

The sun is a fiery chrysanthemum,  
Earth is a lonely bluebell. And Starmaster  
sits in the hand of God—or does he?

**T**HE hand lay supine upon the black lap of space, its craglike fingers towering high above the vast depression—or cwm, as mountaineers would call it—of its palm. A massive ridge formed the thumb. It was a right hand, so perfect as to have been sculptured by Michelangelo—a star-flung fragment of his David, magnified hundreds of thousands of times.

For hours Starmaster had watched the asteroid from the bridge of the muleship, had seen it grow gradually from a distance-blurred chunk of rock into its present conformation. He could not help but be impressed. He had seen asteroids shaped like castles, asteroids shaped like ships and asteroids shaped like animals—but he had never seen one that looked as though it had been sculptured into the likeness of a macrocosmic hand.

Even for an atheist like himself it was impossible to look upon it and not entertain, however briefly, the notion that it was the right hand of God.

The notion angered him. He kicked it contemptuously out of his mind and returned his attention to the muleship's matter-detector. It was beeping loudly. It had been beeping for hours. Its sound had guided him to the hand. For five years he had been combing the Belt for a rich lode of doranium and at last he had found one.

**H**E SAW the wreck of the pilgrim ship as he brought the mule down into the cwm of the palm—and knew he was not the first to find the hand after all. Not long after he landed he found the pilgrim's body. The palm was crisscrossed with shallow rills, and the dead man was lying in one of them about fifty feet from his birdlike ship. The advanced emaciation of the frozen face beyond the faceplate indicated that he had died of starvation.

Starmaster slit open the pilgrim's suit and withdrew the dead man's pocket portfolio. He thumbed through it, hampered by his cumbersome gloves. Name: Jason Swinton. Rank: Apostle, 2nd class. Address: Institute of Stellar Pilgrims, New Baltimore, Md., USNA, Earth.

He slipped the portfolio into an outside pocket of his suit and walked in his self-adjusting gray boots to the wrecked ship. It told him little he had not already guessed. The ship's cramped living quarters contained one bunk, one chair, one table, one stove, one plate, one cup, one fork, one knife, one spoon and one book. The book, of course, was *The Space-Age Testament*. It related how the first astronauts to orbit Mars had looked into outer space and had seen the face of God—how, upon returning to Earth, both they and their story had been ridiculed—how they had founded the Order of Stellar Pilgrims and launched the search for God—how the ranks of the Order had swelled during the ensuing years as more and more Protestants and Jews became convinced that the abode of Jehovah/Yahweh lay somewhere beyond the orbit of Mars.

The pilgrim had not been a neat housekeeper. Ration cans were scattered everywhere, the lighter ones floating about the room. The deck was littered with them. They covered every square inch of the stove—one was even lying on the bunk. Starmaster was not surprised. In his opinion all pilgrims had been dirty housekeepers to begin with—dirty housekeepers of the mind.

He took the ship's log with him so that when he got back to Earth he could turn it in to the Space Authority, along with the portfolio. Then he made his way over the maze of rills and returned to his own ship.

Thus far the hand's topography had touched only the borderline of his attention. Now, as he walked beneath the stars farther inland, he became uncomfortably aware of the finger crags towering awesomely

before him, of the enormous thumb ridge looming in the north, of the flesh-hued slope of the cwm as it rose to meet the unreal line of the horizon. Perversely he likened himself to a mite crawling slowly across the palm of a human hand, oblivious that it was sentient and could at any moment close into a fist. Had the crag fingers risen higher into the sky? Had the thumb ridge shifted? Was the palm twitching beneath his feet?

He forced his thoughts back into their proper grooves. He was no mite—he was a man. And this was no hand—it was a chunk of rock. A chunk of rock wheeling senselessly around the sun, as dead as Mars, as cold as the moon and as frozen as Pluto.

Upon regaining the mule, he inflated the dome tent. Its mouth sealed itself around the outer cargo lock and its base sphinctered to provide air tight access to the surface. When he opened the inner lock, the mule's warmth and atmosphere became the dome tent's, too.

The matter-detector screen had showed the lode's exact location, and it had been a simple matter for him to spot the mule on a site slightly west of where the vein began and where the first of the five charges had to be placed. This put his present location a half mile east of the base of the little finger and a similar distance from the edge of the palm. The lode followed a fairly straight course beneath the southern slope of the cwm, at an average depth of four hundred feet. To separate it, he would have to take most of the outer section of the palm with it. When the section broke free he would latch onto it with the mule's attractor beams and tow it to the orbital refineries of Earth.

After opening the inner cargo lock he pulled the drill rig down the ramp and set it up over the sphincter. The low gray made the task child's play but necessitated the sinking of extra anchors. He had already analyzed the hand's geological composition, computed its mass, estimated the temperature effect. Synthesizing the three factors, he concluded that the charges would have to be placed at a depth of seventy-one feet.

**F**EW Belt combers were loners. They could not afford to be. They were self-sufficient in some fields—in others, they walked by night. Generally it required three or four to isolate a lode section and tow it back to Earth.

Starmaster was a true loner. He had seen the Light at an early age, and the Light was this: A man comes into the world alone and he leaves it alone—his friends accompany him as far as the grave, but they do not accompany him into the grave. They are utterly incapable of alleviating his ultimate aloneness. Of what use, then, are friends? Are they not parasites riding upon a man's shoulders as he walks through life? If he is wise he will learn to do everything they can do so there will be no need for him to carry them.

And when all is said and done, of what use to a man is a family? Is it not as incapable as his friends of alleviating his ultimate aloneness?

No one rode upon Starmaster's shoulders—no man, no woman, no child. There was little he could not do, little he did not know. He towered high above his fellow men, a loner.

He picked up the big drill and threaded it into the brace. He had just finished tightening it when the RHO-ixviii storm struck.

It caught him off-guard because: (1) he had been preoccupied with his task, (2) the dome tent was a cheap one and lacked transparency, and (3) RHO storms were created by the conflicting pulls of Jupiter's moons and seldom traveled as far sunward as the Belt.

An RHO storm can best be likened to a giantess's skirt covered with polychromatic polka-dots. It descends upon planet or planetoid and swirls across the surface, its radiation killing every living creature in its path. Starmaster was the only living creature on the hand. His spacesuit, which would have afforded him some protection, was in the mule. When he saw the hem of the skirt penetrate the walls of the tent, he dropped the wrench he had been using. He scurried around the deadly dots and leaped through the outer lock. Air was already escaping, and the suction proved almost too powerful for the lock motors to cope with—but at last they won and the lock dogged itself shut.

Starmaster leaned against it, basking in the warmth of relief. But a second ordeal lay in store. Unlike

the RHO storm, the black moment did not catch him unaware. He had experienced it before and had grown sensitive to its approach.

When his eyes closed of their own accord he braced himself against the lock—and the lock dispersed and the deck dissolved beneath his feet and he found himself in blackness. No, not quite blackness. Scattered around him in the vast distances were pale patches of light, some elliptic, some circular, some with spiral arms. Island universes. Slowly, as though he were a little star, he began to revolve.

He knew where he was. He was in his own mind. But what was he doing there? Why had he conjured up the local group of galaxies and positioned himself in deep space an equidistance from each galaxy?

As he rotated on his axis he identified the various Messier and NGC objects surrounding him: NGC 404, the Magellanic Clouds and NGC 598, the vast swirl of the Milky Way with its garden of globular clusters, Great Andromeda and her stardust moons. NGC 404 again, the Lesser Magellanic Cloud ...

Gradually he became aware of the awesome cold, of the abysmal emptiness. When both became unendurable, the black moment passed.

**S**HAKEN, Starmaster climbed the companionway to the bridge. Through the transparent bulkheads he watched the RHO storm as it moved across the hand. If you looked hard enough you could see the giantess—tall, black, Brobdingnagian, polka-dot skirt swirling as she danced over the rills and among the rocks, up one finger crag and down the next, over the ridge of the thumb. Before she was done she might return the way she had come and dance through the dome tent once again. There was no telling how soon she would tire of her lonely rigadon and dance off into space.

It was an opportune time for him to get some sleep. But he knew he could not sleep—that he would not be able to relax until the job was done and the lode section safely in tow. So to kill time he retired to his cabin with the pilgrim's log and propped himself up on his bunk pillows.

The script was spidery yet easy to read. The pilgrim ascribed the crash to "pilot error occasioned by a Manual Epiphany." Logical enough. If an atheist could see God's hand in a chunk of rock, a pilgrim would be overwhelmed by such a phenomenon and bound to make a mistake.

Starmaster read bits and pieces of further entries. The pilgrim in his search for God had journeyed far and wide, and at last he had been no longer alone. "God comforts me during my final days in this world." He had not found it odd that only God's right hand should be visible. "There are dimensions and dimensions beyond the picayune trio man is imprisoned in and the fourth, which he theorizes. God dwells in all of them, and only by obtaining omnidimensions himself could a mere mortal ever perceive Him in His entirety." He thought often of his fellow pilgrims and wished he might apprise them of the "Manual Epiphany" that had brought him "out of night and into day, but his radio had been damaged in the crash and he had been incapable of repairing it.

The entries became incoherent toward the end, although some of the lines possessed a poetic if not a realistic clarity of thought. "For what is a man if there is no God? Is he not one with the flotsam and jetsam of space?" "Pity the self-made gods, for they who have need of Him the most shall never see Him." "My journey has been a long one, but it has not been in vain." "His touch is gentle—it drives away my pain. It expunges my despair ... the stars are His eyes—their light is His eternal gaze."

Skirt swirling, the black giantess danced off into space and disappeared. Starmaster donned his spacesuit and went back outside.

**T**HE dome tent was irreparable but the rig was undamaged. He plugged the DDX cable into the mule's powerpack by means of a hull receptacle. Then he threw the switch and watched the big pulley raise the drill for the first drop. At the extremity of the lift, the pulley activated the minirocket engine in the brace. The engine fired a single noiseless burst that sent brace and drill plummeting to the surface. Cable trailing, the drill plunged into the rock. Promptly the pulley retracted it, and repeated the operation.

Starmaster had set the depth gauge for seventy-one feet. When the drill reached that depth the rig would shut itself off. He readied the first charge. It consisted of a manganese-bronze cylinder pre-filled with neodynamite. Working awkwardly in his heavy gloves, he inserted the first sequential impulsor in a slot in the cylinder's wall. The impulsor was attuned to the number-one activator on the mule's console panel and would respond to no other stimulus.

The job done, he sat back and looked up at the black star-flowered sky. The sun was a fiery chrysanthemum. Venus was a silvery rose. Earth was a lonely bluebell. Soon he would be back home, enjoying the riches the lode would bring him. The doranium lodes he had towed in before had been dilute compared to this one, but even they had netted him excellent profits. This one's potential profit made his head swim.

The rig shut itself off and the pulley retracted the drill. He carried the cylinder over to the shaft and dropped it down into the darkness. It did not fall fast, but eventually it would reach bottom.

The axial rotation of the hand had brought the fingers higher into the sky and, with their approach toward the sun, a lake of black shadows began to take shape at their base. Starmaster partially dismantled the rig and lashed it to the hull of the mule, utilizing the cargo rings provided for the purpose. Then he lifted the mule to five hundred feet and walked it on its retros to the next charge site. The black lake receded into the distance, and he brought the mule back down and went out into the sunlight.

He was unlashng the rig when the Hell Wind hit.

It slammed him against the hull and raised the interior temperature of his suit to a blistering 131° Fahrenheit. His fingers found a pair of cargo rings and clamped around them. He wound his legs about the nearby drill. Furious, the Wind upped its momentum, raising the interior temperature of his suit still higher, flattening him against the hull. He felt the drill move and for a moment feared that the rig would be torn from its lashings, he along with it, to go tumbling across the surface of the hand and out into space. But the lashings somehow held.

Even in his agony he could not help wondering how the Wind had reached so far outward from the sun. Such winds, born deep in the solar vortices known as sunspots, blasted Mercury's dayside, penetrated Venus's gown, and had been known to touch the atmosphere of Earth. But this was the Belt and the Belt was beyond Mars. Only a hyper-holocaust could have lived so long in the cold caverns of space.

He felt it diminish in intensity, but he did not relax his grip on the rings or loosen his legs from their scissors-hold on the drill. He did not trust the Wind any more than he had trusted the giantess in the polka-dot skirt. His body blazed. He thought his veins would burst.

And then the pressure vanished altogether and he knew the Wind had departed and that it would not come back. He pried his fingers free from the rings, forced his legs from around the drill and sagged to the ground. After a while the interior temperature of his suit returned to normal. He realized that he was trembling and knew that he needed a drink.

**A**FTER inspecting the rig and finding it undamaged he entered the mule, unsuited and climbed the companionway to his cabin. He poured a drinking glass nearly full of bourbon and raised it to his lips. The first swallow exploded in his stomach and sent shockwaves all the way to his fingers and toes. However, not until the glass was empty did he attain the lucid interval that precedes alcoholic deterioration of the thought processes and become able to analyze his situation objectively.

(1) The fact that RHO-ixviii storms seldom traveled as far sunward as the Belt did not necessarily call into question the appearance of the giantess in the polka-dot skirt.

(2) The fact that Hell Winds had never been known to reach beyond the orbit of Earth did not necessarily imply that one of them could not.

(3) The nearly coincidental appearance of two such phenomena involved astronomical odds hut, given eternity, such odds were not insuperable and the cosmic racing form was both big enough and broad enough to admit them.

Conclusion: Neither the RHO storm nor the Hell Wind nor their juxtaposition in space and time could

he credited to an attempt on the part of some cosmic force—or, to call a spade a spade, a supreme being—to thwart the rape of the hand.

**S**TARMASTER drank three thermocups of coffee, resuited and went back outside. The fingers were almost touching the sun and the black lake had spread into the cwm of the palm, inundating the pilgrimage. He set up the rig and got it going on the second shaft. By the time he finished placing the second charge, the fingers had obscured the sun and the waters of the black lake were lapping against the feet of the rig. He relashed the rig to the hull, lifted the mule and saw the sun again. He had made a metal map of the hand and put an X where each charge had to be placed. The third X was on the floor of a rill. He drilled the shaft, impulsified the third cylinder, dropped it down into the darkness and went on to site number four. He was near the eastern slope of the cwm now and in the distance he could see the passlike depression that separated the thumb mound from the outer palm.

He made good time placing the fourth charge—even so, the waters of the black lake reached the rig before he finished. They filled almost the entire cwm now and the fingers wore gloves blacker than space. He went on to the fifth and final site. It was high on the slope of the outer palm, but the surface was reasonably level and he had no great trouble setting up the rig. When the shaft was finished he impulsified the fifth cylinder, dropped it and stepped back from the rig. Except for the interruptions occasioned by the RHO storm and the Hell Wind, the operation had come off smoothly. The charges were perfectly placed and the lode section could not fail to break free when the impulsors were activated. It was as good as in his pocket.

He waited to savor the self-satisfaction that was rightfully his. Oddly, it did not materialize. He felt strangely depressed.

He ascribed the first tremor to a temporary loss of equilibrium. The second sent him staggering backward. The third opened a long five-foot-wide fissure beneath one leg of the rig, causing the big machine to topple. As it fell it twisted clockwise, and the drill swung around in a wide arc. Starmaster saw it coming and had plenty of time to get out of its way, but he could not move. He was stunned. The likelihood of tectonic activity had been so slight he had not even included it in his calculations. The drill struck him in the chest and sent him tumbling down into the cwm. He came finally to rest on his back, and the waters of the black lake closed over him.

**H**E WAS unconscious for a subjective second. Objectively, an hour went by.

During that second/hour, he experienced the black moment once again.

He hovered like a tiny star amid the immensities and watched the majestic march of the island universes across space-time. Once again he grew acquainted with the awesome cold and the abysmal emptiness of intergalactic space. When both became unendurable the moment passed.

What frightening fact was his sub-conscious trying to get across to him?

**T**HERE was a heaviness in his chest, but he could breathe.

He sat up, came laboriously to his feet. The black lake overflowed the cwm now—in the distance, the fingers rose up like the towers of a huge black castle. A hundred feet up the slope, next to the ruined rig, stood the mule. He stumbled up the incline and let himself through the locks. Apparently the hand-quake had done no damage. After climbing the companionway to the bridge he ran a quick test on all systems. Everything checked out perfectly.

Pain, absent until now, began in his chest and spread throughout his thorax. A brief but thorough palpation informed him that at least two of his ribs were cracked and that his right collar-bone was broken. It was imperative, therefore, that he separate the lode section and leave for Earth at once.

He extended his fingers toward the controls, but he did not touch them. He could not. He had been able to rationalize the RHO storm and the Hell Wind and he had even succeeded in rationalizing their

juxtaposition in space and time. But the quake was something else. Granted, the shafts he had sunk might have precipitated it—but when you added the quake to the storm and the Wind, you got an astronomical set of odds that even the cosmic racing-form would not accept.

Before he returned to Earth he had to free himself from the terrible doubt those odds gave rise to. The intellectual universe he lived in had no room for a supreme being. For the sake of his peace of mind, for the sake of his future, he had to prove to his own satisfaction that the asteroid was not God's right hand and that therefore God did not exist.

There was only one way for him to do so.

Lifting the mule, he began walking it along the edge of the fissure. He estimated the distance carefully, then brought the mule down and descended to the cargo compartment. There he impulsified a sixth cylinder. Then he let himself through the locks and dropped the cylinder into the fissure.

Reentering the mule, he lifted it again, walked it a similar distance and repeated the procedure.

The fissure was erratic. It extended in the direction of the thumb ridge for a while, then veered sharply westward toward the fingers. Again, it veered, this time to the south, and zigzagged partway across the palm. Finally it veered to the west again as though the hand, in trying to kill him, had paved the way for its own destruction. Altogether he dropped nine charges, the last one near the base of the monolithic third finger, a little way from where the fissure came to an end.

His pain was unendurable by this time; every breath he took made it more so. He could barely raise his right arm, and his legs were heavy with fatigue. But his determination to prove that God did not exist exalted him and gave him strength. Once again in the mule, he closed the locks, unsuited, climbed the companionway to the bridge and stood before the console.

He lifted the mule straight up, watched the hand diminish in the floorscope. When it shrank to human size he put the mule in orbit. Then he depressed the first five activators.

He saw the hand tremble. Then he saw the crescent-shaped lode section part ponderously from the palm. Immediately he seized it with the attractors and began pulling it toward the mule. When it was within five hundred feet he neutralized the attractors, locking it in tow position.

His knees were trembling. His mouth felt dry as dust. He activated impulsors ten and fourteen. There was no immediate reaction—then, suddenly, the hand shuddered and the third finger broke away. Grimly he activated eight and eleven. Again, no immediate reaction then a shudder more profound than before. He gaped. Awesomely, the remnant of the hand broke in two. He depressed the remaining activators in swift succession and the two major sections of the hand shattered into rubble. Only the thumb and third finger remained intact. The third finger had already drifted off into space and presently the rubble began rotating around the thumb. Light from the faraway sun shone on the little universe, bequeathing day to the picayune planets Starmaster had created.

**D**EFIANTLY he raised his eyes to the heavens and waited for God's left hand to appear and smite him from the sky.

He waited and he waited. After a while he realized that he had sunk to his quaking knees and was praying for it to appear—and suddenly he knew that what he had done, he had done not to prove there was no God, but to prove there was.

All he saw was the vast, indifferent face of space.

After an eternity he climbed numbly to his feet, threw the mule into full drive and began the journey back to Earth. He would never know the black moment again, but he would never know peace either . . . Back to Earth, to walk once more among his fellow men aloof, unfettered—and alone.