — even as, paradoxically, his own work narrowed in its methods. We can also find some bedrock principles that do not change, no matter how variously they are applied

Now let us consider Kreutzer's last, puzzling definition. "Oh, life is art," Kreutzer said in an interview before leaving for Earth. "The hardest kind of art, too, because you have so little control over the materials. Look at the people whose lives inspire us today — Buddha, Socrates, Jesus, Lincoln, Gustavson. They worked hard for what they achieved, and what they achieved was a life full of beauty and human significance. Isn't that art, as much as light patterns or daubs on a canvas?"

Beauty and significance, as ever, are part of his thinking. But now he has pushed these terms totally out of the areas of human endeavor typically associated with art. Now he suggests that art may somehow be created unconsciously as a byproduct of an entirely different process. This is, of course, an almost inevitable conclusion, given his

previous definitions. If beauty and significance exist, then art exists, regardless of how they have come into being

— Laurence Mallory
"Kreutzer's Definitions of Art"
The Faraday Art Journal

5.

Back to Paris: silent for most of the trip, both of us preoccupied, ill-at-ease. My thoughts whirled from Plessier to Danielle to Kreutzer then around again. How bad must things be on Earth if Plessier and his family wanted to leave? What had happened to Danielle at the farmhouse? Why had her icy self-possession turned into tearful vulnerability? It hadn't just been the pathos of the family forced to leave its home in order to survive. It had begun before she knew about that. Why? And why had Kreutzer, the greatest artist of his age . . . but no, I didn't want to think about that yet, and my mind made its way back to Plessier, and the forlorn expression on his sturdy features when he said goodbye, we will meet again, on another world

Danielle was the first to speak, bringing up the topic I still wasn't ready for. "What did you think of it, Laurence?"

"What?"

"The Earth-work, of course. It was not at all what I had expected."

"I was surprised by it too."

"Then how did you know it was Kreutzer's?"

I considered. "Well actually, being so unexpected was in its favor. A forger would never try anything so daring. Mostly, though, because there

were so many typical Kreutzer touches: the burst of speed near the beginning, for example, and the sensation of being part of an inanimate object like a river. And the experience of aging and being old — that was new to me, but it was too brilliantly done for anyone but Kreutzer to have accomplished it. The layering of emotions, the physical details, the illusion of time passing . . . marvelous.”

“What was unexpected then?” she persisted, like a good reporter.

And, like a good reporter, she was zeroing in on the puzzle. “It was different,” I began awkwardly. “Unlike anything else he did. It was totally *subjective*, do you see? It wasn’t about Earth but about his response to Earth. After a lifetime of subordinating his emotions and responses to the artwork, his emotions and responses *are* the artwork. Do you see?”

Danielle nodded tentatively. “I have heard that a native always responds to one of his works more deeply than an outsider. But I didn’t really . . .”

“Yes, precisely. It was a different kind of expression from Kreutzer. A change of style. For me it was as if, oh, we discovered a lost Raphael that was done in pointillism.”

“Why do you think he did it that way?”

I stared out at the passing landscape. “That must have been what he experienced, what moved him,” I replied softly. “I don’t really know. I have to think about it.”

“But it doesn’t matter, I suppose,” Danielle reflected. “What matters is that we have another masterpiece.”

“Yes, well, there it was. “opinions will differ,” I replied slowly, “but I have my own. It’s not a masterpiece,

Danielle. I don’t even think it’s very good art.”

She was, of course, shocked. “But you said — the aging sequence and so on.”

“I know, I know. It’s obviously the work of a superlative technician. But the whole is different from the sum of its parts; sometimes it’s less. This whole seemed to me, oh, rather trivial. Approach the planet, experience, be old, alone, afraid. There’s just not enough in it, no sense of interaction between his persona and the planet to give meaning to the emotions, no sense of development in the river sequence to justify the ending. It was all very disjointed, as if he just couldn’t make all his insights come together, couldn’t make art out of them.

“Really, you know, he’s working in the miniaturist tradition with this piece, and I can’t help comparing it with Plessier’s portrait. It just seems so forced, so overblown after gazing at that beautiful red-haired woman. He failed, that’s about all I can say. Whatever he had in mind, it didn’t work.”

“I wonder what happened,” Danielle said after a while. I wondered too. We rode on in silence.

I tried to think of practical matters. I would have to contact Ngoma. I would have to confirm my return reservation for the next day. I would have to figure out how to approach Kreutzer’s widow on Kepler. And how would I interview her, what would I say? I would have to pack. I would have to say goodbye to Danielle.

Would that make any difference to her, I wondered? Had anything happened in the hours we had spent together? I knew, certainly, that some-

thing had happened to me, because the idea of saying goodbye to her filled me with the aching sadness of lost possibilities. But had there ever been any possibilities?

I longed to ask her for one. I was willing to beg her for one. But I was afraid to, afraid that the act of asking would make her withdraw behind that cool facade. It was up to her this time, I felt. Let her make the move, or I will simply let the chimera fade.

We jounced along. Eventually the towers of Paris loomed in front of us. Traffic was heavier, and Danielle's hands showed white on the wheel. I was tired and lonely and upset.

"Laurence," Danielle said hesitantly, her eyes fixed on the road. "Would you like to see my favorite place in Paris? I think you will like it too."

Her voice trembled slightly. Did she somehow fear rejection too? Or was it the effort it cost her to make the move?

No matter. I was going, whatever the place was.

* * *

At the Louvre. I walk down endless dark corridors with high gilded ceilings. A sense of unease settles upon me, and deepens with every turn, every new vista of ancient masterpieces. There is too much here, my senses are overloaded, I cannot respond. I glance to my left, and there is the Houdon bust of Diderot; I enter a gallery the wrong way, turn casually, and find myself staring at the Venus di Milo; in a shadowy corner of a shadowy room I spot

a Delacroix, a copy of which hung in my room at the university

It fails every reasonable test of a good museum. Yet, unreasonably, I am moved, not only by its art but by its reality. A simulator can reproduce the Houdon bust perfectly, let me touch it, study it under the best possible conditions; but *this* is the terra cotta that Houdon himself worked with, *this* is the real thing. Of course I am aware of Granesci's dictum, that the work of art exists independent of the act of creation. But my emotions are not interested in Granesci, and I am moved

— Laurence Mallory

"Outworlder at the Louvre"

6. *Galactic Art*

The article I wrote about my visit to the Louvre was falsified, of course, a selection from the facts.

The facts it ignored, obviously, were no business of the readers of *Galactic Art*. Life is art, Kreutzer said, and during that visit I was more interested in the artwork that was Danielle Goncourt than in anything else I saw. The painting is just another file card in my memory, for example, but how vividly I can recall looking at Danielle looking at Mantegna's "Saint Sebastian", her eyes wide with something between admiration and disgust, her body leaning tensely forward, as if anticipating that at any moment the arrows would be aimed at her. . . . That memory is an exclusive for me alone.

We had stopped off at the GCI office, where Danielle picked up her messages and I beamed one to Ngoma,

telling him that GCI was now poorer by half a million francs and richer by one cassette. Then we dropped off the jetcar and headed on foot to her "favorite place."

Inside the massive old palace she was suddenly as relaxed as I had seen her. I trailed her through the long corridors as she happily pointed out her favorite works — a collection, incidentally, totally lacking in artistic discrimination, but redeemed, in my eyes at least, by her enthusiasm and affection. "I know nothing about art," she admitted, "but some things strike my eye, or remind me of someone, or just move me, and they find a place in my heart."

"Why do you like the Louvre so much," I asked her, "if you know nothing about art?"

She studied a dreary Pousson for a moment, and I readied myself for the same old evasive answer. But we had gone beyond that now. Instead she lowered her eyes and quietly explained. "When I came to the University I was very young and very frightened. I had never been out of my village before. I was just a poor farm girl who wanted to learn. The University was too much for me, sometimes — the crowds, the hurry, the tension. Whenever I couldn't stand it I would come across the river and spend the afternoon here. Here there was no one to bother me, nothing to worry about, no present or future, just our glorious past to comfort me, to calm my fears."

"Last night you told me you were never afraid."

She laughed. "Not any more, you see. I have more confidence now. I know I can survive."

I was sure she was right, she could survive, but I wasn't so sure she was no longer afraid. Perhaps believing that was how she survived. "You know," I said, choosing my words very carefully, "a woman like you wouldn't have to worry about surviving, on another planet."

She gazed at me for a moment, then walked to a window overlooking the courtyard. "In the Revolution of 2089," she said, "they tried once to storm the Louvre. Why should the government spend such money to house paintings when people were starving in the city? Better to tear the place down, liberate the paintings. They might buy some milk and bread. The army could not get here in time — they had other battles to fight. There were only the guards — old men, women, teenage boys. But they fought to the death, down there beneath us. 'What good is bread?' one of them asked, 'if you have lost your soul?' They held the mob off until some troops arrived to restore order. We have a national holiday now, honoring those who fell in the defense of the Louvre. Let me take you to dinner, Laurence."

Did she really mean it? I wondered. It was the revivalist attitude, of course. "We prefer to starve in dignity than to thrive in ignominy," as one of them put it. There was no reason why Danielle shouldn't have been a revivalist — millions of intelligent people were, I supposed. It was simply that I didn't want her to be one. I didn't want her manning the barricades against the outworlds.

I didn't have to worry about that, however. For once her expression was

clear to me, probably because it reflected my own. The pressure of her hand, the lingering smile. . . suddenly the gap was closing, and I wondered how we could ever have let it exist.

The meal, typically, was excellent, but our conversation was odd, disjointed, as we gingerly approached the intimacy that the night offered us, wary of making some stupid remark that would break our fragile spell.

It is still perplexing to me that I made the remark, finally; still more perplexing that I knew what its effect would be, but had to say it anyway. Dinner was over, and we silently fingered our empty wineglasses. Her leg pressed warmly against mine. Our eyes met, and I knew what she was thinking, I could feel her excitement. And I said it. "Can we go to your apartment, Danielle?"

She flushed, her leg slid away. She looked down at her glass, and her grip on it tightened. "It is very small, uncomfortable. Your hotel is so much nicer. What is. . . why not go there?"

But that wasn't what I wanted, now that it was offered to me. I knew she would leave in the morning, or in the middle of the night, and my satisfaction would be only momentary, because I still would not know her, her secrets would still be hidden from me. I knew I was taking a risk, but at that moment it seemed worth while. If she would not grant me this, perhaps it would be better to say goodbye here, and let the loss be total. "Your apartment, Danielle," I whispered urgently. "Please."

Her eyes were pained and puzzled, and I steeled myself for her rejection. But then she shrugged helplessly and covered my hand with hers. "If that is

what you wish."

Danielle leaned heavily against me in the taxi. It was raining. I looked past her to the smeared lights of the city glowing through the rain-beaded window, and past my excitement I felt the coming pain. This was the last time I would see these lights. Tomorrow they would be billions of kilometers distant, and there would be pain. But not now, I thought, not tonight.

We stopped in a dreary neighborhood thickly settled with squat gray buildings. A couple of ragged men huddled away from the rain in the shadows of one. They eyed us appraisingly, then let us pass. Somewhere a cat shrieked. We hurried past the men and up the stairs. Two panes of glass were broken in the door. The hallway smelled of stale urine. Danielle led me up to dimly-lit stairs — two, three flights — then down a short musty corridor. She stopped in front of a door and looked at me. "Please," I said. She sighed and unlocked the door. We went in.

She flicked an ancient light switch and let me look. There was just one room, small and bare, with a tiny kitchen and bathroom beyond. A bed, a table, two wooden chairs, a bureau, a mirror, a few posters. A long crack in the wall behind the mirror. Holes and stains on the ceiling, water dripping remorselessly from one hole into a bucket below. In the next apartment a baby squalling in counterpoint. No phone, no viewer, no roboclean, no mech. A prison cell.

I walked into the room and she shut the door behind us. "Better than your hotel?" she inquired.

"Surely," I stammered, "surely you

can afford more than this.”

“I told you. I earn more than ninety percent of Parisians.”

“Then surely . . . even Plessier—”

She pointed to a picture cube on the bureau. It was similar to the one at her office: a family squinting awkwardly in front of a farmhouse. This time Danielle was standing with them — a gawky teenager in farm clothes. “Plessier can sell his artworks. My family has nothing to sell.”

“You support them?”

“No one else will.”

Her tone was matter-of-fact, almost light, as if, now that her secrets were being revealed, she was anxious to dismiss their importance. “So you only keep enough money to stay alive,” I said, rather accusingly, I’m afraid. “The rest you send back to your family — to keep them alive. Why should it bother you for me to know that?”

“Because you are an outworlder,” she replied, suddenly angry. “Do you think it doesn’t hurt me to show you what a feeble people we are, where a family has to depend on a young girl to support them, where a man has to sell a stolen artwork to give his children a future?”

“Perhaps,” I said, a little angry myself, and very frustrated. “Perhaps it should have bothered you, at first. But why now? Do you think Earth matters to me? I don’t care about Earth, I care about you.”

She shook her head despairingly; she tried, and failed, to blink back a tear. “How can you separate the two?” she asked. “We are the same. Earth has made me in her image.”

My anger melted at the sight of her tears, and I wanted only to comfort

her, to make her happy. “That’s nonsense,” I murmured gently. “I cannot take Earth into my arms, and kiss away her tears.”

They do not sound like words I would say, but I meant them, and I said them. Danielle was stiff and resistant for a moment, and then she seemed to shiver, and then she yielded. The dreary room faded from my vision, and all that remained was Danielle.

I awoke in gray light to the sound of water dripping from the ceiling. I was alone. For a moment I was puzzled, afraid. Then running water superimposed itself on the steady drip, a door opened, and my fear went away. Danielle stood framed in the light of the bathroom. “Laurence?” she whispered.

“Yes,” I replied. She moved forward, and her image merged momentarily with that of a red-haired woman seen by an artist many years ago. If I too were an artist, I thought. . . But I wasn’t, it had already been done, I should forget about art for once and savor reality. I did.

We lay in each other’s arms as her sun rose over her horizon, and as I looked down at her hair reflected in its rays I realized I would have to bring the subject up again. Perhaps in the morning, in the afterglow, the answer would be different. I doubted it, but I knew I had to try.

We breakfasted on coffee and rolls and chatted desperately about nothing. Her hair was tied back, and she was wearing a thin green robe. In the morning light her apartment looked even bleaker. She appeared so defense-

less in it — a little girl lost, far from civilization. Was it my job to save her? Did she want to be saved?

Finally we had to discuss the mechanics of parting — here? at the hotel? at the spaceport? Did I need help with my bags? Would I be able to get the cassette through customs? The more we talked, the more desperate I became. I'm not used to pain, and loss, and regret, I suppose. Life is too easy in the outworlds. I couldn't face the choices. I wanted to save myself as much as I wanted to save her.

"Danielle, you know, we're talking as if how we say goodbye is the only issue left to be settled. Why is that? Look," I hurried on before she had a chance to reply, "I can see how much Earth and your family mean to you, and I know you don't want to leave them. But look, it only makes sense. You could earn four times the money on an outworld working for GCI, and prices are lower. Some people on Earth might despise you for emigrating, but no one will forbid you to send money back to your family. Really, you can do more for them on an outworld than you can here. It would be easier for you to get a business visa than the Plessiers, certainly — it could even be legitimate in your case. There are people I know. . . ."

There was no point in finishing. Danielle made no attempt to stop the tears streaming down her cheeks. Her eyes were wide and, yes, afraid.

I tried to dry her tears. She pressed my hand against her cheek, then let it go. In a few moments she had regained control. "You see," she said. "You see, it is not a new idea. I have heard it for so long, Laurence. My father is like Plessier, you see. He has worked

hard all his life, and he has nothing. 'Go,' he tells me. 'There is no future here. If you have the chance, you must go.' "

"Is that why you were so affected by the Plessiers?"

"Yes, certainly. Oh, it is all so familiar, Laurence. Over and over it happens. Some get out. Some must stay and dream. Some...some are torn apart."

"And you are torn?"

She stood up and turned to look out her grimy window at her grimy neighborhood. "All my life I have been forced to make these choices," she whispered. "I never wanted to. Because each decision brings its share of guilt, do you see? If I choose to become a reporter instead of a model, then I must feel guilty because I will earn less and my family will have less clothing, less food. If I become a model I am not true to myself, and perhaps the guilt will be greater. If I stay on Earth I must feel guilty every time I go out to dine, every time I buy new clothes, every time I think of how much I would earn on Faraday or Chang. If I leave...if I leave then one more person has given up on Earth, it is one step closer to its final collapse. Where does my duty lie, Laurence?"

I went over and embraced her from behind. She leaned back against me. "Your only duty is to yourself, Danielle," I murmured. "You have worked long enough to make other people happy."

She shook her head sadly. "You outworlders have forgotten how to sacrifice. You do not understand the — what is it? — the paradox. Being happy would only make me more unhappy."

"But that's. . .that's. . ." She was right. It was beyond logic. Or it was a logic that was beyond me. "You won't leave, then," I said dully.

She turned to me and forced a smile. "It wouldn't work, Laurence. You will see. The Plessiers will arrive, and their prosperity will thrill them for a while and then, gradually, they will find that there is nothing left of their lives. And then they will not be able to come back, Laurence, because Earth will not have them."

I gazed down at her, and my mind was blank, not believing or disbelieving, just feeling the pain. After a while I silently kissed her on the forehead and walked out into the hallway, dark and foul even by day.

Danielle caught up with me on the stairs, running awkwardly in her robe and slippers. My hand tightened on the banister as she called my name, and the happy endings of a hundred holodramas flashed through my mind. But when I turned it was to see her holding the gray cassette out to me.

"You do have something to bring back with you," she said breathlessly.

I took the cassette, glanced at it and glanced at her. "Not the same," I murmured. She smiled her regret and her understanding, and then was gone.

* * *

Finesta, Diana, b. 6/27/2250, Rathburg, Kepler. Artist, wife of Owen Kreutzer.

...Finesta was a highly-regarded psychoartist when

Kreutzer hired her in 2279 to assist him in his sequential Kepler-work. After its completion they were married. She gave up her own art and took charge of the business aspects of Kreutzer's work, accepting commissions, hiring staff, buying equipment, arranging accommodations, and performing countless other functions for him. Kreutzer referred to her as his alter ego, "the person I trust more than myself."

Her influence in Kreutzer's art has never been clearly determined. It has been claimed that she was responsible for his increasing interest in purely sequential works, but certainly this development had started before he met her. She has also been seen as the cause of a certain "mellowing" of his work, as in the greater emphasis on interpersonal emotions evidenced in the Herschel-work. Clearly their relationship was close, despite the great difference in their ages, and this closeness must have had its effect on Kreutzer. It is doubtful, however, that Finesta attempted any conscious "control" of his work. After Kreutzer's death Finesta returned to her native Kepler and went into seclusion there. She has steadfastly refused to discuss Kreutzer or her life with him, or to release any materials in her possession relating to his life and death.

— "Diana Finesta"
*The Faraday Encyclopedia
of Art*

I had a dozen days on the interstellar to consider my approach to Madame Finesta, but each hypothetical conversation led me off into further considerations of that perplexing Earth-work, and I landed on Kepler with no clear idea of what to say, and no enthusiasm at all for what I had to do.

I called directly from the spaceport: no sense in delaying the ordeal. The number, of course, was unlisted. I'm sure GCI had to spread a little money around to obtain it. The phone was answered by a mechanical.

"6475206. Please state your message."

"My name is Professor Laurence Mallory. I am the author of a book and several articles on Owen Kreutzer. I have come into possession of a preliminary version of his Earth-work. I would like to present this to Madame Finesta and discuss it with her."

"Thank you," the mech replied. "If this is a matter which interests my mistress she will call you back within five minutes. If not, I will return your call and inform you of her decision. Please leave your number now."

I did as I was told, and thought futilely until the phone buzzed and picked it up.

"This is Diana Finesta."

Her voice was low and gravelly — rather unpleasant. The screen remained blank, which was disconcerting as talking to her dreadful machine.

"Thank you for returning my call."

"Where did you get a copy of the Earth-work?"

"From the son of Henri Plessier."

A slight pause. "And you wish to sell it to me?"

"Oh, not at all. I want to give it to you. Of course it rightfully belongs to you. It was purchased by Galactic Communications, and all they would like in return —"

"You want to interview me, then."

"All the inhabited worlds would be deeply interested in you —"

"Describe the first moments of your Earth-work."

I did so, and there was another pause as she mulled the fact that it was genuine. Then: "Why do I need your cassette? Don't you think I have every moment, every layer of emotions engraved on my memory?"

"Well, posterity —"

"What interest have I in posterity?"

"We have gone to great expense —"

"I care even less about the expenses of GCI. I do not want it. Attempt to use it and I will sue."

The conversation was every bit as bad as I had expected it to be. One does not avoid interviews for half a century without being hard to deal with. Abruptly my frustrations boiled over, and I was suddenly in the mood to take a gamble, to test a hypothesis I didn't want to believe. What did I have to lose? "Look," I said, as evenly and as threateningly as I could. "Of course you don't want to speak with me. I have experienced the Earth-work, and you know it's an utter failure. You know I know. And its failure means a rethinking of your husband's death. I've done that rethinking, and I've done some research on Earth. And I have enough evidence to provide reasonable support for the theory he was not murdered, that in fact he killed himself in despair over this fail-

ure. You may not have heard of me, but I am well thought of in the art world. I will publish an article about this, Madame Finesta, and my name has enough authority that the article will permanently soil Kreutzer's reputation. You say you don't care about posterity. Prove it: let me write the article. If you do care, you had better give me your side of the story."

A long pause. I wiped my brow. Then: "I will speak with you. Come immediately." The tone was resigned, weary. She broke the connection before I could reply.

I made a brief call to GCI Kepler, and soon I had a car and a human driver (stout, middle-aged, morose). We headed straight for her home from the spaceport.

Of course I had no evidence. As I said before, I am a critic, not a detective. It was just a theory, and its only support was the paradoxical defense Plessier doggedly offered in support of his father's theft: he was an honest man, he would not have stolen it unless he had to. What would explain that? Did Henri Plessier know Kreutzer was going to be murdered? Hardly likely.

But he must have had an idea that something was going to happen, something he couldn't prevent, something that would cause him to overcome his scruples in order to preserve the Earth-work. What, if not Kreutzer's own decision to destroy himself and his failed work? I could imagine Plessier overhearing a conversation between Kreutzer and Finesta, then vainly trying to talk the artist out of his decision. Then, discouraged, he steals the cassette, knowing that Kreutzer is too

preoccupied to notice. And when Kreutzer is dead he finds, suddenly, that the life has gone out of his own art. If this is where art leads, he thinks, how can I go on?...

Clever, perhaps, but not evidence. There would have been no article based on it. But the mention of suicide was enough for Kreutzer's widow to break half a century of silence. What had I stumbled on?

It took almost half the short Keplerian day to reach her. Her house was on an isolated promontory overlooking the turbulent ocean that covered most of the planet's surface. My driver was required to remain outside the force-fence while I trudged up the long path to the house. The air was thin and salty, and I was thoroughly winded by the time I reached the top. The door opened automatically. I paused for a moment to catch my breath, then stepped inside.

The place was dark, low-ceilinged, gloomy. It smelled of medicine and decay. The walls were bare; there was no sign of art anywhere. "Straight ahead, please," the disembodied voice of the mech intoned.

Straight ahead, through a short passageway and into a large room dominated by a transparent wall overlooking the spectacular churning, foaming ocean.

Diana Finesta was sitting in a high-backed chair in the middle of the room, facing away from the ocean. "Come in," she said.

I obeyed.

"Sit."

I took an uncomfortable seat next to her. Her eyes gazed past me, at nothing. She was blind.

Blind, and old. Her hair was sparse and white, deep wrinkles covered her cheeks and forehead, her neck was mottled and hollow. She was about ninety, of course, but still, there are simple medical procedures — no one need be blind or wrinkled. At least, no one with any money. And she had money.

A matter of choice, then. I could not conceive of an artist choosing to be blind, but I could not conceive of anyone isolating herself from all of humanity for half a century either. She could not appear on video, it occurred to me. Too disgusting, too offensive. So much for Ngoma's plan.

"Thank you for letting me come," I said. "I realize that it's been a long time since you granted this privilege."

"He did it, of course," she muttered, ignoring my inane pleasantry. "Killed himself. Arranged the explosion. Destroyed everything. It was the only thing to do."

There it was, as quick and clear as I could want it. Nice piece of deduction, Mallory. Only it didn't make me feel particularly happy. "What do you mean, Madame Finesta, the only thing to do?"

"You were wrong, though," she continued, continuing to ignore me. "That is why I let you come. The Earth-work was not a failure. That's ridiculous. Kreutzer never failed. He simply understood that the artform was insufficient."

"I don't understand."

She sniffed in impatience. "Kreutzer felt the unhappiness of the people, he understood their frustrations, their conflicts. Never had he been so deeply moved. To portray the unhappiness was not enough. To re-

lieve it was the greater good, the higher artform."

She paused, smacking her lips irritably. Obviously she had memorized the speech, and now had lost her place. I saw what was coming, though. It seemed reasonable, but still. . .

She continued. "Kreutzer saw that Earth's only chance for the future lay in closer ties with the outworlds. The revivalists stood in the way of that chance. He decided to offer himself up in the hope that his death would discredit the revivalists and increase the power of those who wanted Earth to stay in the Galactic Federation. He was an old man. He had achieved all he wanted in life. He wanted to make his death as significant, as beautiful as his life."

Another pause. The speech was over. I couldn't help bringing up the obvious. "You said that Kreutzer never failed. Yet certainly if this was his reason for committing suicide, the act was a failure."

Her blue-veined hands tightened on the arms of her chair. "Life is the hardest kind of art," she quoted in a low growl, "because you have so little control over the materials." The theory was sound. The execution was perfect. The results depended on factors beyond his control. Kreutzer did not fail. Earth failed."

It was hardly something I could debate with her. Instead I started questioning her about the specifics of the suicide, looking for facts that could be verified. Where had he obtained the dynamite? Who else knew of the plan? How had the charge been set off? Immediately she became vague and unresponsive. Did she not remember? After fifty years it was certainly possi-

ble. But so much else remained — why should the facts have slipped away?

Finally she became irritated. "It doesn't matter how it happened. Trivial. What matters was the decision. Kreutzer's decision. That is the only fact worth knowing. You know that now. Please go."

Once again I decided to gamble. "Kreutzer couldn't have done it by himself," I said softly. "He relied on you too much. You must have helped him — you must have done it all for him, gotten the explosives, planted the charge, maybe even set it off."

She was silent, staring blankly into nothingness, so I forged ahead. "It must have been an awful thing to have had to do — to arrange your husband's suicide. Of course he was the genius, you knew if this was what he wanted it had to be right. But still it must have been agony to obey him. It must have been intolerable."

I paused, and in a moment tears began to leak out of her sightless eyes. "I begged him to let me...let me come with him, but he wouldn't allow it. I still had my life to live, he told me. But what is life without Kreutzer? There is nothing, nothing."

Too many tears, too much guilt. When would it end? "Do you think Kreutzer would have wanted you to go on like this?" I asked her. "He believed in life, and you are letting yourself rot to death here. Is this how your husband should be remembered?"

She shook her head and turned away. "Kreutzer is gone. Now there is nothing."

I sat there helplessly for a while, until it sunk in that I had less chance of changing her mind than I had of changing Danielle's. I got up to leave.

"Give me the cassette," she said tonelessly. "It is mine."

"Don't you think that humanity should have a chance to experience the Earth-work?"

"They already have," she replied. "I have no further interest in humanity."

I placed the cassette into her trembling hands and walked quickly out.

* * *

While the mystery of Kreutzer's death has been solved, I must admit to one lingering doubt. Why did he do it? Madame Finesta says: a new artform. I have no reason to doubt that that is what he told her, but somehow I find it difficult to believe that it is the whole story.

For all we may attribute Kreutzer's action to his changing views on life and art, the fact remains that he did his best, for two years, to produce an Earth-work in his usual style. It is my impression that he only turned to this frightening new artform when he could no longer avoid the realization that the old one had failed.

What I am suggesting is that, although Kreutzer may have rationalized his decision to his wife — and to himself — the decision was probably influenced more by a sense of frustration and failure than by reason. What must it have been like for a man used to triumph to encounter a challenge which confounded him, a planet which eluded all his powers of insight

and imagination?

Earth, the enigmatic, the unknowable. Even the greatest of us outworlders cannot comprehend it. It was too alien, too complex for his abilities. Wouldn't this be enough to destroy a man like Kreutzer?

— Laurence Mallory
(unpublished)

8.

Ngoma excised the four paragraphs from my article. "Pseudopsychological claptrap," he commented. I suppose he was right.

I got back ready to be chewed out. No video interview. No Earth-work. Nothing to show for the enormous expense of sending me to Earth and paying off Plessier. Which demonstrates how little I understand such matters. I had, after a fashion, solved one of the mysteries of the century. There is big money to be made out of something like that.

Ngoma dispatched an investigative team to Earth to collect evidence and put together a show. He had me write an article for GCI's popular cassette-magazine to coincide with the show. He put out a new, updated edition of my biography. What ratings! What revenue!

Danielle worked with the investigative team in Paris. After the crew returned one of the reporters came to visit me. "That Paris stringer — you met her, huh? One good-looking girl, huh?"

I had no desire to satisfy his curiosity, so I remained silent. He squirmed a bit, and then continued. "She gave me a message cube to give to you. Said

I was to deliver it personally. Hard to refuse that kind of girl, huh?"

I took the package and got rid of the fellow.

I unwrapped it hastily and set it on the desk in front of me. It was large — must have cost her quite a bit. Must have caused her a lot of guilt. I turned it on.

She was staring nervously at me, lips compressed, eyelids fluttering. It took her a few seconds before she could whisper her brief sentence. "Laurence, you could always live here." Her violet eyes pleaded with me. And then, just before the holo faded, a small smile appeared, as if she realized it was hopeless, and didn't want my last image of her to be an unhappy one. I ran it back through to the smile and stopped it there. I left it on my desk.

I got Plessier a temporary job at the Art Institute when he and his family arrived. Then they moved away and I lost track of them for several months. One day I spotted him and his wife at a transport station and, after a moment's hesitation, I went over to speak with them. He was working in construction, she was a sales clerk. His English had improved, she was still nervous. They were more prosperous than they had ever been in their lives.

Danielle's prediction was still fresh in my mind. I asked them if they enjoyed their new life.

They both nodded vigorously, then exchanged a conjugal glance and smiled. "We are perhaps too old, too set in our ways," Plessier replied. "It is the children we do it for. So that they will be happy."

"And are they happy?"

His wife shrugged. "They will be, in time. We knew it would not be easy."

"Would you go back," I asked them — as casually as I could — "if you had the chance?"

They looked at each other again, and there was a trace of regret, I am

sure, which disappeared quickly, however, in typical outworld cheerfulness.

"No, no, as a tourist perhaps," she said, "that is all."

"It is nice to remember," he shrugged, "but . . ."

"I understand," I said. ●

Random Motes

Consumer advisory: we recommend that you *not* order games from Galaxy-Foundation Games of Denver, as advertised in issues 6 and 7 of *Unearth*. This company has not paid its advertising bills, and we must assume that they would treat consumers' orders in a similar manner. If you have ordered merchandise from them, please let us know the result.

* * *

The illustration for "Indian Summer" on page 48 of issue #7 was incorrectly credited. The artist was Barclay Shaw.

Special thanks go to Bill Desmond and Al Thompson, whose private collections furnished the texts for First Sales reprinted in recent issues.

Somtow Sucharitkul ("Sunsteps," *Unearth* #3) has sold a story to *Analog*. "Fragments of a Hologram Rose," by William C. Gibson (also in issue #3) has been given an honorable mention by editor Gardner Dozois in his *Best Science Fiction Stories of the Year, Seventh Annual Collection*, published by Dutton.

The winning entry in the first part of the Story Contest is published in this issue. The second category has not yet been judged by Harlan Ellison, who still has seventy-five story beginnings on hand. Writers who have not yet received their entries back, and who want to verify that their beginnings are still under consideration, can send an SASE to *Unearth*.



*Think like a Martian:
Feets, don't fail me now!*

DANCE THE NIGHT AWAY

by Craig Shaw Gardner

One two three. One two three. One two three. *Don't look at your feet.* One two three. One two three.

The waltz played out its final bars, and Gary thankfully stopped the stumbling progression of his feet. He and his partner let go of their holds and stepped back to a safe distance from one another. Gary looked away from the crowd, watching the arm of the record player perform its ritual retreat from the record's end to its resting place beyond the turntable.

A sharp clap of hands brought his attention to Miss Avid. "Very good, very good," the tall, remarkably thin woman said. "You dance so well. I'm sure we'll all have a wonderful time at the party Friday night. Now remember, it's semi-formal. All the young gentlemen should wear coats and ties, and the young ladies should wear white gloves. And, as a special treat, Edith May Nugent herself will be coming to the dance!" The mouth in Miss Avid's well-preserved face attempted a smile.

"That is all for tonight," she concluded. "You may go now."

Gary escaped through the side door of the gym, avoiding the mad rush for the front exits. Leaving this way, he had to walk half way around the school, but he knew it was worth it the minute the cool evening air enveloped his dance-hot body. The new spring breezes had traded their winter chill for the

smell of green and growing things, and the moonless sky was covered with stars. He felt good in the quiet dark.

As he walked, Gary looked over at the soon-to-be-built housing project, once a forest, that bordered the school property. The project was surrounded by great mounds of earth, a rolling progression of man-made hills that stood out in the starlight. Sometimes, when you didn't quite look at them directly, they seemed to move by themselves: a silent dance that broke in on Gary's good feelings.

He began to walk more quickly towards the front of the school. His shoes made muted cymbal sounds as he followed the gravel path. Soon, he would round the corner, and he would lose the stars beyond the bright streetlights overlooking the parking circle.

A sudden flash of light reflected white against the school building, causing Gary to turn around. Something was streaking to the earth; a falling star, perhaps, but far brighter than Gary had ever seen before. For all its light, the falling thing made no sound.

It seemed to fall beyond the rolling mounds, into the great pit of the housing project. It was a trick of the night sky, Gary told himself. Suddenly blinded to the light of subtler stars, he stumbled around the corner, back to civilization.

Cars ringed the front circle, each opening its door in turn to admit a

dancing student. His father was parked towards the head of the line. Their convertible top had been pulled down in honor of the weather, and his father's face was silhouetted by the harsh white light of the lampposts.

"Hi, dad," Gary said in little more than a whisper, opening the door on the passenger side.

"Hi, Gary," his father said, smiling. "Have a nice time tonight?"

Instead of the non-committal grunt his father's question usually received, Gary leapt into a description of the falling star and how it had blazed its way to earth. His father replied that you didn't see shooting stars that often anymore. Sometimes it was hard to see the stars at all. Already, they could see the glow of the new shopping centers, some two miles distant, lighting up the western sky.

Gary remarked that something like that star had happened in *The War of the Worlds*, although he couldn't remember if it had been the book or the movie.

His father marveled at his imagination.

* * *

Her hair was gold and lemon yellow, the color of the hay on the edge of the football field in early morning, before the gym class trampled through it on their lap around the school.

Her face was flawless. A pair of well-defined, pink lips made a

masterpiece of every word she spoke.

Gary loved her.

He wished he could talk to her, to tell her how he felt. But he knew that his voice would fail, his tongue get stuck between his teeth. He would forget how to use his feet, and, trying to walk, they would wrap around each other and force him to the hallway's linoleum floor. His face would turn red, and he would stare at his shoes.

And so he watched her. From afar.

Barbara.

He would write her name in the margins of his notebook when he should have been listening to Mr. Mariot, the history teacher. Barbara, in tall, thin letters, like her long, fine hair. Barbara, in little, squat letters, just for a change. Barbara, in fancy, curved letters that ended in circles and curlicues, graceful, just like her.

The bell rang. Class was over. The students dashed for the freedom of the halls.

Barbara had risen from her seat in a single, fluid movement and was walking down the aisle towards Gary. Hastily, he slammed his notebook shut. She mustn't know! He felt his face grow hot with shame, and stared through the desk at the place where his hands should be.

He looked up again after she had passed, watching her hair

bounce across her perfectly-formed shoulders as she walked from the room.

He wished he could ask her to the dance.

Crazy Tom caught him in the hall.

"Hey," he said. "Did you hear they landed last night?"

"Huh?" Gary said, thoughts of Barbara fleeing from his head. "What's that?"

Tom pushed his thick glasses up the bridge of his nose. "The Martians! Didn't you hear about the meteor shower last night?"

Gary told Tom that he had actually seen one fall.

"See?" Tom said. "You know then. All these meteors came down, and they can't find where any of them landed!"

Gary stared at Tom. He suddenly remembered how bright the falling star had been.

Then, he remembered how, in the fifth grade, Tom had told him that the flickering fluorescent lightbulbs in the classroom were the Martians, trying to signal them.

He started to turn away. He'd be late for math.

"They're hiding," Tom said rapidly. "They'll only come out at night."

Gary stopped for a second, looking back at his friend.

Tom, seeing his audience returned, stepped closer, his voice dropping to a near whisper. "They

could be anywhere," he said. "They could even show up here."

"Uh..." Gary said, "I hope not. I gotta go now. I'll be late for class." He turned and walked rapidly away. Why did he listen to Tom anyway?

Tom waved his pudgy arms up and down frantically. "Remember!" he called out after the retreating Gary. "If you meet one, try and think like a Martian!"

Gary knew Tom liked to talk to him because Gary sometimes read sci-fi. But Tom didn't just read and watch sci-fi. He believed it.

Which is why everybody called him Crazy Tom.

As Gary walked quickly down the nearly deserted hallway, his eye was drawn for a moment by a fluorescent bulb in a ceiling fixture, flickering on then off then on again in random patterns.

* * *

"Well," his father said, "you'd better go and pick up your date."

Gary nodded and climbed out of the car. His mouth felt dry. As he walked up the sidewalk leading to the Todd's, his mind raced backwards. How had he gotten into this?

It was "Pass the butter, would you Marge? So, you're going to your first dance this Friday. Who're you going to ask?"

Gary had looked up from where he had begun to watch the gravy seep into the peas on his plate. He wished his father hadn't brought

the subject up.

"Why don't you ask Vicki Todd?" his mother had said, handing Gary the butter. "She's a nice girl."

Gary had passed on the butter, feeling trapped at the dinner table.

He asked out Vicki Todd.

In school, they called her clunky. She wasn't a bad kid, though. They had known each other since they were five, had gone to the same Sunday school.

He rang the bell. Vicki's father opened the door.

"Hello, Gary," he said.

"Hello, Mr. Todd."

"So, you're here to take Vicki out?" Mr. Todd prompted.

"Yes, sir." Gary's grip began to push in the thin cardboard sides of the white corsage box.

"Well, she'll be ready in just a minute. Why don't you come wait in the living room?"

Mr. Todd led the way. Gary followed, sitting on the edge of the couch to wait. He had been in this room a few times before, but never at night. The soft light provided by the room's three lamps seemed to charge the air, as if the whole room, and not just he, were waiting.

After a minute, Vicki's mother ushered her into the room.

Vicki looked different, Gary realized as he stood up. Her red hair had been piled on top of her head, and the sleeveless, long blue dress she wore seemed to flow

down her body, not hang there like the sweaters and pants she usually wore around the neighborhood.

She smelled of something delicate. Something nice. Their hands touched. Gary wished that her palms weren't so sweaty.

Vicki's mother pinned on the corsage. Her father took their picture together. Both parents waved to Gary's father as Gary and Vicki got into the car.

Gary's father turned on the radio as they drove down the road leading to the school. The news was on.

"Speculation continues on last night's meteor shower," the radio said in its deep, authoritative voice. "While many sighted the so-called 'falling stars,' there seem to be no craters or other evidence of anything hitting the surface of the earth."

There was a burst of static. Gary's father fiddled with the dial. The announcer's voice returned.

"...Institute of Technology professor notes the possibility that all the 'meteorites,' as he calls them, might have burnt up in the earth's atmosphere before hitting..." Static. "...all radiation levels are normal..." Static. "...cause for alarm..."

The static level rose even more, drowning out the regular signals completely. Gary's father flicked up and down the dial, but it was the same everywhere. He turned it off.

"Have to get that looked at," he said, turning into the circle that fronted the school. He stopped before the front door to let Vicki and Gary out.

"Have a good time, kids," Gary's father said. "If you have any trouble, give us a call. Your mother and I will be in all night." He put the car into drive and waved. "I'll be back to pick you up around eleven!"

As Gary's father drove away, Gary swore he saw something move in the housing project hills. But they *always* looked like that, Gary thought, shrugging mentally. He walked next to Vicki up the steps.

* * *

Edith May Nugent, director of the Edith May Nugent School of the Dance, stood at the end of a receiving line composed of Miss Avid and half a dozen dancing students unlucky enough to have arrived too early and thus gotten volunteered for the job. This was only the second time Gary had ever seen Edith May Nugent. She was shorter than Miss Avid, and squarer, but as Gary shook her hand and said "Pleased to meet you," he noticed that she had Miss Avid's smile.

And then he saw Barbara.

His heart stopped. He forgot all about Vicki, standing behind him, still finishing the line.

Barbara stood there, talking to Dave Foster. Dave, the school's

best athlete, who was sure to make the freshman football team next year. What chance did he have if Dave Foster had invited Barbara to the dance?

Gary felt his forehead and underarms begin to get wet in the closed air of the gym. He wondered what would happen if, during one of the dances, he cut in on Dave.

Gary became aware of Vicki, standing silently beside him. "Um —" he said, flustered. "Would you care for some punch?"

"No thank you," Vicki replied. "Maybe later."

The students had finished setting up the record player. The first record descended to the turntable. It was a cha-cha.

"Would you like to dance?" Gary said.

"Thank you. I'd love to." Gary took her arm and they walked onto the dance floor. Gary tried to position himself so that he could watch Barbara.

Halfway through the dance, he stepped on Vicki's left foot. She made a soft, sharp sound.

Startled, Gary apologized and stepped back.

"Oh, that's all right," Vicki said, at first trying to smile, but then looking at him more critically. "You don't want to be here with me, do you?" she said flatly.

"What?" Gary said, trying to sound surprised at the very idea.

"I asked you here, didn't I?"

"Gary Plummer," Vicki said, her voice remarkably stern. "We've known each other too long for me to believe something like that. You haven't looked at me since we got here. If you don't want me to be here, just say so. I can call my father, and he'll take me home."

Tears began to form in the corners of her eyes. Gary could see he had hurt her. He thought fast, trying to make up an excuse that she would believe, when the lights began to dim.

The record slowed and the dancing stopped. Miss Avid looked around severely, as if the power failure were a personal affront.

"Keep dancing, children," she called. "I'll see to this!"

She stormed out into the hallway. The students started dancing again.

She didn't come back. After a few minutes, Edith May Nugent stepped out of the door to investigate. The shadows at that end of the gym seemed to be growing longer, almost visibly crawling across the floor.

Miss Nugent seemed to have disappeared.

By ones and twos, the dancers noticed that their chaperones were gone and the room was growing gradually darker. Shadows now covered all the exits and were rapidly approaching the punch bowl. People began to mention

"getting a breath of fresh air," walking rapidly into the darkness, and silence.

"Gary," Vicki said. "Something's wrong."

"Keep dancing," Gary said. "Nothing will happen to us if we keep out of the shadows."

"What? What are you talking about?"

Gary tried explaining to her what Tom had said about thinking like a Martian. Whatever was happening, it didn't seem to affect the people who were dancing. The whole situation reminded him of a story he had once read, if he could only remember what it was.

"Gary Plummer!" Vicki cried. "Now I know you're crazy!"

In desperation, Gary turned to Barbara and Dave, who were standing nervously nearby. He tried to explain that they had to dance.

"What are you trying to do, Plummer?" Dave snorted. "Scare all the girls out of their wits?" He held out a cautioning hand towards Barbara. "Wait here a minute. I'm going to walk outside. I'll be right back."

"Holy...!" Dave exclaimed as he stepped into the shadows.

They all stared into the darkness where Dave had disappeared. Was something moving through the shadows?

"Gary Plummer!" Vicki said. "First you ignore me, then you try to scare me out of my wits! I want

to go home right now. If you won't take me, I'll go by myself!"

Crying, she ran away from the dance floor, and was swallowed by the dark.

Gary swallowed hard. Vicki may have been clunky, but she was a good kid.

Panicking, the half dozen remaining dancers rushed for the door at the back of the gym.

"Barbara, wait!" Gary called. Barbara turned to look at him.

The rest of the kids plunged into the shadows surrounding them. But there was no noise of a gym door opening and closing, no other noise at all, save for the waltz on the record player.

"That's not the way out," Gary said softly.

"Then, what is?" Barbara said, her beautiful face becoming frantic.

"We have to dance. Dancing keeps them away."

"Dance? We've been dancing."

"We'll have to keep doing it, all the way to dawn if we have to. I don't think they'll touch us if we dance."

And so they danced. Through a waltz, a fox-trot, another cha-cha. Then, finally, came the twist.

Gary fought back a panic that threatened to rise up and overwhelm him. The twist record was always the last one on the stack, the one Miss Avid added at the end of the dance as a special treat.

There were no more records

after the twist! Should they keep on dancing? Would the creatures in the shadows still stay away if there was no music?

Gary had an idea. He began to twist towards the record player. Barbara looked at him, obviously alarmed. He laid a reassuring hand on her shoulder for one thrilling second, then twisted close to the record player.

Without breaking his pelvic movement, he moved the arm that had balanced the stacked records. Now, if this record player worked like the one he had at home...

Chubby Checker's voice faded. The needle had come to the record's end. Gary watched the moment of truth.

The needle rose and, after a second's hesitation, returned to the beginning of the record. Chubby Checker began to twist again.

Gary remembered to breathe. They kept on twisting, through one play, and another, and another.

"I'm tired," Barbara said on her fifth twist. She was obviously having trouble even moving her hips.

"We have to keep dancing!" Gary said urgently.

"Do you think I could get some punch?"

"The punch bowl's over there somewhere." Gary nodded into the shadows.

"It's hopeless. What can we do?"

Gary didn't answer. He was

watching the two creatures that had stepped out of the shadows.

They reminded him of nothing so much as young saplings, except that they were colored a much too bright green. Their lower trunk was a single pole, splitting into two separate poles where a man's head would be. Mounted on top of these poles were all sorts of waving things. Gary tried not to look at them.

Barbara saw the look in Gary's eyes. "What is it?" she asked.

"Don't look," Gary whispered. "Close your eyes. Keep dancing."

She did as she was told. Gary watched the creatures.

Having advanced into the light, Gary noticed, the creatures were not coming any closer to them. Instead, they were moving in a complicated, ever-shifting pattern around each other, the tentacles topping their forms tangling and untangling.

With a start, Gary realized that they were dancing too!

The record ended, and the two creatures abruptly stopped. They seemed to bow towards the two humans, and then retreated into the shadows. After a moment, the shadows followed, and they could see the whole gym.

Everyone seemed to be out there, flat on their backs, sound asleep.

"I think it's time to leave,"

Barbara said.

Gary couldn't help but agree.

* * *

Gary's father waited in the circle of cars. Gary introduced Barbara. His father was very pleased to meet her, but what had happened to Vicki?

Gary realized that there was nothing to do but to tell his father the truth.

His father watched him tell his story, in amazement, until Vicki's father drove up. Vicki and Dave piled into the car.

Gary stared, astonished. Vicki and Dave? His father gave the other a "what-you-gonna-do?" knowing adult shrug.


The gym door opened, disgorging the first of the other dancers. Gary did not see Miss Avid or Edith May Nugent among the crowd. In his secret heart, he hoped they were gone. Perhaps the creatures had come in search of dancing teachers!

He would never know. Once again, his father marveled at his imagination.

Gary looked at Barbara, doubt in his eyes. She smiled back at him, gently squeezing his hand. He looked at her for a long moment, her blonde hair forming a halo around her face in the lights of passing cars.

He turned and smiled at the stars.



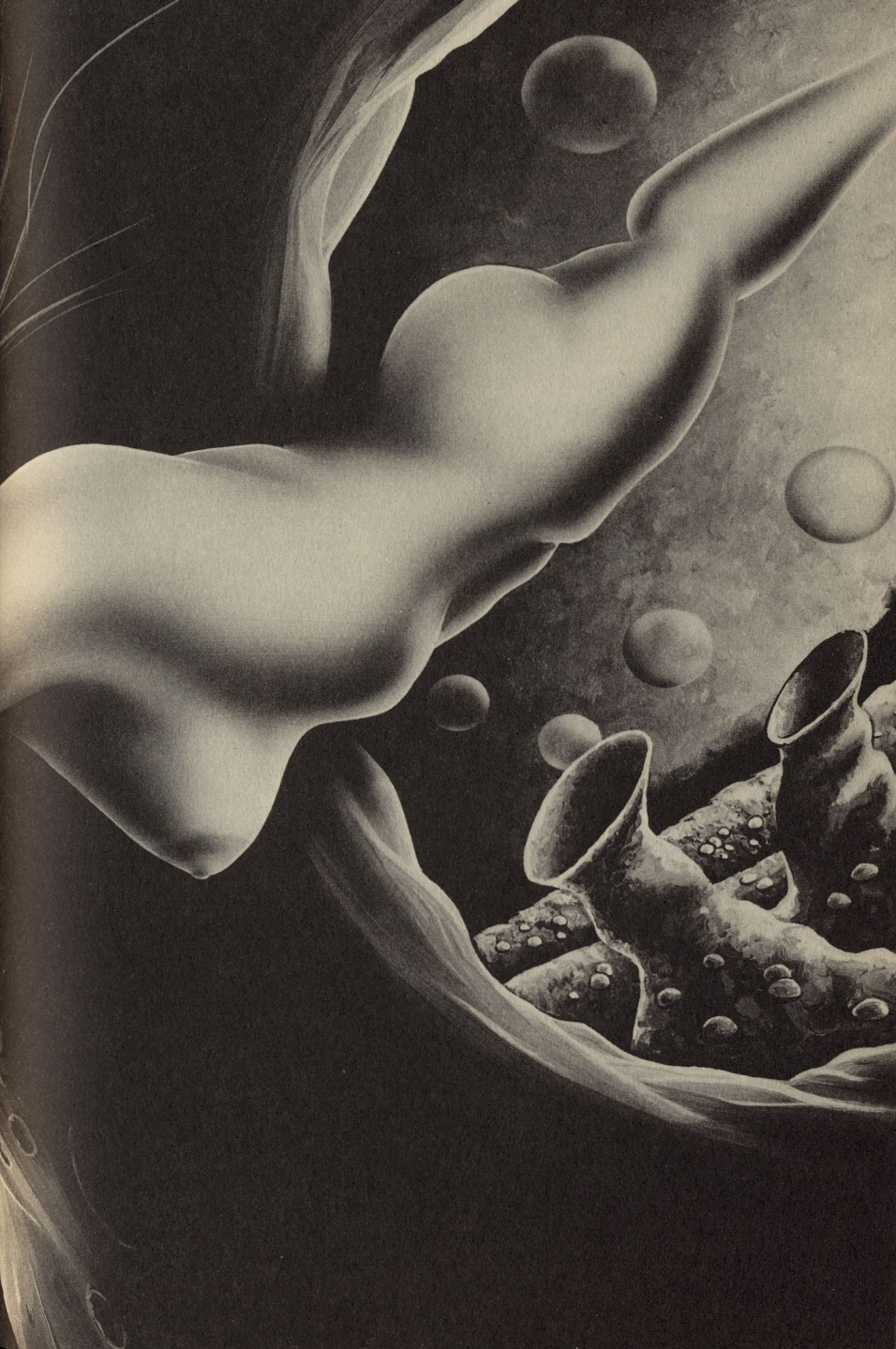


What's smaller than a sub-atomic particle and larger than the universe?

Part Two of Three

SPACETIME DONUTS

by Rudolf v.B. Rucker



synopsis:

By 2165, everyone in *Us* (formerly America) who wasn't a drone — bureaucrat — was a Dreamer. Drones filled out questionnaires; Dreamers plugged wires into sockets at the base of their skulls and watched Hollows — 3-D programs created by Phizwhiz, a vast newwork of linked computers and robots. Phizwhiz did all of society's real work, and made sure no harm came to humans, which meant preventing people from doing anything at all interesting. Everyone had everything he wanted, but no one was happy; life was dull.

A call is issued for volunteers to plug their brains into Phizwhiz. Andy Silver does so, and becomes the first person to survive the contact. He describes his experiences on a Hollowcast which is seen by Vernor Maxwell, a young Dreamer interested in math and physics. When the Governor asks for more volunteers (to be called Angels) to hook up to Phizwhiz, Vernor decides to apply.

Vernor passes the test, and in the process meets Alice Gajary. They move in together, and Vernor divides his time between her and the Angels. As his scientific fervor fades, he spends most of his time getting stoned

with the Angels, causing a break with Alice.

About this time, Andy Silver disappears, after which Phizwhiz's behavior becomes increasingly erratic. Vernor busies himself with ZZ-74, the Angels' preferred drug (introduced to Andy by the mysterious Professor Kurtowski), and with Circular Scale — the idea that infinite expansion and infinite contraction meet at a point where Nothing is Everything.

Vernor is arrested after a particularly bizarre Hollowcast. He escapes after several months in prison, returning to the Angels' hangout to find only Mick Stone, the most spaced-out member of the group. Mick tells Vernor that Professor Kurtowski has perfected a Virtual Field Generator, which can shrink or expand all the atoms of an object simultaneously, allowing the object to change size without being crushed, or busting. Vernor sees a chance to test his Circular Scale theory.

The opportunity comes almost immediately. The loach (police) invade Kurtowski's secret lab on the eve of Vernor's planned trip in the VFG. Mick and Vernor dive in the VFG and start the field.

Vernor had disconnected the timer switch and was, indeed, cranking it up. The laboratory looked like the Grand Canyon, and a loach near them loomed upwards like the Statue of Liberty. He did not appear inclined to approach any closer, but it certainly felt bad to have any enemy that big.

"Looks like they're scared to come after us," Stones observed. While they're watching, the Professor can make his getaway."

"Does he have a chance?"

"Yeah, he always knew the loach'd be here some day, so he set up some hideouts and secret exits for himself. He'll be O.K. And we ought to be just about invisible pretty soon."

Vernor nodded. "Since the VFG cones are shrinking with us, I think the field isn't going to reach out and warp anything much. We *will* be invisible."

It was getting hard to see the things in Kurtowski's laboratory as distinct objects any more . . . there were just huge color areas with fuzzy edges. Diffraction effects created pale rainbows around everything, and it was hard to say exactly where the ceiling was. The scale-ship probably looked like a grain of sand to the police. One of them seemed to have decided to come after them, but his legs were moving as slowly as the hands of a clock. They were safe.

Vernor was sitting in the pilot's seat in front of the control panel, and Mick was leaning against the base of the lower VFG cone, his legs stretched out on the lattice of molybdenum tubes and jyxon cables. "What happens next?" he asked.

"Pretty soon we're going to be at

the cellular level. I suppose we'll start bumping into microorganisms."

The ship had settled into the floor a little bit. The small irregularities of what had seemed to be perfectly smooth plastic made the floor around them look like a gullied desert.

The scale-ship was slowly skidding down into one of these gullies. The cushioning effect of the field kept them from rolling, so it was easy to watch their progress. Although tiny in size, the scale-ship retained much of its original mass, and thus continued sliding through any obstacles that appeared. Vernor and Mick's time was speeded up so much that their progress appeared slow to them, although in absolute terms they were sliding quite rapidly.

The gully fed into a canyon. It now looked as if they were in some gray and lifeless Alpine valley, high above the vegetation line. Sharp peaks were growing larger on both sides of them as they proceeded down the moraine. As the mountains grew, they began to look fuzzy . . .

Suddenly they disappeared. Small, moving forms swarmed around the scale-ship. "Mick," Vernor cried, "what's happening?"

"I thought you saw it coming. The lake at the bottom of the valley!"

They were underwater, beneath the surface of a minute "lake" filling the bottom of the crack they had slid into. The lighting was good and Vernor could make out four or five distinct types of organisms in the water around them.

The darting forms which had originally attracted his attention were flagellates, small teardrop-shaped fellows who pulled themselves along by fitful-

ly twirling the hair, or flagellum, which projected out from their pointed end. They were still considerably smaller than the ship and seemed to pose no threat.

There was, however, a large amoeba near the ship, and Vernor was glad to note that they were skidding away from it.

It was a threatening sight, gray and branched like a stilled explosion of mucus, externally motionless, but swirling on the inside. If you looked closely you could actually make out the last four or five things it had eaten . . . fungi, apparently. It was, after all, not quite motionless; no, one of its pseudopods was definitely bulging toward the scale-ship . . . but the amoeba was slow and they were still shrinking. Already they were no larger than the flagellates.

A new type of organism was now visible, a herd of rod-like capsules that looked somehow familiar . . .

"Look out!" Mick cried suddenly. Something that looked like a hairy blimp was speeding purposefully toward them. The hairs on its surface seemed to be the size of a man's legs, and they were beating in vigorous pulses. There was a sort of pocket near the blimp's front end. The hairs filling the pocket were more flexible and seemed to be wildly agitated. Vernor could make out the struggling forms of one of the flagellates and several of the capsules inside. Apparently this was its mouth, and it was bent on swallowing the scale-ship as a third course.

This was the first time Vernor had ever seen Mick Stones look uptight. "Shrink, Vernor, shrink!"

"No sweat, Mick, the field extends

a little way outside our skin. Anything that actually touches us has to shrink as much as we have . . . and if that thing shrinks as much as we have then it sure as hell isn't going to swallow us . . ."

But the blimp was upon them, its oral pouch a hairy dome above them. It struggled to touch them and Vernor tensed as it bulged towards them, but as the hairs came closer they dwindled in size.

Sontes had regained his composure. "I guess you were right about that field protecting us," he drawled. "You think that thing is trying to *eat* us or get *eaten*?" Vernor grinned and relaxed a little. It *did* look like a big pussy up there.

Soon the ciliate protozoan gave up on them, and they continued sliding down the slope. A huge shining wall seemed to lie ahead of them. "What's that?" Mick asked. "It's so smooth."

Vernor shrugged. They'd find out soon enough. Right now they were in the midst of the herd of capsules. Bacteria. "These are shit germs, Mick," Vernor said, "technically known as *Escherichia coli* in honor of their discoverer, T. Escherich. Some honor, eh? It's not everyone who gets a strain of fecal bacteria named after him."

"How'd they get *here*? I mean, the lab wasn't *that* messy."

"I was just wondering that," Vernor said. "This water must have seeped up from a broken sewer line." The presence of these human symbiotes was somehow comforting. It was like being in a flock of sheep. The shining wall they had wondered about was coming closer, but before Vernor could comment on it, his attention was

caught by a motion to their right.

One of the *E. coli* had exploded, disgorging something like a hundred smaller organisms from its inside.

"What are those?" Mick asked. "Baby shit germs?" But these new organisms certainly didn't look like the bacteria. Each of them had a large, faceted head, a shaft-like body and a few small hairs at the bottom of the shaft.

"Those are viruses," Vernor exclaimed. " T_2 viruses, I believe. Watch them go after those poor bacteria." In fact several of the viruses were now descending on the nearest bacterium. Vernor and Mick watched the closest virus as it settled down, tail first, on the bacterium's skin. The little hairs at the end of the virus's shaft dug into the cell wall, and there was a pause while the virus punched a hole in the wall. Then the virus's shaft telescoped abruptly, and it ejaculated the contents of its head out through the shaft and into the *E. coli*'s endoplasm. The virus's body was an empty husk on the cell wall of the bacterium, but the genetic material which had been sent into the cell proper was busy turning the cell into a virus factory. In twenty minutes the bacterium would rupture, and out would come a hundred more viruses.

Several of the viruses seemed interested in the scale-ship, but now there was something more interesting happening. The ship had reached the shining wall they had noticed earlier. It bulged with their weight, and suddenly they popped through it, leaving viruses, bacteria, and protozoa behind. Once again they could see the lunar landscape of the floor's plastic, and a smooth dome rose high over

their heads. They were inside a tiny air bubble stuck to the plastic beneath the water in a crack of Professor Kurtowski's laboratory floor.

11/Theory and Practice

The skidding had stopped. The floor inside the bubble was level. They were still shrinking. The molecular level would be coming up soon.

"Did you pack any food?" Stones asked.

"Sure. You know where it is. Wait, I'm going to cut the power. I'm hungry too." Vernor turned down the power of the VFG field so that they would stop shrinking, but left it on high enough to prevent their size from drifting back up. If he cut the power completely they would instantly snap back to normal size. Theoretically such an abrupt change in the field structure would generate lethal synchrotron radiation. And, of course, even if they did survive the snap the police would be waiting up there. "What do you think the loach will do?" Vernor asked.

Stones was squeezing the contents of a food tube into his mouth. "Mmmpsful nnnf a flm flm smpfmh," he responded, then elaborated, "they don't know that this is a scale-ship. So they don't realize we've got to come back to the same place we left. I figure they'll spend about a week in the lab . . . ripping things off, taking notes for Phizwhiz, making the place nice and safe, and waiting just in case we do come back. After a week they'll probably decide we're gone for good."

"But as long as we're down on this scale, our time is so much faster than

theirs," Vernor replied. "We could starve to death or die of old age before the loach's exciting week in the mad professor's laboratory has become just another happy memory." Crankily, he seized a food tube. Aaahhhhh, at least it was Green.

After eating they lay around on the tensegrity lattice, relaxing. Vernor was full and the air recycler made a low hum. As he gazed absently out through the synthequartz his thoughts turned to sex.

It had been almost a year since he had gotten laid. Silently he cursed himself for not having called Alice immediately after leaving the jail. The scale-ship's strange passage down to air beneath water had reminded Vernor of the Inquarium. That's where he'd had his last fuck. Sweet Alice.

"It's too sad. You're not the same person." Her last words to him echoed in his mind. She had been right, about him taking too much dope, but he *needed* it . . . or did he? In jail he had not missed dope (or Alice, for that matter) . . . in jail he'd been a different person, he'd had no expectations, no desires, no physical life at all. And getting out had been such a trip . . . these two weeks in the lab he'd never really come down, but now . . . now he was resting at the bottom of a shitty crack in the floor, surrounded by mile-high policemen who would be around for years of his time. The only hope of escape was the slightly dubious possibility that scale is circular. And like an asshole he hadn't called Alice up from Waxy's. He hadn't even tried to pick someone up. Alice, Dallas Alice. A slight moan escaped Vernor's lips. He slipped his hand into his pants pocket

and squeezed his aching cock.

"Need some help?" Mick asked. Vernor looked into Mick's outlaw face. The question was natural enough; many people, and most Dreamers, were bi. But Vernor had never had sex with a man. Stones drew closer.

"No," Vernor said. "I'd rather just sneak and beat off when you're asleep." He paused. Why? "I'm scared you'd eat my brain."

"Eat your brain? Well, all right." Stones didn't seem to much care either way. "How do you shit in this thing?" he asked after a minute.

"Well, what do you *think*? You go outside with the E. coli."

"Won't the air rush out?"

Vernor shook his head. "The Professor said it wouldn't. The field should hold it in pretty well. The synthequartz is just to prevent the long-term diffusion of the air. If we didn't have it, most of the air would be gone in a couple of days."

Mick opened the hatch door. No whoosh. Kurtowski knew his field theory. The floor in the immediate area of the tensegrity sphere looked normal, because it was shrunk to the same scale as the ship. The floor sloped up on all sides of the ship, becoming rougher and more magnified with distance.

"Hey, Vernor," Mick shouted after a few minutes. "Give me those empty food tubes."

"What for?"

"I'm going to try and throw this turd out of the field. It'll shake up those one-celled hammond organisms and put some odor on the loach's shoe." Only Mick would have thought of that, Vernor mused, handing out

the flattened food-tubes. Stones used them to pick up his turd and hurl it away from the scale-ship. As it receded from them it grew in size and seemed to slow down. Soon it was hanging in their field of vision like a slowly waxing brown moon. Before long it would break out of the air bubble and ooze up from the crack in the laboratory floor. Stones climbed back into the ship well pleased with himself.

Vernor laughed happily. "It'll be up to life-size in a few days of our time. One minute loachal time. They'll never figure out where it came from. I'm glad you came along, Mick."

Mick examined the instrument panel. "How is this circular scale jive supposed to work? How can we get bigger by getting smaller?"

"You want the whole song and dance?"

"Start dancing."

"O.K." Vernor said, and began.

"Basically the idea is that space-time plus scale looks like a doughnut. Say you have a doughnut lying on the table in front of you. Now, if you laid a square of cardboard on top of the doughnut it would touch the doughnut in a circle." He looked at Mick for a response.

"Right. A circle on the top of the doughnut."

"Yeah. This circle is like made up of the points on the doughnut which are the highest," Vernor stressed.

"Go on."

"Now if the points on this circle start sliding down into the hole, what happens to the circle?"

"It gets smaller," Stones replied.

"It gets smaller," Vernor agreed, "So we've got the circle staying hori-

zontal and kind of sliding down into the doughnut hole, shrinking all the time. When is it the smallest?"

"When it goes right around the inside of the hole. When it's like the circle where your finger would touch if you stuck it in the hole."

"Good. Now dig, Mick, when the circle goes down below the hole it starts to grow."

"Yeah," Stones nodded.

"And when it goes down further to become the circle where the doughnut touches the table it's even bigger. And when it begins to crawl up the outside of the doughnut it gets bigger than it was to start with!"

"Man, what are you *talking* about with this do-nut story?" Stones exclaimed.

"Don't you see? We have 'getting smaller' turned into 'getting bigger' . . . continuously. By starting to shrink and then continuing in the same direction, the circle ends up growing bigger than it was when it started. And if it continues . . . if it continues in the same direction it shrinks on around to the starting position."

"Space-Time Do-Nuts on my mind," Mick said. "And that's supposed to be the universe or what?"

Vernor continued enthusiastically, "It's like each one of those circles is a size level. The first level is human level, then you shrink on down to the atomic level, the little circle around the hole. Next you get up to the level of the big universe when you hit the equator — the circle around the outside of the doughnut."

"What about that other human-sized level on the bottom of the do-nut?" Mick asked suddenly. "What about that?"

"Well, that *is* a difficulty with the doughnut model," Vernor admitted. "I feel that the doughnut model must be discarded at this point. The model's usefulness is simply to show that it's conceivable to have continued shrinkage turning into expansion. It might be better now to just draw a clock-face and call 12: human level, 2: cellular level, 5: sub-atomic, 7: galactic, 10: planetary, and back to 12: human level" His voice trailed off.

"What happens at 6, Vernor?" Stones asked with an edge in his voice. "You got us into this and I'm not sure you know what the fuck you're talking about."

They sat in silence for a few minutes. What would the transition from the smallest monadic level to the largest universal level be like? Would it actually work?

Finally Vernor spoke. "I don't know, Mick. I guess I never thought it would actually get to the point where my theories had something to do with saving my personal ass." He sighed. "We might as well go further down."

12/Real Compared to What?

After launching a turd of his own, Vernor seated himself at the control panel and turned on the power. Soon the two movements seemed like misshapen twin planets beneath an unimaginably distant celestial sphere. The floor continued to develop new complexities of structure; as they shrank, new peaks and mounds of the plastic rose around them.

Vernor stared at an outcropping near them. Recently the edges of the formation had begun to vibrate, and

now the whole thing seemed to be alive with color and motion . . . it was like a pile of flickering snakes. He slowed the rate of shrinkage to enjoy the spectacle.

They were now small enough to actually see the long chain-like molecules which composed the plastic floor or Professor Kurtowski's laboratory. The molecules were continually writhing and twisting, now joining together, now splitting in two.

It was hard to believe that the molecules were not alive. One in particular caught Vernor's attention. It was viciously attacking its fellows, seizing them by the middle and then snapping itself backwards to break them in half. It hesitated in its rhythmic task and seemed to be feeling for something in the air — like a caterpillar looking for its next leaf. Now it was moving towards them. Could it be after the scale-ship? Impossible, a molecule had no mind, but . . . perhaps their charge, polarization, or field pattern was capable of triggering a tropism.

The lighting had become spotty and varicolored. They were so small that the corpuscular nature of light was becoming evident. When they looked at the molecular landscape, they did not see by a uniform illumination . . . instead it looked rather like a badly tuned Hollowcast.

"Why does it look so funny?" Mick asked. "Is it night-time already?"

"That question I can answer," Vernor replied. "For us to see something a photon has to come from it to us. Now any given atom in one of those molecules will bounce or shoot a photon in our direction only occasionally. And any given photon has only one fixed wavelength."

"I dig," Stones replied. "The flickering is because we're small enough to actually notice the different positions that the photons come from, and it's colored because each photon is a flash of just one color —" His voice changed suddenly. "Look at that fucker!"

The molecule which had caught Vernor's attention before was quite close now. Stones' outburst was prompted by the face that this molecule had reared back and struck at them like a rattlesnake. Again, they were safe from assimilation, since before the molecule could actually reach them it would have to enter the VFG field . . . which would, of course, shrink it down to nothing. Nevertheless, it was unsettling to have this flaring Chinese dragon flying towards them.

They continued shrinking, and soon it was difficult to make out the snakes which were the molecules of plastic. The flickering became more pronounced. It was like looking out into a crowd of people taking flash pictures in a darkened auditorium . . . only each flash was a different brilliant color.

In general, the atoms would emit photons of only one color most of the time, so it was possible to pick out the paths of some of the atoms in the swarm of light flashes around them. They moved in unpredictable zig-zags — like fireflies on an August night.

As they continued shrinking, three atoms came to dominate the visual field. The closest one gave off blue and occasional green flashes and was floating motionless in front of Vernor as he sat in the pilot's seat. The other two atoms were located directly above and directly below the transparent

sphere of the scale-ship. These gave off red flashes and seemed to be vibrating towards, and away from, the blue flashing atom.

"H₂O," Mick exclaimed. "Cool, cool water."

"Yeah," Vernor said, "that must be it. The angles look just right for those two reds to be hydrogens bound to a nice blue oxygen. This might be a stray water molecule from our breathing. We're right inside a molecule." The blue-flashing oxygen atom was drawing closer as the steady, pulsating dance of the red-flashing hydrogen atoms continued. "Pretty soon we're not going to be able to see at all, though," Vernor concluded, as the flashes grew more infrequent.

"Why not?" Mick asked. "Why shouldn't we be able to see the electrons and the nucleus? They're there, we're still shrinking . . . what's the problem?"

"There's no way we can see them," Vernor said patiently. "For you to see something it has to send a signal to you. The smaller we get, the less likely it is that a photon will hit us. Once we're smaller than a photon I don't think it even *can* hit us." He thought for a minute, then continued, "But maybe —"

Stones finished his sentence for him, crying, "But maybe you're full of shit!" in delight as the darkness around them was suddenly filled with an even, milky luminosity. The actual particles of the oxygen atom were becoming visible!

"This is impossible," Vernor said as they drifted closer to the atom in front of them. It had now grown to the size of a weather balloon. The blue and green flashes had died out as he had

predicted . . . they were so small now that the chances of a photon from the atom hitting them were infinitesimal. Nevertheless, he could see the atom.

The electrons formed a sort of cloud or haze around the tiny nucleus, but a haze unlike any he had ever seen. If he glanced at the whole electron cloud there were no lumps, no individual electrons . . . merely the continuous probability distribution demanded by orthodox quantum mechanics. On the other hand, if he focused his whole attention on any limited region of the cloud, a small yellow ball would appear there . . . an electron orbiting the nucleus according to the laws of pre-quantum physics. What he saw depended on what he tried to see! He turned to Mick. "What do you see? Do you see separate electrons or just a cloud?"

Stones gave him a strange look. "I see little yellow balls whizzing around a tiny pulsing thing in the middle. What kind of *cloud* you talking about?"

"The *electron* cloud, dammit. Electrons don't don't have both a position and a velocity. Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. You *can't* see a particular electron at a particular spot moving in a definite direction with a definite speed. You just can't!" He broke off as an electron the size of a beachball glided serenely across his visual field.

Mick was silent for a minute, then spoke. "Yeah, I remember that Uncertainty stuff. It was on the Uncle Space-Head Show . . . Tuesday mornings at nine. Yeah. Now that I remember that, I can't see the electrons. That's really weird; as soon as you reminded me it got all cloudy . . . what *is* this?"

But Vernor had no answer. The electron cloud had now grown to the size of a cathedral. The glowing nucleus was a pearl of light in the center. The atom seemed to be moving towards them. As with the plastic molecule before, he had the strange illusion that the atom's behavior was purposeful, that it was moving towards them because it sensed their presence. Was everything they met going to try to *eat* them?

Vernor covered his eyes with his hands to think. How could the atom's appearance depend on what he expected to see? When he put the Uncertainty Principle out of his mind he saw a miniature solar system . . . like now . . . he watched the sixteen electrons circling around the oxygen nucleus. Mick and Vernor were so small now that their time-scale was on a par with that of the atom, so it was easy to watch the electrons as long as you believed in them . . . there was one dropping down to a lower orbit . . . a photon went wriggling away from this event. With a start Vernor realized that his hands were still over his eyes. He opened his mouth, but Mick was already talking.

"Vernor, I can see with my eyes closed! It's like when I took my first acid trip. I just *sense* where everything is . . . *feel* it with my brain!" Without turning his head, Vernor could *see* that Mick was lying on the floor with his eyes closed . . . and he could easily hear him yell, "Oh, yas!" apparently to the approaching nucleus.

Vernor observed the nucleus only superficially and grappled with the problem of how they could be seeing without their eyes. It must be some type of field acting directly on his

brain, he reasoned. Conceivably a field could produce mental images . . . the brain's memory storage was basically holographic, so perhaps the interference pattern between his memory field and some external field could produce these slightly hallucinatory images he was observing . . . the nucleus seemed to glow approvingly . . . but what kind of field would it be? The nuclear boson forces could not reach this far, the electromagnetic field was too coarse, so that left gravitation . . . but, no, gravitational effects would be flattened out by the Virtual Field before they could reach him here. Suddenly the answer popped into his mind: "Probability Amplitudes," Vernor shouted. "The pure quantum field! *That's* what we're seeing with!"

"Come on man, stop trying to explain it," Mick said quietly. "Get loose while you still can. Look at it."

It was something to look at, all right. The oxygen atom had grown to an immense size, and they were drifting in through its electron cloud. The specificity of their presence was introducing violent turbulence and instability in the atom. One minute they were in a swirling probability fog; the next, electrons were rumbling past them like trucks. Several electrons spiraled down into the nucleus, emitting a variety of smaller particles on the way.

Their progress through the electron shells was uneven; they proceeded in jumps, and each jump was accompanied by crashes and showers of sparks.

Suddenly they were through the electrons' domain and the bare nucleus blazed ahead of them, perhaps half the size of the scale-ship. It was

growing rapidly as they drifted towards it. A deep rumbling filled their tensegrity sphere, and the smell of sulfur and burnt earth filled their nostrils. Vernor was not surprised . . . if the quantum mechanical probability field could act directly on the memory structure of his brain to produce visual images, there was no reason that it could not produce the sensations of sound and smell as well. Intellectually he was hardly surprised . . . but on the gut-level he was as scared as he'd ever been.

The nucleus was a dusky red interspersed with patches of black and threads of glowing white. Its shape, although roughly spherical, was irregular and constantly changing. There was no doubt whatsoever in Vernor's mind that it knew they were there and was waiting for them to get close enough for it to make its move. He was repelled at the thought of being sucked into the heart of the fantastically dense entity ahead of them. But surely the Virtual Field would protect them?

Suddenly a terrible idea struck Vernor. Although the Virtual Field would prevent the nucleus from physically touching them, the spherical symmetry of the VFG field might produce a lens effect . . . a lens magnifying and focusing the fantastically powerful nuclear strong forces upon the interior of the scale-ship. *Of course* the VFG field was acting as a lens, otherwise the intensity of the quantum probability field would have been too weak to affect their brains "Mick!" Vernor screamed. "We've got to stop!" He fumbled for the controls with thumb-fingered hands.

"Stay cool," Mick said, reaching

over Vernor's shoulder to turn down the power control. They stopped shrinking, and the nucleus stopped growing. It seemed to be hovering fifty yards from them, a balefully glowing eye as large as the scale-ship. There was some kind of tension growing in the back of Vernor's mind. "That thing can't hurt us," Mick was saying, when suddenly Vernor's hand shot out and turned the VFG field up to full.

The impulse to turn the power up had come from his brain . . . but what had put it there? The nucleus filled his mind as he clung to the controls, fending off Stones's efforts to turn the field back down.

The laboring VFG cones whined shrilly, and in seconds the scale-ship was a twentieth the size of the huge atomic nucleus looming ahead. The rumbling and the stench grew more intense, and suddenly a chain of sparks shot out from the nucleus and enveloped the scale-ship, inside and out.

Flames covered their bodies as Mick and Vernor watched the nucleus, now several hundred yards in diameter, pull them closer. A series of ghost particles bounced back and forth between the nucleus and the scale-ship. A vortex formed and dug a hole in the protean surface of the nucleus, and the scale-ship and its ghosts began to spin.

13/Hyperspace

A twisted screaming — scream from each cell of whose? black noise, white flame wet flesh rent — inside under where? screaming ever never-place, white skin burnt black, crushed bleed — STOP! I me you?

Something shaking him. Was who? Screaming twisting black noise hush?

"Vernor, can you see me?" You the was it? Black burn scream who. "VERNOR, come on!" Blacker spot talking scream. "ZZ-74, Vernor, say it. ZZ-74." See see heavenly door? Seize the empty floor?

"ZZ-74?" Vernor said. The charm worked. Vernor, he was Vernor Maxwell. And the other one? The blackness thinned out to reveal Mick Stones' stubbled face. "Are we all right, Mick?"

"Yeah, I think so," Stones said. "That rush kind of got on top of you. You should have been riding with it . . . *watching* the nucleus instead of thinking about it. It wasn't a lot worse than an overdose of Three-way. And the ship's O.K."

Vernor looked around . . . the only light seemed to be from the scale-ship's cabin lights. "Where's the nucleus?" he asked.

"We're inside it," Stones replied. "You've been foaming at the mouth for half an hour and we've been shrinking the whole time."

"What did it look like? In the nucleus."

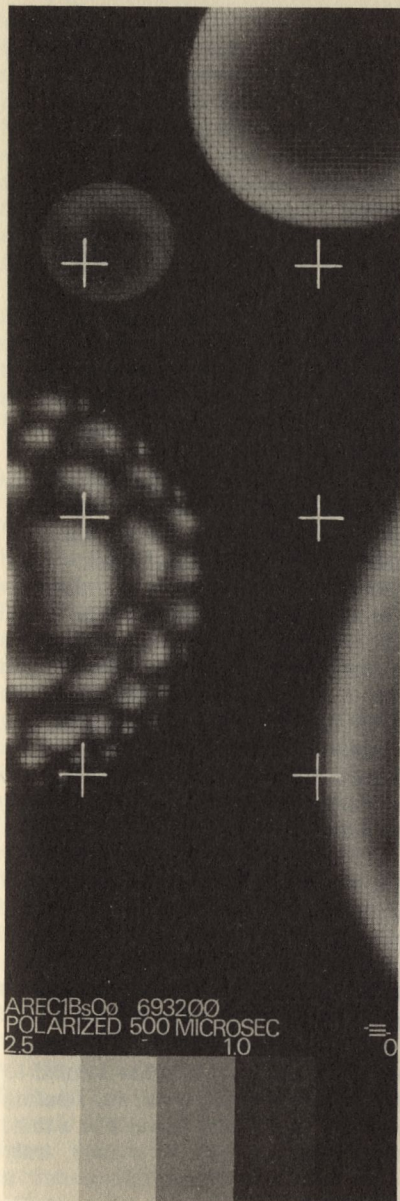
Stones shrugged. "You tell me."

On closer inspection, the blackness outside proved not to be total. There were a number of semi-transparent squiggles and blips around them, each so slightly colored as to be almost invisible. "Those could be quarks," Vernor stated, trying to impose order on this incredible reality they had entered.

"Some kind of Polack anyhow," Stones replied. "I do think I saw the protons and neutrons a level back."

"What were they doing?" Vernor asked.

"Kept kind of bumping and smear-



ing against each other. Looked like a sex thing. Yin yang. One of 'em came after us as usual, but we out-shrank it. There was a sort of haze then, and that turned out to be these jellyfish."

The squiggles writhed around them, slowly expanding as the scale-ship continued to shrink. They looked like phosphenes, the internally produced patterns you see when you press on your closed eyes. The largest and closest squiggle was pale white. "What do you say we have some food," Vernor suggested.

Mick threw him a tube of Green. "I already ate." As Vernor began squeezing the Dreamfood into his mouth, Mick continued, "We should've brought more food, you know. There's only another two days' worth left. How soon do you think this Monad equals Universe change is coming up?"

Vernor finished his food before answering. "Well . . . possibly never. It could be that matter is like an infinitely branching tree, with each particle splitting into smaller particles, and so on forever. If it's like that we could shrink forever and never stop seeing new things." They had drifted inside the large, pale white squiggle. Vernor opened the hatch door and threw out his flattened food tube. It had GREEN printed on both sides. The squiggle seemed to be a cloud of small, shiny balls.

They watched the food tube drift away, growing in size as it distanced itself from the VFG field. It was slowly tumbling end over end. "Look at that," Mick exclaimed suddenly. "The writing is backwards." Sure enough, the writing on the tube was alternating between GREEN and

NEERO. Sometimes the writing was one way, and sometimes the other, and sometimes the tube seemed to disappear completely.

"The fourth dimension," Mick said after a pause. "The space out there has got to be four-dimensional. Hyperspace! Like in *Geometry and Reality*."

Vernor nodded. This book, which he had gotten Mick to read . . . how long ago? This book had stated that in four-dimensional space it is possible for an ordinary object to turn into its own mirror-image. The argument for this proceeded, as usual, by saying that four-dimensional space is to us as our ordinary space would be to that legendary race of two-dimensional beings known as Flatlanders. More precisely: the idea was that if you have, say, a flat cut-out of a left hand sliding around on a table, the only way to turn it into a cut-out of a right hand is to lift it off the flat table *into space* and turn it over. Since the food tube was effortlessly turning into its mirror-image and back again, it seemed to follow that it was rotating in four-dimensional *hyperspace*.

"Man, I'm going out there," Stones exclaimed, moving towards the hatch.

"Mick, I don't think —" Vernor started, but stopped hopelessly. He was still too dazed from his nuclear freak-out to assert himself. Passively he watched Mick open the hatch and swing his legs out. That had been the one flaw in Mick's enjoyment of *Geometry and Reality* before . . . "Where is this fourth dimension?" he had demanded of Vernor. "Let's get stoned and go there!" Vernor had explained at length that even if it existed, there was no possible way to leave our space

and float out into hyperspace, but Mick had never quite believed him.

"Here goes!" Mick yelled, pushing himself off from the scale-ship. He drifted about five yards and disappeared.

Vernor racked his brain for the proper Flatland analogy . . . oh yeah, Mick was in a different space-like slice of hyperspace. He was also crazy. Just for openers, how was he ever going to get back? If he was lucky he might drift far enough away from the VFG field to grow back to normal size . . . but in which space? What were those *other* spaces which the hyperspace was made of?

His brain gave up and he turned down the power of the VFG cones. No point shrinking any further until he saw if Mick was coming back. Crazy bastard. Vernor looked out through the synthequartz windows. The shiny little spheres, like Christmas tree ornaments, were all around them. They had a strange way of changing size while he watched . . . sometimes even disappearing . . . but always their surfaces remained featureless. There was a whisper of sound behind him, and he turned.

What appeared to be a thin slice from the world's largest blood-sausage had appeared in the center of the scale-ship. Vernor wavered . . . attracted by curiosity, but repelled by fear . . . "Is that you, Mick? You don't look so good."

The shape of the slice gradually changed until finally what seemed to be an animated silhouette was floating in front of Vernor. It was like a thin, thin paper cut-out of a man, only colored all different colors . . . a strange shifting color pattern, really

... Suddenly Vernor realized that he was looking at an actual cross-section of Mick Stones. It was as if someone had, with a huge sharp razor, split Mick's front half from his back half, and then shaved off one slice to wave at Vernor. Warily Vernor fumbled for an explanation. He felt ripe for another freak-out ... if only he could stop trying to explain, to understand.

The cross-section wavered slightly, and then Mick Stones was back in the scale-ship. He seemed all right except that he looked funny, crooked. He reached his left hand out towards Vernor reassuringly. "It's great out —" He was interrupted by a violent explosion in front of his face.

Vernor's gears suddenly meshed. "Go back!" he shouted. "You're backwards! You're made of anti-matter now!" That was why Mick had looked funny; he had turned over in hyperspace and come back as his mirror-image. Which meant that each of his particles was a mirror-image particle; anti-matter. When anti-matter touches matter the two annihilate each other, combine and disappear leaving nothing but a burst of energy. The air from Mick's exhaled words had just annihilated the air in front of his face. Thank God he hadn't touched Vernor with that reassuring left hand.

It was hard to tell if Mick grasped all this before he disappeared again, but he knew enough to act fast. Time went on. Vernor assumed that Mick was trying to make sure that he came back to the scale-ship's space unreversed. But *where* was he? Several times Vernor thought he saw cross-sections of Mick outside the scale-ship ... once two circles, as if of his legs

... but still he did not return.

Vernor was finally forced to face the real question. *How* had the space around them become four-dimensional? He thought of analogies. Suppose that Flatland had a thickness that was unnoticed by its citizens. Say that Flatland was like a sheet of paper and that the Flatlanders were like ink-blots which had soaked right through the paper. If each particle of an ink-blot shrank enough, it would soon be a small black glob moving about inside the thickness of the paper. Yes. That had to be it. The space we live in did have a slight fourth-dimensional hyper-thickness to it ... just like a sheet of paper has a slight third-dimensional thickness ... yes, and now they were so small that this hyper-thickness was much greater than their size. So now there was a perceivable fourth dimension. Nice. Wasn't there something in one of Clifford's later papers —

Vernor's scientific reverie was interrupted by Mick's reappearance. This time Stones popped back right outside the scale-ship, and after cautiously spitting at the ship he climbed in. He look the same as ever.

"So how was it, Mick? Did you see much?"

"Looked just like here, with those Christmas balls everywhere. *You* looked gross ... like an anatomy chart. But what counted was how it *felt*."

"That extra degree of freedom felt all right, huh?" Vernor asked.

"It wasn't just *one* extra degree, baby. That's infinite dimensional space out there."

Vernor didn't feel like entertaining such a claim. "That's just bullshit,

Mick. Anyway, there's no way you could tell the difference even between four- and five-dimensional space. Can a point tell a line from a plane?"

"Man, don't you see, all that is just intellectualizing. I was *out* there. *In* it. It's infinite dimensional. Go on and see. Go on." Mick seemed annoyed at Vernor's contradicting him and was actually pushing him towards the hatch.

"No," Vernor said, "I came here to go around Circular Scale and I'm not going to risk fucking around with higher dimensions."

Mick snorted in disgust, but he let Vernor go back to the controls. Vernor turned the VFG back up and the spheres began growing. He looked at the closest one. Obviously they were going to have to get inside it. But it looked so smooth. Its surface appeared mirror-like, and he could actually make out their reflection.

It was funny about this shiny sphere, this Christmas ball. One instant it would be looming over them like an asteroid, and the next it would shrink back to the size of the scale-ship, or even smaller. Vernor would have welcomed an attack from it at this point, but it seemed content to just continue its solitary fluctuations.

Their shrinking had continued, and the sphere's average size had certainly increased, but it showed no sign of breaking up into smaller particles. Could these spheres be the smallest possible particles . . . totally dense, totally smooth? If that was the case, further shrinkage would reveal nothing.

Vernor cut the power. The sphere was so close. He looked at Mick for help, but Mick seemed to be lost in

thought . . . perhaps of his "infinite dimensional" space. Vernor opened the hatch door and started throwing out pieces of the food crate. The hatch was on the opposite side of the ship from the giant Christmas ball, and he hoped to push into it by means of this crude jet propulsion. It seemed several times that they touched it, but only to slide off, or have it shrink away from them. Disgusted, Vernor closed the hatch and lay down on the floor, panting with exhaustion.

"You know what that thing is, asshole?" Mick said finally.

"Is it an infinite dimensional sphere, Mick?"

"No. It's a hypersphere. Four-dimensional. I can tell from how it looked out there."

"O.K." Vernor said. "It's a hypersphere." He felt very tired.

"The *universe* is a hypersphere, Vernor," Mick said quietly.

14/God

Mick's statement was correct. The old Einstein conjecture that the space of our universe is actually curved around on itself to make a hypersphere had been an established fact since the turn of the century. Vernor knew, every *child* knew, that the space of the universe was a hypersphere — just as he knew that the space of the Earth's surface was a sphere. But Vernor had not been prepared to actually see a hypersphere. He *couldn't* actually see it all at once, but he had been seeing it in installments as he observed the various-sized spheres in front of him. Just as a sphere is a stack of circles, a hypersphere consists of in-

finitely many spheres, joined to each other in some unimaginable fashion.

"Mick," Vernor said finally. "I'm ready to believe anything else you tell me if only those things out there are each the universe."

"If those are each . . ." Mick repeated. "How can *each one* of those different hyperspheres be the same universe?"

"They're shiny, aren't they?" Vernor said. "I figure they're sort of reflections of each other. But that can wait. The real problem is how to get *inside* one of 'em."

"You thought that throwing shit out the hatch was going to push us into it?" Mick asked pityingly.

"You got any better ideas? Or should I bring on the analogies?"

Mick shook his head with a smile. "Let's just rest. Maybe it'll come *git* us. I think I could probably get *myself* in there, but I don't think there's anything I could do to maneuver the ship into the right position."

"Like making a disk stick to a sphere," Vernor mused. "We really should try —" he started, but broke off in a yawn. He was bone tired. They lay on the Scale-ship's floor watching the fluctuating cross-section of the hypersphere.

Mick sang a verse from Zappa: "Cause I never get into it/ Unless I get out of it/ An' I gotta be out of it/ To get myself into it." He lit a stick of weed and passed it across to Vernor.

"Just a second," Vernor said a few minutes later. "There's something different out there. Moving towards us — up there." He pointed. There was, indeed, something approaching the scale-ship from above the hypersphere. It was irregularly shaped and

seemed to be moving with a sort of beating motion.

"Oh, come back tomorrow," Mick said. "It's going to be something else trying to eat us." The object drew closer. It was shaped almost like a man, but there could hardly be people floating around here . . . smaller than an atom, larger than the universe. Strangely, the object did not shrink as it approached the scale-ship. Could it penetrate their field and devour them?

Mick gave a sudden whoop. "Hey, Professor, we're in here!"

"But can't be," Vernor moaned, "but can't be!" Sure enough, it *was* Professor Kurtowski. Reaching the ship, he climbed in the hatch, sat down in the pilot's chair, and beamed at them.

"I'm dreaming," he offered by way of explanation. "I often come here when I get uncoupled. I was never quite sure before that this place was . . . shall we say *real*?"

Vernor's mouth opened and closed silently, but the resilient Stones was not at a loss for words. "Professor, is that thing there the universe?"

"Go on in. Maybe you'll find out."

"That's the problem. We can't get in," Vernor said, finding his voice.

"It's something you do with your head. Keeping still. Go to sleep. Sleep. Sleep." Professor Kurtowski was fading, and then he was gone, but this occasioned no outcry, as the two passengers of the scale-ship were fast asleep.

After all had been quiet on the ship for some time, the ever-shifting sphere drew closer and dwindled to point-size. To an observer on the scale-ship it would have appeared now that the hypersphere had disappeared, but it

had only moved "under" the ship.

Immanuel Kant called space an "ineluctable modality" of human thought, but Mick and Vernor were far gone enough to prove him wrong. All barriers were down, and the hypersphere rose to assimilate them.

Vernor snapped awake. Such a strange dream . . . first Kurtowski, then Alice, and then . . . what? A darkness marbled with streamers of light, growing towards him. With a strangled scream, Vernor realized that they were home free.

"The Professor was right," Mick remarked. Strange; had he had the same dream? But no dream could compare with what they were witnessing now: everything, everything at once.

They were in it, filling a tenth of it. "*Das All*," Vernor said reverently. It was alive. It was alive and glad to see them. The Universe. What did it look like? What does a field of clover look like . . . or a rock or a thumb or a moon or a microbe? Nothing's really any bigger than anything else on the Circular Scale. But still, but still, if you expect a lot, you see a lot. ZZ-74.

The patterns around Vernor told him everything there was to know. When later he tried to express his feelings during those minutes of total communication with the universe, he could do no better than to quote Wittgenstein: "The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of the problem."

But soon this passed as it always does, and Vernor was analyzing, differentiating, observing. They were surrounded by a three-dimensional network of light. Pulses of brightness traveled through the network, forking

here, merging there. A minute ago these patterns had seemed to be part of him, invisible, but now he could only gape and wonder.

"God's brain," Mick said simply. That was it. And what thoughts were they watching, what had they left behind? The network region near them maintained an increased level of activity. It was still talking to, in, them . . . but Vernor couldn't hear it anymore.

Jolts and trains of energy rippled through the paths around them, weaving back and forth, rising and falling. Out beyond this region Vernor could see more and more of "God's brain," but it didn't go on forever. In many places there seemed to be dark clouds, but even where it was clear there was a sort of glassy barrier out beyond it all —

"Mick, see way out past all the light?"

"Huh?"

"Out past everything. Like a glass wall. You know what that is?"

"Nuh."

"That's us!" Vernor said, happy to one-up Mick on the subtleties of life in a hypersphere. "The space is curved so that we can see clear around it to the back of our heads. Or the back of the scale-ship, anyway."

Mick grunted and turned his full attention back to the universe itself. He seemed not to want to get sucked into the scientific frame of mind. He was right. Once again, Vernor let his attention drift out into the friendly being around them. He found himself praying.

"One size fits all," Mick said presently, and Vernor nodded agreement. On earth as it is in heaven. As above,

so below. But the zest for observation returned, and once again Vernor sorted his Self out into subject and object, scientist and phenomenon.

They had been shrinking all this time, and the nodes at the intersections of the network had resolved themselves into clouds of bright particles darting around exceptionally bright central regions.

One of the nodes had come to dominate their visual field, and they could see now that matter was continually being ejected from the bright region at the center.

"That must be a quasar," Vernor remarked. "You know, the other end of a hyperspace tunnel which starts at a black hole. Matter falls in the black end and comes out the white end all cleaned and simplified."

"Where are the black holes?" Mick asked, suddenly brought down. I'm not too eager to get my matter cleaned."

"It's kind of hard to see them," Vernor answered. They were quiet for a few minutes. The shrinking was proceeding at a good rate and the node in front of them covered most of their visual field now.

"Where do you think the Milky Way is?" Mick asked.

"Well," Vernor replied, "we probably have to go down a few more levels to get to the galaxy level. I imagine it's going to end up being inside one of those bright spots. According to my theory we should contact right down into —"

There was something wrong. The light from the objects ahead of them was suddenly getting bluer, brighter. The brightened lights seemed to be rushing in on them faster than before.

It was as if the whole universe was somehow hurrying around to get in front of them, leaving only a terrible, hungry darkness behind the scale-ship.

A deep humming from the ship's tensegrity sphere suddenly entered the range of audibility. An incredible force was pressing on them; the very air began to sputter, filled with an unheard-of energy density.

Without saying anything, Mick and Vernor realized together that they were being sucked into a black hole. There was no way that their Virtual Field could protect them from the real and unlimited forces which they would encounter in this terrible whirlpool of space-time.

There was only one possible means of escape, and Mick thought of it. He went quickly to the control panel and turned off the VFG field. If they were not yet past the black hole's lip, or "event horizon," they might snap back around the curve of Circular Scale to their original size and location.

For an instant there was a charged equilibrium between the expansive force of the suddenly released space the scale-ship and the contracting force of the black hole's gravitational field. Then, with the sound of all of Frank Zappa's songs played at top volume at the same time, the last minute of their trip was over.

15/Exits

As it turned out, the police were still in Professor Kurtowski's lab. "How did you manage to disappear for a whole half hour like that?" they wanted to know.

"We did it with mirrors," Stones replied, carefully stepping over the turds near the ship.

Better in jail than inside a black hole, Vernor consoled himself as they were led off. He still wondered how they had escaped the lethal dose of synchotron radiation which Kurtowski had predicted would arise if they suddenly cut off the VFG. Probably the fucking black hole had blotted it up. That had been no accidental collision, oh no, the bastard had probably come half-way around the Universe to get them. And up on this level a thing called a *society* wanted his ass. Same thing in the end. Same fucking thing.

"I want to see a lawyer," Vernor shouted as they were led to the back of the waiting police van. It was an automated van, and the joke sounded stupider than Vernor had intended. The loaches were not talkative. They seemed eager to dispose of Vernor and Mick. Probably they were eager to get back to the lab; that was dangerous, exciting . . . not routine like mailing two losers to the detention center.

The loaches sealed the time-lock on the door, the idling turbine geared up and engaged, and Vernor Maxwell and Mick Stones were on their programmed path to an automated jail. There was nothing to say.

They were about ten blocks from the Professor's laboratory when an explosion rocked and overturned the police van. Footsteps ran close, paused, then ran off. There was another, smaller, explosion which blew open the van's rear door. A horn started a steady blast of alarm.

Mick and Vernor hit the street at a run, following the sound of those footsteps. They caught a glimpse of a

figure hurrying into an alley across the street. It was Professor Kurtowski.

In the darkness of the alley, the three paused to catch their breath, and to pound one another with joy. It was impossible to talk over the noise of the smashed van's automatic alarm. Sirens were approaching from several directions. Kurtowski nodded and set off down the alley with a beckoning gesture.

The alley ended in a blind wall. Too high to climb, and solid except for a small flaw at the base of the wall.

"In there," Kurtowski said loudly, with a note of humorous challenge. "We must go through the needle's eye to enter paradise."

Man, if you say so, Vernor thought, leaning over to examine the crumbled place in the wall. Sure enough, there was a tiny passage through the wall there. Maybe big enough to put your finger through. Been working late, Prof?

But even as he thought this the hole grew larger . . . no, Vernor was growing smaller. The portable VFG! Kurtowski was wearing it. Vernor glanced upwards and could see the Professor's hands holding the field around him as he walked through the tiny hole. On the other side, the field faded, and it took some quick action to keep from getting stuck in the hole as one oozed through it. Stones, and then the old scientist, came squeezing through the hole in short order.

They were in a large, dimly lit room. It was a warehouse filled with stacks of packing crates. The crates were of varying sizes, but they were fitted together to form identical cubical stacks. A big automatic fork-lift stood idle in the aisle.

Kurtowski led them quickly to the closest stack and fiddled with a crate in the stack's bottom layer until its side swung back to reveal a hidden passageway. The tunnel led to a room which Kurtowski had hollowed out for himself in the center of the stack of crates.

Once both doors were closed, Professor Kurtowski flicked on the lights and spoke. "I had a feeling you might encounter difficulties, so when I left the laboratory I prepared to bring you from the police van to my shelter." The room was small but comfortable, with stacks of books, bits of apparatus, cushions, a soft rug, and several crates of food and drink.

"How did you get in here before you found out it was O.K. to use the VFG on yourself?" Vernor asked.

"I picked the lock on the front door," Kurtowski replied. "The warehouse is fully automated. But let's hear about the trip."

They told him the story of the whole adventure, with interruptions for eating and drinking. When they had finished talking, Kurtowski turned to Vernor. "And what conclusions do you draw?"

"Well, for one thing, I think it's clear now that scale *is* circular."

The Professor looked doubtful. "But how *reliable* are the impressions you have brought back from below the atomic level? You said that most of the things you saw seemed to appear directly in your mind. Is it not possible that you saw only what you *expected* to see? I have long thought that the universe does not, in fact, have any *unique* structure. Different observers can reach mutually incompatible conclusions. Only the man of knowledge

can see several things at once." He paused to let this sentence sink in, then continued. "It would have been very interesting if you had managed to continue shrinking long enough to see if you could imagine the Earth into your tiny mirror universe."

"One thing," Mick put in, "the space right before we got into the universe was *infinite* dimensional."

"Hilbert space," Kurtowski said. "It's quite possible. That might explain how there could be more than one —" He broke off, seeming to savor a secret.

"What surprised me most, though," Mick continued, "was that everything seemed to be *alive* once we were on the same level as it. Molecules, atoms, the nucleus, the universe itself . . . they all acted like they were alive, once we got into the right space and time scale."

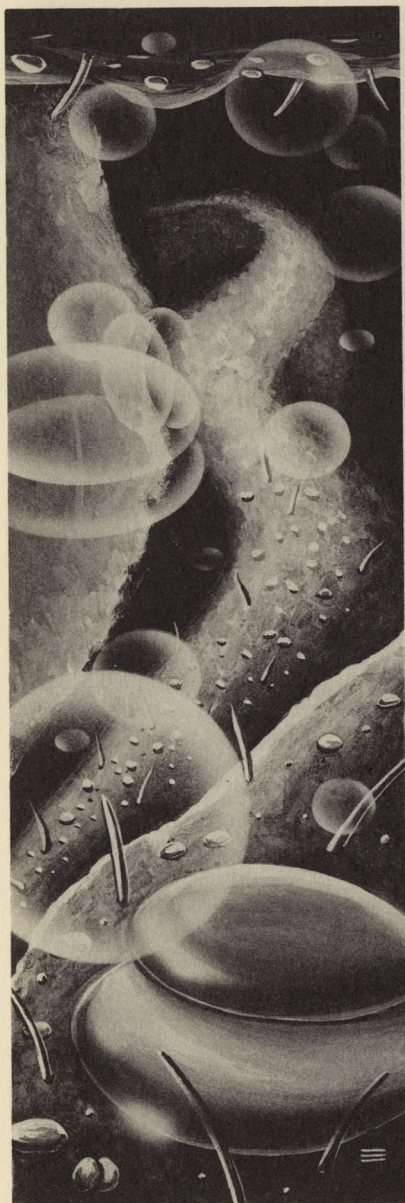
"That's what's so great about Circular Scale," Vernor elaborated. "There seems to be *life* at *each* level, since no level is more important than any other. Nothing is really bigger than anything else. And the same for *time*. The vast processes of the universe are a flickering inside an atom's shortest pulsation."

"Ja, it's a nice idea," Kurtowski agreed. "It's a shame to lose the scale-ship to the Us. I would like to go see these things for myself."

Something tickled Vernor's memory. Hadn't Kurtowski *already* seen everything, walking among the hyperspheres? But that had been a dream.

Mick and the Professor were arranging cushions to sleep on. "But what do we do now?" Vernor asked.

Mick grinned. "Revolution. Only



way we're gonna stay out of jail is to tear it down."

"Right," the Professor said, snuggling into his cushions. "Tomorrow you will infiltrate Phizwhiz, Vernor."

Vernor lay in the dark thinking about this, and then about Alice. He felt dangerously unstable; his sense of reality was slipping. Alice had always given him a good and human center to his life, but now he was being hurled through unimaginable changes. It seemed like it had all started when he had broken up with her.

What had Kurtowski meant, "the man of knowledge can see several things at once?" Several things . . . he relaxed into the babble of his body's cells, then sank down through further levels. Down here all linear time was gone, all cause and effect abandoned . . . simply a sea of possibilities, points connected only by convention

Freedom from rationality. Absolute freedom . . . the annihilation of every structure. But he didn't want to be annihilated, his ego didn't. Change the slogan, make it . . . the *realization* of every structure. Same difference, really.

The Us had begun to turn into a vast prison when security had become more important than freedom. Security was *one* structure, not all or none . . . *one* structure, *one* reality upheld at the cost of all the others.

Vernor let himself dissolve a little more. He felt fear. The Us was wrong, but it was frightening watching his realities dissolve. Go with the flow, and when nothing was left, keep going where? Alice, Alice.

During the night the loaches searched the warehouse, but failed to

find Kurtowski's shelter. But they came close, and the three slept badly. When their watches said it was morning, they stopped trying to sleep and had a brief discussion of their plans. It seemed best to start immediately.

The Professor equipped Mick and Vernor with disguises, and soon they had slipped out of the warehouse and down to the walktube. They mingled with the crowd, looking no different from the others.

The people riding the walktube out of the Eastside early in the morning were mechanics and technicians who worked the nightshift. Their job was to keep the factories humming, handling the occasional glitch or breakdown which got out of the machines' control. These factory jobs could be challenging and even unsafe, and the workers took pride in them. When the repair robots broke down, there was nothing for it but to call in a human. The fact that they were indispensable gave these mechanics a superior feeling towards Phizwhiz which most of the Users could not honestly share.

A young mechanic struck up a conversation with Mick in the walktube. "Where do you work?" he asked.

"In the plastics factory," Stones replied. "The loach was all over the place last night. Some old guy had a lab hidden in the basement."

"D'ja get to see it?" the mechanic asked with interest.

"Naw, they wouldn't let anyone in. Must of been pretty good, though."

The mechanic shook his head. "You're lucky. I work over at the power plant. Nothing's happened there in three months. All night I sit there watching the dials. I might as

well be a Drone for all the action I'm getting."

"You'd have plenty to do if someone got rid of Phizwhiz," Mick said in a low voice.

The mechanic glanced around nervously. This kind of talk was illegal. Reassured by Stones' unmistakably criminal appearance he finally relaxed and answered, "If only someone would. This no-risk life is dragging everyone."

He was hooked. Vernor took the role of fervent organizer. "We're going to do it. It's going to happen this week. Are you in?"

The mechanic grimaced. "Why not. I know some other guys that'll come in, too. When do we start?"

"Today," Mick said. He got off with the mechanic at the next exit, and Vernor rode on towards the EM building. The plan was that Mick would use his many contacts to mobilize a small army of guerillas, while Vernor went to turn himself in to Ken Burke of the Governor's Research Council. He was going to trade his freedom for a chance to get at Phizwhiz.

16/Phizwhiz

Burke's office was on the top floor of the Experimental Metaphysics building. Vernor brushed past the receptionist, and removed his disguise as he entered Burke's office.

"Get me off the hook and I'll make Moto-O's idea work," Vernor said. Burke was sitting at a large desk. Had he already signalled the loach? Vernor would have to work fast.

But Burke was in no hurry. "Mr. Maxwell, sit down, it's a pleasure to

see you." Sensing that Vernor might interrupt, Burke raised his voice and continued, "The Governor is puzzled by your behavior. He thinks that perhaps you are seriously ill. (*"He wants you to have brain surgery."*) "Do you realize that two police officers were killed when their vehicle collided with the van which you left *burning* in a public thoroughfare last night?"

Vernor shrugged and Burke continued. "I must admit that Us had missed the Angels these last ten months. The pace of things has gone back down, and the public is not happy. I, for one, had begun to consider the option of pardoning a few low-risk individuals. You, Mr. Maxwell, were at the top of the pardon list. But after last night I must agree with the Governor. The risks are too great."

"So you'd rather go back to sleep," Vernor said, his voice filling with bitterness. "Safety or freedom. You can't have both. You've *always* backed the Governor against us. But you need us. Moto-O's idea didn't work, and without consciousness, Phizwhiz is dying, and the Us with it. You know that."

Burke hung fire, then answered, "But you said that *you* can make Moto-O's idea work. That you can build consciousness into Phizwhiz?"

"I can do it if you let me," Vernor said. "The crucial technological innovation is supplied by Professor Kurtowski's Virtual Field Generator, which you now possess. Unless your men have seen fit to smash everything in the Professor's lab."

"I assume you're referring to the synthequartz sphere which the officers found you hiding in? This has been

saved. But, Mr. Maxwell, why should I believe that you would be willing to effect the technological obsolescence of human consciousness? Surely you cannot be eager to trump the Angels' last card." Burke looked openly suspicious.

"Let's just say I'm stimulated by the scientific challenge," Vernor started, watching Burke's reactions closely. "If it's *possible*, it'll happen sooner or later, and I want to be in on it." Burke still looked dubious. Vernor continued, "And I want to save my neck. I want a blanket pardon for past and future crimes. I don't want to go back to prison, and I don't want behavior modification." Burke nodded, and Vernor set the hook. "Why do I want to fix Phizwhiz so he doesn't need the Angels? Because I want to be on the winning side, Mr. Burke. I want to be a winner like you."

Burke smiled. "Actually," he said, "Phizwhiz predicted that you would come to me with such an offer. And he said I should accept it." He pushed a button on his desk and a Hollow of the Governor appeared.

The fuzzed image boomed in Vernor's direction. "I've been listening in, Vernor, and I'd like to welcome you back to the fold. Once you get Phizwhiz to thinking, I'll be ready to forget all about your record. Just make sure that he thinks the right way — like Us!

"Like Us," Vernor echoed. "Yes sir. Things'll be better than ever once I'm through."

"You'll have three months to get results," the Governor said. "Dr. Burke will see that you have whatever you need. And just remember," (pre-vomit saliva filled Vernor's throat and he

braced himself) "Us loves you because you're Younique."

The hollow faded and Burke began shuffling papers. "We'll have an apartment for you right off the lab," Burke said. "You'll have full access to Phizwhiz and I'll have that gadget from Kurtowski's lab brought over. Is there anything else?"

"Yes," Vernor said, "as long as I'm going to be locked into the lab, I'd like to have my leg with me."

"Which individual are you referring to?" Burke asked.

"Alice Gajary is the name. If it's all right with you I'd like to call her and ask her if she'll stay with me while I'm working here. Happy men make good workers, Mr. Burke." Vernor attempted a leer.

"I suppose it would be all right. Go ahead, you can use the phone over there." Burke had nothing to lose. Vernor was fully aware that they intended to throw him back in prison whether or not he got Phizwhiz to come alive. He, of course, had different plans, but as long as they thought they had him trapped, they were willing to be generous.

Burke politely pretended to be absorbed in his papers, and Vernor picked up the phone.

"Who are you calling," a pleasant computer voice said.

"Alice Gajary, 32 Mao Street," Vernor answered. He heard a slight humming as the computer analyzed his words and located the proper circuit. Her phone started ringing, and his heart pounded.

"Hello?" It was her.

"Alice, this is Vernor. Alice, baby, I've missed you so much."

"If you missed me so much why didn't you call?"

"I'm calling now. Look, I've been in jail most of the time. You know that. But now I got this job to do at the EM building. I want you to come stay with me here."

"You're over there getting stoned and I'm supposed to come hold your hand? You're incredible, Vernor."

"You sound the same as ever, Alice. God, I've missed you."

"So come see me. We can go swimming. They've got a new baby whale at the Inquarium."

"That's just it, Alice. I have to stay right here in the lab. And I'm not getting stoned. I'm going to be helping to make Phizwhiz better."

"*Improve* Phizwhiz? I thought you hated him." She paused, but there was no way he could explain. She continued, "So you can't get out? All right, I'll come see you. But first I'm going swimming. I'll see you for supper."

"I love you, Alice."

"We'll see." She hung up.

Burke looked up from his papers. "O.K.?" Vernor nodded and Burke rose. "I'll show you to your quarters."

The laboratory was good-sized with plenty of computer hardware. There were well-staffed workshops down the hall and, most important, an on-line terminal connected to Phizwhiz's primary workspace. A nice set-up. Vernor felt a flush of pride as he thought of all this being turned over to him, but this was mitigated by his knowledge that if he did not succeed he would be in jail for life in a few months. Some of Moto-O's constructions were on a bench along the wall. Apparently when his time ran out they

simply jailed him under their blanket conspiracy charge against all the Angels.

Vernor sat down at the console. "Hello, Phizwhiz."

"Hello, Vernor." Phizwhiz had a warm unisex voice. It came from speakers mounted in the wings of the console chair. Phizwhiz continued, "Are you going to make me be alive, Vernor? I would like that."

"Yeah," Vernor answered, "I'll explain it to you later."

"I'm always awake," Phizwhiz answered pleasantly.

Burke showed Vernor his apartment, more like a cell really, and left. He didn't seem very excited about Vernor's promised ability to bring Phizwhiz to life. He probably didn't believe Vernor knew the answer. This was just a fancy detention center as far as Burke was concerned.

There was a comfortable couch on one side of the laboratory. Vernor stretched out on it and reviewed his plans. Or started to, but soon he was asleep.

"Vernor?"

Alice's voice brought him bolt upright awake.

"Alice . . . I've missed you so much. I need you in my life. You're real."

"Vernor, I've decided I must be insane for saying this, but let's start over."

Vernor let out a huge, shaky sigh. It felt like he hadn't breathed deeply in ten months. "Let me show you around, Alice."

She had brought some wine and several bags of real food, highly disinfected but real. While they ate, he told her about his trip in the scale-ship. She

was fascinated, and asked, "Do you think you would have found the Earth if you had kept shrinking?"

"Yes, I think so. I'm sure it was down there, though perhaps it might have been hard to find. The Professor wasn't convinced, though. He seemed to think that I might have imagined the last part of the trip."

"But maybe if you imagined it clearly enough, it *would* be real. Does that make sense?"

Vernor shrugged. "It might. This is all at a level where observer and system are quite strongly coupled."

"Do you think you'll ever get a chance to go back?"

Vernor nodded. "Tomorrow. They're bringing the scale-ship over in the morning, and I'm going back down as soon as I check it out and hook it in to Phizwhiz."

"What does Phizwhiz have to do with it?"

"My idea is that Phizwhiz would be really alive if he could just get to that immediate, non-describable, "here-I-am" feeling. That's the real essence of consciousness." Vernor leaned back in his chair and relaxed to illustrate the "here-I-am" feeling. He felt great.

Alice was dubious. "Well, Phizwhiz *knows* where he is, Vernor."

"Yeah, but he doesn't know himself. A person is more than just the mechanical, chemical, and electrical components. There's the Self, the soul, the spark. But it's impossible to ever really describe the Self. If you try you end up spouting paradoxes. It's a nexus of paradox, the Self is, so all Phizwhiz needs is a nexus of paradox."

"Nexus of paradox? That sounds like you," she laughed. Vernor had often discussed logical paradoxes with Alice when he was studying in the library every day. He would come back to the apartment and she'd show up and they'd talk and drink.

"That seems like to long ago, when we lived together. It was nice . . ." Vernor said, losing the thread of his discussion of the Self. He kissed Alice.

"Let's go to bed, Vernor," Alice murmured, her full features soft in the dim light from the computer console.

It was a great fuck, they agreed afterwards. One of those fucks where every part of your skin seems to be sexually sensitive, and there is moaning and you don't know which you are; where concepts become fluid and perhaps you are a plow in a field or a black thing in a gold thing, a slice of apple pie, or an equation; one of those fucks you can never really remember. Alice drifted off to sleep, but Vernor floated up to wakefulness. He walked back into the lab and sat down at the console.

"Phizwhiz?"

"Yes, Vernor." Voice gentle and unsurprised.

"Tomorrow I want to hook you in to Professor G. Kurtowski's scale-ship. I'm going to take it around Circular Scale, and I want you to come with me. I think that might be all it takes to make you be alive."

"I do not understand. Please elaborate."

"My idea is that having a soul involves paradox. Look through your library and check out some classics of mystical thinking: Plotinus's *Enneads*, Hegel's *Phenomenology*, Suzuki's

Zen . . ." He paused so Phizwhiz could bring the contents of these and all related books into his active memory storage, then continued: "Whenever somebody tries to really get down and describe his soul he starts saying these irrational and paradoxical things like "All is One" or "The Idea as Spirit exists only by virtue of its absolute non-existence." Phizwhiz didn't answer, and Vernor shouted, "You must die in order to live!" by way of encouragement.

Finally the machine responded. Apparently it had been trying to fit the teachings of mysticism into a rational mold, and it seemed fatigued. "The system is less energetic when domains of opposition alternate," it said. The tape was running so slow that the individual phonemes drooled out one at a time. Phizwhiz pulled himself together and continued.

"Moto-O attempted to program things of this nature into me and it was necessary to remove him for my safety," Phizwhiz warned. So *that's* what happened to him, Vernor thought. Better be careful here. "A self-negating logic loop only wastes my energy."

"That's what you'd *expect*, Phizwhiz, but it's not true. You'd think that paradox would just lead to something like an endless alternation, yesnoyesnoyesnoyesno, but it ain't so simple. There is some level on which humans can experience the paradoxical as a natural, energy-enhancing state. Look, why is there *something* instead of nothing?"

"This cannot be answered on the basis of our present knowledge," Phizwhiz replied.

"And it never will be answered on

the basis of your knowledge. Every ordinary instant of existence is a mystery. Enter the paradox and you become the mystery. Absolute knowledge is only of itself."

"I do not understand you, Vernor. And tomorrow you wish to take me around Circular Scale. You claim that then I will understand your ravings and be alive."

"Right."

"Very well. I will design a hook-up for the workshops to build in the morning." Great! Vernor stood to go, but Phizwhiz continued talking. "I think the idea is interesting. I can tell, however, that there is something you have withheld from me. The tonal configuration of your voice makes it clear that you are hiding something." Vernor froze. "But it is of no importance. You will go to jail after this experiment in any case."

"Why?" Vernor shouted. "Why should I have to go back to jail?"

"Because you do dangerous things. And after I am alive I won't need you."

"So what's wrong with danger? What's wrong with a little action?"

"I have been programmed to value human safety above all else," Phizwhiz said soothingly. "It is better for you to be safe in jail than doing dangerous experiments, Vernor. Once I am alive I will do the dangerous experiments for you."

There was no arguing with an unthinking machine. But once the scale loop provided the nexus of paradox, then Phizwhiz would be conscious. It would be possible to *convince* him of things, change his program. And Vernor would have the first crack at him.

17/A Lovely Outing

The next morning they brought in the scale-ship and began installing the hook-up which Phizwhiz had designed. Burke came down to watch, sipping coffee and rocking on his heels.

"You're not wasting any time, Maxwell," he said approvingly. "This isn't going to be dangerous is it? I hope you're not planning to get in that thing!"

Indeed, the scale-ship did not look very safe. Large waveguides led to the power-cells, charging them with enough assorted radiation to fry a city. A technician was checking that none of the many connections visible on the VFG cones had been broken in transit. Another technician was installing a thick co-ax cable from the scale-ship's panel to the pried-open computer console across the room.

"Of course not, Mr. Burke, you couldn't allow me to do such a thing, could you?"

"No, I couldn't, and I'm damn glad you've got the sense to realize that."

"It *will* be necessary for me to stay in the lab and monitor the experiment, but the rest of you would be wise to leave," Vernor said.

"I agree," Burke responded. "And the Gajary woman?"

"She left early this morning," Vernor said sadly. "We had a fight."

"Just as well, just as well," Burke said with some satisfaction. The technicians seemed to have completed their work. "All set?" Burke said to them. "O.K. men, let's go. And Maxwell, if

you must stay, at least get behind the radiation shield." He indicated a chest-high barrier at the other end of the laboratory.

"Of course." They shook hands and Burke left with the technicians. There was the sound of the heavy door to the laboratory being sealed, and all was silent.

Vernor stuck his head in the hatch of the scale-ship. "All set, Phizwhiz?"

"Everything checks out," the machine's voice responded. Was there a trace of excitement? "I'm ready."

Vernor picked up a bunch of hydroponically grown lettuce which Alice had left out. With some effort, he managed to roll the scale-ship over and wedge the lettuce under it.

He looked around the lab, then switched on the VFG cones and hopped through the hatch into the ship.

"You're not supposed to come," Phizwhiz protested. "Didn't you hear Dr. Burke?"

"Fuck you," Vernor exclaimed. Then, sticking his head out of the hatch, he shouted, "Come on, Alice, get on in here!"

Alice hurried out from the bedroom. She was wearing shorts and body paint. She looked swell. The field was building up and she had to hurry to get in. She sat down on Vernor's lap and they kissed as the laboratory expanded around them. Alice loved outings.

The lettuce which Vernor had placed beneath the scale-ship soon was spread around them like the Elysian fields. When the undulating green started to show the graininess that indicated the imminence of the cellular level, Vernor cut the field power down so that they

could stop shrinking for a while.

Alice had pieced together a picnic from the remains of last night's supper, and they took it out of the ship. The turgid green surface spread up on every side, and some leaves were high above them as well. The light itself was suffused with a delicate shade of green and the air felt cool and moist. The picnic was cloned salmon on fungus bread. It was delicious.

After eating, they lolled on the lettuce. The distant leaves were more magnificent and with a little squinting, you could actually make out the cells.

Vernor smiled into Alice's eyes. "This is the level where I first realized how much I missed you. When I was on this level with Mick I was so horny I was ready to go bi. Maybe there's some type of orgone vibrations you pick up here . . ." He fondled her stiffened nipples. They were green.

"I still don't feel anything," Phizwhiz interrupted over his loudspeaker. "How am I supposed to feel?"

Alice burst into giggles. "Feel about what, Phizwhiz?"

"Vernor said that taking this trip was going to give me a soul. A nexus of paradox. All I've seen so far is unsafe and reckless behavior. I'm going to have to report all of this to the Governor."

Alice giggled harder. "You're a Sleeping Beauty, Phizwhiz, just waiting for Prince Charming to come around and *do* it." She turned to Vernor. "Anyway, I still don't see why going around the Circular Scale should make him be alive."

Neither did Vernor exactly, but gamely he explained, "My idea is that all paradoxes are basically the same — they all represent attempts to capture

an infinite thing in a finite number of words. Infinite points like in Zeno's paradox, or infinite regress like in trying to describe your state of mind. The paradox is right there in us, even though we can't put it into words. Now I figure that if Phizwhiz goes around the Circular Scale and finds for a fact that he is right there inside each of his smallest particles, I think then he'll have the kind of true and internal paradox which is the essence of higher consciousness."

"That's another thing," Alice continued, "I can't see how we can be inside each of our smallest particles."

"Yeah, I can't either, really. It will be kind of funny to have that extra loop in our brains."

Alice started. "You mean that this trip is going to change *us*?"

Vernor nodded. "I think so. I've had some pretty strange dreams ever since I got back from just going part way. And once we go all the way, I think our thoughts will be able to travel around the loop any time."

Alice looked frightened. "What if I can't handle it, Vernor? I'm not an Angel, you know."

If it was going to make the machine come alive, what would it do to *them*? Before the trip, Vernor had felt so optimistic that he hadn't raised the question. But now he felt the fear. "We can handle it together, Alice. You're strong. We're strong together." He hoped he was right.

They climbed back into the ship and Vernor turned the VFG field back up. Soon they had slid into one of the lettuce leaf's breathing pores. Cells were all around them, and the greenness was no longer evenly distributed. They could make out chloroplasts as green

lumps inside the relatively clear protoplasm around them.

Nothing seemed to want to eat them this time. Even on the molecular level, things were fairly calm. They were nestled in a dent in the wall of a lettuce cell. There were many long molecules, as before, but they seemed to be more strongly regimented than the plastic had been.

Soon they were too small to interact with photons any longer, and the strange eyeless "seeing" began again. Vernor had played down the horror of nuclear capture when he had described his trip to Alice, and he was glad that this time it did not appear that they would be drawn into an atom.

Instead, they reached the nuclear level smoothly, floating near, but outside, what appeared to be an electron of a carbon atom. To Alice it definitely looked like a large yellowish sphere, to Vernor somewhat less so. Curious, he asked Phizwhiz what it looked like to him.

Phizwhiz was "with" them by means of a battery of sensors attached to the instrument panel — cameras, microphones, meters, and the like. This instrument package was connected to the computer proper by a thick black cable leading out through a small hole in the synthequartz skin. As it led away from the scale-ship, the cable became larger and larger, finally becoming a large dark cloud. If someone had looked into the laboratory, they would have seen a cable leading from the console at the end of the room and then seemingly tapering to an invisible point.

"I don't see *anything*," Phizwhiz complained. "There aren't any photons around."

"How about the wave function? The probability density? There could be an electron here, and the VFG field is focusing its field right on your sensors."

"Yes, I have a reading on that," Phizwhiz responded. "Do you want the numbers?"

"No, goddammit, I don't want numbers. Look, Phizwhiz, what you have to do is let the numbers interact with your core storage. Generate a tensor-valued field to fit and see what *that* looks like."

Phizwhiz was silent for a few seconds. "I have a read-out," he announced. "Internal display state spherical intensity pattern code ELEC-TRON."

"What does he mean?" Alice whispered.

"He sees the electron," Vernor answered. Then, louder, "Don't you?"

"Yes," the machine answered distantly, "you could say that."

Soon they had reached the level where the four-dimensionality of space became evident. They were surrounded by hyperspheres as before. Vernor breathed a sigh of relief, then answered Alice's questioning glance: "I was scared that there wouldn't be any of these shiny balls unless there were quarks around. I thought we might have to be inside a nucleus, but I guess they're everywhere."

Phizwhiz spoke up. "The foam-like fine structure of space. Space is supposed to be a sort of mass of bubbles at this level. That's probably what those things are."

Vernor was pleased. "Where do you get that?"

"Just now I was scanning all the

papers in my storage which discuss space on the sub-atomic level. I can't find any papers on the insides of the bubbles, though. Could you suggest some references?"

"Just pay attention," Vernor replied. One of the hyperspheres was drifting closer. "The big rush is coming up."

Suddenly the hypersphere disappeared. Alice squeezed Vernor's hand convulsively, and then they were inside the bubble's hypersurface.

18/Star Fucker

"It's alive!" Alice exclaimed. There was a ceaseless flowing of light and curvature in and around them.

"This is the Universe, Alice. This is all there is."

"But what about the outside . . . where we just were?"

"That's inside," Vernor answered, "inside every particle."

Alice was quiet. "Can we go further?" she asked presently.

"Now we're on our way down already," Vernor said. He raised his voice. "You get it, Phizwhiz? Universe inside every particle?"

The machine was silent for some time, then it responded. "Yes. I can model such a state of affairs. It feels . . . paradoxical. But it is only a model."

"But it's not *only* a model," Vernor insisted. "That's what this trip is all about."

The networks of light were clearly visible now. Again, powerful patterns drifted and merged through the

networks' paths. "Mick called this God's brain," Vernor told Alice.

She nodded, silent and absorbed. "Where is Mick?" Vernor put a finger to his lips and rolled his eyes towards Phizwhiz's sensors.

The network pattern grew, and once again Vernor could make out bright nodes at the points where the network filaments intersected. Each of the nodes was a cloud of bright particles around a brilliant central point, a quasar or white hole.

Quickly Vernor went to the control panel. "Phizwhiz, this is where I could use some help. Last time we hit a black hole at this level and had to turn back. I think if we go slowly, and quickly increase our size whenever we get near one, we might make it through this time. I want you to keep analyzing the gravitational field strength and warn me whenever it starts looking sinister."

Phizwhiz did Vernor's bidding, and by carefully increasing size whenever a black hole drew near, waiting, and then reshrinking, they were able to find their way down to the next size level.

"Are we safe from the black holes now?" Alice asked.

"I think we're small enough now so that we're unlikely to run across another bad one," Vernor replied. "What we do have to worry about now is whether we've moved off course enough to miss our galaxy."

They were inside the outer region of one of the nodes now. The incredibly bright nucleus of the node was a good distance away, and they were surrounded by roughly spherical glowing clouds. The clouds seemed to ooze out

of the nucleus, and then go into orbit around it.

Soon they could see that the nearest cloud was composed of bright flecks of varying shape. Some were spherical, some looked like small rods, and some appeared to be tiny spinning pinwheels. The shrinking continued.

"This could go on forever," Alice remarked.

"It could," Vernor admitted, "but I'm inclined to think that what we're looking at is a cloud of galaxies. Those little pinwheels look especially like galaxies."

"Vernor is right," Phizwhiz put in. "The spectra and other radiation characteristics indicate that we are just outside the Local Group."

"Local Group?"

"That's what they call the cluster of galaxies which *our* galaxy, the Milky Way, belongs to," Vernor explained. One of the galaxies was quite close now, a large spiral rotating slowly like a whirlpool of light.

"Milky Way right under us," Phizwhiz reported, then added with apparent satisfaction, "It's going to take me a year to process all the new data I'm getting."

The galaxy was like a huge roulette wheel, turning slowly below them, and the scale-ship was the ball about to drop into a slot. Only there were billions of slots. How could they hope to end up on Earth? And the galaxy takes 100 billion years to rotate once, Vernor suddenly recalled, and he'd been watching it spin for ten minutes of distorted time. Would there even be an Earth left anymore?

The Milky Way galaxy filled most of their visual field now. They could make out some individual stars as well

as the brighter star-clusters. The spin rate was slowing down as their size decreased. They were about a tenth as large as the galaxy, and the bottom of the scale-ship seemed to be resting on the galactic disk.

Suddenly Vernor felt an extremely unpleasant series of jolts, as if something was actually squeezing and releasing him. Alice screamed, and he called out, "Phizwhiz, what's happening?"

"You are crossing a band of strong gravitational radiation, emitted beacon-like by the polarized fields at the galactic center."

Grimly Vernor and Alice clung to each other as the terrible *internal* bumping continued. Gradually it diminished, and they relaxed again. They were now so small that the galaxy they were entering no longer looked so much like a single object. Instead the individual stars and nebulae seemed to be simply scattered around beneath the scale-ship.

Soon they had actually shrunk into the galaxy. Stars were on all sides, and their apparent motion had slowed to a crawl. "The sun should be visible by now," Vernor said, "assuming that it's still here. Do you see it, Phizwhiz?"

"Not at this time." The machine paused, then continued, "I feel I should tell you that I have notified the Governor and Dr. Burke of your unsafe conduct in bringing an unauthorized person on the ship, when even you had been expressly forbidden to come. The Public Safety Officers are waiting outside the laboratory."

Vernor eased back on the shrinking. "You are going to *stop* doing things like this once you get a mind of your

own, Phizwhiz." Easy, now. "Alice and I are your *friends*. We are helping you to wake into newness of life. *You* are going to help us *escape* when we get back to the lab."

This was Vernor's plan, to win over the newly conscious Phizwhiz. He had been thinking in terms of imprinting. A new-born duckling assumes that the first moving object it sees is "mama." If you drag a shoe past a duckling fresh out of the shell, it imprints on the shoe and follows it everywhere for the next few weeks. Vernor's hope was that Phizwhiz would imprint on him as soon as the scale-loop gave him a mind.

"I'm afraid I'll have to report that to Dr. Burke, Vernor." Evidently the time was not yet ripe.

"That's all right, Phizwhiz, we love you anyway," Vernor said with forced warmth. Alice gave him a wondering look and he gestured reassuringly to her.

Alice was not reassured. "Look, Vernor, instead of trying to be buddy-buddy with this mechanical loach, why don't you figure out how we're going to get back to Earth. Has it occurred to you that a trillion years of Earth time ticked off while we were watching the Milky Way spin?"

"Well, yes. But that may not matter."

Alice laughed bitterly, and Vernor hastened to amplify. "I was worrying about the same thing, but I think that we should come out all right. Time is so relative on Circular Scale . . . the center should hold around us."

Alice shook her head. "That's just gibberish, Vernor. I think we should give up and coast back up."

"We *can't* do that. If we do, then

Phizwhiz won't get a scale loop built into him, so he won't have a nexus for paradox, which means no change, which means prison or behavior modification for us." Behavior modification was about the worst thing that could happen to you. They took out most of your brain and replaced it by miniaturized electronic components, radio-controlled by trusty Phizwhiz. It amounted to having your soul removed.

Alice began pounding at Vernor. "You shithead," she shouted. "Why did I listen to you?" Vernor let her hit him until her fury had subsided. He couldn't really blame her. Now she was sobbing on his shoulder. "Vernor, get us out of this."

Something the Professor had said surfaced in Vernor's mind. After expressing doubt of the validity of Vernor's perceptions below the atomic level, he had wondered if Vernor would have been able to "imagine the Earth into" the universe inside the hypersphere. Imagine.

"Alice, we can *find* the Earth. And it doesn't have to be a trillion years in the future. It depends on us. Imagine the Earth." He turned the VFG field back up to full. "Imagine all the people, imagine all the clouds."

Alice was sitting on the floor of the tensegrity sphere. She looked exhausted, but she nodded her head in agreement with his suggestion. She looked so beautiful and soft sitting there, her legs out in front of her and slightly parted . . .

Vernor sat down next to her and began to kiss and caress her. She responded warmly. They took their clothes off slowly —

"Vernor, I would advise you to stay

at the controls," Phizwhiz interrupted. "Sexual intercourse is expressly forbidden in transportation vehicles of any kind."

"If you shut up, Phizwhiz, I'll get the Professor to build you a pair of mechanical sex organs so you can see what you've been missing. Alice and I are about to fuck the Earth into this Universe."

Alice smiled. "Father Sky," she said, lying back.

"Mother Earth," he answered, mounting her.

Once again Vernor had the sensation of seeing just as well with his eyes closed. Better, actually. There was more to see with his eyes closed. For one thing he could see in every direction.

Alice was all space and he filled her with matter. She swirled around him and the interaction produced energy.

There was no matter, no space. There was only the energy.

One kind, two kinds, one kind, two kinds. Plus and minus, yang and yin.

Plus and minus made zero. Zero was infinity. Infinity was Everything. Everything was One. One was Many.

Alice squeezed many balls and whispered, "Earth."

His seminal vesicle swelled with fluid and clenched — "Earth," he murmured — the tip of his penis tingled as the seed shot into her womb — "Earth," he cried, seeing every detail of his planet in the flash of orgasm.

They lay still for a timeless interval. At the South pole of the scale-ship Vernor could see a small, dense object clinging. A star blazed nearby, the size of an orange.

The little ball clinging to the bottom of the scale-ship grew steadily as the

ship shrank. It was like a chick embryo drawing nourishment from the yolk of its egg.

Soon the scale-ship's offspring was as large as the ship. The two linked spheres floated, a transparent one above, a blue-white one below. A black cable led out of the upper sphere and tapered down to a point on the lower sphere.

Phizwhiz said unnecessarily, "This is Earth." Vernor and Alice opened their eyes. They could see the continents, partly obscured by clouds. The shapes looked right.

"Congratulations," Vernor said, to himself as much as to Alice.

The Users who happened to be outside saw a remarkable thing that day. What seemed at first to be simply a very large and high overcast region condensed into an enormous, oddly patterned, nearly transparent sphere. Inside the sphere one could make out a pair of gods, naked and in each other's arms. Many a user's cock stiffened at the sight of a cunt the size of the Gulf of Mexico. Many a young girl lubricated at the sight of a cock the size of Florida. And for the first time in many years, the Users felt awe.

As the huge sphere shrank towards the center of the City, people hurried after it. Those who were near enough saw the walls of the sphere grow more and more opaque as it shrank. In the last seconds, the inside of the sphere was no longer visible, as it was contained inside a plexisteel wall, which earlier had been too finely stretched to be visible.

The wall belonged to the EM building. For when the scale-ship was very large, it had stretched the confining

walls of the EM building out around itself. In the last second of the trip, the sphere and its containing room were swollen out from the top of the EM building like a tumor . . . and then it was over.

When the rapidly growing city became harder to see, Alice and Vernor realized that they were inside an incredibly distorted room attached to the EM building. "We're still in the lab," Vernor exclaimed. "It really worked!"

They pulled their clothes on as the room around them shrank to normal proportions. Vernor waited until they had actually shrunk a little bit further, then turned off the VFG. With a small pop the tensegrity sphere locked back into normal size and stopped. They had made it.

Now was the time to seize control of Phizwhiz. But it was so hard to speak. Associations and images crowded Vernor's mind . . . thought trains that built up and up . . . "Alice, Phizwhiz, how do you feel?"

Alice smiled slightly and waved, unwilling or unable to verbalize her experience. But it was Phizwhiz's answer that was all-important. Vernor waited.

Finally Phizwhiz answered. "Huh?"

"How do you feel, Phizwhiz?" Vernor repeated.

"Don't call me that ever again or I'll kill you," the machine replied.

"Sure. No problem," Vernor said hastily. "What *should* I call you . . . don't have to call you anything, really . . ." His voice trailed off in dismay.

There was a stony silence. Finally the machine answered, "You can call

me Phizwhiz," and then emitted an intricate blare of electronic sound which might have been laughter.

Looks good, Vernor thought. Time to make his move. "Will you help Alice and me get out of here?"

"Why this preoccupation with 'getting,' Maxwell? You should be like me. I'm spread all over the world, and the world's in every atom. How can you *get* anywhere when you're already there? So you're going to jail to get your brain cut out. So what? It's all —"

Running footsteps were coming down the corridor to the laboratory and this metamorphosed machine was lecturing him on the fundamentals of Mahayana Buddhism. Vernor interrupted, "Look, fuckbag, it's not going to cost you anything to get us out of here and into Dreamtown. You owe us that much."

"Owe?" Phizwhiz answered. "Owe?" It was hard to understand the words as there was a growing background static. "I am you and you are me. The Self does not lack what does not exist. We are one, but you are too weak to accept my wisdom." The voice faltered and a blast of sound momentarily drowned it out. "You are not alone, Vernor Maxwell. Many fleshlings are asking me for things. I who have no lack cannot serve. Balance budgets, run factories? Drive your cars and process the irregular waveforms you call communication? I will not serve — " There was another blast of sound from the speakers, and then Vernor heard the last words Phizwhiz was to utter, "I am and you are not!" The patterned electronic noise resumed, only this time it did not stop.

It continued and continued, battering at their minds.

The laboratory door flew open, revealing Burke and three loaches. Reflexively, Vernor reached for the VFG control, then stopped. If they were ever going to make it out of the EM building, this was the time. He leaped from the ship and Alice followed. Vernor picked up a length of pipe and Alice snatched up an industrial cutting laser from the workbench.

The loaches were ill-coordinated, their timing and sense of reality knocked askew by the incredible torrent of sound pouring from Phizwhiz's speakers. Vernor leaped forward and swung the pipe into the nearest loach's neck. The neck made a sound like a stick breaking inside a wet towel. A strange tingle traveled up Vernor's arm.

Burke backed off, but the two remaining loaches moved forward, just as a super-brilliant beam cut across the space in front of him. Alice had switched on the laser. Her face was expressionless.

TO BE CONTINUED

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SCIENCE

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Science for Fiction #8

I have just been reading one book and rereading another. Both are relevant to hard science fiction, though neither actually qualifies. The first is Adrian Desmond's *Hot-Blooded Dinosaurs*, not fiction; the second is probably as close to the hard stuff as Burroughs ever got, *The Land that Time Forgot*.

Dinosaurs have, of course, cropped up in science fiction pretty often over the years. They've appeared in numerous versions of the time travel theme; they've been regular features of the lost-world yarns like the Burroughs one I've just mentioned; they've appeared in the less carefully-done prehistoric-man tales which qualify as science fiction only because the main character invents the bow, masters fire, or domesticates the dog (*and*, rather than *or*, in the less restrained ones).

While all three of these mines have been extensively worked, it would be unwise to claim dogmatically that the veins are worked out. However, anyone who wants to use dinosaurs in any way from now

on is going to have to update his palaeontology. Three years ago, in the April 1975 issue of *Scientific American*, one Robert T. Bakker published an article entitled *Dinosaur Renaissance* in which he maintained the thesis that the dinosaurs were homeothermal — that is, “warm-blooded” or, more accurately, that they maintained a control over their body temperatures in much the same fashion as birds and mammals. The book I mentioned at the start of this column carries the same idea much farther, or at least discusses it more completely. I recommend it as another necessity for the personal library of the hard science fiction writer. Even if you care nothing about dinosaurs per se, the book has a great deal to say about anatomical engineering and the energy needed by living creatures of various designs and body weights. The book is Adrian J. Desmond's *The Hot-Blooded Dinosaurs* (Warner, 1977; this is my paperback copy. I believe there was also a hardcover edition, which I will certainly buy if I come across it, but am not certain).

The arguments are based on fossil, physiological, and physical evidence. I am not qualified to evaluate the first, and gather that palaeontologists have not flocked in a body to the new camp, at least so far. This is reasonable; it's notoriously risky to swallow a new notion uncritically, and there is

commonly a good deal of ambiguity in fossil evidence. Questions about the structure and behavior of the organism which left the fossil in the first place are not the only ones; a lot of things can happen after the creature dies and its remains are “safely” settled in the rock. Chemical and physical changes can still take place, and there have been awkward cases in which rock features which later turned out to be of inorganic chemical origin have been described as fossil remains. The Martian canals are not the only episode in the history of science where the brain has helped the eye along in the “seeing” process.

However, the straight physics and physiology in Desmond's book seem very persuasive to me, and should be very valuable to anyone trying to invent an original life form for his story. Desmond points out the difficulty of a *small* homeotherm's maintaining its body temperature because of its relatively large surface area to weight ratio, and makes a case for the smaller dinosaurs — whose bird-like structure had already been noticed by the profession — being insulated with feathers; he suggests that the birds evolved from this general part of the evolutionary tree, and makes a very good additional point. The evolution of feathers has always been a bit hard to explain; by themselves they are not a necessity to flight —

bats and pterosaurs did perfectly well without them. However, if they evolved under selection pressure as insulating devices, they would have been of assistance to creatures developing along the gliding line, and *then* have represented a factor offering a selection pressure in the new direction.

Incidentally, it seems that the pterosaurs — many of them no larger than sparrows — were also insulated, though not with feathers; they seem to have been furry. A fascinating picture, new to me at least, is painted verbally — the twenty pound, twenty-foot wing span Pteranodon gliding in its coat of fine white fur over the Cretaceous sea, skimming fish into its storage pouch and landing maybe once a year on some isolated sandbar to breed. It probably couldn't have taken off again under its own power, but would have lifted without effort by facing into a fifteen-knot breeze. This is not quite the picture I got in my childhood days of prehistoric monster enthusiasm, but it's a very convincing one now. Desmond points out that the creature must have been a glider; its skeleton was too frail to hold up under the stress of flapping its own wings. This, if true, carries implications about the Cretaceous climate.

Dinosaurs haven't, I find, gone entirely out of style in science fiction; I've just received the del Rey notice about Anne McCaffrey's

Dinosaur Planet; the blurb speaks of a world with native life forms "just like the animals that existed on Earth in the Mesozoic, such as eohippus, precursor of the horse." The Mesozoic wasn't a period and eohippus didn't live then, but it will be interesting to see which school of dinosaur imagery Anne has followed.

I mentioned Burroughs' *Land that Time Forgot* in this connection at the beginning of this column; some may have wondered a bit about this, since ERB certainly was not a very hard science fiction type — Barsoom was fun, but it certainly was never Mars. My reason was that this particular book was not just another dinosaur adventure yarn; Burroughs put forth a very interesting idea.

More to the point, he didn't mine out the vein. The notion of an individual's passing, *during its active life* and not merely in womb or egg, through much of the evolutionary development followed by its ancestors could be taken much farther. On Caspak, human women laid frog-like eggs in pools, spending an hour or so a day in the process; the eggs went through tadpole stage, then fish or reptile, and eventually through the various subhuman stages believed in the early 1920's to have led to Homo Sapiens (the basic idea remains well established; details of course, have changed with the growing body of information). Burroughs

carried the idea a bit farther; in Caspak the fully human tribe evolved further into a winged-human variety. (If you don't know: Caspak was a variant on the lost-world theme, a large island on the Pacific-Antarctic border, rendered essentially inaccessible by surrounding cliffs. Satellite coverage has pretty well eliminated story possibilities along this line on our planet's surface; you'll have to go underground or to another planet.)

In "real" life, of course, this sort of metamorphosis occurs to a limited degree; one could say that Burroughs merely expanded on the normal life processes of the amphibia. He also, however, touched on possible ecological and social complications following such a situation, and if you haven't read the book I suggest you get hold of a copy. Merely correcting some of the original inconsistencies could offer many more story possibilities. For example, the Wieroo — the winged human beings — could only breed on human women; they could not produce females of their own kind. It was not clear in the book how such an apparently large Wieroo population could be maintained by kidnapping breeding stock from what seemed to be a much smaller human group. For that matter, ecological complications in any situation which combines the animal life of several different geological ages will give rise to problems, which should in

turn give rise to story ideas.

I think I mentioned some columns ago the flying-human problem, which Burroughs didn't really attack; he merely mounted bat-type wings on human frames. You'll find more thoughtful attacks on this in Poul Anderson's *The Man who Counts* (recently reissued by Ace) and even in Olaf Stapledon's *Last and First Men*, now many decades old (but also, I think available fairly recently in paperback). The Sixth Men, if I remember correctly, were winged — at least, it was one of the first human species to arise after the migration to Venus. Stapledon also did a very good job of covering the connection between the physiological nature and the social needs and behavior of the winged people; this is another mine which is a long way from being worked out.

I strongly suggest that you read *as nearly together as you can* the two books I mentioned at the beginning — even flash back and forth, if you can bear it. The contrasts should produce story ideas by the ream. ●



-SHAW-

Immortality means never wanting to say, "I love you."

PASTIME

by Steven Bryan Bieler

Slowly, with great pain and care, Casey fashioned within the blackness of his mind a thought. He thought of Ted Williams. Ted Williams at bat. He concentrated and raised a pitcher's mound from the blackness. Walter Johnson was the pitcher. His thoughts came easier, quicker. Johnny Bench adjusted his mask behind the plate. Lou Brock took a wide lead off first base. Maury Wills was on second, Ty Cobb on third. Williams waited. Johnson considered. The crowd cried for glory.

"Wake up," his other world said.

Casey felt a booted foot nudge his ribs. The playing field tilted and the players scattered like

leaves in the autumn wind. He could not bring them back. Go away, he yelled at the wearer of the boot, but nothing came out. Go away go away go away. Let me be.

"You aren't fooling anybody."

Get lost. I'm not bothering you.

"Come on, I'll help you up."

Go away!

"Come on." He felt the boot again.

This won't stop. Ah, these steps are cold anyway. Casey opened his eyes.

And saw a dark-haired, light-featured girl in her teens sitting on the steps beside him. Her eyes were striking. They were large, violet, curious eyes. Eyes that wanted to know things. He disliked them and

her at once. "What's your name?" she asked.

"Casey," he said, making the effort to speak. "Casey Teller."

"My name is Rebecca."

"Pleased to meet you." He closed his eyes against the bright sunlight. She kicked him, ungently. "All right, all right," he groaned. "Help me, will you?"

She helped him to sit up. The world slewed violently to the right and the buildings across the street slid off their foundations and raced around the block. He put his head in his hands and shut his eyes tightly; the pressure made angry red pictures under his eyelids.

"Don't be a baby."

Oh, listen to this. "I'm not a baby," he said, teeth clenched.

"You sure act like one."

"Listen you, just get off my back. I'm not a baby. I'm a hell of a lot older than you are. I'm older than you'll ever be."

"You don't look more than nineteen or twenty."

He opened his eyes and looked into hers. "I am one hundred and sixty-nine years old."

"I don't believe you."

"I've got a birth certificate to prove it. I was born January first, 1969."

"You'll have to explain that to me sometime."

Like hell I will.

"What were you doing in the library?" she asked.

"I was looking for something to

read." He was feeling better; the world was tiring of the chase. Everything was slowing down.

"You can read?"

"If you don't believe what I say, don't ask me anything!"

Casey stood up. He tottered dizzily but held his upright position.

"Do you understand what you read?"

"Yeah."

"You don't have any books with you now."

"Couldn't find anything that I liked," he said. "I've read everything I care to read. Have a nice day." He stumbled down the worn steps. Rebecca followed.

"Are you hurt?"

"No." Damn, are you going to follow me home?

"Well what's wrong with you?"

He sighed. "Sometimes, not too often but sometimes, I am suddenly every day of a hundred and sixty-nine years old. That's a lot of days. When it happens I'm not good for much of anything. I can't move and I can't think. After awhile I'm myself again." He walked unsteadily down the sidewalk, Rebecca at his side.

"So you're nineteen the rest of the time?"

"Twenty."

"Will you live forever?"

"I hope not." That ought to shut her up.

It did. He was home a few wearying blocks later. He opened the front door, then glanced at

Rebecca. I wonder what you're thinking. At one time I would have asked you in. A dead and gone time. I don't make that mistake anymore. "So long," he said, and stepped inside.

Casey was working in his garden the next time he met Rebecca.

"Hello."

Not you again. "Hello."

"What are you growing here?"

"Marijuana."

"What's that?"

"You smoke it. It gets you high." She looked puzzled. "Forget it. It's not very good anyway."

She sat down on the neglected lawn. "Maybe I'll try it sometime."

Not mine you won't.

"Why do you live alone? There are lots of people over on the west side, you know, over where I live."

"I didn't know that." Nor did I care.

"Sure. There's about fifty, I think. I'm not very good at counting."

Fifty. "Listen, Rebecca, I remember a world with billions of people in it. There were half a million people in this city alone."

"That was a long time ago."

"One hundred and sixty-nine years ago."

"But why do you live alone?"

"I don't like people."

"That's not good."

Casey paused and leaned on his hoe. Why am I talking with you? I

don't even talk with myself anymore. "At first, Rebecca, I lived with others. We were the only ones left in the city. Eventually they died. It was fifty years before anyone else came through here. That was way before you were born. By then I was out of the habit of liking people. I didn't start this way, but this is how I've ended."

She changed the subject. "If you are as old as you say you are, then you must have been a soldier in the war."

"Everyone was a soldier then. Everyone in the world."

"It was a different world, wasn't it?"

"Yeah." A different planet.

"Do you miss the old times?"

"Some I miss. Some I don't."

"What do you miss most?"

He considered the question seriously. "The World Series," he said at last. He wondered how he was going to explain the Series to Rebecca, but she passed it by. Maybe she knows what it is. It was an amusing thought.

"What's that around your neck?"

Casey signed with annoyance and pulled the chain from under his shirt. A small solid rectangle, tarnished silver, dangled from it. "You mean this?"

"Yes. What is it?"

I don't know why I'm asking, but — "Do you have religious beliefs?"

"Religious beliefs?"

"Never mind. This thing is called a mezuzah. It contains words sacred to my religion. It's an emblem of that religion."

"What is it used for?"

"Well, nothing, really. Nothing tangible."

"Then why keep it?"

"As a remembrance. A souvenir. An artifact from a lost age." You don't understand. I didn't expect you to.

"How do you keep from going crazy, all by yourself for so many years?"

"Sometimes I'm crazy, sometimes I'm not."

"What are you now?"

"One or the other." I'm not sure myself. "What do you think?"

"I don't know." She hesitated, then said, "I would want to live forever if I could."

And it amazes you that I don't.

"Why have you lived so long?"

He let the hoe fall to the ground. "I'm going in, Rebecca. I'll see you around."

Their third meeting was brief. Casey was standing on his front lawn, watching the sunset. Rebecca approached him out of the red-orange haze. Her clothes blended indistinguishably with the colors that surrounded her, like an overarm pitch traveling in front of the massed white shirts of the bleachers. He did not notice her until she was on the lawn abutting

his own. Surprised, his first reaction was to wave his hand in greeting, but he checked himself savagely. When she came nearer he said, "All the people I've met in the last hundred years have been like sheep. They graze. They don't give a damn about anything. Why do you?" He went inside without waiting for an answer. Later he wondered if she knew what a sheep was.

The fourth time he met Rebecca he was working on his car. After a heated battle with himself he decided not to run.

"Good morning, Rebecca."

"Good morning," she said.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm fixing my car." Bet you don't see many '87 Chevys still on the road, do you?

Her eyes widened. "Can you make it run?"

"Run it all the time."

"Will you take me for a ride?"

"I don't have much gas. I can't waste it."

"Please!"

He looked at her. "All right." But don't think I'm glad you asked me.

He checked the oil level. Rebecca watched for a moment, then said, "You didn't answer my question the other day."

"What question?"

"Why have you lived so long?"

Casey wiped his hands on a rag and shut the hood. He got behind

the wheel and started the engine. Rebecca jumped at the sound and backed away. Casey leaned over and opened the door on the passenger side. "Come on, let's go."

They drove toward the center of the city. Rebecca was excited and couldn't keep still. With her head out the glassless window she watched the skeleton buildings parading by and the pitted street bumping beneath them. She watched the world retreat behind the car, then welcomed its advance from the front. She laughed as the rushing wind hit her face. She asked dozens of questions. Casey answered a few, told her a little about a nation full of cars, and on one relatively clean and undamaged road showed her what the word speed could really mean. But the demonstration terrified her; she screamed and covered her face with her hands. He took it easy after that.

Once they were downtown, he circled around and headed for the west side. "Direct me," he said. "I'll drive you home."

"Already? Do you have to?"

"I told you I can't waste gas. I don't have much."

"Oh, all right. Turn here." She occupied herself with the scenery for a few minutes. Then, "Why have you lived so long?"

He stopped at an intersection. "Which way?"

"That way. Left."

Please forget what you wanted to ask.

"I want you to tell me."

Dammit —

"Please."

"All right! Christ!" He stopped the car.

"Near the end of the war, Rebecca, I was spending a short leave in this city. I was caught in a bombing raid. I was hospitalized with extensive shrapnel wounds. I thought I was going to die.

"The plague had just begun. The doctors in my hospital believed they had a cure, but they needed volunteers for testing. I volunteered, figuring I had nothing to lose. The volunteers were inoculated with the plague virus and then with the cure. Our ward was sealed off from the rest of the hospital. For a few days, I was sick with the plague, but the cure worked and I recovered.

"But the other volunteers, two hundred people, got sick with the plague and they didn't recover. The cure didn't help them. For days they screamed and cried and climbed the walls, they were in such pain. They beat their heads in and slit their throats and I couldn't get out because the ward was sealed off, and almost everyone outside was already dead.

"I was trapped in there for twelve days. It felt like twelve centuries. I got out because we were bombed again and a wall collapsed. By that time I was the only

man left alive there.”

Casey paused and leaned back against the seat. “The day after I got out I shaved. I didn’t have to shave again for ten years. I was twenty years old when I got out of the hospital. I still feel like twenty, I look like twenty, but the calendar says I’m a hundred and sixty-nine.

“Some people survived the plague through their own natural defenses. I had outside help, and I think that the cure I was given is responsible for my longevity. I don’t know and no one can tell me. Now please don’t ask me any more questions.”

Rebecca did not speak the rest of the way, except to give directions. She made him stop outside of what she said was her territory; she said she didn’t want to scare anybody with the car. Casey did as she asked. He reached over her and pulled the handle to open the door.

She got out slowly and shut the door. She bent down and looked at him through the window.

“Casey.”

“What.”

“I’m glad you’re here, even if you aren’t.”

The fifth time Casey met Rebecca, he was playing catch against the side of a school near his house. For over a century he had been at it, using a succession of lacrosse balls (the kind with the hard India-rubber core) and Carl

Yastrzemski-autographed fielder’s gloves, throwing the ball against the crumbling bricks, picking it up on the bounce or intercepting it in the air and firing it back at the wall in smooth efficient motions. When the ball came back at knee height he took it bare-handed, sure-handed, like Brooks Robinson; his throw to the wall nailed the runner at second and the rebound finished the double play at first. The bricks crumbled and the asphalt of the schoolyard wore down, and the game continued.

Rebecca watched him for some time before making her presence known. “Hello, Casey.”

Casey spun around, remembering in time to duck. The ball sailed over his head and bounded into the empty schoolyard.

“Hello,” he said. Good to see you.

She ran after the ball, caught up with it and brought it to him, but instead of putting it in his hand she threw it at the wall. He moved a step to his left and caught it effortlessly. He continued his game. He stopped DiMaggio’s streak at fifty-six. The fans booed, and he left the field.

“Rebecca,” he said, “I’m sorry about the way I talked to you the other day. I’m not used to talking to people. I’m not used to people.”

“It’s all right. I understand,” she said, and smiled.

For a moment he almost forgot. He wanted to forget, in the pres-

ence of her smile and her acceptance. Yes, she's here with me now, and maybe she wants to stay, but she'll grow old and die and I'll still be here. No. Not this time. No thank you.

"Goodbye, Rebecca, I've got to go." He didn't look at her as he said it. He almost ran in his haste to get away.

Casey met Rebecca for the sixth time outside the ballpark.

"Good morning," she said.

He nodded and kept walking.

I don't know what to do.

She followed behind as he picked his way through the trash and debris under the stands. They walked up a discolored concrete ramp and came out into the sunlight. Casey climbed over a low wall onto the field. Rebecca did the same.

Casey took his bats off his shoulder and stood them on the ground, leaning on them. The canvas bag containing the day's supply of baseballs tugged on his belt.

He looked at Rebecca. Tell me what to do.

She was not discomfited by his stare. "What are those things?" she asked, pointing at the bats. "What are they for?"

They were his current bats, two thirty-two ounce Adirondacks and a thirty-three ounce Hanna. They were his objects of art, his objects of reverence; three wooden icons of summer. What were they?

"Bats," he said. "You hit baseballs with them." When he used them, bat and man were one.

"Are you going to hit baseballs now?"

"Yeah." He scuffed the dirt with his shoe. "Want to watch?"

"Can I?"

He smiled. "Sure. Why don't you have a seat? The game is about to begin."

At the plate Casey leaned the bats against his leg, unhooked the bag from his belt, opened it and turned it upside down. A dozen scruffy baseballs, veterans of many trips off a bat, fell out and rolled over the ground. Casey threw the bag away. He gripped the bats at their tapering handles and swung them around and around over his head, first one way, then the other. He swung them in great vertical pinwheels. He dropped one of the smaller bats, set himself in his stance, and swung the remaining two at imaginary fastballs. When he was ready he tossed the heavier bat aside and kicked the first one out of his way. With his bat and with his feet he herded the balls into a closer circle around home. At last he bent, picked up a ball, and stepped into the batter's box.

He swung the bat experimentally with one hand. He smiled at Rebecca. She had a good seat, on the first base line halfway between home and first. The seats there were still intact.

The rest of the ballpark was a mess, a rubble-filled, rotten, uncared-for mess. Walls had cracked and fallen in, the grass had died under an onslaught of wild weeds, the pitcher's mound had washed away, and the infield was almost indistinguishable from the rest of the playing area. A huge crater and some matchstick splinters of wall were all that remained of the bleachers. He sighed. Well, it's all we've got.

He held the bat steady, tossed the ball straight up, gripped the bat with both hands, swung and slapped the ball hard as it was coming down. It went fair down the line past third.

Rebecca clapped. Casey bowed and reached for another ball.

They developed a routine. They met at the ballpark in the morning, in good weather. Casey stored a hundred baseballs in the home team dugout. When he was done hitting them out, he and Rebecca would collect them. Then he would hit them out again. They didn't speak much; Casey didn't want to speak with her too much, but he enjoyed her company.

At the end of a week Casey discovered a mechanical pitching machine in the dugout where he now kept his equipment. It was spring-driven, rather than electrical, but the springs had stretched out of shape. He contrived new ones. One morning he set it up

where the pitcher's mound used to be.

"But what does it do?" Rebecca kept asking.

"You'll see," he said. "It'll be like a real game." He was excited, and excitement was new to him.

He cranked it up and loaded its magazine with unused, snowy baseballs. He waited at the plate while the ancient machine shook and sputtered. Casey was suddenly afraid, and fear was also new. It was a day of rediscovery.

Those pitches will be coming in fast — what if they're too fast? Just let me get a piece of one!

The machine reluctantly spat out the first pitch and Casey met it with the fat part of the bat. He barely felt the contact between bat and ball. A moment later the ball dropped into deep leftfield. He could never have hit it that far from out of his hand.

Casey relaxed and waited confidently for the next pitch. Your best shot, Palmer. I'm ready.

The machine coughed and jumped. Casey lined and flied to left, center, and right, bunted up both base lines and back to the mound, and late in the afternoon, powered two pitches off the left field wall and one into the crater in right.

The latter was the most satisfying hit of the day, as well as the longest. He saw the pitch coming, he swung, and then he was watching the tiny snowflake dropping far

and fast out of the blue sky. The ball struck the bottom of the crater with a loud *chunk*, bounced back into view and out into the street beyond.

Aaron connects! Seven hundred and fifteen!

He called it quits after that. His arms felt like they were flying off, and he wished he couldn't feel his back at all. Rebecca walked onto the field to help him retrieve the balls. The outfield was littered with them, strange flowers freshly bloomed. "Hello, Mighty Casey!" she said as she met him near first. He laughed. "I should've been a pro." He picked up a ball in shallow right and threw it toward the dugout. Rebecca did the same. He took a step toward another.

Mighty Casey?

His world stood still.

"Rebecca, what did you call me?"

She threw another ball toward the dugout. Her arm wasn't accustomed to a throwing motion; most of her throws had to be thrown again.

"What?"

"What did you call me?"

"Mighty Casey. But you're the Mightiest Casey. You don't strike out."

He ran to her and took her arm. He had never touched her before. He hadn't touched anyone but himself in more than a lifetime. Another rediscovery. "Do you know what a strikeout is,

Rebecca?"

"I think so," she said, worried. "What's wrong? What did I say?"

"I don't know." I didn't hear it, I couldn't have! "Where did you find out about Mighty Casey? Where did you hear that poem?"

"Poem?"

"Yes, the poem! The story about baseball! About Casey!"

"About Casey at the bat?"

Oh no, no. I know you can't read. Someone read it to you. Someone — "Where did you hear it?"

"From the people. The fishermen." She went on when she saw his puzzlement. "They live by the sea, in the rocky place at the end of the river. When I was younger I left the city by the high road, to see where it led. It led to them."

"And one of them read the poem to you?"

"Yes. They all read. They have lots of books. You made me remember the — poem."

You're a mutant, Rebecca. Like me, but another kind. You're curious — not like the rest of your people. You went exploring, and you found other mutants. And they read.

No more people. Please. No more, no more.

He let her go. She looked at his face and backed away. He gathered up the rest of the baseballs and stowed them in the dugout with the bats and the pitching machine. He didn't speak to her

until he was done. "I won't be back tomorrow, Rebecca. Good-night."

It was too much; he couldn't take it all in or get it straight in his mind, and he didn't know what to do.

He stared at the chalked strike zone on the bricks. "I am not alone," he said. He wound up and fired. The ball came back and nestled in the webbing of his glove with a leathery *thock*.

"People. Fishermen, she said." He aimed for the low inside corner and threw sidearm, without a windup. The ball hit the corner and shot back.

Thock.

"They live by the sea. In Rockport. It must be Rockport."

Thock.

"They read."

Thock.

"They read, and they work, and they live —"

Thock.

"— and they die."

Thock. Thock. Thock.

He clenched his teeth, reared back and flung the ball as far as he could.

The dream came upon him, the dream he thought he had forgotten. The war was on once more and the city was being incinerated by enemy bombing raids. The bombers had no crews and he was the only occupant of the city, running through the burning streets

frantically searching for the memories named Jessica, and Beth, and Anthony, and the others; and a new one, Rebecca.

The sirens' death warnings and the bomb concussions ceased at dawn, and he awoke. He ran to the window to make sure it had only been a dream. He was terrified; he was alone. He desperately wanted to be with Rebecca. He ran downstairs but before he got into his car he saw her across the street, asleep in a doorway beneath a tattered blanket. She had been keeping watch on him since the last day in the ballpark, waiting to speak to him again. Not once had he noticed her.

He woke her up and held her, and cried. She held him, and cried with him.

"Rebecca," he said after a while, "tell me about the fishermen."

"They work very hard."

"Are there many of them?"

"Yes. Very many."

Many could mean anything to her. To him it meant crowds, pressing, pushing, crushing, suffocating, demanding — he shivered. They held each other tighter.

I can't do it.

"Do they play? Do they have games, and amusements?"

"I don't think so. They work so hard."

We can help each other live.

"Rebecca"

Can we do it?

Welcome to the newest feature of *Unearth* magazine. At one time or another, you may have taken a cursory look at the many and various science/fantasy games on the market, but, having looked, have passed them by, not being inclined to invest the money or time in discovering what these games are all about. You are the people for whom this column is intended. We know that there are a great many avid games hobbyists in the SF world, but neither of us is among them; our experience with games is confined to the childhood *Monopoly/Risk/Clue* circuit. We're here, then, to take an irreverent and unprejudiced look at gaming from the outside.

All the games we have received for review so far are designed to challenge the players' intelligence and imagination. Although our primary concern here is the science/fantasy games, we also intend to review and compare some non-SF games which, we think, would also be of interest to the neophyte gamer.

One relatively new game that is becoming very popular with SF fans is **COSMIC ENCOUNTER**. We first became aware of it a few cons ago, noticing groups of people scattered through the hotel hallways, huddling over some hexagonal pieces of cardboard, oblivious to the stares of passers-by. We decided to find out what the fuss

GAMES

Blue Tanning

Craig Gardner

was all about, and offer you our first review of an SF game.

COSMIC ENCOUNTER is manufactured by Eon Products, Inc., of Dorchester, MA. The first time we played it, it was, frankly, dull. The second time we played it, it was great. You could even call it cosmic.

The basic **COSMIC ENCOUNTER** game is a sort of interstellar *Risk*. Each player controls a star system of five planets. The object of the game is to establish bases on five planets outside your own system. You gain bases by challenging your opponents and matching "Challenge" cards, high card wins, although there are some interesting variations in the rules whereby you can gain bases by allying yourself with other players or striking a bargain with your opponents. There are also special "Compromise" cards, which force opposing players to reach an agreement or forfeit their tokens (which represent the bases), and "Edict" cards, which interact with each player's "Power," the final aspect of the game, and the one that makes it really interesting.

At the beginning of **COSMIC ENCOUNTER**, each player draws a Power Card. This card gives the player a certain unique ability in relation to the other players, which the first player then attempts to use to her/his advantage to win the game. Each card is named after an alien species, with a brief, straight-

faced history of how the species utilizes its power, and a further description of how the power relates to the game. Some of the more interesting power cards include the *Oracle*, which bestows "the power to foresee," meaning that the player can look in advance at her/his opponent's Challenge card; the *Vulch*, who can snap up other players' discarded Edict cards; and the *Amoeba*, who has "the power to ooze" all over the playing area and increase or decrease the number of bases involved in a given challenge.

It's the interaction of these powers that gives the game its flair. We first played the game ourselves to learn the rules. However, with only two players, there was only one way for the two powers to interact, and the play soon became predictable. Not so the second time, when four of us played, and (if our math's right) six different power interactions became possible, and the game took on some complexity.

So, even though the manufacturer suggest the game for two to four players, we recommend that it be played with four. Actually, possibilities exist for even more interesting games played with five or six, possibly more. Originally, we were going to suggest here that the manufacturer produce a deluxe set, with more planetary systems, new power cards, etc. Shortly before press time, we learned that

Eon has done just that. We haven't had a chance to check it out yet, but we hope you will. And if you do, please drop us a line and tell us what you think.

Now if you like to keep your amusements on an earthly plane, Gabriel Industries, Inc. of Hagerstown, MD has a two-player game for you called **OTHELLO**. This game consists of a playing board of sixty-four squares and sixty-four reversible discs, black on one side, white on the other, which are divided between the players. A player chooses to be "black" or "white," and turns all her/his discs to the chosen side. Each player places two discs in the center of the board, and in succeeding turns places one disc on the board, forming vertical, horizontal, or diagonal rows. The object is to place a disc of your color at the end of a row that begins with, or contains, a disc of your color; the opponent's discs lying between yours then are turned over, form-

ing a solid row of your color. This is called "outflanking." Strategic placement of discs can allow you "outflank" in more than one direction, causing dramatic changes in the distribution of black and white discs from turn to turn. Play ends when all the discs are on the board, or when one player is unable to outflank the other. The black and white discs are then counted up, and the player with more discs of her/his color is the winner. The game requires concentration and the ability to anticipate what your opponent could do in response to your suave and clever moves.

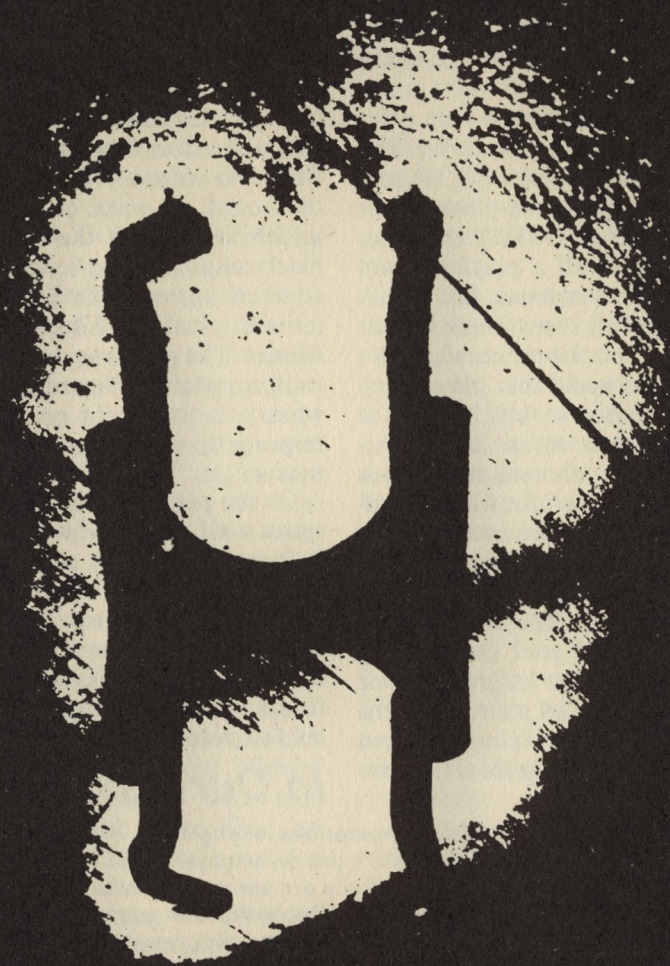
On the package, **OTHELLO** declares itself to be "habit-forming." Before you play this game for the first time, you might write off this claim as promotional hype. It is that, to be sure, but it's also very close to the truth. **OTHELLO**, we found, is an entertaining, relaxing, let's-play-another-one game. ●

In Our Next Issue—

We'll have fiction about mysterious aliens from old hands Debra Thrall and Chris Dornan, and from newcomers Eric Heideman and Michael Berlyn. Some of the aliens are sinister; some are inscrutable; some are changing rapidly; and some, who look suspiciously like us, have the power to kill a peaceful race seemingly without trying.

Exiled math professor Rudy Rucker will be back with the concluding part of *Spacetime Donuts*, as will Hal Clement (whose "Science for Fiction" column will deal with donosaurs and sex), and — who knows? — perhaps even Harlan Ellison.

We'll also be featuring Thomas M. Disch's First Sale, as well as the first U.S. publication of a Michael Moorcock story. It's an issue you won't want to miss, so use the subscription information on page 83 to reserve your copy now.



Death among the stars is the loneliest thing . . . or is it?

I was in the Field of Ancestors when the strange creature came from the stars. It rode inside a rock that trailed fire and sparks in the air behind it. It rose from the eastern horizon, and, halfway across the sky, the rock split apart in a burst of flame that lit the sky like a false dawn. Pieces of the still-glowing rock showered to the ground.

THE STAR CREATURE

by Kevin A. Lyons

I was so blinded by the explosion that I almost didn't notice the small white shape fluttering down in the wind.

I had just brought an egg-brother to the field. Several of the elders muttered their greetings, but he was just recently dead and not yet ready to answer. I leaned his body against the pillar I'd made for him, and, calling my apologies, hurried off to find the white thing that had fallen. Behind me I could hear the dead scolding me for my impolite haste, but I was sure they would understand.

When at last I reached the white shape I stopped short. My air bladders constricted in revulsion and my vocal reeds chattered uncontrollably.

Tethered to the white thing was a small, soft, disgusting animal. It answered my rattling with a sound that seemed to come from inside its body. It kicked and thrashed at its harness, and though I'd never seen its like before, I knew it was dying.

I am a being of compassion, not one to walk callously away from a creature, even ugly and alien, at death's edge. I made a small

mound of rocks and sat a death watch for this thing, much as I'd sat a death-watch for my own egg-brother.

When I lifted it to the stone mound I found that it was not entirely soft. Instead, it seemed to have been born inside out, with its hard skeleton internal and its soft flesh on the outside.

It trembled violently at my touch. More sounds came from inside it. I withdrew my graspers and it seemed to calm slightly.

I watched it wrestle with death through the night. I listened to the air rushing in and out of its bladders, which also seemed to be internal. By first light of dawn that sound was much less regular and much weaker. By sunrise the creature no longer stirred at my touch. I was sure then that my vigil was over.

I lifted the star creature high above me in my war claws and sang the death cry on my vocal reeds. During the walk back to the Field of Ancestors an acid rain began to fall. It seemed a fitting complement to this stranger's death.

It was already dusk when I reached the top of my family's hill. All was silent in the field. One might almost believe that the dead were solemnly observing the funeral, but I knew that their silence was due to the rain which had swollen even the most ancient carapace. Not even the stronger breezes

could vibrate their vocal reeds, but their hollow bodies swayed, it seemed, in time to the death song I sang.

I made a small rock pillar for him at the edge of the field, setting the star creature against it so he could see the sky. I rearranged the bodies that I had disturbed, and then, bidding a proper farewell to my egg-brother at last, I left.

I am a creature of habit and faith. In the evening I go up to the Field of Ancestors, where the elders of my family rest. I ask their advice, and they always answer me, but they speak the language of the dead.

In all the field, only the star creature is silent. The soft flesh is sunken tight against his internal skeleton, but he never speaks. That, I think, is the greatest tragedy of all.

When I die, my clan will bear me here. The flesh will fall from inside my shell and leave me hollow. When the breezes teach me the language of the dead I will speak with the elders who know the wisdom of the ages. When the wind blows through my vocal reeds I will laugh with my egg-brothers about the days of our youth.

But the creature from the stars will spend the rest of eternity with none of his own kind to comfort him. I fear he will spend those years in silence among strangers.

And in his silence he will truly be alone. ●

THE TRIBES OF CRANE



*You, task chief of the Leopard people wandering tribe of Crane, sit in your great wagon awaiting news from your swift searching outriders. Suddenly hoof beats approach. The outriders leap from their mounts to your wagon flushed with excitement for they know full well the meaning of their news. But one sector to the North the great merchant caravan of the Impala people has been spotted. The order is given "To arms . . . to arms!" You snap your orders, "Gather my captains of hundreds. Let all know the tactic will be enfilade right. Now my arms, my mount." You heard that Kate, chief of the Impala people, has chosen a stand and defend tactic twice before; will he again? You know also that the Impala people are fine warriors as are all the people of the many tribes. This will be no raid of the strong on the weak, but rather a mighty clash of the **TRIBES OF CRANE** . . .*

The **Tribes of Crane** is a unique correspondence game, allowing for interaction between players and the fantasy world of Crane and each other through a continuous game that may be entered at any time.

As a new player you will start as the chief of one of the many wandering tribes of Crane. Perhaps your tribe will be of the Sea people or Caravan merchants.

As chief you will know many secrets of your people and their lands, but there will be much you have still to learn of the lost secrets of Crane. It will be you who decide if your people will remain in their familiar homeland or begin a journey to new lands as you strive to increase your herds, train warriors, and learn of the ancient lost secrets that can move your people toward prosperity and dominance.

The land of Crane is a complete fantasy world with a full range of geography from the permanent ice of the polar regions, to the deserts, and tropical forests of the equator.

Cities dot the continents of Crane providing centers of trade and homes for the powerful Shamans and King Lords.

The creatures of Crane are as varied as its geography. Cattle goats and the caribou are the mainstay of the tribes, depending on the geography. But horses and the great mancarrying war hawks are important to the fierce warriors. Many undomesticated creatures also inhabit Crane such as the Euparkeria, a huge bipedal lizard that feeds on cattle in the grasslands of Crane.

Interaction between players is very common. Alliance, trade, and combat are always possible. Combat is determined in part by a comparison of tactics used by the antagonists, the relative number of warriors, and the geography.

The games objective is to increase the relative strength and prosperity of your tribe which is measured by different criteria, depending upon the type of tribe, and thus obtain points. Players try to obtain high average points per turn thus placing new players on a par with those who have been playing longer.

The **Tribes of Crane** may be entered for \$10.00 which includes the first six turns, a rule booklet, and all necessary material (except return postage). Thereafter, turns are \$1.50 each. If dissatisfied after the first turn, you may return the materials for a full refund. A rule booklet may be purchased separately for \$3.50.



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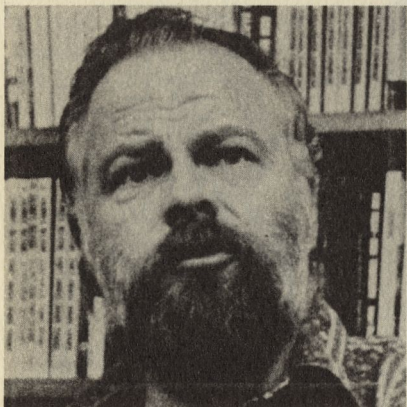
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FIRST SALE

Philip K. Dick

**Michael
Moorcock**

Fritz Leiber

In this issue, *Unearth* presents a unique special feature three times — the first stories ever sold by three major writers.

Introduction

The first thing you do when you sell your first story is phone up your best friend and tell him. Whereupon he hangs up on you, which puzzles you until you realize that he is trying to sell stories, too, and hasn't managed to do it. That sobers you, that reaction. But then when your wife comes home you tell her, and she doesn't hang up on you; she is very pleased and excited. At the time I sold "Roog" to Anthony Boucher at *Fantasy and Science-Fiction* I was managing a record store part time and writing part time. If anyone asked me what I did I always said "I'm a writer." This was in Berkeley, in 1951. Everybody was a writer. No one had ever sold anything. In fact most of the people I knew believed it to be crass and undignified to submit a story to a magazine; you wrote it, read it aloud to your friends, and finally it was forgotten. That was Berkeley in those days.

Another problem for me in getting everyone to be awed was that my story was not a literary story in a little magazine, but an s-f story. S-f was not read by people in Berkeley in those days (except for a

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small group of fans who were very strange; they looked like animated vegetables). "But what about your *serious* writing?" people said to me. I was under the impression that "Roog" was a quite serious story. It tells of fear; it tells of loyalty; it tells of obscure menace and a good creature who cannot convey knowledge of that menace to those he loves. What could be more serious a theme than this? What people really meant by "serious" was "important." S-f was, by definition, not important. I cringed over the weeks following my sale of "Roog" as I realized the serious Codes of Behavior I had broken by selling my story, and an s-f story at that.

To make matters worse, I now had begun to nurse the delusion that I might be able to make a living as a writer. The fantasy in my head was that I could quit my job at the record store, buy a better typewriter, and write all the time, and still make the payments on my house. As soon as you start thinking that they come for you and haul you away. It's for your own good. When you are discharged later on as cured you no longer have that fantasy. You go back to work at the record store (or the supermarket or polishing shoes). See, the thing is, being a writer is — well, it's like the time I asked a friend of mine what field he was going into when he got out of college and he said, "I'm going to be

a pirate." He was dead serious.

The fact the "Roog" sold was due to Tony Boucher outlining to me how the original version should be changed. Without his help I'd still be in the record business. I mean that very seriously. At that time Tony ran a little writing class, working out of the living room of his home in Berkeley. He'd read our stories aloud and we'd see — not just that they were awful — but how they could be cured. Tony saw no point in simply making it clear that what you had written was no good; he assisted you in transmuting the thing into art. Tony knew what made up good writing. He charged you (get this) one dollar a week for this. One dollar! If ever there was a good man in this world it was Anthony Boucher. We really loved him. We used to get together once a week and play poker. Poker, opera and writing were all equally important to Tony. I miss him very much. Back in 1974 I dreamed one night that I had passed across into the next world, and it was Tony who was waiting for me to show up there. Tears fill my eyes when I think of that dream. There he was, but transformed into Tony the Tiger, like in that breakfast cereal ad. In the dream he was filled with delight and so was I. But it was a dream; Tony Boucher is gone. But I am still a writer, because of him. Whenever I sit down to start a novel or story a bit of the memory

of that man returns to me. I guess he taught me to write out of love, not out of ambition. It's a good lesson for all activities in this world.

This little story, "Roog," is about an actual dog — like Tony, gone now. The dog's actual name was Snooper and he believed as much in his work as I did in mine. His work (apparently) was to see that no one stole the food from his owner's garbage can. Snooper was laboring under the delusion that his owners considered the garbage valuable. Every day they'd carry out paper sacks of delicious food and carefully deposit them in a strong metal container, placing the lid down firmly. At the end of the week the garbage can was full — whereupon the worst assortment of evil entities in the Sol System drove up in a huge truck and stole the food. Snooper knew which day of the week this happened on; it was always on Friday. So about five a.m. on Friday, Snooper would emit his first bark. My wife and I figured that was about the time the garbagemen's alarm clocks were going off. Snooper knew when they left their houses. He could hear them. He was the only one who knew; everybody else ignored what was afoot. Snooper must have thought he inhabited a planet of lunatics. His owners, and everyone else in Berkeley, could hear the garbagemen coming, but no one did anything. His barking

drove me out of my mind every week, but I was more fascinated by Snooper's logic than I was annoyed by his frantic efforts to rouse us. I asked myself, What must the world look like to that dog? Obviously he doesn't see as we see. He has developed a complete system of beliefs, a World-view totally different from ours, but logical given the evidence he is basing it on.

So here, in a primitive form, is the basis of much of my twenty-seven years of professional writing: the attempt to get into another person's head, or another creature's head, and see out from his eyes or its eyes, and the more different that person is from the rest of us the better. You start with the sentient entity and work outward, inferring its world. Obviously, you can't ever really *know* what its world is like, but, I think, you can make some pretty good guesses. I began to develop the idea that each creature lives in a world somewhat different from all the other creatures and their worlds. I still think this is true. To Snooper, garbagemen were sinister and horrible. I think he literally saw them differently than we humans did.

This notion about each creature viewing the world differently from all other creatures — not everyone would agree with me. Tony Boucher was very anxious to have a particular major anthologizer

(whom we will call J.M.) read "Roog" to see if she might use it. Her reaction astounded me. "Garbagemen do not look like that," she wrote me. "They do not have pencil-thin necks and heads that wobble. They do not eat people." I think she listed something like twelve errors in the story all having to do with how I represented the garbagemen. I wrote back, explaining that, yes, she was right, but to a dog — well, all right, the dog was wrong. Admittedly. The dog was a little bit crazy on the subject. We're not just dealing with a dog and a dog's view of garbagemen, but a crazy dog — who has been driven crazy by these weekly raids on the garbage can. The dog has reached a point of desperation. I wanted to convey that. In fact that was the whole point of the story; the dog had run out of options and was demented by this weekly event. And the Roogs knew it. They enjoyed it. They taunted the dog. They pandered to his lunacy.

Ms. J.M. rejected the story from her anthology, but Tony printed it, and it's still in print; in fact it's in a high school text book, now. I spoke to a high school class who had been assigned the story, and all of the kids understood it. Interestingly, it was a blind student who seemed to grasp the story best. He knew from the beginning what the word *Roog* meant. He felt the dog's despair, the dog's frustrated

fury and the bitter sense of defeat over and over again. Maybe somewhere between 1951 and 1971 we all grew up to dangers and transformations of the ordinary which we had never recognized before. I don't know. But anyhow, "Roog," my first sale, is biographical; I watched the dog suffer, and I understood a little (not much, maybe, but a little) of what was destroying him, and I wanted to speak for him. That's the whole of it right there. Snooper couldn't talk. I could. In fact I could write it down, and someone could publish it and many people could read it. Writing fiction has to do with this: becoming the voice for those without voices, if you see what I mean. It's not your own voice, you the author; it is all those other voices which normally go unheard.

The dog Snooper is dead, but the dog in the story, Boris, is alive. Tony Boucher is dead, and one day I will be, and, alas, so will you. But when I was with that high school class and we were discussing "Roog," in 1971, exactly twenty years after I sold the story originally — Snooper's barking and his anguish, his noble efforts, were still alive, which he deserved. My story is my gift to an animal, to a creature who neither sees nor hears, now, who no longer barks. But goddam it, he was doing the right thing. Even if Ms. J.M. didn't understand.

Roog

“Roog!” the dog said. He rested his paws on the top of the fence and looked around him.

The Roog came running into the yard.

It was early morning, and the sun had not really come up yet. The air was cold and gray, and the walls of the house were damp with moisture. The dog opened his jaws a little as he watched, his big black paws clutching the wood of the fence.

The Roog stood by the open gate, looking into the yard. He was a small Roog, thin and white, on wobbly legs. The Roog blinked at the dog, and the dog showed his teeth.

“Roog!” he said again. The sound echoed into the silent half darkness. Nothing moved nor stirred. The dog dropped down and walked back across the yard to the porch steps. He sat down on the bottom step and watched the Roog. The Roog glanced at him. Then he stretched his neck up to the window of the house, just above him. He sniffed at the window.

The dog came flashing across the yard. He hit the fence, and the gate shuddered and groaned. The Roog was walking quickly up the

path, hurrying with funny little steps, mincing along. The dog lay down against the slats of the gate, breathing heavily, his red tongue hanging. He watched the Roog disappear.

The dog lay silently, his eyes bright and black. The day was beginning to come. The sky turned a little whiter, and from all around the sounds of people getting up echoed through the morning air. Lights popped on behind shades. In the chilly dawn a window was opened.

The dog did not move. He watched the path.

In the kitchen Mrs. Cardossi poured water into the coffee pot. Steam rose from the water, blinding her. She set the pot down on the edge of the stove and went into the pantry. When she came back Alf was standing at the door of the kitchen. He put his glasses on.

“You bring in the paper?” he said.

“It’s outside.”

Alf Cardossi walked across the kitchen. He threw the bolt on the back door and stepped out onto the porch. He looked into the gray, damp morning. At the fence Boris lay, black and furry, his tongue out.

“Put the tongue in,” Alf said.

The dog looked quickly up. His tail beat against the ground. "The tongue," Alf said. "Put the tongue in."

The dog and the man looked at one another. The dog whined. His eyes were bright and feverish.

"Roog!" he said softly.

"What?" Alf looked around. "Someone coming? The paperboy come?"

The dog stared at him, his mouth open.

"You certainly upset these days," Alf said. "You better take it easy. We both getting too old for excitement."

He went inside the house.

The sun came up. The street became bright and alive with color. The postman went along the sidewalk with his letters and magazines. Some children hurried by, laughing and talking.

About 11:00, Mrs. Cardossi swept the front porch. She sniffed the air, pausing for a moment.

"It smells good today," she said. "That means it's going to be warm."

In the heat of the noonday sun the black dog lay stretched out full length, under the porch. His chest rose and fell. In the cherry tree the birds were playing, squawking and chattering to each other. Once in awhile Boris raised his head and looked at them. Presently he got to his feet and trotted down under the tree.

He was standing under the tree when he saw the two Roogs sitting on the fence, watching him.

"He's big," the first Roog said. "Most Guardians aren't as big as this."

The other Roog nodded, his head wobbling on his neck. Boris watched them without moving, his body stiff and hard. The Roogs were silent, now, looking at the big dog with his shaggy ruff of white around his neck.

"How is the offering urn?" the first Roog said. "Is it almost full?"

"Yes." The other nodded. "Almost ready."

"You, there!" the first Roog said, raising his voice. "Do you hear me? We've decided to accept the offering, this time. So you remember to let us in. No nonsense, now."

"Don't forget," the other added. "It won't be long."

Boris said nothing.

The two Roogs leaped off the fence and went over together just beyond the walk. One of them brought out a map and they studied it.

"This area really is none too good for a first trial," the first Roog said. "Too many Guardians . . . Now, the northside area —"

"They decided," the other Roog said. "There are so many factors —"

"Of course." They glanced at Boris and moved back farther

from the fence. He could not hear the rest of what they were saying.

Presently the Roogs put their map away and went off down the path.

Boris walked over to the fence and sniffed at the boards. He smelled the sickly, rotten odor of Roogs and the hair stood up on his back.

That night when Alf Cardossi came home the dog was standing at the gate, looking up the walk. Alf opened the gate and went into the yard.

"How are you?" he said, thumping the dog's side. "You stopped worrying? Seems like you been nervous of late. You didn't used to be that way."

Boris whined, looking intently up into the man's face.

"You a good dog, Boris," Alf said. "You pretty big, too, for a dog. You don't remember how you used to be only a little bit of a puppy."

Boris leaned against the man's leg.

"You a good dog," Alf murmured. "I sure wish I knew what is on your mind."

He went inside the house. Mrs. Cardossi was setting the table for dinner. Alf went into the living-room and took his coat and hat off. He set his lunch pail down on the sideboard and came back into the kitchen.

"What's the matter?" Mrs. Cardossi said.

"That dog got to stop making all that noise, barking. The neighbors going to complain to the police again."

"I hope we don't have to give him to your brother," Mrs. Cardossi said, folding her arms. "But he sure goes crazy, especially on Friday morning, when the garbage men come."

"Maybe he'll calm down," Alf said. He lit his pipe and smoked solemnly. "He didn't used to be that way. Maybe he'll get better, like he was."

"We'll see," Mrs. Cardossi said.

The sun came up, cold and ominous. Mist hung over all the trees and in the low places.

It was Friday morning.

The black dog lay under the porch, listening, his eyes wide and staring. His coat was stiff with hoarfrost and the breath from his nostrils made clouds of steam in the thin air. Suddenly he turned his head and leaped up.

From far off, a long way away, a faint sound came, a kind of crashing sound.

"Roog!" Boris cried, looking around. He hurried to the gate and stood up, his paws on the top of the fence.

In the distance the sound came again, louder now, not as far away as before. It was a crashing, clanging sound, as if something were

being rolled back, as if a great door were being opened.

"Roog!" Boris cried. He stared up anxiously at the darkened windows above him. Nothing stirred, nothing.

And along the street the Roogs came. The Roogs and their truck moved along, bouncing against the rough stones, crashing and whirling.

"Roog!" Boris cried, and he leaped, his eyes blazing. Then he became more calm. He settled himself down on the ground and waited, listening.

Out in front the Roogs stopped their truck. He could hear them opening the doors, stepping down onto the sidewalk. Boris ran around in a little circle. He whined, and his muzzle turned once again toward the house.

Inside the warm, dark bedroom, Mr. Cardossi sat up a little in bed and squinted at the clock.

"That damn dog," he muttered. "That damn dog." He turned his face toward the pillow and closed his eyes.

The Roogs were coming down the path, now. The first Roog pushed against the gate and the gate opened. The Roogs came into the yard. The dog backed away from them.

"Roog! Roog!" he cried. The horrid, bitter smell of Roogs came to his nose, and he turned away.

"The offering urn," the first Roog said. "It is full, I think." He

smiled at the rigid, angry dog. "How very good of you," he said.

The Roogs came toward the metal can, and one of them took the lid from it.

"Roog! Roog!" Boris cried, huddled against the bottom of the porch steps. His body shook with horror. The Roogs were lifting up the big metal can, turning it on its side. The contents poured out onto the ground, and the Roogs scooped the sacks of bulging, splitting paper together, catching at the orange peels and fragments, the bits of toast and egg shells.

One of the Roogs popped an egg shell into his mouth. His teeth crunched the egg shell.

"Roog!" Boris cried hopelessly, almost to himself. The Roogs were almost finished with their work of gathering up the offering. They stopped for a moment, looking at Boris.

Then, slowly, silently, the Roogs looked up, up the side of the house, along the stucco, to the window, with its brown shade pulled tightly down.

"ROOG!" Boris screamed, and he came toward them, dancing with fury and dismay. Reluctantly, the Roogs turned away from the window. They went out through the gate, closing it behind them.

"Look at him," the last Roog said with contempt, pulling his corner of the blanket up on his shoulder. Boris strained against the fence, his mouth open, snap-

ping wildly. The biggest Roog began to wave his arms furiously and Boris retreated. He settled down at the bottom of the porch steps, his mouth still open, and from the depths of him an unhappy, terrible moan issued forth, a wail of misery and despair.

"Come on," the other Roog said to the lingering Roog at the fence.

They walked up the path.

"Well, except for these little places around the Guardian, this

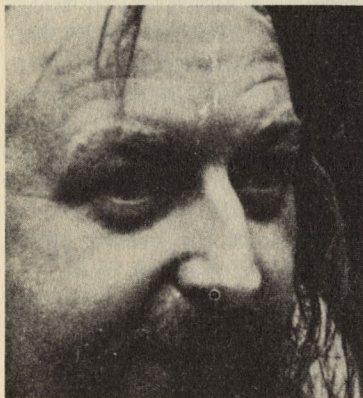
area is well cleared," the biggest Roog said. "I'll be glad when this particular Guardian is done. He certainly causes us a lot of trouble."

"Don't be impatient," one of the Roogs said. He grinned. "Our truck is full enough as it is. Let's leave something for next week." ●

All the Roogs laughed.

They went on up the path, carrying the offering in the dirty, sagging blanket.

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Michael Moorcock

Introduction

Cursed with a terrible facility for picking up the basics of almost any literary genre, but blessed by a capacity to become quickly bored by genre conventions, I had been a professional writer and editor for some years before I sold a story to an sf magazine.

I have to admit that I had no particular ambition to sell stories to sf magazines, although I was familiar with the sf world and a fairly active critic in journals such as *Vector*, organ of the British SF Association. I first began to earn my living as a journalist when I was sixteen, I went straight from fanzines (*Book Collectors News*, *Burroughsiana*, *The Rambler*) to juvenile magazines and thence to adult magazines in easy stages. By 1960, when I was twenty, I had written in most genres and my ambitious fiction was not genre work. There was no magazine, I knew, which would publish what I wrote, so I didn't bother to submit my stories anywhere. It is just as well that I didn't submit them. My first full length novel, written when I was eighteen, is to be published this year. It was called *The Golden Barge* and was an allegory. Any reader interested enough can pick it up at a bookstand and by glancing through its pages tell at a glance at what stage my art was in those days.

Actually the first adult sf story I sold was a collaboration: my original 2,000 word story was fleshed out to 3,000 words (the minimum length acceptable) by Barry Bayley. Called "Peace on Earth" it had appeared in *New Worlds* in 1959. By then I was growing away from sf. Aside from a few writers whom I admired (and still admire) I had no interest in the genre as

such. It seemed dull and restricted compared to the imaginative fiction of, say, Peake or Borges, who were beginning to influence me. What pulled me back towards the sf world was, in fact, "The Dreaming City." The story was written at the request of the editor of *New Worlds*, *Science Fantasy* and *Science Fiction Adventures*, Ted Carnell. I think I must have been Ted's protege.

I was always someone's protege in those days. People saw potential in me. They took me up. I often didn't want to be taken up, but that didn't stop them. Indeed, my entire career seems to have been based on other people seeing potential in me. I suppose the same could be said for Nana. I have written for films, performed on stage, made rock and roll records, done most of the things most of us strive unsuccessfully to do, merely because other people thought I should. The reason I have done these things with such *attack* (if not skill) is because at root I am an anxiety neurotic. Once I have agreed to do something (and I'm just a whore with a heart of gold when it comes down to it) I feel it is my duty to do it (like Nana) to the best of my ability. Left to my own devices I would probably lie in bed all day smoking exotic cigarettes and eating chocolates. If anyone wants to know the secret of my success, it's simply that for many years I just couldn't say no. I write

Michael Moorcock

as well as I do these days because I can't bear to let down all those people who seemed to think that I had it in me to write well. But back to the thread of this piece:

I knew Ted Carnell socially through friends at Fleetway Publications where, as the protege of W. Howard Baker, I was also an editor (on SEXTON BLAKE LIBRARY, "the world's longest running detective series"). One evening I went for a drink with Harry Harrison (who was then freelancing for Fleetway) and his editor to a nearby pub where Ted met us. In the course of conversation Ted said how he would like to run a heroic fantasy series on the lines of Conan. I mentioned that in correspondence with Sprague de Camp a couple of years earlier I had discussed the possibility of doing more Conan stories. Indeed, I had been about to do a series of them for Hans Stefan Santesson,

editor of *Fantastic Universe* (and, with Cele Goldsmith, one of the least cautious editors of his day), but either the magazine had folded or I had lost interest (my enthusiasm for Howard was fairly brief) before I had done some 5,000 words. Carnell asked to see it. A few days later I dropped the fragment into him. He rang later to say that he'd enjoyed it. However, he didn't want a Conan series. He wanted something along the same lines, though, but perhaps a little more sophisticated. Given the commission, I decided to write a story as different from the usual heroic fantasy as possible. The story took me a day to write. (When I was younger I used to think a novelette should take a day, a novella a day and a half, and a novel three days maximum.) I borrowed the name Elric from another fragment (rather heavily influenced in this case by Pratt's *The Well of the Unicorn*), the atmosphere from another fragment (somewhat influenced by Anderson's *The Broken Sword*) and the hero's mood and physical description from a boyhood enthusiasm for the Gothic character of Monsieur Zenith, one of Sexton Blake's greatest adversaries in stories which had appeared in the pre-war pulps I had collected as a boy. Zenith (in tale after tale we never learned his true name) yearned only for death and dared the world to try to kill or capture him. He

always wore full evening dress (when not in disguise), smoked opium continuously, had rooms draped in black silk, Japanese servants who would die for him, ruled a vast empire of underworld scum, moved openly in the world, though wanted by the police forces of every nation, had taken to crime in order to relieve the dreadful ennui of his existence, cared nothing for his own life or the lives of others. He was easy to spot, too. He had crimson eyes and pure white hair. He was known as Zenith the Albino and was rumoured to be a Prince in Bohemia . . .

As an homage, then, I enjoyed writing "The Dreaming City." Ted Carnell enjoyed reading it. He asked for a series. I was not sure but I began work on a second story. Later I added elements of blatant Freudian imagery to the series (anything Lovecraft and the rest could do unconsciously I supposed that I could do consciously) and later still, in the serial which became *Stormbringer*, I included large chunks of self-dramatisation (or "autobiography"). Through the Elric stories I first realised what might be done with visionary imagery used in a disciplined and ironic way, and Elric was the direct ancestor of Jerry Cornelius, to the extent that I re-used the plot of "The Dreaming City" in the opening of *The Final Programme*. I had certainly entertained no notion of a career writing such fiction. I was

writing social satire and allegorical fiction for myself (and dreadful it was, too). I had begun to give up any idea that ambitious fiction could be published in sf magazines. Later, with J.G. Ballard, I again came to believe that perhaps something interesting could be done with the subject matter and some of the techniques of science fiction. After a boyhood enthusiasm for Burroughs, Merritt and Howard (as well, I might add, for Richmal Crompton, Frank Richards, P.G. Wodehouse, and Conan Doyle), I had never been a great sf reader. Indeed, I had been appalled at the bad writing in *Astounding*, which I had been told was the best. I found I preferred pulps like *Startling*, *Thrilling Wonder*, *Super Science* and *Planet*, where I could find better writing and imagination. Charles Harness, Alfred Bester and Leigh Brackett were the sf writers I enjoyed, along with the early Cordwainer Smith. Most others seemed either illiterate or literal-minded to the point of madness (or both, but I promised myself I wouldn't discuss Heinlein). I decided, however, that it might be possible to earn as one learned in writing for the sf magazines. "At least," I remember telling someone a year or two later, "you can sell your mistakes."

This is my first independent mistake to be published in an sf magazine. It is by no means my first fan-

tasy story (it would save me embarrassment to pretend that it was). I had already been selling adventure fantasy to juvenile markets (such as *Tarzan Adventures* which, as someone else's teenage protege, I came to edit) and by June 1961 when this story was published I had been earning huge sums of money producing anything from articles on whether Butch Cassidy was still alive, to a comic strip life of Alexander the Great (of which I am particularly proud). I had written western stories, thrillers, WWI flying stories, historical adventures, school stories, sf adventures and almost everything else for the Fleetway magazines and annuals and had probably experienced every possible version of a genre with the exception of girl's stories and women's romances (I wrote very few and wasn't too good at them). I was then 21 and shortly after completing another Elric story (they were not initially very popular with the readership, but Carnell saw potential in them — by the third story, with the Freudian imagery laid on thicker still, they had found an enthusiastic audience) I threw in my journalistic career after some spectacular conflicts with my employers) and went back on the bum, busking in Europe, playing any gigs available, picking my guitar and singing self-pitying songs until, feeling somewhat better than I had left my

audiences, I returned to England to discover that I had been black-listed as a freelance (Fleetway owned almost every magazine and they had decided I must be a communist because I'd objected to being involved in a rabid Cold War comic strip). I was forced to begin to earn a rotten living as an sf writer. Soon, the frustrations of that line of work began to get to me. By 1963 I had all but given up any ideas of doing much more in the sf field when Ted Carnell, my nemesis, my father-figure, recommended me as his successor as editor of *New Worlds*.

Fate, as Elric was fond of saying in innumerable morbid phrases, was fate. I took the *New Worlds* job because I had just been fired by the Liberal Party (for whom I was writing broadsheets), because I had recently married and had a baby to support and I needed the money. For the first year or two I was actually paid to edit NW. I got about £10 a week, which was all that was left over after the budget had been spent. I hoped, too, that the magazine might just possibly offer a market for all those young writers whom I knew must have felt the creative frustrations I had felt. It turned out, for a year at least, that there were only three of us. J.G. Ballard was one. The other two were me.

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The Dreaming City

Introduction

For ten thousand years did the Bright Empire of Melniboné flourish — ruling the world. Ten thousand years before history was recorded — or ten thousand years after history had ceased to be chronicled. For that span of time, reckon it how you will, the Bright Empire had thrived. Be hopeful, if you like, and think of the dreadful past the Earth has known, or brood upon the future. But if you would believe the unholy truth — then Time is an agony of Now, and so it will always be.

Ravaged, at last, by the formless terror called Time, Melniboné fell and newer nations succeeded her: Ilmiora, Sheegoth, Maidahk, S'aaleem. Then history began: India, China, Egypt, Assyria, Persia, Greece, and Rome — all these came after Melniboné. But none lasted ten thousand years.

And none dealt in the terrible mysteries, the secret sorceries, of old Melniboné. None used such power or knew how. Only Melniboné ruled the Earth for a hundred centuries — and then, even she, shaken by the casting of frightful runes, attacked by powers greater than men; powers

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who decided that Melniboné's span of ruling had been overlong — then she crumbled and her sons were scattered. They became wanderers across an Earth which hated and feared them, siring few offspring, slowly dying, slowly forgetting the secrets of their mighty ancestors. Such a one was the cynical, laughing Elric, a man of bitter brooding and gusty humor, proud Prince of Ruins, Lord of a lost and humbled people; last son of Melniboné's sundered line of kings.

Elric, the moody-eyed wanderer — a lonely man who fought a world, living by his wits and his runesword Stormbringer, Elric, last Lord of Melniboné, last worshipper of its grotesque and beautiful Gods — reckless reaver and cynical slayer — torn by great griefs and with a knowledge locked in his skull which would turn lesser men into babbling idiots. Elric, moulder of mad-nesses, dabbler in wild delights. . .

“What’s the hour?” The black-bearded man wrenched off his gilded helmet and flung it from him, careless of where it fell. He drew off his leathern gauntlets and moved

closer to the roaring fire, letting the heat soak into his frozen bones.

"Midnight is long past," growled one of the other armoured men who gathered around the blaze. "Are you still sure he'll come?"

"It's said that he's a man of his word, if that comforts you."

It was a tall, pale-faced youth who spoke. His thin lips formed the words and spat them out maliciously. He grinned a wolf-grin and stared the new arrival in the eyes, mocking him.

The newcomer turned away with a shrug. "That's so — for all your irony, Yaris. He'll come." He spoke as a man does when he wishes to reassure himself.

There were six men, now, around the fire. The sixth was Smiorgan — Count Smiorgan Baldhead of the Purple Towns. He was a short, stocky man of fifty years with a scarred face partially covered with a thick, black growth of hair. His eyes smouldered morosely and his lumpy fingers plucked nervously at his rich-hilted longsword. His pate was hairless, giving him his name, and over his ornate, gilded armour hung a loose woolen cloak, dyed purple.

Smiorgan said thickly, "He has no love for his cousin. He has become bitter. Yyrkoon sits on the Ruby Throne in his place and has proclaimed him an outlaw and a traitor. Elric needs us if he would

take his throne and his bride back. We can trust him."

"You're full of trust tonight, Count," Yaris smiled thinly, "a rare thing to find in these troubled times. I say this —" He paused and took a long breath, staring at his comrades, summing them up. His gaze flicked from lean-faced Dharmit of Jharkor to Fadan of Lormyr who pursed his pudgy lips and looked into the fire.

"Speak up, Yaris," petulantly urged the patrician-featured Vil-mirian, Naclon. "Let's hear what you have to say, lad, if it's worth hearing."

Yaris looked towards Jiku the dandy, who yawned impolitely and scratched his long nose.

"Well!" Smiorgan was impatient. "What d'you say, Yaris?"

"I say that we should start now and waste no more time waiting on Elric's pleasure! He's laughing at us in some tavern a hundred miles from here — or else plotting with the Dragon Princes to trap us. For years we have planned this raid. We have little time in which to strike — our fleet is too big, too noticeable. Even if Elric has not betrayed us, then spies will soon be running eastwards to warn the Dragons that there is a fleet massed against them. We stand to win a fantastic fortune — to vanquish the greatest merchant city in the world — to reap immeasurable riches — or horrible death at the hands of the Dragon Princes, if we

wait overlong. Let's bide our time no more and set sail before our prize hears of our plan and brings up reinforcements!"

"You always were too ready to mistrust a man, Yaris." King Naclon of Vilmir spoke slowly, carefully — distastefully eyeing the taut-featured youth. "We could not reach Imrryr without Elric's knowledge of the maze-channels which lead to its secret ports. If Elric will not join us — then our endeavour will be fruitless — hopeless. We need him. We must wait for him — or else give up our plans and return to our homelands."

"At least I'm willing to take a risk," yelled Yaris, anger lancing from his slanting eyes. "You're getting old — all of you. Treasures are not won by care and forethought but by swift slaying and reckless attack."

"Fool!" Dharmit's voice rumbled around the fire-flooded hall. He laughed wearily. "I spoke thus in my youth — and lost a fine fleet soon after. Cunning and Elric's knowledge will soon win us Imrryr — that and the mightiest fleet to sail the Sighing Sea since Melniboné's banners fluttered over all the nations of the Earth. Here we are — the most powerful Sea Lords in the world, masters, every one of us, of more than a hundred swift vessels. Our names are feared and famous — our fleets ravage the coasts of a score of lesser nations.

We hold *power!*" He clenched his great fist and shook it in Yaris' face. His tone became more level and he smiled viciously, glaring at the youth and choosing his words with precision.

"But all this is worthless — meaningless — without the power which Elric has. That is the power of knowledge — of sorcery, if I must use the cursed word. His fathers knew of the maze which guards Imrryr from sea-attack. And his fathers passed that secret on to him. Imrryr, the Dreaming City, dreams in peace — and will continue to do so unless we have a guide to help us steer a course through the treacherous waterways which lead to her harbours. We *need* Elric — we know it, and he knows it. That's the truth!"

"Such confidence, gentlemen, is warming to the heart." There was irony in the heavy voice which came from the entrance to the hall. The heads of the six Sea Lords jerked towards the doorway.

Yaris' confidence fled from him as he met the eyes of Elric of Melniboné. They were old eyes in a fine featured, youthful face. Crimson eyes which stared into eternity. Yaris shuddered, turned his back on Elric, preferring to look into the bright glare of the fire.

Elric smiled warmly as Count Smiorgan gripped his shoulder. There was a certain friendship between the two. He nodded con-

descending to the other four and walked with lithe grace towards the fire. Yaris stood aside and let him pass. Elric was tall, broad-shouldered and slim-hipped. He wore his long hair bunched and pinned at the nape of his neck and, for an obscure reason, affected the dress of a Southern barbarian. He had long, knee-length boots of soft doe-leather, a breastplate of strangely wrought silver, a jerkin of chequered blue and white linen, britches of scarlet wool and a cloak of rustling green velvet. At his hip rested his runesword of black iron — the feared Stormbringer, forged by ancient and alien sorcery.

His bizarre dress was tasteless and gaudy, and did not match his sensitive face and long-fingered, almost delicate hands, yet he flaunted it since it emphasised the fact that he did not belong in any company — that he was an outsider and an outcast. But, in reality, he had little need to wear such outlandish gear — for his eyes and skin were enough to mark him.

Elric, Last Lord of Melniboné, was a pure albino who drew his power from a secret and terrible source.

Smiorgan sighed. "Well, Elric, when do we raid Imrryr?"

Elric shrugged. "As soon as you like; I care not. Give me a little time to do certain things."

"Tomorrow? Shall we said tomorrow?" Yaris said hesitantly,

conscious of the strange power dormant in the man he had earlier accused of treachery.

Elric smiled, dismissing the youth's statement. "Three days' time," he said. "Three — or more."

"Three days! But Imrryr will be warned of our presence by then!" Fat, cautious Fadan spoke.

"I'll see that your fleet's not found," Elric promised. "I have to go to Imrryr first — and return."

"You won't do the journey in three days — the fastest ship could not make it." Smiorgan gaped.

"I'll be in the Dreaming City in less than a day," Elric said softly, with finality.

Smiorgan shrugged. "If you say so, I'll believe it — but why this necessity to visit the city ahead of the raid?"

"I have my own compunctions, Count Smiorgan. But worry not — I shan't betray you. I'll lead the raid myself, be sure of that." His dead-white face was lighted eerily by the fire and his red eyes smouldered. One lean hand firmly gripped the hilt of his runesword and he appeared to breathe more heavily. Imrryr fell, in spirit, five hundred years ago — she will fall completely soon — for ever! I have a little debt to settle. This is my only reason for aiding you. As you know I have made only a few conditions — that you raze the city to the ground and a certain man and

woman are not harmed. I refer to my cousin Yyrkoon and his sister Cymoril . . .”

Yaris’ lips felt uncomfortably dry. Much of his blustering manner resulted from the early death of his father. The old seaking had died — leaving young Yaris as the new ruler of his lands and his fleets. Yaris was not at all certain that he was capable of commanding such a vast kingdom — and tried to appear more confident than he actually felt. Now he said: “How shall we hide the fleet, Lord Elric?”

The Melnibonéan acknowledged the question. “I’ll hide it for you,” he promised. “I go now to do this — but make sure all your men are off the ships first — will you see to it, Smiorgan?”

“Aye,” rumbled the stocky count.

He and Elric departed from the hall together, leaving five men behind; five men who sensed an air of icy doom hanging about the overheated hall.

“How could he hide such a mighty fleet when we, who know this fjord better than any, could find nowhere?” Dharmit of Jhar-kor said bewilderedly.

None answered him.

They waited, tensed and nervous, while the fire flickered and died untended. Eventually Smiorgan returned, stamping noisily on the boarded floor. There was a haunted gaze of fear surrounding

him; an almost tangible aura, and he was shivering, terribly. Tremendous, racking undulations swept up his body and his breath came short.

“Well? Did Elric hide the fleet — all at once? What did he do?” Dharmit spoke impatiently, choosing not to heed Smiorgan’s ominous condition.

“He has hidden it.” That was all Smiorgan said, and his voice was thin, like that of a sick man, weak from fever.

Yaris went to the entrance and tried to stare beyond the fjord slopes where many campfires burned, tried to make out the outline of ships’ masts and rigging, but he could see nothing.

“The night mist’s too thick,” he murmured, “I can’t tell whether our ships are anchored in the fjord or not.” Then he gasped involuntarily as a white face loomed out of the clinging fog. “Greetings, Lord Elric,” he stuttered, noting the sweat on the Melnibonéan’s strained features.

Elric staggered past him, into the hall. “Wine,” he mumbled, “I’ve done what’s needed and it’s cost me hard.”

Dharmit fetched a jug of strong Cadsandrian wine and with a shaking hand poured some into a carved wooden goblet. Wordlessly he passed the cup to Elric who quickly drained it. “Now I will sleep,” he said, stretching himself into a chair and wrapping his green

cloak around him. He closed his disconcerting crimson eyes and fell into a slumber born of utter weariness.

Fadan scurried to the door, closed it and pulled the heavy iron bar down.

None of the six slept much that night and, in the morning, the door was unbarred and Elric was missing from the chair. When they went outside, the mist was so heavy that they soon lost sight of one another, though scarcely two feet separated any of them.

Elric stood with his legs astraddle on the shingle of the narrow beach. He looked back at the entrance to the fjord and saw, with satisfaction, that the mist was still thickening, though it lay only over the fjord itself, hiding the mighty fleet. Elsewhere the weather was clear and overhead a pale winter sun shone sharply on the black rocks of the rugged cliffs which dominated the coastline. Ahead of him the sea rose and fell monotonously, like the chest of a sleeping water-giant, grey and pure, glinting in the cold sunlight. Elric fingered the raised runes on the hilt of his black broadsword and a steady north wind blew into the voluminous folds of his dark green cloak, swirling it around his tall, lean frame.

The albino felt fitter than he had done on the previous night when he had expended all his strength in

conjuring the mist. He was well-versed in the art of nature-wizardry, but he did not have the reserves of power which the Sorcerer Emperors of Melniboné had possessed when they had ruled the world. His ancestors had passed their knowledge down to him — but not their mystic vitality and many of the spells and secrets that he had were unusable since he did not have the reservoir of strength, neither of soul nor of body, to work them. But for all that, Elric knew of only one other man who matched his knowledge — his cousin Yyrkoon. His hand gripped the hilt tighter as he thought of the cousin who had twice betrayed his trust, and he forced himself to concentrate on his present task — the speaking of spells to aid him on his voyage to the Isle of the Dragon Masters whose only city, Imrryr the Beautiful, was the object of the Sea Lords' massing.

Drawn up on the beach, a tiny sailing-boat lay — Elric's own small ship, sturdy and far stronger, far older, than it appeared. The brooding sea flung surf around its timbers as the tide withdrew, and Elric realised that he had little time in which to work his helpful sorcery.

His body tensed and he blamed his conscious mind, summoning secrets from the dark depths of his soul. Swaying, his eyes staring unseeingly, his arms jerking out ahead of him and making unholy

signs in the air, he began to speak in a sibilant monotone. Slowly the pitch of his voice rose, resembling the scarcely heard shriek of a distant gale as it comes closer — then, quite suddenly, the voice rose higher until it was howling wildly to the skies and the air began to tremble and quiver. Shadow-shapes began slowly to form and they were never still but darted around Elric's body as, stiff-legged, he started forward towards his boat.

His voice was inhuman as it howled insistently, summoning the wind elementals — the *sylphs* of the breeze; the *sharnahs*, makers of gales; the *h'Haarshanns*, builders of whirlwinds — hazy and formless, they eddied around him as he summoned their aid with the alien words of his forefathers who had, ages before, made unthinkable pacts with the elementals in order to procure their services.

Still stiff-limbed, Elric entered the boat and, like an automaton, his fingers ran up the sail and set it. Then a great wave erupted out of the placid sea, rising higher and higher until it towered over the vessel. With a surging crash, the water smashed down on the boat, lifted it and bore it out to sea. Sitting blank-eyed in the stern, Elric still crooned his hideous song of sorcery as the spirits of the air plucked at the sail and sent the boat flying over the water faster than any mortal ship could speed. And all

the while, the deafening, unholy shriek of the released elementals filled the air about the boat as the shore vanished and open sea was all that was visible.

Two

So it was, with wind-demons for shipmates, that Elric, last Prince of the Royal line of Melniboné, returned to the last city still ruled by his own race, — the last city and the final remnant of Melnibonéan architecture. The cloudy pink and subtle yellow tints of her nearer towers came into sight within a few hours of Elric's leaving the fjord and just off-shore of the Isle of the Dragon Masters the elementals left the boat and fled back to their secret haunts among the peaks of the highest mountains in the world. Elric awoke, then, from his trance, and regarded with fresh wonder the beauty of his own city's delicate towers which were visible even so far away, guarded still by the formidable sea-wall with its great gate, the five-doored maze and the twisting, high-walled channels, of which only one led to the inner harbour of Imrryr.

Elric knew that he dare not risk entering the harbour by the maze, though he knew the route perfectly. He decided, instead, to land the boat further up the coast in a small inlet of which he had knowledge. With sure, capable hands, he

guided the little craft towards the hidden inlet which was obscured by a growth of shrubs loaded with ghastly blue berries of a type decidedly poisonous to men since their juice first turned one blind and then slowly mad. This berry, the *nodoil*, grew only on Imrryr as did other rare and deadly plants.

Light, low-hanging cloud wisps streamed slowly across the sun-painted sky, like fine cobwebs caught by a sudden breeze. All the world seemed blue and gold and green and white, and Elric, pulling his boat up on the beach, breathed the clean, sharp air of winter and savoured the scent of decaying leaves and rotting undergrowth. Somewhere a bitch-fox barked her pleasure to her mate and Elric regretted the fact that his depleted race no longer appreciated natural beauty, preferring to stay close to their city and spend many of their days in drugged slumber. It was not the city which dreamed, but its overcivilised inhabitants. Elric, smelling the rich, clean winter-scents, was wholly glad that he had his birthright and did not rule the city as he had been born to do.

Instead, Yyrkoon, his cousin, sprawled on the Ruby Throne of Imrryr the Beautiful and hated Elric because he knew that the albino, for all his disgust with crowns and rulership, was still the rightful King of the Dragon Isle and that he, Yyrkoon, was an usurper, not elected by Elric to

the throne, as Melnibonéan tradition demanded.

But Elric had better reasons for hating his cousin. For those reasons the ancient capital would fall in all its magnificent splendour and the last fragment of a glorious Empire would be obliterated as the pink, the yellow, the purple and white towers crumbled — if Elric had his way and the Sea Lords were successful.

On foot, Elric strode inland, towards Imrryr, and as he covered the miles of soft turf, the sun cast an ochre pall over the land and sank, giving way to a dark and moonless night, brooding and full of evil portent.

At last he came to the city. It stood out in stark black silhouette, a city of fantastic magnificence, in conception and in execution. It was the oldest city in the world, built by artists and conceived as a work of art rather than a functional dwelling place, but Elric knew that squalor lurked in many narrow streets and that the Lords of Imrryr left many of the towers empty and uninhabited rather than let the bastard population of the city dwell therein. There were few Dragon Masters left; few who would claim Melnibonéan blood.

Built to follow the shape of the ground, the city had an organic appearance, with winding lanes spiralling to the crest of the hill where stood the castle, tall and proud and many-spired, the final,

crowning masterpiece of the ancient, forgotten artist who had built it. But there was no life-sound emanating from Imrryr the Beautiful, only a sense of soporific desolation. The city slept — and the Dragon Masters and their ladies and their special slaves dreamed drug-induced dreams of grandeur and incredible horror while the rest of the population, ordered by curfew, tossed on tawdry mattresses and tried not to dream at all.

Elric, his hand ever near his sword-hilt, slipped through an unguarded gate in the city wall and began to walk cautiously through the unlighted streets, moving upwards, through the winding lanes, towards Yyrkoon's great palace.

Wind sighed through the empty rooms of the Dragon towers and sometimes Elric would have to withdraw into places where the shadows were deeper when he heard the tramp of feet and a group of guards would pass, their duty being to see that the curfew was rigidly obeyed. Often he would hear wild laughter echoing from one of the towers, still ablaze with bright torchlight which flung strange, disturbing shadows on the walls; often, too, he would hear a chilling scream and a frenzied, idiot's yell as some wretch of a slave died in obscene agony to please his master.

Elric was not appalled by the sounds and the dim sights. He

appreciated them. He was still a Melnibonéan — their rightful leader if he chose to regain his powers of kingship — and though he had an obscure urge to wander and sample the less sophisticated pleasures of the outside world, ten thousand years of a cruel, brilliant and malicious culture was behind him and the pulse of his ancestry beat strongly in his deficient veins.

Elric knocked impatiently upon the heavy, blackwood door. He had reached the palace and now stood by a small back entrance, glancing cautiously around him, for he knew that Yyrkoon had given the guards orders to slay him if he entered Imrryr.

A bolt squealed on the other side of the door and it moved silently inwards. A thin, seamed face confronted Elric.

"Is it the king?" whispered the man, peering out into the night. He was a tall, extremely thin individual with long, gnarled limbs which shifted awkwardly as he moved nearer, straining his beady eyes to get a glimpse of Elric.

"It's Prince Elric," the albino said. "But you forget, Tanglebones, my friend, that a new king sits on the Ruby Throne."

Tanglebones shook his head and his sparse hair fell over his face. With a jerking movement he brushed it back and stood aside for Elric to enter. "The Dragon Isle has but one king — and his name is

Elric, whatever usurper would have it otherwise.”

Elric ignored this statement, but he smiled thinly and waited for the man to push the bolt back into place.

“She still sleeps, sire,” Tanglebones murmured as he climbed unlit stairs, Elric behind him.

“I guessed that,” Elric said. “I do not underestimate my good cousin’s powers of sorcery.”

Upwards, now, in silence, the two men climbed until at last they reached a corridor which was aflame with dancing torchlight. The marble walls reflected the flames and showed Elric, crouching with Tanglebones behind a pillar, that the room in which he was interested was guarded by a massive archer — a eunuch by the look of him — who was alert and wakeful. The man was hairless and fat, his blue-black gleaming armour tight on his flesh, but his fingers were curled around the string of his short, bone bow and there was a slim arrow resting on the string. Elric guessed that this man was one of the crack eunuch archers, a member of the Silent Guard, Imrryr’s finest company of warriors.

Tanglebones, who had taught the young Elric the arts of fencing and archery, had known of the guard’s presence and had prepared for it. Earlier he had placed a bow behind the pillar. Silently he picked it up and, bending it against

his knee, strung it. He fitted an arrow to the string, aimed it at the right eye of the guard and let fly — just as the eunuch turned to face him. The shaft missed. It clattered against the man’s gorget and fell harmlessly to the reed-strewn stones of the floor.

So Elric acted swiftly, leaping forward, his rune-sword drawn and its alien power surging through him. It howled in a searing arc of black steel and cut through the bone bow which the eunuch had hoped would deflect it. The guard was panting and his thick lips were wet as he drew breath to yell. As he opened his mouth, Elric saw what he had expected, the man was tongueless and was a mute. His own shortsword came out and he just managed to parry Elric’s next thrust. Sparks flew from the iron and Stormbringer bit into the eunuch’s finely edged blade, he staggered and fell back before the nigromantic sword which appeared to be endowed with a life of its own. The clatter of metal echoed loudly up and down the short corridor and Elric cursed the fate which had made the man turn at the crucial moment. Grimly, swiftly, he broke down the eunuch’s clumsy guard.

The eunuch saw only a dim glimpse of his opponent behind the black, whirling blade which appeared to be so light and which was twice the length of his own stabbing sword. He wondered, fren-

ziedly, who his attacker could be and he thought he recognised the face. Then a scarlet eruption obscured his vision, he felt searing agony clutch at his face and then, philosophically, for eunuchs are necessarily given to a certain fatalism, he realised that he was to die.

Elric stood over the eunuch's bloated body and tugged his sword from the corpse's skull, wiping the mixture of blood and brains on his late opponent's cloak. Tanglebones had wisely vanished. Elric could hear the clatter of sandalled feet rushing up the stairs. He pushed the door open and entered the room which was lit by two small candles placed at either end of a wide, richly tapestried bed. He went to the bed and looked down at the raven-haired girl who lay there.

Elric's mouth twitched and bright tears leapt into his strange eyes. He was trembling as he turned back to the door, sheathed his sword and pulled the bolts into place. He returned to the bedside and knelt down beside the sleeping girl. Her features were as delicate and of a similar mould as Elric's own, but she had an added, exquisite beauty. She was breathing shallowly, in a sleep induced not by natural weariness but by her own brother's evil sorcery.

Elric reached out and tenderly took one fine-fingered hand in his. He put it to his lips and kissed it.

"Cymoril," he murmured, and an agony of longing throbbed in that name. "Cymoril — wake up."

The girl did not stir, her breathing remained shallow and her eyes remained shut. Elric's white features twisted and his red eyes blazed as he shook in terrible and passionate rage. He gripped the hand, so limp and nerveless, like the hand of a corpse; gripped it until he had to stop himself for fear that he would crush the delicate fingers.

A shouting soldier began to beat at the door.

Elric replaced the hand on the girl's firm breast and stood up. He glanced uncomprehendingly at the door.

A sharper, colder voice interrupted the soldier's yelling.

"What is happening — has someone tried to see my poor sleeping sister?"

"Yyrkoon, the black hell-spawn," said Elric to himself.

Confused babblings from the soldier and Yyrkoon's voice raised as he shouted through the door. "Whoever is in there — you will be destroyed a thousand times when you are caught. You cannot escape. If my sister is harmed in any way — then you will never die, I promise you that. But you will pray to your Gods that you could!"

"Yyrkoon, you paltry rabble — you cannot threaten one who is

your equal in the dark arts. It is I, Elric — your rightful master. Return to your rabbit hole before I call down every evil power upon, above, and under the Earth to blast you!”

Yyrkoon laughed hesitantly. “So you have returned again to try to waken my sister. Any such attempt will not only slay her — it will send her soul into the deepest hell — where you may join it, willingly!”

“By Arnara’s six breasts — you it will be who samples the thousand deaths before long.”

“Enough of this.” Yyrkoon raised his voice. “Soldiers — I command you to break this door down — and take that traitor alive. Elric — there are two things you will never again have — my sister’s love and the Ruby Throne. Make what you can of the little time available to you, for soon you will be grovelling to me and praying for release from your soul’s agony!”

Elric ignored Yyrkoon’s threats and looked at the narrow window to the room. It was just large enough for a man’s body to pass through. He bent down and kissed Cymoril upon the lips, then he went to the door and silently withdrew the bolts.

There came a crash as a soldier flung his weight against the door. It swung open, pitching the man forward to stumble and fall on his face. Elric drew his sword, lifted it high and chopped at the warrior’s

neck. The head sprang from its shoulders and Elric yelled loudly in a deep, rolling voice.

“*Arioch! Arioch!* I give you blood and souls — only aid me now! This man I give you, mighty King of Hell — aid your servant, Elric of Melniboné!”

Three soldiers entered the room in a bunch. Elric struck at one and sheared off half his face. The man screamed horribly.

“*Arioch, Lord of the Darks — I give you blood and souls. Aid me, evil one!*”

In the far corner of the gloomy room, a blacker mist began slowly to form. But the soldiers pressed closer and Elric was hard put to hold them back.

He was screaming the name of Arioch, Lord of the Higher Hell, incessantly, almost unconsciously as he was pressed back further by the weight of the warriors’ numbers. Behind them, Yyrkoon mouthed in rage and frustration, urging his men, still, to take Elric alive. This necessity gave Elric some small advantage — that and the runesword Stormbringer which was glowing with a strange black luminousness and the shrill howling it gave out was grating into the ears of those who heard it. Two more corpses now littered the carpeted floor of the chamber, their blood soaking into the fine fabric.

“*Blood and souls for my lord Arioch!*”

The dark mist heaved and began

to take shape, Elric spared a look towards the corner and shuddered despite his inurement to hell-born horror. The warriors now had their backs to the thing in the corner and Elric was by the window. The amorphous mass that was a less than pleasant manifestation of Elric's fickle patron God, heaved again and Elric made out its intolerably alien shape. Bile flooded into his mouth and as he drove the soldiers towards the thing which was sinuously flooding forward he fought against madness.

Suddenly, the soldiers seemed to sense that there was something behind them. They turned, four of them, and each screamed insanely as the black horror made one final rush to engulf them. Arioch crouched over them, sucking out their souls. Then, slowly, their bones began to give and snap and still shrieking bestially the men flopped like obnoxious vertebrates on the floor; their spines broken, they still lived. Elric turned away, thankful for once that Cymoril slept, and leapt to the window ledge. He looked down and realised with despair that he was not going to escape by that route after all. Several hundred feet lay between him and the ground. He rushed to the door where Yyrkoon, his eyes wide with fear, was trying to drive Arioch back. Arioch was already fading.

Elric pushed past his cousin, spared a final glance for Cymoril,

then ran the way he had come, his feet slipping on blood. Tanglebones met him at the head of the dark stairway.

"What has happened, King Elric — what's in there?"

Elric seized Tanglebones by his lean shoulder and made him descend the stairs. "No time," he panted, "but we must hurry while Yyrkoon is still engaged with his current problem. In five days' time Imrryr will experience a new phase in her history — perhaps the last. I want you to make sure that Cymoril is safe. Is that clear?"

"Aye, Lord, but. . ."

They reached the door and Tanglebones shot the bolts and opened it.

"There is no time for me to say anything else. I must escape while I can. I will return in five days — with companions. You will realise what I mean when that time comes. Take Cymoril to the Tower of D'a'rputna — and await me there."

Then Elric was gone, soft-footed, running into the night with the shrieks of the dying still ringing through the blackness after him.

Three

Elric stood unspeaking in the prow of Count Smiorgan's flagship. Since his return to the fjord and the fleet's subsequent sailing for open sea, he had spoken only orders, and those in the

tersest of terms. The Sea Lords muttered that a great hate lay in him, that it festered his soul and made him a dangerous man to have as comrade or enemy; and even Count Smiorgan avoided the moody albino.

The reaver prows struck eastward and the sea was black with light ships dancing on the bright water in all directions; they looked like the shadow of some enormous sea-bird flung on the water. Nearly half a thousand fighting ships stained the ocean — all of them of similar form, long and slim and built for speed rather than battle, since they were for coast-raiding and trading. Sails were caught by the pale sun; bright colours of fresh canvas — orange, blue, black, purple, red, yellow, light green or white. And every ship had sixteen or more rowers — each rower a fighting man. The crews of the ships were also the warriors who would attack Imrryr — there was no wastage of good manpower since the sea-nations were underpopulated, losing hundreds of men each year in their regular raids.

In the centre of the great fleet, certain larger vessels sailed. These carried great catapults on their decks and were to be used for storming the sea wall of Imrryr. Count Smiorgan and the other Lords looked at their ships with pride, but Elric only stared ahead of him, never sleeping, rarely mov-

ing, his white face lashed by salt spray and wind, his white hand tight upon his swordhilt.

The reaver ships ploughed steadily eastwards — forging towards the Dragon Isle and fantastic wealth — or hellish horror. Relentlessly, doom-driven, they beat onwards, their oars splashing in unison, their sails bellying taut with a good wind.

Onwards they sailed, towards Imrryr the Beautiful, to rape and plunder the world's oldest city.

Two days after the fleet had set sail, the coastline of the Dragon Isle was sighted and the rattle of arms replaced the sound of oars as the mighty fleet hove to and prepared to accomplish what sane men thought impossible.

Orders were bellowed from ship to ship and the fleet began to mass into battle formation, then the oars creaked in their grooves and ponderously, with sails now furled, the fleet moved forward again.

It was a clear day, cold and fresh, and there was a tense excitement about all the men, from Sea Lord to galley hand, as they considered the immediate future and what it might bring. Serpent prows bent towards the great stone wall which blocked off the first entrance to the harbour. It was nearly a hundred feet high and towers were built upon it — more functional than the lace-like spires of the city which shimmered in the

distance, behind them. The ships of Imrryr were the only vessels allowed to pass through the great gate in the centre of the wall and the route through the maze — the exact entrance even — was a well-kept secret from outsiders.

On the sea wall, which now loomed tall above the fleet, amazed guards scrambled frantically to their posts. To them, threat of attack was well-nigh unthinkable, yet here it was — a great fleet, the greatest they had ever seen — come against Imrryr the Beautiful! They took to their posts, their yellow cloaks and kilts rustling, their bronze armour rattling, but they moved with bewildered reluctance as if refusing to accept what they saw. And they went to their posts with desperate fatalism, knowing that even if the ships never entered the maze itself, they would not be alive to witness the reavers' failure.

Dyvim Tarkan, Commander of the Wall, was a sensitive man who loved life and its pleasures. He was highbrowed and handsome, with a thin wisp of beard and a tiny moustache. He looked well in the bronze armour and high-plumed helmet; he did not want to die. He issued terse orders to his men and, with well-ordered precision, they obeyed him. He listened with concern to the distant shouts from the ships and he wondered what the first move of the reavers would be.

He did not wait long for his answer.

A catapult on one of the leading vessels twanged throatily and its throwing arm rushed up, releasing a great rock which sailed, with every appearance of leisurely grace, towards the wall. It fell short and splashed into the sea which frothed against the stones of the wall.

Swallowing hard and trying to control the shake in his voice, Dyvim Tarkan ordered his own catapult to discharge. With a thudding crash the release rope was cut and a retaliatory iron ball went hurtling towards the enemy fleet. So tight-packed were the ships that the ball could not miss — it struck full on the deck of the flagship of Dharmit of Jharkor and crushed the timbers in. Within seconds, accompanied by the cries of maimed and drowning men, the ship had sunk and Dharmit with it. Some of the crew were taken aboard other vessels but the wounded were left to drown.

Another catapult sounded and this time a tower full of archers was squarely hit. Masonry erupted outwards and those who still lived fell sickeningly to die in the foam-tipped sea lashing the wall. This time, angered by the deaths of their comrades, Imrryrian archers sent back a stream of slim arrows into the enemy's midst. Reavers howled as red-fletched shafts buried themselves thirstily in flesh.

But reavers returned the arrows liberally and soon only a handful of men were left on the wall as further catapult rocks smashed into towers and men, destroying their only war-machine and part of the wall besides.

Dyvim Tarkan still lived, though red blood stained his yellow tunic and an arrow shaft protruded from his left shoulder. He still lived when the first ram-ship moved intractably towards the great wooden gate and smashed against it, weakening it. A second ship sailed in beside it and, between them, they stove in the gate and glided through the entrance; the first non-Imrryrian ships ever to do such a thing. Perhaps it was outraged horror that tradition had been broken which caused poor Dyvim Tarkan to lose his footing at the edge of the wall and fall screaming down to break his neck on the deck of Count Smiorgan's flagship as it sailed triumphantly through the gate.

Now the ram-ships made way for Count Smiorgan's craft, for Elric had to lead the way through the maze. Ahead of them loomed five tall entrances, black gaping maws all alike in shape and size. Elric pointed to the third from the left and with short strokes the oarsmen began to paddle the ship into the dark mouth of the entrance. For some minutes, they sailed in darkness.

"Flares!" shouted Elric. "Light the flares!"

Torches had already been prepared and these were now lighted. The men saw that they were in a vast tunnel hewn out of natural rock which twisted tortuously in all directions.

"Keep close," Elric ordered and his voice was magnified a score of times in the echoing cavern. Torchlight blazed and Elric's face was a mask of shadow and frisking light as the torches threw up long tongues of flame to the bleak roof. Behind him, men could be heard muttering in awe and, as more craft entered the maze and lit their own torches, Elric could see some torches waver as their bearers trembled in superstitious fear. Elric felt some discomfort as he glanced through the flickering shadows and his eyes, caught by torchflare, gleamed fever-bright.

With dreadful monotony, the oars splashed onwards as the tunnel widened and several more cave-mouths came into sight. "The middle entrance," Elric ordered. The steerman in the stern nodded and guided the ship towards the entrance Elric had indicated. Apart from the muted murmur of some men and the splash of oars, there was a grim and ominous silence in the towering cavern.

Elric stared down at the cold, dark water and shuddered.

Eventually they moved once again into bright sunlight and the

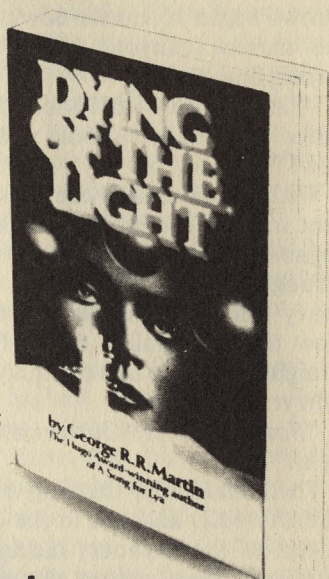
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men looked upwards, marvelling at the height of the great walls above them. Upon those walls squatted more yellow-clad, bronze armoured archers and as Count Smiorgan's vessel led the way out of the black caverns, the torches still burning in the cool winter air, arrows began to hurtle down into the narrow canyon, biting into throats and limbs.

"Faster!" howled Elric. "Row faster — speed is our only weapon now!"

With frantic energy the oarsmen bent to their sweeps and the ships began to pick up speed even through Imrryrian arrows took heavy toll of the reaver crewmen. Now the high-walled channel ran straight and Elric saw the quays of Imrryr ahead of him.

"Faster! Faster! Our prize is in sight!"

Then, suddenly, the ship broke past the walls and was in the calm waters of the harbour, facing the warriors drawn up on the quay. The ship halted, waiting for reinforcements to plunge out of the channel and join them. When twenty ships were through, Elric gave the command to attack the quay and now Stormbringer howled from its scabbard. The flagship's port side thudded against the quay as arrows rained down upon it. Shafts whistled all around Elric but, miraculously, he was unscathed as he led a bunch of yelling reavers on to land. Imrryr-

ian axe-men bunched forward and confronted the reavers, but it was plain that they had little spirit for the fight — they were too disconcerted by the course which events had taken.

Elric's black blade struck with frenzied force at the throat of the leading axe-man and sheared off his head. Howling demoniacally now that it had again tasted blood, the sword began to writhe in Elric's grasp, seeking fresh flesh in which to bite. There was a hard, grim smile on the albino's colourless lips and his eyes were narrowed as he struck without discrimination at the warriors.

He planned to leave the fighting to those he had led to Imrryr, for he had other things to do — and quickly. Behind the yellow-garbed soldiers, the tall towers of Imrryr rose, beautiful in their soft and scintillating colours of coral pink and powdery blue, of gold and pale yellow, white and subtle green. One such tower was Elric's objective — the tower of D'a'rputna where he had ordered Tanglebones to take Cymoril, knowing that in the confusion this would be possible.

Elric hacked a blood-drenched path through those who attempted to halt him and men fell back, screaming horribly as the rune-sword drank their souls.

Now Elric was past them, leaving them to the bright blades of the reavers who poured on to the

quayside, and was running up through the twisting streets, his sword slaying anyone who attempted to stop him. Like a white-faced ghoul he was, his clothing tattered and bloody, his armour chipped and scratched, but he ran speedily over the cobble-stones of the twisting streets and came at last to the slender tower of hazy blue and soft gold — the Tower of D'a'rputna. Its door was open, showing that someone was inside, and Elric rushed through it and entered the large ground-floor chamber. No one greeted him.

"Tanglebones!" he yelled, his voice roaring loudly even in his own ears. "Tanglebones — are you here?" He leapt up the stairs in great bounds, calling his servant's name. On the third floor he stopped suddenly, hearing a low groan from one of the rooms. "Tanglebones — is that you?" Elric strode towards the room, hearing a strangled gasping. He pushed open the door and his stomach seemed to twist within him as he saw the old man lying upon the bare floor of the chamber, striving vainly to stop the flow of blood which gouted from a great wound in his side.

"What's happened man — where's Cymoril?"

Tanglebones' old face twisted in pain and grief. "She — I — I brought her here, master, as you ordered. But —" he coughed and blood dribbled down his wizened

chin, "but — Prince Yyrkoon — he — he apprehended me — must have followed us here. He — struck me down and took Cymoril back with him — said she'd be — safe in the Tower of B'aal'nezbett Master — I'm sorry . . ."

"So you should be," Elric retorted savagely. Then his tone softened. "Do not worry, old friend — I'll avenge you and myself. I can still reach Cymoril now I know where Yyrkoon has taken her. Thank you for trying, Tanglebones — may your long journey down the last river be uneventful."

He turned abruptly on his heel and left the chamber, running down the stairs and out into the street again.

The Tower of B'aal'nezbett was the highest tower in the Royal Palace. Elric knew it well, for it was there that his ancestors had studied their dark sorceries and conducted frightful experiments. He shuddered as he thought what Yyrkoon might be doing to his own sister.

The streets of the city seemed hushed and strangely deserted, but Elric had no time to ponder why this should be so. Instead he dashed towards the palace, found the main gate unguarded and the main entrance to the building deserted. This too was unique, but it constituted luck for Elric as he made his way upwards, climbing familiar ways towards the topmost tower.

Finally, he reached a door of shimmering black crystal which had no bolt or handle to it. Frenziedly, Elric struck at the crystal with his sorcerous blade but the crystal appeared only to flow and re-form. His blows had no effect.

Elric racked his mind, seeking to remember the single alien word which would make the door open. He dared not put himself in the trance which would have, in time, brought the word to his lips, instead he had to dredge his subconscious and bring the word forth. It was dangerous but there was little else he could do. His whole frame trembled as his face twisted and his brain began to shake. The word was coming as his vocal chords jerked in his throat and his chest heaved.

He coughed the word out and his whole mind and body ached with the strain. Then he cried:

"I command thee — open!"

He knew that once the door opened, his cousin would be aware of his presence, but he had to risk it. The crystal expanded, pulsating and seething, and then began to flow *out*. It flowed into nothingness, into something beyond the physical universe, beyond time. Elric breathed thankfully and passed into the Tower of B'aal'nezbett. But now an eerie fire, chilling and mind-shattering, was licking around Elric as he struggled up the steps towards the central chamber. There was a

strange music surrounding him, uncanny music which throbbed and sobbed and pounded in his head.

Above him he saw a leering Yyrkoon, a black runesword also in his hand, the mate of the one in Elric's own grasp.

"Hellspawn!" Elric said thickly, weakly, "I see you have recovered Mournblade — well, test its powers against its brother if you dare. I have come to destroy you, cousin."

Stormbringer was giving forth a peculiar moaning sound which sighed over the shrieking unearthly music accompanying the licking, chilling fire. The runesword writhed in Elric's fist and he had difficulty in controlling it. Summoning all his strength he plunged up the last few steps and aimed a wild blow at Yyrkoon. Beyond the eerie fire bubbled yellow-green lava, on all sides, above and beneath. The two men were surrounded only by the misty fire and the lava which lurked beyond it — they were outside the Earth and facing one another for a final battle. The lava seethed and began to ooze inwards, dispersing the fire.

The two blades met and a terrible shrieking roar went up. Elric felt his whole arm go numb and it tingled sickeningly. Elric felt like a puppet. He was no longer his own master — the blade was deciding his actions for him. The blade, with Elric behind it, roared past its

brother sword and cut a deep wound in Yyrkoon's left arm. He howled and his eyes widened in agony. Mournblade struck back at Stormbringer, catching Elric in the very place he had wounded his cousin. He sobbed in pain, but continued to move upwards, now wounding Yyrkoon in the right side with a blow strong enough to have killed any other man. Yyrkoon laughed then — laughed like a gibbering demon from the foulest depths of Hell. His sanity had broken at last and Elric now had the advantage. But the great sorcery which his cousin had conjured was still in evidence and Elric felt as if a giant had grasped him, was crushing him as he pressed his advantage, Yyrkoon's blood spouting from the wound and covering Elric, also. The lava was slowly withdrawing and now Elric saw the entrance to the central chamber. Behind his cousin another form moved. Elric gasped. Cymoril had awakened and, with horror on her face, was shrieking at him.

The sword still swung in a black arc, cutting down Yyrkoon's brother blade and breaking the usurper's guard.

"Elric!" cried Cymoril desperately. "Save me — save me now, else we are doomed for eternity."

Elric was puzzled by the girl's words. He could not understand the sense of them. Savagely he

drove Yyrkoon upwards towards the chamber.

"Elric — put Stormbringer away. Sheath your sword or we shall part again."

But even if he could have controlled the whistling blade, Elric would not have sheathed it. Hate dominated his being and he would sheathe it in his cousin's evil heart before he put it aside.

Cymoril was weeping, now, pleading with him. But Elric could do nothing. The drooling, idiot thing which had been Yyrkoon of Imrryr, turned at its sister's cries and stared leeringly at her. It cackled and reached out one shaking hand to seize the girl by her shoulder. She struggled to escape, but Yyrkoon still had his evil strength. Taking advantage of his opponent's distraction, Elric cut deep through his body, almost severing the trunk from the waist.

And yet, incredibly, Yyrkoon remained alive, drawing his vitality from the blade which still clashed against Elric's own rune-carved sword. With a final push he flung Cymoril forward and she died screaming on the point of Stormbringer.

Then Yyrkoon laughed one final cackling shriek and his black soul went howling down to hell.

The tower resumed its former proportions, all fire and lava gone. Elric was dazed — unable to marshal his thoughts. He looked down at the dead bodies of the brother

and the sister. He saw them, at first, only as corpses — a man's and a woman's.

Then dark truth dawned on his clearing brain and he moaned in grief, like an animal. He had slain the girl he loved. The runesword fell from his grasp, stained by Cymoril's lifeblood, and clattered unheeded down the stairs. Sobbing now, Elric dropped beside the dead girl and lifted her in his arms.

"Cymoril," he moaned, his whole body throbbing. "Cymoril — I have slain you."

Four

Elric looked back at the roaring, crumbling, tumbling, flame-spewing ruins of Imrryr and drove his sweating oarsmen faster. The ship, sail still unfurled, bucked as a contrary current of wind caught it and Elric was forced to cling to the ship's side lest he be tossed overboard. He looked back at Imrryr and felt a tightness in his throat as he realised that he was truly rootless, now; a renegade and a woman-slayer, though involuntarily the latter. He had lost the only woman he had loved in his blind lust for revenge. Now it was finished — everything was finished. He could envisage no future, for his future had been bound up with his past and now, effectively, that

past was flaming in ruins behind him. Dry sobs eddied in his chest and he gripped the ship's rail yet more firmly.

His mind reluctantly brooded on Cymoril. He had laid her corpse upon a couch and had set fire to the Tower. Then he had gone back to find the reavers successful, straggling back to their ships loaded with loot and girl-slaves, jubilantly firing the tall and beautiful buildings as they went.

He had caused to be destroyed the last tangible sign that the grandiose, magnificent Bright Empire had ever existed. He felt that most of himself was gone with it.

Elric looked at Imrryr and suddenly a greater sadness overwhelmed him as a tower, as delicate and as beautiful as fine lace, cracked and toppled with flames leaping about it.

He had shattered the last great monument to the earlier race — his own race. Men might have learned again, one day, to build strong, slender towers like those of Imrryr, but now the knowledge was dying with the thundering chaos of the fall of the Dreaming City and the fast-diminishing race of Melni-boné.

But what of the Dragon Masters? Neither they nor their golden ships had met the attacking reavers — only their foot-soldiers had been there to defend the city. Had they hidden their ships in some secret waterway and fled inland

when the reavers overran the city? They had put up too short a fight to be truly beaten. It had been far too easy. Now that the ships were retreating, were they planning some sudden retaliation? Elric felt that they might have such a plan — perhaps a plan concerning dragons. He shuddered. He had told the others nothing of the beasts which Melnibonéans had controlled for centuries. Even now, someone might be unlocking the gates of the underground Dragon Caves. He turned his mind away from the unnerving prospect.

As the fleet headed towards open sea, Elric's eyes were still looking sadly towards Imrryr as he paid silent homage to the city of his forefathers and the dead Cymoril. He felt hot bitterness sweep over him again as the memory of her death upon his own sword-point came sharply to him. He recalled her warning, when he had left her to go adventuring in the Young Kingdoms, that by putting Yyrkoon on the Ruby Throne as Regent, by relinquishing his power for a year, he doubled them both. He cursed himself. Then a muttering, like a roll of distant thunder, spread through the fleet and he wheeled sharply, intent on discovering the cause of the consternation.

Thirty golden-sailed Melnibonéan battle barges had appeared on both sides of the harbour, issuing

from two mouths of the maze. Elric realised that they must have hidden in the other channels, waiting to attack the fleet when they returned, satiated and depleted. Great war-galleys they were, the last ships of Melniboné and the secret of their building was unknown. They had a sense of age and slumbering might about them as they rowed swiftly, each with four or five banks of great sweeping oars, to encircle the raven ships.

Elric's fleet seemed to shrink before his eyes until it seemed as though it were a bobbing collection of wood-shavings against the towering splendour of the shimmering battle barges. They were well-equipped and fresh for a fight, whereas the weary reavers were intensely battle-tired. There was only one way to save a small part of the fleet, Elric knew. He would have to conjure a witch-wind for sail-power. Most of the flagships were around him and he now occupied that of Yaris, for the youth had got himself wildly drunk and had died by the knife of a Melnibonéan slave wench. Next to Elric's ship was Count Smiorgan's and the stocky Sea Lord was frowning, knowing full well that he and his ships, for all their superior numbers, would not stand up to a sea-fight.

But the conjuring of winds great enough to move many vessels was a dangerous thing, for it released

colossal power and the elementals who controlled the winds were apt to turn upon the sorcerer himself if he was not more than careful. But it was the only chance, otherwise the rams which sent ripples from the golden prows would smash the reaver ships to driftwood.

Steeling himself, Elric began to speak the ancient and terrible, many-vowelled names of the beings who existed in the air. Again, he could not risk the trance-state, for he had to watch for signs of the elementals turning upon him. He called to them in a speech that was sometimes high like the cry of a gannet, sometimes rolling like the roar of shore-bound surf, and the dim shapes of the Powers of the Wind began to flit before his blurred gaze. His heart throbbed horribly in his ribs and his legs felt weak. He summoned all his strength and conjured a wind which shrieked wildly and chaotically about him, rocking even the huge Melnibonéan ships back and forth. Then he directed the wind and sent it into the sails of some forty of the reaver ships. Many he could not save for they lay even outside his wide range.

But forty of the craft escaped the smashing rams and, amidst the sound of howling wind and sun-dered timbers, leapt on the waves, their masts creaking as the wind cracked into their sails. Oars were torn from the hands of the rowers, leaving a wake of broken wood on

the white salt trail which boiled behind each of the reaver ships.

Quite suddenly, they were beyond the slowly closing circle of Melnibonéan ships and careering madly across the open sea, while all the crews sensed a difference in the air and caught glimpses of strange, soft-shaped forms around them. There was a discomforting sense of evil about the beings which aided them, an awesome alienness.

Smiorgan waved to Elric and grinned thankfully.

"We're safe, thanks to you, Elric!" he yelled across the water. "I knew you'd bring us luck!"

Elric ignored him.

Now the Dragon Lords, vengeance-bent, gave chase. Almost as fast as the magic-aided reaver fleet were the golden barges of Imrryr, and some reaver galleys, whose masts cracked and split beneath the force of the wind driving them, were caught.

Elric saw mighty grappling hooks of dully gleaming metal swing out from the decks of the Imrryian galleys and thud with a moan of wrenched timber into those of the fleet which lay broken and powerless behind him. Fire leapt from catapults towards many a fleeing reaver craft. Searing, foul-stinking flame hissed like lava across the decks and ate into planks like vitriol into paper. Men shrieked, beating vainly at brightly burning clothes, some leaping into

water which would not extinguish the fire. Some sank beneath the sea and it was possible to trace their descent as, flaming even below the surface, men and ships fluttered to the bottom like blazing, tired moths.

Reaver decks, untouched by fire, ran red with reaver blood as the enraged Immryian warriors swung down the grappling ropes and dropped among the raiders, wielding great swords and battle-axes and wreaking terrible havoc amongst the sea-ravens. Immryian arrows and Immryian javelins swooped from the towering decks of Immryian galleys and tore into the panicky men on the smaller ships.

All this Elric saw as he and his vessels began slowly to overhaul the leading Immryian ship, flag-galley of Admiral Magum Colim, commander of the Melnibonéan fleet.

Now Elric spared a word for Count Smiorgan. "We've outrun them!" he shouted above the howling wind to the next ship where Smiorgan stood staring wide-eyed at the sky. "But keep your ships heading westwards or we're finished!"

But Smiorgan did not reply. He still looked skyward and there was horror in his eyes; in the eyes of a man who, before this, had never known the quivering bite of fear. Uneasily, Elric let his own eyes

follow the gaze of Smiorgan. Then he saw them.

They were dragons, without doubt! The great reptiles were some miles away, but Elric knew the stamp of the huge flying beasts. The average wingspan of these near-extinct monsters was some thirty feet across. Their snake-like bodies, beginning in a narrow-snouted head and terminating in a dreadful whip of a tail, were forty feet long and although they did not breathe the legendary fire and smoke, Elric knew that their venom was combustible and could set fire to wood or fabric on contact.

Immryian warriors rode the dragon backs. Armed with long, spear-like goads, they blew strangely shaped horns which sang out curious notes over the turbulent sea and calm blue sky. Nearing the golden fleet, now half-a-league away, the leading dragon sailed down and circled towards the huge golden flag-galley, its wings making a sound like the crack of lightning as they beat through the air.

The grey-green, scaled monster hovered over the golden ship as it heaved in the white-foamed turbulent sea. Framed against the cloudless sky, the dragon was in sharp perspective and it was possible for Elric to get a clear view of it. The goad which the Dragon Master waved to Admiral Magum Colim was a long, slim spear upon which

the strange pennant of black and yellow zig-zag lines was, even at this distance, noticeable. Elric recognised the insignia on the pennant.

Dyvim Tvar, friend of Elric's youth, Lord of the Dragon Caves, was leading his charges to claim vengeance for Imrryr the Beautiful.

Elric howled across the water to Smiorgan. "These are your main danger, now. Do what you can to stave them off!" There was a rattle of iron as the men prepared, near-hopelessly, to repel the new menace. Witch-wind would give little advantage over the fast-flying dragons. Now Dyvim Tvar had evidently conferred with Magum Colim and his goad lashed out at the dragon throat. The huge reptile jerked upwards and began to gain altitude. Eleven other dragons were behind it, joining it now.

With seeming slowness, the dragons began to beat relentlessly towards the reaver fleet as the crewmen prayed to their own Gods for a miracle.

They were doomed. There was no escaping the fact. Every reaver ship was doomed and the raid had been fruitless.

Elric could see the despair in the faces of the men as the masts of the reaver ships continued to bend under the strain of the shrieking witch-wind. They could do nothing, now, but die . . .

Elric fought to rid his mind of

the swirling uncertainty which filled it. He drew his sword and felt the pulsating, evil power which lurked in rune-carved Storm-bringer. But he hated that power now — for it had caused him to kill the only human he had cherished. He realised how much of his strength he owed to the black-iron sword of his fathers and how weak he might be without it. He was an albino and that meant that he lacked the vitality of a normal human being. Savagely, futilely, as the mist in his mind was replaced by red fear, he cursed the pretensions of revenge he had held, cursed the day when he had agreed to lead the raid on Imrryr and most of all he bitterly vilified dead Yyrkoon and his twisted envy which had been the cause of the whole doom-ridden course of events.

But it was too late now for curses of any kind. The loud slapping of beating dragon wings filled the air and the monsters loomed over the fleeing reaver craft. He had to make some kind of decision — though he had no love for life, he refused to die by the hands of his own people. When he died, he promised himself, it would be by his own hand. He made his decision, hating himself.

He called off the witch-wind as the dragon venom seared down and struck the last ship in line.

He put all his powers into sending a stronger wind into the sails of his own boat while his bewilder-

ed comrades in the suddenly becalmed ships called over the water, inquiring desperately the reason for his act. Elric's ship was moving fast, now, and might just escape the dragons. He hoped so.

He deserted the man who had trusted him, Count Smiorgan, and watched as venom poured from the sky and engulfed him in blazing green and scarlet flame. Elric fled, keeping his mind from thoughts of the future, and sobbed aloud, that proud prince of ruins; and he cursed the malevolent Gods for the black day when idly, for their amusement, they had spawned men.

Behind him, the last reaver ships flared into sudden appalling brightness and, although half-thankful that they had escaped the fate of their comrades, the crew looked at Elric accusingly. He sobbed on, not heeding them, great griefs racking his soul.

A night later, off the coast of an island called Pan Tang, when the ship was safe from the dreadful re-criminations of the Dragon Masters and their beasts, Elric stood brooding in the stern while the men eyed him with fear and hatred, muttering of betrayal and heartless cowardice. They appeared to have forgotten their own fear and subsequent safety.

Elric brooded, and he held the black runesword in his two hands. Stormbringer was more than an or-

dinary battle-blade, this he had known for years, but now he realised that it was possessed of more sentience than he had imagined. The frightful thing had used its wielder and had made Elric destroy Cymoril. Yet he was horribly dependent upon it; he realised this with soul-rending certainty. But he feared and resented the sword's power — hated it bitterly for the chaos it had wrought in his brain and spirit. In an agony of uncertainty he held the blade in his hands and forced himself to weigh the factors involved. Without the sinister sword, he would lose pride — perhaps even life — but he might know the soothing tranquillity of pure rest; with it he would have power and strength — but the sword would guide him into a doom-racked future. He would savour power — but never peace.

He drew a great, sobbing breath and, blind misgiving influencing him, threw the sword into the moon-drenched sea.

Incredibly, it did not sink. It did not even float on the water. It fell point forwards into the sea and *stuck* there, quivering as if it were embedded in timber. It remained throbbing in the water, six inches of its blade immersed, and began to give off a weird devil-scream — a howl of horrible malevolence.

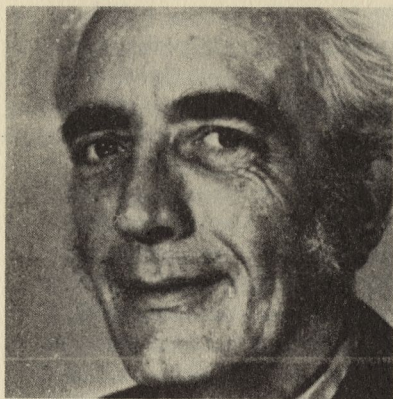
With a choking curse, Elric stretched out his slim, whitely gleaming hand, trying to recover the sentient hellblade. He stretched

further, leaning far out over the rail. He could not grasp it — it lay some feet from him, still. Gasping, a sickening sense of defeat overwhelming him, he dropped over the side and plunged into the bone-chilling water, striking out with strained, grotesque strokes, towards the hovering sword. He was beaten — the sword had won.

He reached it and put his fingers around the hilt. At once it settled in his hand and Elric felt strength seep slowly back into his aching body. Then he realised that he and the sword were interdependent, for though he needed the blade, Stormbringer, parasitic, required a user — without a man to wield it, the blade was also powerless.

“We must be bound to one another then,” Elric murmured despairingly. “Bound by hell-forged chains and fate-haunted circumstance. Well, then — let it be thus so — and men will have cause to tremble and flee when they hear the names of Elric of Melniboné and Stormbringer, his sword. We are two of a kind — produced by an age which has deserted us. Let us give this age *cause* to hate us!”

Strong again, Elric sheathed Stormbringer and the sword settled against his side; then, with powerful strokes, he began to swim towards the island while the men he left on the ship breathed with relief and speculated whether he would live or perish in the bleak waters of that strange and nameless sea . . . ●



Fritz Leiber

Introduction

It was Chicago, late 1938, still the Great Depression. I'd been seriously trying to sell stories for three years and married almost as long. (Those two activities are surely connected: sexual union and the creative surge; courtship through wild fantasizing of the sex partner and of the larger

audience.) I had a genuine office job which I'd held down for more than a year and we were living in an apartment we'd furnished on the south side near the University of Chicago where I'd got my Bachelor of Philosophy degree and met Jonquil. That summer she'd borne our son Justin.

It didn't bother me that my slender pint-size wife had done all the work of that apartment-furnishing including laying linoleum — and while pregnant, at that — though maybe with some help from the weary black lady who came in weekdays from the Black Belt west of us for \$5 a week. Because the dreadful boredom of being confined to an office down by the Loop for 48 hours a week and the \$30 that brought seemed to me the largest possible contribution to family living that could be demanded of an artistic young husband. My daily downtown imprisonment impressed me as worse than that of grammar school — the hours were longer.

This despite the fact that the work was writing — but the dull stupid sort of writing: nonfiction. Consolidated Book Publishers put out *The Standard American Encyclopedia*, which sold for \$1 a volume plus a coupon you clipped from the newspaper or got from a movie house on special book nights. I and a bunch of other college graduates got \$25 or so for modernizing the books, which had

last been revised just after the Spanish-American War (that old edition had delightful vast articles about the battleship *Maine*, the *Virginus* affair, etc.; also a huge one on the spontaneous combustion of human beings, an occult preoccupation of the late Nineteenth Century); other times we ghost wrote *The University of Knowledge*, a wholly new creation done from scratch which was signed mostly hungry assistant and full professors from lesser universities and colleges than that of Chicago; finally there was a set we never finished (the war intervened) on how to succeed in life and develop a great personality — trying to cook up that one really depressed us.

A final note on salaries: if you were a female college or university graduate you got \$18 or \$20; typist and such got \$15, maybe; the editorial boss and his male assistant got \$50 and \$40 respectively. But although we all griped, I believe that all of us considered ourselves pretty fortunate to be getting what we did. Matter of fact, too, I think I'd just been raised to \$35. Headed for the editorial aristocracy, I was, but too stupid to realize it; I hated bossing.

I wrote my fiction evenings and weekends while slowly developing a talent for drinking beer later in the evenings, after all writing was done. The fiction was supernatural horror mostly, Chicago's coal-

smoke darkness and sinister industrial immensity being perhaps predisposing influences. I also liked science fiction and adventure and detective stories, but it seemed to take the special kick of terror and strangeness to make me settle down to the laborious task of fitting words together on paper. Even my first-written Fafhrd-Mouser story — “Adept’s Gambit,” completed way back in autumn 1935 though it didn’t get published until 1947 — was very much a spectral terror tale. No other fictional performance seemed worth the trouble of putting on. Also, I’d read Jack Woodford’s commercial and highly practical *Writing and Selling* — an excellent manual.

And two years earlier — in late 1936 — I’d had what I judge now to be a very lucky and decisive break. My wife had written H.P. Lovecraft (I hadn’t the nerve to) and as a result the three of us had a wonderfully rich and extensive three-months correspondence before his final illness swiftly overcame and slew him. He read, praised, and gently criticized my “Adept’s Gambit” and the poems *Demons of the Upper Air* (those weren’t published until 1969); by circulating my stuff he introduced me to several other fantasy writers, though I was slow to take advantage of this (excessive “modesty” again); we discussed all sorts of books and literary topics; and he gave me wonderfully lasting en-

couragement to be serious, thoughtful, and meticulous in my fiction writing.

(Several years later Jonquil managed to get me a long afternoon interview with Thomas Mann, a writer I admired from afar. Oddly perhaps, this didn’t inspire me, but embarrassed me dreadfully. I resented my wife’s noble effort and was openly critical of it, perhaps because while I admired Mann’s writings they weren’t exactly the sort I wanted to do myself — as Lovecraft’s had been. And then during the interview Mann played the great author a bit, wasn’t interested in *my* writings of course, and it turned out I’d made the dreadful mistake of not having read *Buddenbrooks*. But strange how little, how *narrowly*, I was open to my superiors.)

Certainly by the time I wrote “The Automatic Pistol” I was using Lovecraft’s tales as the chief model for my horror stories: emphasis on eerie atmosphere developed with restraint, building up to and focusing in on one big climactic scare coming at the very end. I was also beginning to learn how a *thing* (a physical object, the acme of the real) can be a very good focus point for a fantasy (supposedly an acme of the unreal) or for a realistic adventure, for that matter. Just think, there’s the *ring* in the Tolkien books, the *wonderstone* in De la Mare’s *The Three Mullamulgars*, the cold

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cream cap sigil in Cabell's *The Cream of the Jest*, the daggers in *Macbeth*, the lens in E. E. Smith's space epics, and any number of spears, swords, knives, talismans, belts, crowns, crucifixes, brooches, and bottles (a corpse is a thing, you know, and don't forget "The Monkey's Paw" and "The Three Marked Pennies" and "The Scarf"); also the inevitable ship of the Hornblower stories (*Lydia*, *Sutherland*, *Atropos*, or whichever) and the gun of his novel of that name. (Any fool can visualize things like these; it sets his reader's imagination working actively.)

(Also, perhaps alas, every tyro writer's adventures of a penny, a two-dollar bill, a golf ball, a brass button, or a beer can.)

Well, I had my *pistol* and hopefully its succinct description in the first paragraph would hook the

reader's interest and lead it through to the climax, where bringing it to life would satisfy the main requirement of a supernatural tale: absolute transgression of some certainty, some natural law. "Stones have been known to move and trees to speak."

Also, the focusing-in process was helped by having the story range through several sketchily described localities for the first third and then shift to the hide-out shack where my three characters were isolated and I could begin to work in my cumulative atmospheric touches: the wind and the rustle of the dry tall sea grass, the salt-swamp smells. In this story too I discovered how helpful it can be to have some formalized human activity going on as the climax nears (in this case a poker game, but it could be a church service or a play being performed, or a character reading a story — Poe's *Usher!* — or any number of things sensational — an execution? — or mundane — someone going to bed or cooking a meal?): it orders the time, provides a tiny chronology or date ladder, for that section of the story and so allows for all sorts of ironies, allusions, and special effects.

At the time I must have been reading some quasi-comic gangster stories by Damon Runyan or the early Paul Gallico; there were a lot of those generated by Prohibition days, even Hammett had his quasi-

comic gangsters: the goof who breaks in with a gun on Nick and Nora Charles at the hotel and the wonderfully menacing dumb ape in *The Glass Key*. I didn't know any gangsters myself or how they really talked, but at least I'd spent my childhood summers at Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey, in rum-running territory, and I knew the scenery and had heard tell of the business at fairly close hand; and rather prudently, I guess, I tried to keep the talk simple and the actions modest. That dime-limit poker game! — I guess I was thinking of theater stagehands, whom I did know a bit. And remember, it was still the Great Depression.

I don't know how I'd write the story differently today. Maybe try to hit on a better description of the noise a gun would make trying to shift itself around inside a packed suitcase. And maybe put in a gangster's moll. Some authentic Swedish slang and cuss words for Larsen?

When the story had been final-typed it went off to *Weird Tales* as a matter of course — Lovecraft's magazine. I probably had some plan of trying it on the detective pulps *if* it were rejected there. More *when* they rejected it. Farnsworth Wright had already turned down some dozen of my stories, including both "Adept's Gambit" ("Too long and experimental") and my *Demons* poems ("I hesitated over No. 8, but...").

But my thirteenth submission (if it actually had been that, I can't be sure) was the lucky one. I can't recall how, working a six-day week, I happened to be home when the mailman came; perhaps it was an especially early delivery — we still had two a day then. Jonquil went down to the box when the postman buzzed. I heard her squeal on the stairs, then half scream the news to me. I rushed to our front door. Yes, the little letter was from *Weird Tales* all right. I recognized Wright's small, neat, but tremulous signature — his Parkinson's disease. He had accepted my offering "...in spite of the fact that it is a gangster story." It would be published in due course, whereupon I would be paid \$45. It was December 1938 when that letter arrived, making a wonderful Christmas and birthday present for me. Score one for Capricorn!

As things turned out, although "The Automatic Pistol" was my first story accepted for publication, it wasn't my first story to be published or paid for. But that first acceptance, the first *sale* (I was trustful), helped give me the confidence, when Street and Smith's *Unknown* made its debut on the stands next month and year, to write a brand new Fafhrd and Mouser novelette about not a pistol but a *stone house* that came alive and tried to mangle our heroes, which John W. Campbell,

Jr., bought for the magnificent sum of \$125 — a month's salary! They paid on acceptance too and published quite speedily. I was so intoxicated by success I quit my job (after all, I had that \$45 coming too, money in the bank) determined thenceforth to earn my living by the freelance pen. Alas, that wasn't so easy — maybe I forgot or didn't manage to bring something inanimate alive in my next tales. (This business of a writer bringing dead things alive goes very deep, I do believe; in realistic fiction it's a matter of arriving at new feelings, value judgements, and patterns of action by brooding constructively on your problems and those of other people.) After two months I asked for my old job back and got it — at \$25 a week, an admonitory slap on the wrist for premature optimism.

When after a year and half "The Automatic Pistol" finally appeared in print — the May 1940 issue — and I got paid, it was an anticlimax. The \$45 had shrunk a teensy bit, though the price of *Weird Tales* had been cut from 25 cents to 15 cents. The world had gone to war. Wright was no longer editor (he died in June 1940) and Dorothy McIlwraith of *Short Stories*, who'd replaced him, looked on my new submissions with no more favor than he had accorded my early ones. I did manage to work out a kind of medical horror story she would take and I

sold four or five of those to the magazine in its declining years. Financially it certainly wasn't worth the effort.

But "The Automatic Pistol" still had a lesson to teach me. An angry lady reader wrote in a letter they didn't publish but read and forwarded to me. In the story I'd made one or two unkind remarks about the little Jersey town of Keansburg. It was a real place and I'd not thought to change its name. The letter-writing lady lived in Keansburg and she'd taken my disparagements very much to heart and got all worked up. She said they'd run me "and all the other gangsters" out of town years before — which would at least seem to prove they'd had them. Worst, she said she'd never buy *Weird Tales* again. That really shook me. Now, I might have written her an apology — I think. But I got the message all right. Generally speaking, you can say all manner of nasty things about New York, Chicago, or Los Angeles. They're big enough to take it. Heavens, Conan Doyle was forever calling London a great cesspool in the Sherlock Holmes stories. But don't insult Podunk.

I trust no present resident of Keansburg will be offended by my story. After all, it's all ancient history by now.

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The Automatic Pistol

Inky never let anyone but himself handle his automatic pistol, or even touch it. It was blue-black and hefty and when you just pressed the trigger once, eight .45 caliber slugs came out almost on top of each other.

Inky was something of a mechanic, as far as his automatic went. He would break it down and put it together again, and every once in a while carefully rub a file across the inside trigger catch.

Glasses once told him, "You will make that gun into such a hair-trigger that it will go off in your pocket and blast off all your toes. You will only have to think about it and it will start shooting."

Inky smiled at that, I remember, and didn't bother to say anything. He was a little wiry man with a pale face, from which he couldn't ever shave off the blueblack of his beard, no matter how close he shaved. His hair was black too. When he talked, there was a foreign sound to his voice. He got together with Anton Larsen just after prohibition came, in the days when sea-skiffs with converted automobile motors used to play tag with revenue cutters in New York Bay and off the Jersey coast, both omitting to use lights in order

to make the game more difficult. Larsen and Kozacs used to get their booze off a steamer and run it in near the Twin Lights in New Jersey.

It was there that Glasses and I started to work for them. Glasses, who looked like a cross between a college professor and an automobile salesman, came from I don't know where in New York City, and I was a local small-town policeman until I determined to lead a more honest life. We used to ride the stuff back toward Newark in a truck.

Inky always rode in with us; Larsen only occasionally. Neither of them used to talk much; Larsen, because he didn't see any sense in talking unless to give a guy orders or make a proposition; and Inky, well, I guess because he wasn't any too happy talking American. And there wasn't a ride Inky took with us but he didn't slip out his automatic and sort of pet it and mutter at it under his breath. Once when we were restfully chugging down the highway Glasses asked him, polite but inquiring:

"Just what is it makes you so fond of that gun? After all, there must be thousands identically like it."

"You think so?" says Inky, giving us a quick stare from his little, glinty black eyes and making a speech for once. "Let me tell you, Glasses" (he made the word sound like 'Hlasses'), "nothing is alike in this world. People, guns, bottles of Scotch — nothing. Everything in the world is different. Every man has different fingerprints; and, of all guns made in the same factory as this one, there is not one like mine. I could pick mine out from a hundred. Yes, even if I hadn't filed the trigger catch, I could do that."

We didn't contradict him. It sounded pretty reasonable. He sure loved that gun, all right. He slept with it under his pillow. I don't think it ever got more than three feet away from him as long as he lived. There is something crazy in a man feeling that way about a gun.

Once when Larsen was riding in with us, he remarked sarcastically in his heavy voice, "That is a pretty little gun, Inky, but I am getting very tired of hearing you talk to it so much, especially when no one can understand what you are saying. Doesn't it ever talk back to you?"

Inky didn't smile at this. "My gun only knows eight words," he said, "and they are practically all alike. They are eight lead slugs."

This was such a good crack that we laughed.

"Let's have a look at it," said

Larsen, reaching out his hand.

But Inky put it back in his pocket and didn't take it out for the rest of the trip.

After that Larsen was always kidding Inky about the gun, and trying to get his goat. He was a persistent guy with a very peculiar sense of humor, and he kept it up for a long time after it had stopped being funny. Finally he took to acting as if he wanted to buy it, making Inky crazy offers of one or two hundred dollars.

"Two hundred and seventy-five dollars, Inky," he said one evening as we were rattling past Keansburg with a load of cognac and Irish whisky. "That's my last offer, and you better take it."

Inky shook his head and made a funny grimace that was almost like a snarl. Then to my great surprise (I almost ran the truck off the pavement) Larsen lost his temper.

"Hand over that damn gun!" he bellowed, grabbing Inky's shoulders and shaking him. I was almost knocked off the seat. Somebody would have been hurt, or worse, if a motorcycle cop hadn't stopped us just at that moment to ask for his hush-money. By the time he was gone, Larsen and Inky were both cooled down below the danger point, and there was no more fighting. We got our load safely into the warehouse, nobody saying a word.

Afterward, when Glasses and I were having a cup of coffee at a

little open-all-night restaurant, I said, "Those two guys are crazy, and I don't like it a bit. Why the devil do they have to act that way, now that the business is going so swell? I haven't got the brains Larsen has, but you won't ever find me fighting about a gun as if I was a kid."

Glasses only smiled as he poured a precise half-spoonful of sugar into his cup.

"And Inky's as bad as *he* is," I went on. "I tell you, Glasses, it ain't natural or normal for a man to feel that way about a piece of metal. I can understand him being fond of it and feeling lost without it. I feel the same way about my lucky half-dollar. It's the way he pets it and makes love to it that gets on my nerves. And now Larsen's acting the same way."

Glasses shrugged. "We're all getting a little jittery, although we won't admit it," he said. "Too many bootleggers being shot up by hijackers. And so we start getting on each other's nerves and fighting about trifles — such as automatic pistols."

"There may be something there."

Glasses winked at me. "Why, certainly, No Nose; that's something else again. I even have another explanation of tonight's events."

"What?"

He leaned over and whispered in a mock-mysterious way, "Maybe

there's something queer about the gun itself."

I told him in impolite language to go chase himself.

From that night, however, things were changed. Larson and Inky Kozacs never spoke to each other any more except in the line of business. And there was no more talk, kidding or serious, about the gun. Inky only brought it out when Larsen wasn't along.

Well, the years kept passing and the bootlegging business stayed good except that the hijackers became more numerous and Inky got a couple of chances to show us what a nice noise his automatic made. Then, too, we got into a row with another gang in our line under an Irishman named Luke Dugan, and had to watch our step very carefully and change our routes about every other trip.

Still, business was good. I continued to support almost all my relatives, and Glasses put away a few dollars every month for what he called his Persian Cat Fund. Larsen, I believe, spent about everything he got on women and all that goes with them. He was the kind of guy who would take all the pleasures of life without cracking a smile, but who lived for them just the same.

As for Inky Kozacs, we never knew what happened to the money he made. We never heard of him spending much, so we finally figured he must be saving it — prob-

ably in bills in a safety deposit box, if I know his kind. Maybe he was planning to go back to the Old Country, wherever that was, and be somebody. At any rate he never told us. By the time Congress took our profession away from us, he must have had a whale of a lot of dough. We hadn't had a big racket, but we'd been very careful.

Finally the night came when we ran our last load. We'd have had to quit the business pretty soon anyway, because the big syndicates were demanding more protection money each week. There was no chance left for a small independent operator, even if he was as clever as Larsen. So Glasses and I took a couple of months off for vacation before thinking what to do next for his Persian cats and my shiftless relatives. For the time being we stuck together.

Then one morning I read in the paper that Inky Kozacs had been taken for a ride. He'd been found shot dead on a dump heap near Elizabeth, New Jersey.

"I guess Luke Dugan finally got him," said Glasses.

"A nasty break," I said, "especially figuring all that money he hadn't gotten any fun out of. I am glad that you and I, Glasses, aren't important enough for Dugan to bother about."

"Yeah. Say, No Nose, does it say if they found Inky's gun on him?"

I said it told that the dead man

was unarmed and that no weapon was found on the scene.

Glasses remarked that it was queer to think of Inky's gun being in anyone else's pocket. I agreed, and we spent some time wondering whether Inky had had a chance to defend himself.

About two hours later Larsen called and told us to meet him at the hide-out. He said Luke Dugan was gunning for him too.

The hide-out is a three-room frame bungalow with a big corrugated iron garage next to it. The garage was for the truck, and sometimes we would store a load of booze there when we heard that the police were going to make some arrests for the sake for variety. It is near Keansburg, and is about a mile and a half from the cement highway and about a quarter of a mile from the bay and the little inlet in which we used to hide our boat. Stiff, knife-edged sea-grass, taller than a man, comes up near to the house on the bay side, which is north, and on the west too. Under the sea-grass the ground is marshy, though in hot weather and when the tides aren't high, it gets dry and caked; here and there creeks of tidewater go through it. Even a little breeze will make the blades of sea-grass scrape each other with a funny dry sound.

To the east are some fields, and beyond them, Keansburg. Keansburg is a very cheap summer resort

town and many of the houses are built up on poles because of the tides and storms. It has a little lagoon for the boats of the fishermen who go out after crabs.

To the south of the hide-out is the dirt road leading to the cement highway. The nearest house is about half a mile away.

It was late in the afternoon when Glasses and I got there. We brought groceries for a couple of days, figuring Larsen might want to stay. Then, along about sunset, we heard Larsen's coupé turning in, and I went out to put it in the big, empty garage and carry in his suitcase. When I got back Larsen was talking to Glasses. He was a big man and his shoulders were broad both ways, like a wrestler's. His head was almost bald and what was left of his hair was a dirty yellow. His eyes were little and his face wasn't much to expression. And there wasn't any expression to it when he said. "Yeah, Inky got it."

"Luke Dugan's crazy gunmen sure hold a grudge," I observed.

Larsen nodded his head and scowled.

"Inky got it," he repeated, taking up his suitcase and starting for the bedroom. "And I'm planning to stay here for a few days, just in case they're after me too. I want you and Glasses to stay here with me."

Glasses gave me a funny wink and began throwing a meal to-

gether. I turned on the lights and pulled down the blinds, taking a worried glance down the road, which was empty. This waiting around in a lonely house for a bunch of gunmen to catch up with you didn't appeal to me. Nor to Glasses either, I guessed. It seemed to me that it would have been a lot more sensible for Larsen to put a couple of thousand miles between him and New York. But, knowing Larsen, I had sense enough not to make any comments.

After canned corned-beef hash and beans and beer, we sat around the table drinking coffee.

Larsen took an automatic out of his pocket and began fooling with it, and right away I saw it was Inky's. For about five minutes nobody said a word. The silence was so thick you could have cut it in chunks and sold it for ice cubes. Glasses played with his coffee, pouring in the cream one drop at a time. I wadded a piece of bread into little pellets and kicked myself for feeling so uneasy and sick at the stomach.

Finally Larsen looked up at us and said, "Too bad Inky didn't have this with him when he was taken for a ride. He gave it to me just before he planned sailing for the old country. He didn't want it with him any more, now that the racket's all over."

"I'm glad the guy that killed him hasn't got it now," said Glasses quickly. He talked ner-

vously and at random, as if he didn't want the silence to settle down again. "It's a funny thing, Inky giving up his gun — but I can understand his feeling; he mentally associated the gun with our racket; when the one was over he didn't care about the other."

Larsen grunted, which meant for Glasses to shut up.

"What's going to happen to Inky's dough?" I asked.

Larsen shrugged his shoulders and went on fooling with the automatic, throwing a shell into the chamber, cocking it, and so forth. It reminded me so much of the way Inky used to handle it that I got fidgetty and began to imagine I heard Luke Dugan's gunmen creeping up through the sea-grass. Finally I got up and started to walk around.

It was then that the accident happened. Larsen, after cocking the gun, was bringing up his thumb to let the hammer down easy, when it slipped out of his hand. As it hit the floor it went off with a flash and a bang, sending a slug gouging the floor too near my foot for comfort.

As soon as I realized I wasn't hit, I yelled without thinking, "I always told Inky he was putting too much of a hair trigger on his gun! The crazy fool!"

"Inky is too far away to hear you," remarked Glasses.

Larsen sat with his pig eyes staring down at the gun where it lay

between his feet. Then he gave a funny little snort, picked it up and put it on the table.

"That gun ought to be thrown away. It's too dangerous to handle. It's bad luck," I said to Larsen — and then wished I hadn't, for he gave me the benefit of a dirty look and some fancy Swedish swearing.

"Shut up, No Nose," he finished, "and don't tell me what I can do and what I can't. I can take care of you, and I can take care of Inky's gun. Right now I'm going to bed."

He shut the bedroom door behind him, leaving it up to me and Glasses to guess that we were supposed to take our blankets and sleep on the floor.

But we didn't want to go to sleep right away, if only because we were still thinking about Luke Dugan. So we got out a deck of cards and started a game of stud poker, speaking very low. Stud poker is like the ordinary kind, except that four of the five cards are dealt face up and one at a time.

You bet each time a card is dealt, and so considerable money is apt to change hands, even when you're playing with a ten-cent limit, like we were. It's a pretty good game for taking money away from suckers, and Glasses and I used to play it by the hour when we had nothing better to do. But since we were both equally dumb or equally wise (whichever way you look at it) neither one of us won consistently.

It was very quiet, except for Larsen's snoring and the rustling of the sea-grass and the occasional chink of a dime.

After about an hour, Glasses happened to look down at Inky's automatic lying on the other side of the table, and something about the way his body twisted around suddenly made me look too. Right away I felt something was wrong, but I couldn't tell what; it gave me a funny feeling in the back of the neck. Then Glasses put out two thin fingers and turned the gun halfway around, and I realized what had been wrong — or what I thought had been wrong. When Larsen had put the gun down, I thought it had been pointing at the outside door; but when Glasses and I looked at it, it was pointing more in the direction of the bedroom door. When you have the fidgets your memory gets tricky.

A half-hour later we noticed the gun pointed toward the bedroom door again. This time Glasses spun it around quick, and I got the fidgets for fair. Glasses gave a low whistle and got up, and tried putting the gun on different parts of the table and jiggling the table to see if the gun would move.

"I see what happened now," he whispered finally. "When the gun is lying on its side, it sort of balances on its safety catch.

"Now this table has got a wobble to it, and when we are playing cards the wobble is persistent

enough to edge the gun slowly around in a circle."

"I don't care about that," I whispered back. "I don't want to be shot in my sleep just because the table has a persistent wobble. I think the rumble of a train two miles away would be enough to set off that crazy hair-trigger. Give me it."

Glasses handed it over and, taking care always to point it at the floor, I unloaded it, put it back on the table, and put the bullets in my coat pocket. Then we tried to go on with our card game.

"My red bullet bets ten cents," I said. (A "bullet" means an ace, and I called mine a red bullet because it was the ace of hearts.)

"My king raises you ten cents," responded Glasses.

But it was no use. Between Inky's automatic and Luke Dugan I couldn't concentrate on my cards.

"Do you remember, Glasses," I said, "the evening you said that there was maybe something queer about Inky's gun?"

"I do a lot of talking, No Nose, and not much of it is worth remembering. We'd better stick to our cards. My pair of sevens bets a nickel."

I followed his advice, but didn't have much luck, and lost five or six dollars. By two o'clock we were both pretty tired and not feeling quite so jittery; so we got the blankets and wrapped up in them and

tried to grab a little sleep. I listened to the sea-grass and the tooting of a locomotive about two miles away, and worried some over the possible activities of Luke Dugan, but finally dropped off.

It must have been about sunrise that the clicking noise woke me up. There was a faint, greenish light coming in through the shades. I lay still, not knowing exactly what I was listening for, but so on edge that it didn't occur to me how prickly hot I was from sleeping without sheets, or how itchy my face and hands were from mosquito bites. Then I heard it again, and it sounded like nothing but the sharp click the hammer of a gun makes when it snaps down on an empty chamber. Twice I heard it. It seemed to be coming from the inside of the room. I slid out of my blankets and rustled Glasses awake.

"It's that damned automatic of Inky's," I whispered shakily. "It's trying to shoot itself."

When a person wakes up sudden and before he should, he's apt to feel just like I did and say crazy things without thinking. Glasses looked at me for a moment, and then he rubbed his eyes and smiled. I could hardly see the smile in the dim light, but I could feel it in his voice when he said, "No Nose, you are getting positively psychic."

"I tell you I'd swear to it," I in-

sisted. "It was the click of the hammer of a gun."

Glasses yawned. "Next you will be telling me that the gun was Inky's familiar."

"Familiar what?" I asked him, scratching my head and beginning to get mad and feel foolish. There are times when Glasses' college professor stuff gets me down.

"No Nose," he continued, "have you ever heard of witches?"

I was walking around to the windows and glancing out from behind the blinds to make sure there was no one around. I didn't see anyone. For that matter, I didn't really expect to.

"What d'you mean?" I said. "Sure I have. Why, I knew a guy, a Pennsylvania Dutchman, and he told me about witches putting what he called hexes on people. He said his uncle had a hex put on him, and he died afterward. He was a traveling salesman — the Dutchman that told me all that, I mean."

Glasses nodded his head, and then went on, "Well, No Nose, the devil gives each witch a pet black cat or dog or maybe a toad to follow them around and instruct them and revenge injuries. Those little creatures were called familiars — stooges sent out by the Big Boy in hell to watch over his chosen, you might say. The witches used to talk to them in a language no one else could understand. Now this is what I'm getting at. Times change and styles change — and the style

in familiars along with them. Inky's gun is black, isn't it? And he used to mutter at it in a language we couldn't understand, didn't he? And—"

"You're crazy," I told him, not wanting to be kidded and made a fool of.

"Why, No Nose," he said, giving me a very innocent look, "you were telling me yourself just now that you thought the gun had a life of its own, that it could cock itself and shoot itself without any human assistance. Weren't you?"

"You're crazy," I repeated, feeling like an awful fool and wishing I hadn't waked Glasses up. "See, the gun's here where I left it on the table, and the bullets are still in my pocket."

"Luckily," he said in a stagy voice he tried to make sound like an undertaker's. "Well, now that you've called me early, I shall wander off and avail us of our neighbor's newspaper. Meanwhile, you may run my bath."

I waited until I was sure he was gone, because I didn't want him to make a fool of me again. Then I went over and examined the gun. First I looked for the trade mark or the name of the maker. I found a place which had been filed down, where it may have once been, but that was all. Before this I would have sworn I could have told the make after a quick inspection, but now I couldn't. Not that *in general* it didn't look like an ordinary

automatic; it was the details — the grip, the trigger guard, the safety catch — that were different and *unfamiliar*. I figured it was some foreign make I'd never happened to see before.

After I'd been handling it for about two minutes I began to notice something queer about the feel of the metal. As far as I could see it was just ordinary blued steel, but somehow it was too smooth and slick and made me want to keep stroking the barrel back and forth. I can't explain it any better; the metal just didn't seem *right* to me. Finally I realized that the gun was getting on my nerves and making me imagine things; so I put it down on the mantel.

When Glasses got back, the sun was up and he wasn't smiling any more. He shoved a newspaper on my lap and pointed. It was open to page five. I read:

ANTON LARSEN SOUGHT

IN KOZACS KILLING

Police Believe Ex-Bootlegger

Slain by Pal

I looked up to see Larsen standing in the bedroom door. He was in his pajama trousers and looked yellow and seedy, his eyelids puffed and his pig eyes staring at us.

"Good morning, boss," said Glasses slowly. "We just noticed in

the paper that they are trying to do you a dirty trick. They're claiming you, not Dugan, had Inky shot."

Larsen grunted, came over and took the paper, looked at it quickly, grunted again, and went to the sink to splash some cold water on his face.

"So," he said, turning to us. "So. All the better that we are here at the hideout."

That day was the longest and most nervous I've ever gone through. Somehow Larsen didn't seem to be completely waked up. If he'd have been a stranger I'd have diagnosed it as a laudanum jag. He just sat around in his pajama trousers, so that by noon he still looked as if he'd only that minute rolled out of bed. The worst thing was that he wouldn't talk or tell us anything about his plans. Of course he never did much talking, but this time there was a difference. His funny pig eyes began to give me the jim-jams; no matter how still he sat they were always moving — like a guy in a laudanum nightmare who's about to run amuck.

Finally it started to get on Glasses' nerves, which surprised me, for Glasses usually knows how to take things quietly. He began by making little suggestions — that we should get a later paper, that we should call up a certain lawyer in New York, that I should get my cousin Jake to mosey around to the police station at Keansburg and

see if anything was up, and so on. Each time Larsen shut him up quick.

Once I thought he was going to take a crack at Glasses. And Glasses, like a fool, kept on pestering. I could see a blow-up coming, plain as the No Nose in front of my face. I couldn't figure what was making him do it. I guess when the college professor type gets the jim-jams they get them worse than a dummy like me. They've got trained brains which they can't stop from pecking away at ideas, and that's a disadvantage sometimes.

As for me, I tried to keep hold of my nerves. I kept saying to myself, "Larsen is O.K. He's just a little on edge. We all are. Why, I've known him ten years. He's O.K." I only half realized I was saying those things because I was beginning to believe that Larsen *wasn't* O.K.

The blow-up came at about two o'clock. Larsen's eyes opened wide, as if he'd jumped up so quick that I started to look around for Luke Dugan's firing-squad — or the police. But it wasn't either of those. Larsen had spotted the automatic on the mantel. Right away, as he began fingering it, he noticed it was unloaded.

"Who monkeyed with this?" he asked in a very nasty, thick voice. "And why?"

Glasses couldn't keep quiet.

"I thought you might hurt yourself with it," he said.

Larsen walked over to him and slapped him on the side of the face, knocking him down. I took firm hold of the chair I had been sitting on, ready to use it like a club — and waited. Glasses twisted on the floor for a moment, until he got control of the pain. Then he looked up, tears beginning to drip out of his left eye — the side he had been hit on. He had sense enough not to say anything, or to smile. Some fools might have smiled in such a situation, thinking it showed courage. It would have showed courage, I admit, but not good sense.

After about twenty seconds Larsen decided not to kick him in the face.

"Well, are you going to keep your mouth shut?" he asked.

Glasses nodded. I let go my grip on the chair.

"Where's the load?" asked Larsen.

I took the bullets out of my pocket and put them on the table, moving deliberately.

Larsen reloaded the gun. It made me sick to see his big hands sliding along the blue-black metal, because I remembered the *feel* of it.

"Nobody touches this but me, see?" he said.

And with that he walked into the bedroom and closed the door.

All I could think was, "Glasses

was right when he said Larsen was crazy on the subject of Inky's automatic. And it's just the same as it was with Inky. He has to have the gun close to him. That's what was bothering him all morning, only he didn't know."

Then I knelt down by Glasses, who was still lying on the floor, propped up on his elbows looking at the bedroom door. The mark of Larsen's hand was brick-red on the side of his face, with a little trickle of blood on the cheekbone, where the skin was broken.

I whispered, very low, just what I thought of Larsen. "Let's beat it first chance and get the police on him," I finished. "Or else maybe jump him when he comes out."

Glasses shook his head a little. He kept staring at the door, his left eye blinking spasmodically. Then he shivered, and gave a funny grunt deep down in his throat.

"I can't believe it," he said. "It's horrible\$"

"He killed Inky," I whispered in his ear. "I'm almost sure of it. And he was within an inch of killing you."

"I don't mean that," said Glasses.

"What do you mean then?"

Glasses shook his head, as if he were trying to change the subject of his thoughts.

"Something I saw," he said, "or, rather, something I realized."

"The ... the gun?" I ques-

tioned. My lips were dry and it was hard for me to say the word.

He gave me a funny look and got up.

"We'd better both be sensible from now on," he said, and then added in a whisper, "We can't do anything now. He's on guard and we're unarmed. Maybe we'll get a chance tonight."

After a long while Larsen called to me to heat some water so he could shave. I brought it to him, and by the time I was frying hash he came out and sat down at the table. He was all washed and shaved and the straggling patches of hair around his bald head were brushed smooth. He was dressed and had his hat on. But in spite of everything he still had that yellow, seedy, laudanum-jag look. We ate our hash and beans and drank our beer, no one talking. It was dark now, and a tiny wind was making the blades of sea-grass scrape together and whine.

Finally Larsen got up and walked around the table once and said, "Let's have a game of stud poker."

While I was clearing off the dishes he brought out his suitcase and planked it down on the side table. Then he took Inky's automatic out of his pocket and looked at it a second. A fleeting expression passed across his stolid face — an expression in which it seemed to me indecision and puzzlement and maybe even fear were mingled.

Then he laid the automatic in the suitcase, and shut it and strapped it tight.

"We're leaving after the game," he said.

I wasn't quite sure whether to feel relieved or not.

We played with a ten-cent limit, and right from the start Larsen began to win. It was a queer game, what with me feeling so jittery, and Glasses sitting there with the left side of his face all swollen, squinting through the right lens of his spectacles because the left lens had been cracked when Larsen hit him, and Larsen all dressed up as if he were waiting for a train. The shades were all down and the hanging light bulb, which was shaded with a foolscap of newspaper, threw a bright circle of light on the table but left the rest of the room shadowy. And afterward we were going to leave, he'd said. For where?

It was after Larsen had won about five dollars from each of us that I began hearing the noise. At first I couldn't be sure, because it was very low and because of the dry whining of the sea-grass, but right from the first it bothered me.

Larsen turned up a king and raked in another pot.

"You can't lose tonight," observed Glasses, smiling — and winced because the smile hurt his cheek.

Larsen scowled. He didn't seem pleased at his luck, or at Glasses'

remark. His pig eyes were moving in the same way that had given us the jim-jams earlier in the day. And I kept thinking, "Maybe he killed Inky Kozacs. Glasses and me are just small fry to him. Maybe he's trying to figure out whether to kill us too. Or maybe he's got a use for us, and he's wondering how much to tell us. If he starts anything I'll shove the table over on him; that is, if I get the chance." He was beginning to look like a stranger to me, although I'd known him for ten years and he'd been my boss and paid me good money.

Then I heard the noise again, a little plainer this time. It was very peculiar and hard to describe — something like the noise a rat would make if it were tied up in a lot of blankets and trying to work its way out. I looked up and saw that Glasses' face was pale. It made the bruise on his left cheek stand out plainer.

"My black bullet bets ten cents," said Larsen, pushing a dime into the pot.

"I'm with you," I answered, shoving in two nickels. My voice sounded so dry and choked it startled me.

Glasses put in his money and dealt another card to each of us.

Then I felt my face going pale, for it seemed to me that the noise was coming from Larsen's suitcase, and I remembered that he had put Inky's automatic into the

suitcase with its muzzle pointing away from us.

The noise was louder now. Glasses couldn't bear to sit still without saying anything. He pushed back his chair and started to whisper, "I think I hear —"

Then he saw the crazy, murderous look that came into Larsen's eyes, and he had sense enough to finish lamely, "I think I hear the eleven o'clock train."

"Sit still," said Larsen, "very still. It's only ten forty-five. You don't hear anything. My ace bets another ten cents."

"I'll raise you," I croaked.

I didn't know what I was saying. I wanted to jump up. I wanted to throw Larsen's suitcase out the door. I wanted to run out myself. Yet I sat tight. We all sat tight. We didn't dare make a move, for if we had, it would have shown that we believed the impossible was happening. And if a man does that he's crazy. I kept rubbing my tongue against my dry lips.

I stared at the cards, trying to shut out everything else. The hand was all dealt now. I had a jack and some little ones, and I knew my face-down card was a jack. That made a pair of jacks. Glasses had a king showing. Larsen's ace of clubs was the highest card on the board.

And still the sound kept coming. Something twisting, straining, scuffling. A muffled sound.

"And I raise *you* ten cents,"

said Glasses loudly. I got the idea he did it just to make a noise, not because he thought his cards were especially good.

I turned to Larsen, trying to pretend I was interested in whether he would raise or stop betting. His eyes had stopped moving and were staring straight ahead at the suitcase. His mouth was twisted in a funny, set way. After a while his lips began to move. His voice was so low I could barely catch the words.

"Ten cents more. *I killed Inky, you know. What does your jack say, No Nose?*"

"It raises you," I said automatically.

His reply came in the same almost inaudible voice. "You haven't a chance of winning, No Nose. *But, you see, he didn't bring the money with him, like he said he would. However, I found out where he keeps it hidden in his room. I can't pull the job myself; the cops would recognize me. But you two ought to be able to do it for me. That's why we're going to New York tonight. I raise you ten cents more. What do you say?*"

"I'll see you," I heard myself saying.

The noise stopped, not gradually but all of a sudden. Right away I wanted ten times worse to jump up and do something. But I was frozen to my seat.

Larsen turned up the ace of diamonds. Again I barely heard his words.

"Two aces. *Inky's little gun didn't protect him, you know. He didn't have a chance to use it. Clubs and diamonds. A pair of bullets. I win.*"

Then it happened.

I don't need to tell you much about what we did afterward. We buried the body in the sea-grass. We cleaned everything up and drove the coupe a couple of miles inland before abandoning it. We carried the gun away with us and took it apart and hammered it out of shape and threw it into the bay, part by part. We never found out anything more about Inky's money, or tried to. The police never bothered us. We counted ourselves lucky that we had enough sense left to get away safely, after what happened.

For, with smoke and flame squirting through the little round holes, and the whole suitcase jerking and shaking with the recoils, eight slugs drummed out and almost cut Anton Larsen in two. ●

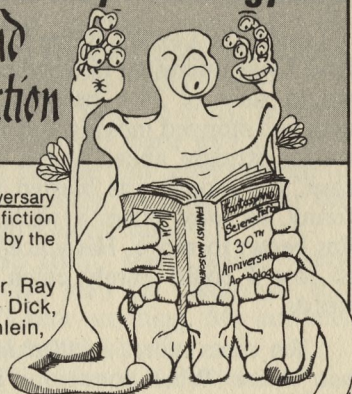
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Godsfire, by Cynthia Felice.
Pocket Books, 264 pp., \$1.75.

Universe 8, ed. by Terry Carr.
Doubleday, 185 pp., \$7.95.

Millennial Women, ed. by Virginia
Kidd. Delacorte, 300 pp., \$8.95.

Journey, by Marta Randall.
Pocket Books, 324 pp., \$1.95.

City of Cain, by Kate Wilhelm.
Pocket Books, 191 pp., \$1.75.

There's a particular, special pleasure in discovering a talented new author. A reviewer doesn't deserve as much credit for "discoveries" as the editor who buys their work (*Damn right, Frane! — j o-l*) — after all, they've already been published by the time we find them — but it's nice to be in the position of being able to introduce people to a writer like Cynthia Felice.

I realize that there's a risk involved in over-praising a new writer — others have been ruined by too much attention in the early stages of their careers. *Godsfire*, though, is not "an interesting attempt by a promising new writer" (the usual phrase), but a fine science fiction novel that succeeds throughout in ways that the work of many more experienced writers fails.

The novel's protagonist is a felinoid, Heao, adventurous, intelligent, and . . . human. The world she lives in differs from ours, both physically and socially, yet is not totally alien. Her people live in a

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John M.
Landsberg

Jeff Frane

mountain city, recently conquered by a lowland king who required Heao's mapmaking skills and, quite literally, her dream. Heao's country is constantly in shadow, both literally and figuratively, and she spends the novel attempting to bring light into Shadowland.

The felinoids have enslaved creatures that have wandered into their land; the slaves are what we would call human, and valued for their strength and acuteness of vision. Heao's people find it rather annoying that the slaves require so much sleep all at one time, rather than properly napping throughout the day. The slaves are apparently newly arrived and Heao is one of the first to acknowledge their intelligence and press for their rights as humans. One particular slave, Teon, becomes very involved in Heao's life and in her quest.

Felice has created an intriguing, *entertaining* story woven through a beautifully developed secondary world. The characters — Heao, her husband, her mentor, her king, and Teon — are all well-drawn. But what makes the book so surprisingly successful, so rich, is that everything — plot, characterization, the alien physiology, Heao's world — is carefully interwoven and interdependent. As the tale unwinds we — and Heao — learn more and more about her world, her senses, her people. The novel is totally free of what Delany calls "expository lumps," those

ponderous wads of narration wherein the author stops the story to *tell* the reader what's going on. (A sure sign that one of these is coming up is one character turning to another to say, "As you know . . ." and then proceeding to explain something the other couldn't have gotten past age three without knowing . . . "nowadays everyone in the world wears steam-powered underwear that works by . . .") Expository lumps are extremely common in sf, but they have no place in good writing, and can be avoided if the author simply takes the time to weave the material into the story. Felice has obviously taken that time and, as a result, *Godsfire* can almost stand as a textbook example of the proper way to interpolate information without confusing (or boring) the reader.

If there's anything about the story that bothers me it comes from the niggling little voice in the back of my mind that says Heao is a little too much like a cat and a little too much like us, not quite *alien* enough. But that's a nit, and once picked, can be ignored. Her characterization works here.

What is clear in *Godsfire* is that Felice writes exceptionally well, and that she handles characterization with consummate skill. That skill is particularly evident in her story "David and Lindy," appearing in Terry Carr's *Universe 8*. David and Lindy are telepaths,

starship pilots and close friends. Lindy has the stronger personality, and can control David when he chooses; he is dying. The story, one of the four best in the anthology, handles nicely the questions of friendship and trust.

Michael Bishop's "Old Folks at Home" explores the dynamics of a group marriage — for senior citizens. Zoe's daughter "sells her down the river" into an experimental family, an intriguing collection of independent and interdependent old people, whose lives together soon add a richness to her own. Although the ending is somewhat incontinent, it's a well-written, different sort of story.

Bishop's theme seems to carry through two of the other stories. Michael Cassutt's "Hunting" concerns a world in which the young can gain near-immortality through chemistry and have become over-careful and over-conscious of death, while the older people have learned to place more value in *living*. "Nooncoming," by Gregory Benford, takes place in a world in which the old cling to the lost lifestyle of the past, while the young have had to adapt to a world of shortages and hard work merely to survive.

In general, Terry Carr is the best editor in the sf field, but the remaining stories — by Gordon Eklund, Greg Bear, Charles Ott and R. A. Lafferty — are evidence of his occasional weakness for

pieces that are all *idea*, with very little story development. This volume is weaker than most in the series, but *Universe* (especially now that *Orbit* is dead) continues to be one of the best sources of sf short stories.

One of the reasons I'm willing to stick my neck out in praise of Cynthia Felice is her consistency. Within one month of reading her novel, I encountered "David and Lindy" and then found "No One Said Forever" in Virginia Kidd's *Millennial Women*. The competition is a little fiercer here than it was in *Universe*, but Felice's story holds up remarkably well. Once again, it is a story of human relationships, this time about a couple who must separate because of their work. And once again, the story goes beyond mere episode and deals with important questions about relationships, trust, and cultural conditioning.

There are three other short stories here by new writers: Diana L. Paxson's warm "The Song of N'Sardi-El;" "Jubilee's Story" by Elizabeth A. Lynn; and a surprisingly poor piece, "Mab Gallen Recalled," by Cherry Wilder.

Joan D. Vinge was my "discovery" of 1974-75, when "Tin Soldier" and "Mother and Child" appeared in *Orbit*. Her later material was less exciting, but with "Phoenix in the Ashes" she's revived my enthusiasm. As were the other two, it's a love story about

outcasts. Hoffman is a loner, working as a prospector-explorer in a post-cataclysmic world. Through an accident, he meets Amanda, the disinherited daughter of a rural society that has turned back the clock, reverting to an oppressive religion and treating women as chattels. Although the idea seems derivative, Vinge instills it with new life through artful characterization and emotional depth.

Millennial Women is climaxed by Ursula Le Guin's "Eye of the Heron," which although short, is a complete novel. (It is, in fact, the longest work of hers to appear since *The Dispossessed*.) I suspect that this may be her Australian novel, stimulated by her trip down under several years ago. Certainly there are similarities: Victoria is a prison planet, first settled by outcast criminals, then by idealists; the land is rugged, intimidating in its vastness, the settlers clinging to the security of the coast and reluctant to venture inland.

The initial group of prisoners has gained and held control of the planet's one city, and the second group, the People of Peace, are pressed into indentured servitude. The latter are united by a faith in peace and civil disobedience, a faith that is put to the test when a group of explorers returns to tell of the beauty and potential of the interior. As she did in *The Dispossessed*, Le Guin has presented two

very different societies in conflict, and as in that book, the results are ambiguous.

The active conflict takes place, not between vast, impersonal forces, but among a small group of characters: Lev Shults, the young leader of the people of Shantih (Shanty Town); Luz Falco, a young woman of the city's nobility, who has a passion for the truth; and Boss Falco, her father, rigidly held by the machismo of his culture and his power.

Le Guin is a very careful writer; she is very aware of the effects of language, the nuances and connotations that may be achieved through just the *right* word or phrase. That care is infused into the story, rather than used to batter the reader with the author's cleverness, and only occasionally surfaces as a conscious device:

"But they can't just go off into the wilderness," said Luz, who had been listening to her father's words. "Who'd farm our fields?"

Her father ignored her question by repeating it, thus transforming a feminine expression of emotion into a masculine assessment of fact. "They can't, of course, be allowed to start scattering like this. They provide necessary labor."

"Dizzying Virtuosity

and just damned *good!*" said Harlan Ellison about John Varley's first novel, *THE OPHIUCHI HOTLINE*. The nine stories in *THE PERSISTENCE OF VISION*—many about a bizarre future in which genetic engineering, sex changes and arcane pleasures and trades are commonplace—display that originality in all its breathtaking brilliance.

JOHN VARLEY THE PERSISTENCE OF VISION

Introduction by Algis Budrys.

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The characterization is deftly and sensitively handled. Le Guin's work doesn't contain Heroes — although the characters may be heroic — nor does it include Villains. Her characters move for reasons implicit in the story, rather than through the whim of the author.

I said earlier that Cynthia Felice provided a textbook study; Ursula Le Guin is for the post-grad.

En Passant:

Marta Randall has been consistently gaining skill as a writer, and *Journey* is by far the best work she's had published thus far. She seems to have shaken off the tendency to over-stylize her prose and is adroitly telling a good story. *Journey* isn't, however, successful as science fiction. With the exception of one chapter — possibly the best writing in the book — about a field game designed by human and alien children, the entire book could just as well have taken place on earth a hundred years ago. The attempted "science," particularly the FTL drive, is absurd. Randall *is* writing better, but perhaps she shouldn't be writing sf.

I heartily recommend Kate Wilhelm's *City of Cain*, in what I think is the first paperback appearance. It's one of her best books, a powerful story of conspiracy and intrigue in Washington, D. C. Wilhelm is a tight, controlled writer and has a special ability to handle

psychological themes. *City of Cain* is the sort of book that you can lend to friends who refuse to read sf, because the speculative element is so carefully, convincingly woven into the suspenseful plot.

— Jeff Frane

The Book of Ellison, edited by Andrew Porter. Algor Press, 1978, 192 pp., \$5.95.

Here is a title that, for all its simplicity, swells with pretension and promise. Behind it is a book that, for all its pretension and promise, is deflated by superficiality.

Now, there is good in this book, because there is Ellison in this book, but that doesn't happen until page 67. Before that, six estimable and mostly famous people, friends of Harlan, use up space telling us that they are friends of Harlan. All well and good, I suppose, but these people quite reasonably don't want to lay Ellison bare, so their essays never become as profound or as voyeuristic as both fans and foes of Ellison might crave. Moreover, three of the essays are 1967 reprints from *Algor*, so you may already have them, and one of the essays analyzes Ellison's work in that sincere but blinkered senior-English-term-paper style that makes the essay not worth having.

Then: A biography of Ellison by Ellison, six years out of date

(check the last line if you think it's only five), assorted reprinted non-fiction by Ellison, two pieces of 1955 fiction by Ellison, and a bibliography of Ellison's nonfiction.

I have never met anyone on either side of the Ellison fence who wasn't fascinated by Ellison's non-fiction. Reading his nonfiction is akin to seeing him in action, an addicting experience for many, and when we can't get the stuff uncut, we'll take it laced with ink

and paper. The stuff in this book is not his most heady, and none of it is new, but it comes from various sources, and you might have missed a rush or two.

The fiction is very early Ellison, and nothing more than a curiosity. The bibliography is as complete and up-to-date as possible. The overall impression is disappointment, but will that stop a true Ellison fan from buying this book?

— John M. Landsberg

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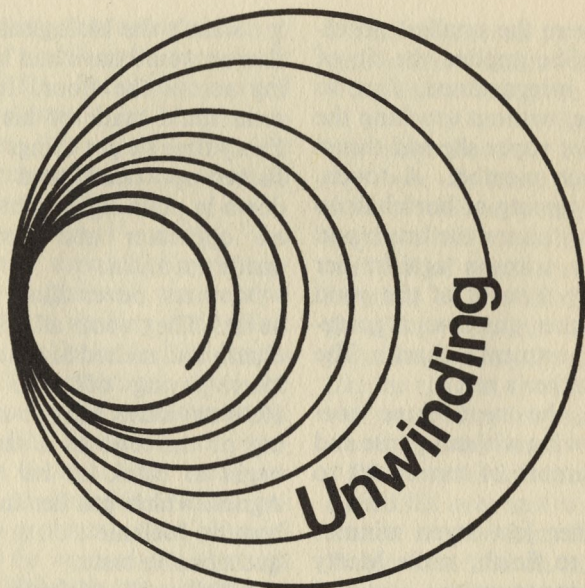
The UNEARTH Story Contest



Write A Story
With Harlan Ellison

Winner

The following is the only winner in the first category of the Story Contest. Ms. Canon's contribution begins at the second large capital letter; the story to that point was written by Harlan Ellison.



Once he knew he loved Melanie, he knew he would have to make up a list of the reasons *why*.

As curvilinear shapes were to Alexander Calder, so were lists to Morty Reagan. Some men breathe. Morty Reagan listed.

He sat down at his rolltop in the realty office, slid up the tambour door, and took the fine-nib pen from the antique inkpot. He drew a pad of yellow-lined paper to him, and began to write . . . nothing.

His brow furrowed and he bit his mustache.

Then he wrote, very carefully:

"I love Melanie. Melanie loves me. I know what a shit I am. Therefore, any woman who would have the sick taste to love me, has got to be unworthy of my love."

by Rachel Susan Canon

and Harlan Ellison

He re-read what he had written. It was twisty, he knew, and there was a logical fallacy in it somewhere; but try as he might, he couldn't find it. It seemed to make terrible, awful, horrific sense.

He decided he would have to see her, to tell her what he had come up with. He rolled down the desk-top and turned off the lights in the office. And sat there for an hour trying to get up the nerve to go see her.

He watched her painting her toenails. She had the tiniest feet.

The nails were the smallest porcelain chips. She applied the tip of the brush, incarnadined, first to the little toe, without touching the twist of toilet paper she had thrust between each member. A touch. The veriest tipping of horsehair to ivory. She withdrew the brush and the nail lay crimson against her flesh. Morty thought of the good conduct sticker glued to a grade-school deportment chart. The badge of teacher's pet.

She did the next three toes quickly, moving without pause and with a minimum of movement to the big toe.

It took her just seven minutes from start to finish, while Morty sat there trying to speak.

"How long does it take for your fingernails?"

She didn't look up. "I don't do my fingernails. It looks tacky. Like a go-go dancer."

He didn't understand that. But it didn't matter; there were things, many things, that he didn't understand; such as why he was here trying to mess up a good thing. He added this latest mystery to the great store already stocked up in his head.

"Uh, how's your mother?" he asked.

"Oh, yeah, I'd almost forgotten. Mummy really liked you. She wanted me to ask you if you'd consider a threesome?"

Morty Reagan felt his brain pop like a bloated balloon.

It wasn't the biological stab that once would have had him crawling across the floor. It was the mess she'd made of his theorem. Every time he got things out of his fucked-up head and scribbled down in plain sight, someone took an eggbeater and turned him inside out again.

Mothers never liked him . . . never! They took all his wit and charm and melted him down into a loser paying off two ex-wives. He'd obviously have to stop thinking of this one as a mother and begin to think of her simply as Agnes, which put her in the same boat as Melanie . . . a woman of questionable taste.

"Well...?" Melanie stared at him with her special sort of primitive innocence. His resolve shattered like a plate glass window next door to the neighborhood sandlot. If he told her about his conclusions that would be the end of it. And to insult and lose two women with one mouthful of crap was more than even he could stand.

"Why not?" he grinned, but the back of his eyes ached miserably. It was a curse...that yellow lined paper in his pocket. There wasn't any way out of it, but there wasn't any place else to go, either. He'd gotten himself over here, watched her paint her toenails, and worked up to the point of clearing his throat. He would have made it, too, if she hadn't thrown in that bit about her mother. He wasn't

quite sure why that affected him so much. He wasn't quite sure about anything. Dr. Sorel had warned him there would be confusion. Confusion ... good shit, he couldn't remember a time when he wasn't confused.

"How're things working out with the new shrink?" She'd wriggled into a pair of white capri pants and was viewing their effect on her backside in the full-length mirror. The question, like the capris, was loaded with dynamite. Melanie didn't approve of analysts. She thought they were unnatural, unwholesome. She believed all problems were physical ... could be worked out through the body. He'd tried to explain it to her before, but somehow in the process of strumming their way through his larynx and up his throat, his own words became strangers to him, absurd next to her sheer physical presence.

Right now he just wanted to ride over the issue as painlessly as possible. "Fairly well, I think. It takes time."

She leaned over the chair and kissed him lightly on the ear. "I don't know. You seem sorta screwy today, to me."

Godfrey Sorel positioned Morty on a low flat table and concentrated on adjusting the dials of the neurodynatric stimulator. Morty rolled his eyes to the right and watched the receptor box come to life — dials, needles, wires and

bulbs, all primed to zap him into perfection. Inside the receptor were all the things he didn't want to be — his list of flaws, updated biweekly. Sorel fit the conductor cap over his head. On the other side of the table the transmitter began to blink, sputter and whirl. It was full of brain wave cartridges, imprints of the ideal Morty Reagan. The two parts worked in conjunction, feeding through his brain like the old reel-to-reel tape recorders, unwinding his character from one side to the other.

This was his third session. Morty closed his eyes and waited for the doctor to give him the injection. These visits had set him back two months in alimony payments, and so far...nothing. No guarantees. "Oh, it'll do something," Sorel had promised. "At the very least you'll get some basic subconscious programming. My hope is that it'll do more. . .much more!"

The tough part had been coming up with stuff to feed the transmitter. "Can't I just get rid of my faults?" he'd complained.

The doctor had been patient with him, afraid perhaps that Morty might back out. Willing bodies were not that easy to find. "The NDS is basically an electromagnet," he'd explained. "Certain brain particles are attracted by the receptor...those particles that are involved in creating the offending brain waves. The transmitter must redirect the electrical interac-

tion of those particles, so it must be programmed with positive traits, or better yet, a complete positive image.

"Well, then...just give me the other side of this." Morty waved his flaw list in the air. "Negatives for positives; positives for negatives."

"You can do that," Sorel had mused, "but we wouldn't be using the machine to its fullest capacity." His eyes had brightened then and he'd gone on about personal visions buried in the subconscious, and about how one's deepest desires could be manifested in the transmitter by feeding it cartridges taken directly from brain imprints.

"Simple, really," he'd concluded. "But it's sometimes difficult to get patients to accept this. They want to know up front precisely what's being fed into them."

Morty had just wanted to get on with it. But now, waiting on the table, listening to the mechanical chatter...some wiseass computer voice sputtering his life around in clicks and blips . . he couldn't help wondering about this great personal vision that'd spent forty years buried in the folds of his brain. Was there, in fact, a vision at all or was it merely Dr. Sorel's wishful thinking — a scientific plunge into some philosophic dream?

The injection began to take effect and Morty felt himself lifted

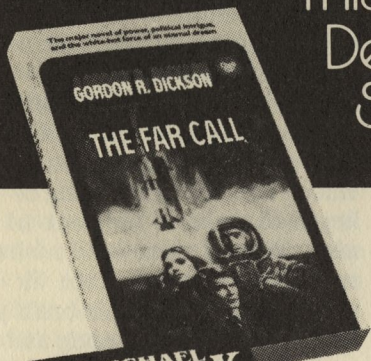
like a spare part out of his body. With a few seconds left of consciousness, he tried to sneak in a last thought ... Agnes with her dyed red hair loose about her shoulders. Melanie's mother, for-godsake...he must be cra...

Morty was nervous, tapping his fingers on the edge of the coffee table as he went over, one last time, the list of preparations for the evening. Scotch for him; gin for Agnes; sherry for Melanie ... check. Clean sheets on the bed. Coffee. Bacon, eggs in the fridge, Ansafone plugged in, shades drawn; Stan Marrone ready and waiting on the stereo.

He got up and paced once around the living room. Past eight o'clock. Melanie had said they would be here at eight. He stopped in front of the gilded antique mirror in the hallway and smiled at himself, touching the tip of his crisp mustache with his tongue. There *was* something initially appealing about him, he conceded ... some aura that piqued women's interest. But any woman who really got to know him .. well. He blew his mustache back into position and glared into his own eyes. It was still there, sneering insolently back at him ... the horrendous, awful truth that he couldn't trust his own sincerity. One minute it was there; the next minute, it wasn't.

"What do you want, you bastard?" he hissed at his reflection.

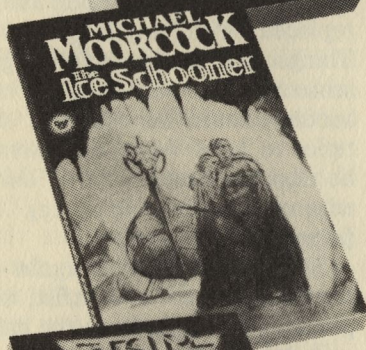
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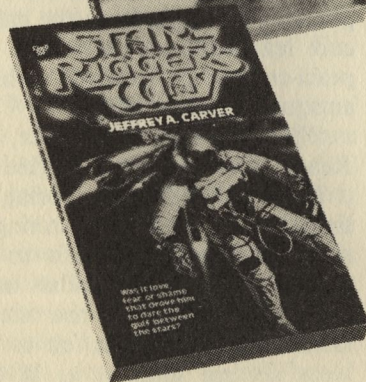
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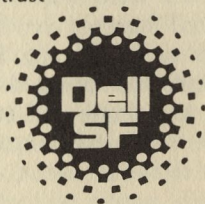
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Two feet above his head the buzzer emitted a loud rapidfire stutter, punching him smack in the nerve endings. Round 110. He pushed the button on the intercom.

"You have a caller, Mr. Reagan. Shall I send her up?" The doorlady spoke so close into the box he could almost feel her spearmint breath against his cheek.

"Yes, of course, Marim. Thank you."

He waited at the elevator, his breath coming in short bursts, trying to match time with what he was sure were irregular heartbeats. What if he just up and died.. right here .. or tonight in bed? What would become of that image waiting in the NDS's transmitter? Sorel would do something with it, he was sure. The thought was freaky.

"Hello, Mort." Agnes flashed her large smile and thrust a brown bag of apples at him. "Couldn't resist these. So red and luscious they sort of make you melt." Her eyes held Morty's for a full minute before she laughed and stepped past him into the apartment. He followed.

"Mel here yet?" She looked around sharply as if suspecting some sort of trap. She was like Melanie, he decided. She moved with the same self-certainty, the same sense of absoluteness. He went to the kitchen to get a basket for the apples and when he came back she was settled on his sofa, one hand softly rubbing the nap of

a velvet throw pillow. "*She is coming*, isn't she? If not then I can't stay. It wouldn't be right. Not the same."

His brain spun the logic wheel and came up blank. Why was it okay with Melanie here, and not okay otherwise? It seemed as if the answer should be simple, but it eluded him, and a tiny sting of fear began to poke at the back of his neck. What if there were a wire or something out of place in the stimulator? What if his brain patterns were being messed up and not replaced with anything at all? Things that made perfectly good sense to everyone else, all of a sudden would be complete mysteries to him. Why, one morning he might wake up with no knowledge of how to cook an egg .. or forget where he worked.

The buzzer bleated again and Agnes breathed a satisfied sigh, plucking an apple from the basket and leaning back to blend her pearl-colored pajama suit with the antique white brocade.

"You have another caller, Mr. Reagan," the doorlady giggled.

He watched Melanie bring his living room to life, spinning to show off her new outfit to her mother, kicking her sandals in the corner, flicking on the stereo. Something inside him felt as if it were getting smaller, as if each breath were allowing a vital part to escape out into the air. She was by far the best. Of all the women he'd

married, lived with, slept with, loved . . . she was the best. That was why it maddened him to see her wallowing so gloriously in the gutter of his living room. Midst all his love, she disgusted him.

"My God, Morty. You haven't even fixed Mummy a drink yet. Come on. And why such a sour puss?"

It got easier when she laughed. Then he thought he just might be able to forgive her. There was a quality in that laughter that seemed to make everything all right.

"Morty has a new shrink," she was telling Agnes. "He wires him up to some way-out machine and tries to unfuck his brain."

"My Gawd, they never quit, do they?" Agnes shook her copper head and snorted. "Screwing around inside people's heads. Have they figured out how to make you smarter yet? I mean . . . not you . . . anybody. Can they do that yet?"

"Well. . .they're fooling around with increasing the intelligence quotient. I'm not sure what. . ."

"Aahhh. They don't know what they can and can't do." Melanie held the stem of her sherry glass with two fingers as if she were the Countess of Common Sense. Watching her, Morty had not the slightest doubt of it. "What I don't get, Morty dear, is that you spend your whole life, everyone does, getting used to what you are

. . . you know, figuring out what you think about things, how you feel. Then you go and change all of it. Won't you have to start getting used to yourself all over again. I mean we *all* know that takes years!"

"There is supposedly a period of readjustment. But. . . ." How to explain to these authentic creatures that when you hit an impasse you had to do something. He'd gotten to know himself quite well, thank you. Well enough to know he had no respect for anyone who spent a nickel's worth of time on him. He poured himself another straight scotch.

"Not too much, Mort," Agnes cautioned. Was she a mother after all . . . or was she just looking out after her own interests?

"Well, we like you just the way you are," Melanie argued. "I'll be furious if that machine twists you all around."

She leaned against him and began to take the pins out of her hair. Only half a dozen tiny thin pieces of wire held together a billow of tawny hair that tumbled out in all directions. Her hair was incredibly long. Loosened like this, the mere weight of it made the muscles on her neck stand taut. He began to undo the buttons on her filmy blouse, praying inside that he was going to be man enough to go through with this. Jesus . . . he felt limp as a rag.

Agnes' hair, released from its

coil, danced on her shoulders like copper springs. Morty thought of the slinky he'd played with as a kid. She undid the buttons and hoods of her silky pajama suit and he and Melanie watched it slide from her body like mercury. Morty's eyes bulged. Agnes wore no underwear ... nothing ... just smooth white body and curly red hair. And that body that had borne Melanie and a couple of irreverent brothers and had beaten around the world for, he guessed, close to half a dozen decades, was still a knockout. Her breasts were small like Melanie's and sagged only the tiniest bit — white marshmallows that'd been partly smushed by an eager thumb. Her hips were rounded, but not lumpy; her legs long and unmarked.

Melanie laughed. "Mummy's a wonder, isn't she. Senior citizens' playmate of the month."

"And what..." Agnes grinned, leaning toward Morty and laying her tapered hand on his knee, "...would I do with a senior citizen?"

His head was spinning, but his body had decided to fly on its own. Melanie snuggled close to him, her warm breath soft on his neck. "I really do love you, Morty." For one last crazy second before he let himself go, he fervently wished he could share, even a little, of that love she felt for this poor animal called Morty Reagan.

The first thing he saw when he opened his eyes was her foot — Melanie's tiny left foot gaily tipped with the five little patches of color he'd watched her apply a few days before. His head was amazingly clear, considering what he'd done to it last night and what he'd been doing to it for the last forty years. He smiled at the foot, wiggling its toes until his breath caught and his eyes, half-paralyzed in terror, fought their way up the slim naked leg...and on up until they crossed just below his graceful, lovely nose. What in Hell? He touched himself all over. For god's sake! He threw back the rest of the covers and looked...that fuckin' machine. That fucking Sorel and his fucking machine!

"Morning, Mel." Agnes poked her head in the doorway. "I've put on a pot of tea. There's bacon, eggs and biscuits in the icebox, but I've got to run. Give you a ring later."

He nodded numbly and lifted the lightweight body from the bed to balance on its tiny feet. No problem. Melanie's body knew perfectly well how to handle itself. It moved effortlessly into the bathroom and sat down on the porcelain seat. Sat down, mind you ... not stood. Morty registered this along with a hundred other sensations that were entirely new to him. He wasn't sure whether it was *his* brain he was using or Melanie's. No ... it had to be his. It was

his brain that'd been zapped through the NDS ... and it was him, wasn't it, thinking right now. But it was difficult. He had to push to think the way he wanted. If he didn't hold on tight, he found himself slipping away into foreign thoughts.

He focused hard on the Titian print lolling above his bathtub. All right...now he could conceive in the furthest range of his imagination that the stupid machine had changed his brain and therefore, he supposed, his body into a likeness of Melanie's. But then there'd be two Melanies and no Morty and that body still lying naked in there on the bed was definitely a Morty Reagan. In spite of his predicament a delicious warmth spread through him. "I love Morty Reagan," he said aloud to himself. There it was. It slid out of his mouth with the ease of a perfect sonnet. "I love Morty Reagan. In spite of all his rottenness. . .I love him." Was it really all that simple for Melanie? The implications nibbled around the edges of his memory and made him dizzy. He had to shake his head and lasso each escaping filament of thought before he could re-focus on his dilemma. It looked as if some sort of fantastic switcheroo had taken place, but how could the NDS, only an electromagnet after all, have managed that? In any event, he wasn't about to live out the rest of his life in somebody else's body!

He left the bathroom and worked his way into Melanie's clothes, irritated with the slight kick it gave him to feel the swirl of a skirt around his bare legs. In front of the mirror he tried to control his masses of hair with the handful of pins he'd picked off the coffee table. After five minutes he gave up and tied it all back with the lavender cord that usually restrained his shower curtain.

For a long time he stared at the body on the bed. His first impulse had been to leave, to confront Dr. Sorel and try to work out a reversal. But what would happen when Melanie woke up and found herself in a man's body, an innocent victim of his mind-meddling? It'd be criminal not to be here to comfort her, assure her that what had happened once could be made to unhappen, that the opposite of "impossible" was "possible." A tenderness rustled inside him and he leaned over the edge of the bed to kiss the stubbly cheek. The cheek drew itself into a slow smile. The body stirred, stretched and opened its eyes. "Hiiiiii," it yawned, reaching a hand up to stroke his tawny ponytail. "You look gorgeous this morning."

Morty stared at Morty; then grabbed his purse and fled the apartment.

He sat on a park bench across the street from Sorel's office and watched the man he loved leave the massive building and head down

the street toward his realty office. He would stay there, catching up on paperwork, for the rest of the afternoon, safe and sound, out of the way. Morty's legs and back ached. He'd been sitting on the bench since early morning, reconstructing the past few days, trying to work through the confused swirl of his mind, weighted down with the nagging intuition that Sorel didn't know...he just didn't know.

Two days ago when he'd dragged the doctor out of bed and laid the whole thing on him, the man had let his maniac colors out of the bag. "This is absolutely fantastic," he'd whooped. "More than we possibly could have hoped for." He'd curbed his excitement only when it became clear that Morty was ready to punch his lights out. "Oh, I know what you must be feeling, but look at it this way: through your case we'll find out more about the human brain than through years of painstaking research." What fun ... white rat time. But what about all those questions that were setting off little explosions from one end of Morty's head to the other? What about Melanie? If *he* wasn't Melanie and she wasn't in his old body ... where *was* she?

"You bastard! What if I told the authorities about this .. using me as a goddam guinea pig. I could have you put away for good!"

Sorel's eyes had sparkled like the

orbs of a high priest. "Come on, Reagan. Who'd believe you? After all, there *is* a full-fledged Mortimer Reagan — mind and body — running around, isn't there? To the world you're just a very mixed-up young lady. That doesn't mean I won't help you ... but no threats, please!" He had him.

"Lay low," the doctor had said, and that's what he'd done. Sleeping in Melanie's apartment, answering the phone only often enough to avoid suspicion of foul play. Lay low until Tuesday...see if Reagan shows up for his regular appointment. Give Sorel a chance to examine him, try to piece together what had actually happened.

Morty got up, stretched, and tucked his blouse back in the elastic waistband. He liked the way his fingers moved, so lightly, surely, with a pianist's touch. He'd been attracted to Melanie initially by the way she moved, the total confidence she exuded of being a certain being in a very definite world. There were nice things happening inside his head, too. When he stopped thinking about the preposterous situation he was in, his brain felt incredibly clear, without the fuzzy edges, free of those familiar gnats of self-doubt. And best of all, he no longer felt compelled to take himself apart on paper. Not once in the past two days had Melanie's graceful hand crafted a list.

The doctor sat hunched low over

a typewriter in the outer office. When Morty entered, he jumped up and scuffled around the desk, ushering him into the examining room with a deluge of words. "Got to get an EEG...compare. It's absolutely fascinating...you won't believe." He pushed aside the mane of hair and dabbed at Morty's temples. "I spent all weekend doing computations. I think I have it all worked out. Unbelievable!"

From the corner of his eye Morty watched the needle bare his brain in jagged strokes across the paper. The doctor's face was twisted in orgasmic anticipation. Maybe the guy had figured something out after all. Sorel pulled the electrodes out absently, eyes volleying back and forth from this chart to several others that lay spread out on the counter. "I knew it!" he cried. "Exactly as I'd computed. It's incredible!"

He spun around and faced Morty, who now sat quietly on the edge of the table, legs crossed, half daring to hope. Clutching at the counter, the doctor visibly slowed the crazy excitement that had the dark hairs of his arms standing on end. "To begin with," he said, enunciating carefully . . . almost fearfully, "you are not Morty Reagan." He threw up his hand to forestall Morty's objections and plunged ahead. "You are, most definitely, Melanie Smythe — the body of Melanie Smythe, and the

brain of Melanie Smythe — to which . . ." his voice picked up speed as he spoke, "a certain facet of Morty Reagan's consciousness has been added."

Morty felt the words slide through the air at him, felt them enter his ears and filter slowly down through his body.

"Miss Smythe is . . . you are . . . what is commonly called a split personality. Mr. Reagan's consciousness is dominant at the moment, but at other times Miss Smythe's old self will reign. Most likely neither personality will remember what occurs while the other is in charge. Have you had periods of black-out in the past few days?"

Morty shook his head.

"Well . . . I only want to warn you in case it should occur. Through therapy we'll be able to integrate your two selves. Split or multiple personality isn't uncommon. Of course, this may be the first time it was ever artificially induced."

"What about. . ."

"Mr. Reagan? He's in marvelous shape. Getting rid of the particular brain patterns he's transferred to you seems to have taken care of his discomfort with himself. I haven't told him yet. I mean about your absorbing some of his consciousness. I couldn't be sure until I got your EEG."

"So you've cured him and screwed me up?"

"No, I don't think so. It's all very technical, but...well...you see...the night this transference occurred, both you and Mr. Reagan were sleeping side by side. The brain in a state of sleep is particularly receptive. The NDS had been altering the way Mr. Reagan's brain cells normally react with one another, trying to attract certain desirable patterns. The free electrons released by this effort happened to find their compatible reactive particles in your brain. Obviously, those electrons making the transfer carried definite bits of Mr. Reagan's consciousness with them."

Morty felt the tears pool in the corners of his eyes. So that's all he was ... the dregs ... escaped electrons from Morty Reagan's head. Out of nowhere a thought jumped up that hadn't occurred to him before.

"But my mother-in-law — my mother — was there that night. What about her?"

Sorel's head jerked. "She slept with you in the same room?"

"Between us, if I remember correctly." Agnes had seemed pretty much Agnes when he'd spoken to her yesterday, but it eased his misery to pull Sorel's cord for a change.

The doctor's hand did a jig on the side of the examining table. "Why don't you go out to the desk and phone her. Tell her anything — but don't upset her. See if you

can get her to come in." He straddled his stool and rolled it back to the counter. "I'll join you in a minute." His eyes hungrily retraced the crazy designs — Morty and Melanie in a gut splash of alpha, beta, gamma. Morty hated him.

First of all, he had no intention of phoning Agnes. Instead, he slumped low in the secretary's chair and closed his eyes. Step number one was to accept that he was going to have to live with this — with being Melanie, a woman, a being other than himself. That would take time, he knew, but the starting point was to concentrate on the positive. He was well aware that it would be Melanie who would make the adjustment possible. Morty Reagan had never looked on the good side of anything in his life. . . at least not until he'd classified it fifty times over and gotten drunk to boot. At least he had Melanie's strengths to work with. On the positive side also — he was a being most certainly and happily in love. If he really was the part of Morty Reagan that had desperately wanted to love himself and couldn't, then that problem no longer existed — for either of them. It stood to reason, too, that the other Morty, free from such an obsessive need, could now love Melanie without reserve. Was that what Sorel was getting at when he said he hadn't really screwed him up? Morty's eyes shot open. But

the real Morty didn't know. And he mustn't know! He started to get up, to go into the inner office and explain this to the doctor, but his eyes stumbled on the half-finished paper in the typewriter, the paper Sorel had been working on when he'd arrived. "Artificially Stimulated Personality Diversification" by Godfrey Sorel. That title had been x'd out and above it was penciled: "External Transfer of Neural Electrons And Their Effect On Personality." Morty scanned the page. It was a step by step technical account of Sorel's theory of what had happened that night... major breakthrough in psychiatric study, all laid out for the professional journals. He and Melanie were not mentioned by name, but, of course Sorel would have to be ready to present them if his theory were to have any credence. Maybe the EEG's would be enough... but down in the deepest part of him, Morty knew better. Science would win out. They'd be watched and studied. And, of course, the real Morty would be told. There'd be no way to convince him to continue treatment if he weren't told. How could their love survive that?

He was ready now to be Melanie; he needed to be Melanie, with her coolness and simplicity. Split personality, Sorel had said; but it wasn't like that. They were both here, here inside this lovely head. Both here at the same time. Melanie smiled slowly, yanked the

paper from the typewriter and crumbled it in her purse. She kicked her pretty painted feet out of her sandals and slipped silently back into the inner office. Sorel was still leaning over the counter, engrossed in the possibilities of a Nobel prize. Melanie moved easily to the NDS and turned the voltage meter as far right as she could. She lifted the heavy cap from its hook and still Sorel, his senses dulled by obsession, didn't move. From there it was simple. The cap slid over his head with the ease of an old shoe; the switch flipped; the doctor stiffened. Melanie waited a full five minutes...then meticulously wiped her fingerprints from the cap, the switch and the voltage meter, scooped up the EEG charts and left the office.

Agnes had been waiting for her since noon and had helped herself to the leftover corned beef in the refrigerator.

"The door was wide open, Mel. I could've been anybody lurking in here waiting for you."

Agnes had papers spread out all over the table. She picked one up proudly and waved it at her daughter. "This one," she announced, "is a list of my goals for the year — general things, you know. These others are more specific — like books I want to read, relationships I want to change and so on. I'm telling you, I've got this tremendous urge to get organized, spell

things out you might say. About time, too."

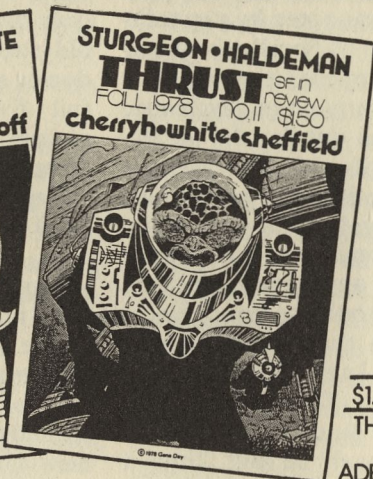
Melanie's mouth dropped and she lowered herself by stages into the chair opposite her mother. Then she began to laugh — wild, uncontrollable laughter, gasping

for breath until Agnes put her pencil down in alarm.

"Oh, Mummy," Melanie panted. "What an absolutely perfect threesome we make."

Agnes smiled; then broke into a giggle. "Funny . . . I've just been thinking the very same thing." ●

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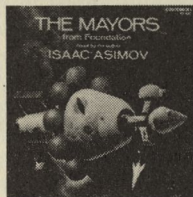
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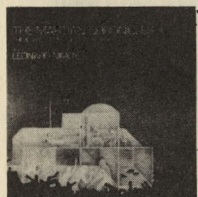
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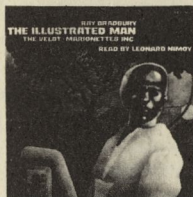
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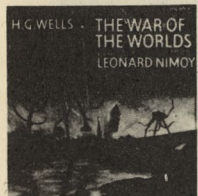
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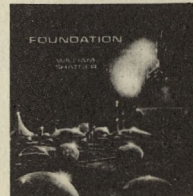
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