
Analog Dec 1971

Priorities

*Do you suppose Puck was right when he said:
"What fools these mortals be!"?*

by BEN BOVA

Dr. Ira Lefko sat rigidly nervous on the edge of the plastic-cushioned chair. He was a slight man, thin, bald, almost timid-looking. Even his voice was gentle and reedy, like the fine thin tone of an English horn.

And just as the English horn is a sadly misnamed woodwind, Dr. Ira Lefko was actually neither timid nor particularly gentle. At this precise moment, he was close to mayhem.

"Ten years of work," he was saying, with a barely-controlled tremor in his voice. "You're going to wipe out ten years of work with a shake of your head."

The man shaking his head was sitting behind the metal desk that Lefko sat in front of. His name was Harrison Bower. His title and name were prominently displayed on a handsome plate atop the desk. Harrison Bower kept a very neat desktop. All the papers were primly stacked and both the IN and OUT baskets were empty.

"Can't be helped," said Harrison Bower, with a tight smile that was supposed to be sympathetic and understanding. "Everyone's got to tighten the belt. Reordering priorities, you know. There are many research programs going by the boards—New times, new problems, new priorities. You're not the only one to be affected."

With his somber face and dark suit Bower looked like a funeral director—which he was. In the vast apparatus of Government, his job was to bury research projects that had run out of money. It was just about the only thing on Earth that made him smile.

The third man in the poorly-ventilated little Washington office was Major Robert Shawn, from the Air Force Cambridge Research Laboratories. In uniform, Major Shawn looked an awful lot like Hollywood's idea of a jet pilot. In the casual slacks and sportscoat he was wearing now, he somehow gave the vague impression of being an engineer, or perhaps even a far-eyed scientist.

He was something of all three.

Dr. Lefko was getting red in the face. "But you *can't* cancel the program now! We've tentatively identified six stars within twenty parsecs of us that have..."

"Yes, I know, it's all in the reports," Bower interrupted! "and you've told me about it several times this afternoon. It's interesting, but it's hardly practical, now is it?"

"Practical? Finding evidence of high technology on other planets, not practical?"

Bower raised his eyes toward the cracked ceiling, as if in supplication to the Chief Bureaucrat. "Really, Dr. Lefko. I've admitted that it's interesting. But it's not within our restructured priority rating. You're not going to help ease pollution, or solve population problems, now are you?"

Lefko's only answer was a half-strangled growl.

Bower turned to Major Shawn. "Really, Major, I would have thought that you could make Dr. Lefko understand the realities of the funding situation."

Shaking his head, the major answered, "I agree with Dr. Lefko completely. I think his work is the most important piece of research going on in the world today."

"Honestly!" Bower seemed shocked. "Major, you know that the Department of Defense can't fund research that's not directly related to a military mission."

"But the Air Force owns all the big microwave equipment!" Lefko shouted. "You can't get time on the university facilities and they're too small anyway!"

Bower wagged a finger at him. "Dr. Lefko, you can't have DOD funds. Even if there were funds for your research available, it's not pertinent work. You must apply for research support from another branch of the Government."

"I've tried that every year! None of the other agencies have any money for new programs. Damn it, you've signed the letters rejecting my applications!"

"Regrettable," Bower said stiffly. "Perhaps in a few years, when the foreign situation settles down and the pollution problems are solved."

Lefko was clenching his fists when, Major Shawn put a hand on his frail-looking shoulder. "It's no use, Ira. We've lost. Come on, I'll buy you a drink."

Out in the shabby corridor that led to the underground garage, Lefko started to tremble in earnest.

"A chance to find other intelligent races in the heavens. Gone. Wiped out... The richest nation in the world... Oh my God..."

The major took him by the arm and towed him to their rented car. In fifteen minutes they were inside the cool shadows of the airport bar.

"They've reordered the priorities," the major said as he stared into his glass. "For five hundred years and more, western civilization has made the pursuit of knowledge a respectable goal in its own right. Now it's got to be practical."

Dr. Lefko was already halfway through his second rye-and-soda. "Nobody asked Galileo to be practical," he muttered. "Or Newton. Or Einstein."

"Yeah, people did. They've always wanted immediate results and practical benefits. But the system was spongy enough to let guys like Newton and Plank and even little fish we never hear about—let 'em tinker around on their own, follow their noses, see what they could find."

" 'Madam, of what use is a newborn baby?'" Lefko quoted thickly.

"What?"

"Faraday."

"Oh."

"Six of them," Lefko whispered. "Six point sources of intense microwave radiation. Close enough to separate from their parent stars. Six little planets, orbiting around their stars, with high technology microwave equipment on them."

"Maybe the Astronomical Union will help you get more funding."

Lefko shook his head. "You saw the reception my paper got. They think we're crazy. Not enough evidence. And worse still, I'm associated with the evil Air Force. I'm a pariah... and I don't have enough evidence to convince them. It takes more evidence when you're a pariah."

"I'm convinced," Major Shawn said.

"Thank you, my boy. But you are an Air Force officer, a mindless napalmer of Oriental babies, by definition. Your degrees in astronomy and electronics notwithstanding."

Shawn sighed heavily. "Yeah."

Looking up from the bar, past the clacking color TV, toward the heavily draped windows across the darkened room, Lefko said, "I know they're there. Civilizations like ours. With radios and televisions and radars, turning their planets into microwave beacons. Just as we must be an anomalously bright microwave object to them. Maybe... maybe they'll find us! Maybe they'll contact us!"

The major started to smile.

"If only it happens in our lifetime, Bob. If only they find us! Find us... and blow us to Hell! We deserve it for being so stupid!"

Tor Kranta stood in the clear night chill, staring at the stars. From inside the sleeping chamber his wife called, "Tor... stop tormenting yourself."

"The fools," he muttered. "To stop the work because of the priests' objections. To prevent us from trying to contact another intelligent race, circling another star. Idiocy. Sheer idiocy."

"Accept what must be accepted, Tor. Come to bed."

He shook his blue-maned head. "I only hope that the other intelligent races of the universe aren't as blind as we are."