PDC 58370-9

THE MAGAZINE O

Fantasy AND Science Fiction

ISAAC ASIMOV
Thinking About Thinking

A MERCURY PUBLICATION

JANUARY

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Sanity Clause
by EDWARD WELLEN

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The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, Volume 48; No. 1, Whole No. 284; Jan. 1975. Published monthly by Mercury Press, Inc. at $.75 per copy. Annual subscription $8.50; $9.25 in Canada and Mexico, $10.00 in other foreign countries. Postmaster: send form 3579 to Fantasy and Science Fiction, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Publication office, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Editorial submissions should be sent to 347 East 53rd St., New York, N.Y. 10022. Second class postage paid at Cornwall, Conn. 06753 and at additional mailing offices. Printed in U.S.A.

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From Ed Wellen ("Mouthpiece," June 1974) an offering for the jolly season, though admittedly one not to be read to the kids on Christmas eve. In fact, a bit of a chiller.

Sanity Clause

by EDWARD WELLEN

Ho ho ho.

They said he used to come down the chimney. But of course these days there were no more chimneys. They said he used to travel in an eight-reindeer-power sleigh. But of course these days there were no more reindeer.

The fact was that he traveled in an ordinary aircar and came in through the ordinary iris door.

But he did have on a red suit with white furry trim, and he did carry a bundle of toys, the way they said he did in the old old days. And here he came.

His aircar parked itself on the roof of the Winterdream condom, and he worked his way down through the housing complex. The Winterdream condom's 400 extended families, according to his list, had an allotment of nine children under seven.

The first eight were all sanes and did not take up more than two minutes of his time apiece. The ninth would be Cathy Lesser, three.

Like the others, the Clements and the Lessers had been awaiting his yearly visit in fearful hope. The door of the Clement-Lesser apartment irised open before he had a chance to establish his presence. He bounced in.

He read in its eyes how the family huddle saw him. His eyes how they twinkled! His dimples how merry! His cheeks were like roses, his nose like a cherry! His droll little mouth was drawn up like a bow, and the beard of his chin was as white as the snow. The stump of a pipe he held tight in his teeth, and the smoke it encircled his head like a wreath. He had a broad face and a little round belly that shook when he laughed, like a bowlful of jelly.

"Ho ho ho."

He looked around for Cathy. The child was hanging back, hiding

behind her mother's slacks.

"And where is Cathy?"

Her mother twisted around and pushed Cathy forward. Slowly Cathy looked up. She laughed when she saw him, in spite of herself. A wink of his eye and a twist of his head soon gave her to know she had nothing to dread.

"Ho ho ho. And how is Cathy?"

He knew as soon as he saw her eyes. He vaguely remembered them from last year, but in the meanwhile something in them had deepened.

Cathy stuck her thumb in her mouth, but her gaze locked wonderingly and hopefully on the bulging sack over his shoulder.

"Cat got Cathy's tongue?"

"She's just shy," her mother said.

"Cathy doesn't have to be shy with me." He looked at the mother and spoke softly. "Have you noticed anything ... special about the child?"

The child's mother paled and clamped her mouth tight. But a grandmother quickly said, "No, nothing. As normal a little girl as you'd want to see."

"Yes, well, we'll see." It never paid to waste time with the relatives; he had a lot of homes to visit yet. Kindly but firmly he eased the Lessers and the Clements out of the room and into the corridor, where other irises were peeping.

Now that she was alone with him Cathy looked longingly at the closed door. Quickly he unslung his bundle of toys and set it down. Cathy's eyes fixed on the bulging sack.

"Have you been a good little girl, Cathy?"

Cathy stared at him and her lower lip trembled.

"It's all right, Cathy. I know you've been as good as any normal little girl can be, and I've brought you a nice present. Can you guess what it is?"

He visualized the beautiful doll in the lower left corner of the bag. He watched the little girl's eyes. She did not glance at the lower left corner of the bag. He visualized the swirly huge lollipop in the upper right corner of the bag. She did not glance at the upper right corner of the bag. So far so good. Cathy could not read his mind.

"No? Well, here it is."

He opened the bag and took out the doll. A realistic likeness of a girl with Cathy's coloring, it might have been the child's sibling.

"Ooo," with mouth and eyes to match.

"Yes, isn't she pretty, Cathy? Almost as pretty as you. Would you like to hold her?"

Cathy nodded.

"Well, let's see first what she can do. What do you think she can do? Any idea?"

Cathy shook her head.

Still all right. Cathy could not see ahead.

He cleared a space on the table and stood the doll facing him on the far edge. It began walking as soon as he set it down. He lifted Cathy up so she could watch. The doll walked toward them and stopped on the brink of the near edge. It looked at the girl and held out its arms and said, "Take me."

He lowered Cathy to the floor, and the doll's eyes followed her pleadingly. Cathy gazed up at the doll. It stood within her sight but out of her reach. The girl's eyes lit up. The doll trembled back to pseudo life and jerkily stepped over the edge of the table.

He caught it before it hit the floor, though his eyes had been on Cathy. He had got to Cathy too in the nick of time. Strong telekinesis for a three-year-old.

"Here, Cathy, hold the doll."

While she cradled the doll, he reached into a pocket and palmed his microchip injector.

"Oh, what lovely curls. Just like the dolly's." He raised the curls at the nape of Cathy's neck, baring the skin. "Do you mind if I touch them?" For some reason he always steeled himself when he planted the metallic seed under the skin, though he knew the insertion didn't hurt. At most, a slight pulling sensation, no more than if he had tugged playfully at her curls. Then a quick forgetting of the sensation. He patted the curls back in place and pocketed the injector.

"Let's play that game again, shall we, sugar plum?"

Gently he pried the doll from her and once more put it on the far edge of the table. This time it did not walk when he set it down. With one arm he lifted Cathy up and held her so she could see the doll. The fingers of his free hand hovered over studs on his broad black belt. The doll looked at the girl and held out its arms and said, "Take me."

The girl's eyes yearned across the vastness of the table. The doll suddenly trembled into pseudo life and began to walk toward them, jerkily at first, then more and more smoothly. He fingered a stud. The doll slowed. It moved sluggishly, as if bucking a high wind, but it kept coming. He fingered another stud. The doll slowed even more. In smiling agony it lifted one foot and swung it forward and set it down, tore the other free of enormous g's and swung it forward, and so kept coming. He fingered a third stud.

He sweated. He had never had to use this highest setting before. If this failed, it meant the child was incurably insane. Earth had room only for the sane. The doll had stopped. It fought to move, shuddered and stood still.

The girl stared at the doll. It remained where it was, out of reach. A tear fattened and glistened, then rolled down each cheek. It seemed to him a little something washed out of the child's eyes with the tears.

He reached out and picked up the doll and handed it to Cathy.

"She's yours to keep, Cathy, for always and always."

Automatically cradling the doll, Cathy smiled at him. He wiped away her tears and set her down. He irised the door open. "It's all right now. You can come in."

The Lessers and Clements timidly flooded back into the room.

"Is she —?"

"Cathy's as normal as any little girl around."

The worried faces regained permanent-press smoothness.

"Thank you, thank you. Say thank you, Cathy."

Cathy shook her head.

"Cathy!"

"That's quite all right. I'll settle for a kiss."

He brought his face close to Cathy's. Cathy hesitated, then gave his rosy cheek a peck.

"Thank *you*, Cathy." He shouldered his toys and straightened up. "And to all a good night."

And laying a finger aside of his nose, and giving a nod, through the iris he bounded. The Clement-Lesser apartment was on the ground floor, and the corridor let him out onto a patch of lawn. He gave his aircar a whistle. It zoomed from the roof to his feet.

As he rode through the night to his next stop, an image flashed into his mind. For an instant he saw, real as real, a weeping doll. It was just this side of subliminal. For a moment he knew fear. Had he failed after all with Cathy? Had she put that weeping doll in his mind?

Impossible. It came from within. Such aberrations were the aftermath of letdown. Sometimes, as now after a trying case, he got these weird flashes, these near-experiences of a wild frighteningly free vision, but always something in his mind mercifully cut them short.

As if on cue, to take him out of himself, the horn of his aircar sounded its *Ho ho ho* as it neared the Summerdaze condom. He looked down upon the chimneyless roofs. Most likely the chimney in the Sanity Clause legend grew out of folk etymology, the word *chimney* in this context coming from a misunderstanding of an ancient chant of peace on Earth: *Ho ... Ho ... Ho Chi Minh.* His eyes twinkled, his dimples deepened. There was always the comfort of logic to explain the mysteries of life.

The aircar parked itself on the roof of the Summerdaze condom, and he shouldered his bundle of toys and worked his way down through the housing complex.

Ho ho ho

The reviewer's hardest task is to define standards. "Good" can mean almost anything: what the British call "a good read," "for those who like it, this is what they'll like," "it won't poison you," "good enough for minor entertainment," "mildly pleasant," "intelligent, thoughtful, and interesting," "charming!," and just plain "good"--excluding the range of better, from fine to splendid to superb to great. Reviewers also tend to adopt a paradoxical sliding scale in measuring a book's quality, i.e. the more ambitious a book, the more it's likely to fail; yet the competent, low-level "success" can be infinitely less valuable and interesting than the flawed, fascinating, incomplete "failure." For example, in July 1973 I reviewed James Gunn's *The Listeners* (which belongs emphatically in category two, above) and managed to make it sound worse than Norman Spinrad's *The Iron Dream,* a considerably lower-level (although interesting) category one. Novels don't only provide different kinds of pleasure; they involve a reader more or less profoundly. *Listeners* was "bad" because parts of it were so wonderfully good; *Dream* was "good" partly because it demanded so little of the reader—some of this by the author's deliberate choice, which only adds to the complexity

JOANNA RUSS

Books

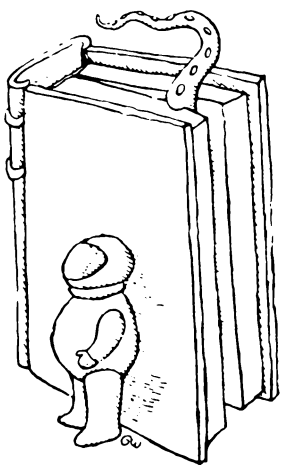
Born With The Dead, Robert Silverberg, Random House, $5.95.

Some Dreams Are Nightmares, James Gunn, Scribners, $6.95

Total Eclipse, John Brunner, Doubleday, $5.95

Flow My Tears, The Policeman Said, Philip K. Dick, Doubleday, $6.95

The Texas-Israeli War: 1999, Howard Waldrop & Jake Saunders, Ballantine, $1.25



of the whole business.

None of this month's hard-cover novels live up to their authors' own best work and in that sense they are not good books. They're certainly not in the "good-by-any-standards" class. Yet none of them is in the droopy-eyeball or loathsome class, either, and all have some excellences. The reviewer's business (as so many reviewers have said) is distinguishing between various levels of failure, keeping in mind that by "good" here I mean very high standards indeed.

Robert Silverberg is a sossidge-factory trying to become an artist. To my mind he's done so only twice, in "Notes from the Pre-Dynastic Epoch" (Tom Disch's *Bad Moon Rising*) and "Schwartz Between the Galaxies" (Judy-Lynn del Rey's *Stellar 1*, reviewed next month). *Born* consists of three related novellas written from 1971 on, two of them ("Born With the Dead" and "Thomas the Proclaimer") interesting but eventually unsatisfying, and one ("Going") just as unsatisfying and considerably less interesting. Mr. Silverberg has hit on a fine idea for making quasi-novels; there are some unnecessary chronological connections (the tales are supposed to happen in the same future world but quite obviously needn't); yet the similarity of theme does enhance all three. They are good—and bad—in exactly the same way: in each some final enlightenment is promised but in none does it occur. Silverberg gets close, especially in the first, "Born With the Dead." The details here are almost perfect: the "Deads" (who have been "rekindled") living in their "Cold Towns," segregated from the "warms," attracted to tombs, shooting living re-creations of extinct animals, eating but not caring what they eat, hating the vibrations of life, oddly waxy-looking, very slowly-aging, almost telepathic among themselves, people to whom "nothing matters ... it's all only a joke" and who have lost every aesthetic sense in the present (to judge from the monumental bleakness of their Cold Towns) and who live, in some elaborate, soulless fashion, behind the psychic equivalent of a sheet of glass. They are modern cousins of our old friends, the Undead; yet when the hero's obsession with tracking down his Dead wife (an inexplicable mania unless he is really trying to become a Dead himself, which doesn't seem to be the case) brings him into the world of the Deads in earnest—he's such a nuisance that his wife and her companions have him killed and rekindled— we find out no more about the Deads than we knew before. Up to a point the story is immensely suggestive, but when it comes to the crunch, Silverberg

knows no more about it than we do, despite the obvious tremendousness of the theme (life and letting go vs. static soullessness) and some extraordinarily fine touches, e.g. the wife's archaeological "find," which she has invented, is not only an elaborate joke but an elliptical description of the interaction between her live husband and herself. The story simply does not deliver. And it's the best of the three.

The second novella, "Thomas the Proclaimer" (under its highly-polished surface) is another of James Blish's "one-lung catastrophes." Again there is so much detail to admire that the fundamental staleness at the center is almost lost—until the very end, when one realizes that the "miracle" which begins the story (the Earth's standing still for twenty-four hours without any of the physical effects that ought to occur therefrom) will never be explained, that the author (again) knows no more than you or I, and that the story, for all its echoes of the story of Christ and its discussions of religion, is basically that old-time world-catastrophe, to which (as Blish pointed out) the range of characters' reactions must necessarily be pretty narrow. The periphery of the tale is as interesting as it can be made: prophet Thomas has a manager/inspirer called "Saul Kraft" who does to Thomas's religion something like what St. Paul (formerly "Saul"!) did to Christ's; the chapter entitled "The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters" (about the conversion of an atheist physicist) is extremely funny—" "And the laws of momentum were confounded, as was I"—but the main event still seems to me merely Silverberg in love with gloom and doom. The inner life of Thomas (which might be the story) is never made concrete, and Thomas's death is neither moving nor interesting but merely annoying.

"Going," the third novella, is about voluntary dying in a long-lived Utopia of 2095. One would swear the author had been reading Max Beerbohm's diabolical parody of Wells ("Sitting Up For the Dawn" in *A Christmas Garland*) with its ceremony of "Making Way," its visit of the doomed man's entire family, and the sickly-sweet, sentimental "healthiness" of the whole business. There are interesting details here too, but the real problem—when (and why) will the hero choose to die?—is answered with pure argle-bargle ("in my unreadiness lies my readiness") while the realistic psychological progression that leads to the end doesn't allow you to deduce what in God's name *is* going on. Perhaps death is not a

possible subject (as Wittgenstein said, "it is not lived through"); perhaps private, untransformed material intrudes in the stories without being fully expressed.

James Gunn's *Nightmares* (another collection of quasi-related pieces) has an excellent, even brilliant, introduction in which he points out that the novella is the ideal length for s.f. (I agree) and then refutes himself by providing two novellas, a long short story, and a short story, of which the short story is by far the best. The introduction is so good that it ought to be printed in a more portable place (*S.-F. Studies? Extrapolation?*); Mr. Gunn not only indicates the peculiar problems of the novel length but carefully lists the false solutions to them, all of which are, unfortunately, familiar to s.f. readers. The fiction (which would be entertaining enough in another context) is here put to considerable shame by the excellence of the introduction—actually the two come not only from different worlds but different decades, "The Cave of Night" (a very good read) having been first published in 1955, "The Hedoniest" in 1954, "New Blood" in 1962, and "The Medic" in 1957. All are pleasantly old-fashioned, sometimes a little foolishly so, but in general they are obvious, noble, colorful, satisfying stories of good behavior on the part of people who find out that they're living in tyrannies (the two novellas) or (in the long short story) represent evolution and life as against power and its rigidity. There are discussions about happiness ("The Hedonist"), the tyranny of medicine and the fear of death ("The Medic"), power &c. (see above, "New Blood") which are solved by personal virtue and conversion to the too-simple, old-fashioned s.f. answers, i.e. fear of death must not become "excessive" (?), freedom is better than happiness, and so on, which are fun but which promptly lower to almost nothing the reasonably sophisticated level on which the discussions were conducted in the first place. The only piece that really explores its theme is "The Cave of Night," with a triply-ironic ending that transforms the obvious (apparent) heroics of the story into something very different. The author's only real errors are in "New Blood," in which a man sheds thirty years in a week, which means that his hair is growing at a rate 52 times faster than normal and his teeth 365 times faster. He doesn't even eat more than usual; where does the energy for this come from? Nor did Mr. Gunn realize in 1962 that hair cannot change color except by growth from the roots, that teeth

can't grow without tooth-buds (and how long do they take to form?), and that brain cells do not divide after birth. Gunn has the odd quirk of highlighting his worst bits by placing them next to his best; here the errors are in a story which is otherwise almost pedantically accurate about medical details.

John Brunner's *Total Eclipse* and Philip Dick's *Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said.* (sic) are hard to assess, since Mr. Brunner can no more be unintelligent than Mr. Dick can lose his feeling for the gritty, chancy irrelevancies of real life. But neither book coheres. *Eclipse* reads like the first draft of a fine novel John Brunner ought to write some day and *Tears* like a beginning that could not find an end—the book literally ends with the equivalent of, "He woke up and found it was all a dream."

Eclipse deals with several things; a fine scientific puzzle about the sudden, planet-wide demise of genuinely alien aliens (almost the whole book), the death of a human colony on the same planet (the last forty pages of 187), a man's "becoming" one of the aliens in a prosthetic simulacrum (twenty-odd pages, some of them brilliant), parallels between the aliens' fatal flaw (the solution to this one is smashingly good) and the humans' (conventional stuff about war, &c., which gets natural and unforced only long after the human research team becomes isolated from Earth), and the conversion of a tyrannical Blue Meanie by plain-speaking, which is damnfool nonsense and occupies fifty pages of padding.

It's easy to see how these fit together intellectually (the paranoid tyrant, the possible death of Earth, the parallel flaws, and the two races lying dead on one planet, done in by the same preference for individual gain over species gain) but they have not been made to cohere dramatically. *Eclipse* is worth reading for the scientific puzzle alone and the way the author sets up a logical, rigorous process of reasoning which only appears to lead deeper and deeper into mystery: here all the details cohere, and in one moment. Knowing what Doubleday usually pays for science fiction (I will be glad to be refuted, but $2000 is the highest figure I've ever heard of) I can only conclude that if Brunner had had the time, we'd have a better book.

Tears (also Doubleday's) is non-coherent in the opposite way; Dick apparently starts with the overtones and lets them (when he is at his best, as in *Counter-Clock World* produce their own, organically

whole plot.* *Tears* is best in its digressions and at its periphery and weakest at the center; the genetically special hero is a very unconvincing superman who in fact has only his charm (and perpetually bad judgment). The theme of finding out what life is like among the proles (i.e. losing your money and power) is God-awfully stale, nor does the author really care about it, and his attempt at the end — I mean I *think* so — to replace the hero's second reality by a third, only piles up inconsistencies and unanswered questions instead of attacking our very perceptions of reality. Some of the digressions are fine by any standards; for example the telepathic clerk in a cheap hotel who says cheerfully, "I know this hotel isn't much, but we have no bugs. Once we had Martian sand fleas, but no more"; Monica Buff who is a compulsive shotlifter, with a big wicker bag she got in Baja California once, and who never wears shoes or washes her hair (she's only talked about!); Ruth Rae (something of a character herself) who tells a marvelous story about the pet rabbit ("lipperty-lipperty") who wanted to be a cat; the agreeable Jesus-Freak cop who answers Ruth Rae's frightened, "I *hate* L. A." (she's being arrested) with an earnest, "So do I. But we must learn to live with it; it's there." The most brilliant character in the book is a waif called Kathy, all innocence and psychotic emotional blackmail, who has violent temper tantrums in which she goes rigid and screams (she calls them "mystical trances") and who allows the author to render with frightening verisimilitude what happens when you try to tightrope-walk a conversation with a skillful, vicious, grown-up eight-month-old. Unfortunately the book also has failures like Alys Buckman, who is a Lesbian *and* married to her brother *and* a drug freak *and* an undefined "fetishist" (she wears tight pants, a leather shirt, hoop earrings, and a chain-link belt), *and* a sadist (her stiletto-heeled boots are hardly Lesbian), *and* an electronic-sex addict *and* lobotomized in some way never clearly described, *and* a collector of "bondage" photos (another male specialty). In short, she is pure *diabola ex machina,* a male fantasy of a macho, homosexual, leather, S & M freak projected on to a

*_Counter-Clock World_ is built on the dichotomy of the Hobard Effect, i.e. the physical resurrection of the dead, and the deaths of almost everyone you care about in the book — as a line of poetry (which is quoted more than once) says, "It is the lives, the lives, the lives, that die."

woman.* The Epilog is unfortunately like a cartoon *Punch* once printed: author-at-typewriter with the caption "The hell with it." Several shots rang out and they all fell dead. The End.'" In any other profession *Tears* would be called a good, sometimes fascinating, example of overwork and the prolific author would be pensioned generously for several years in order to mellow and recuperate.

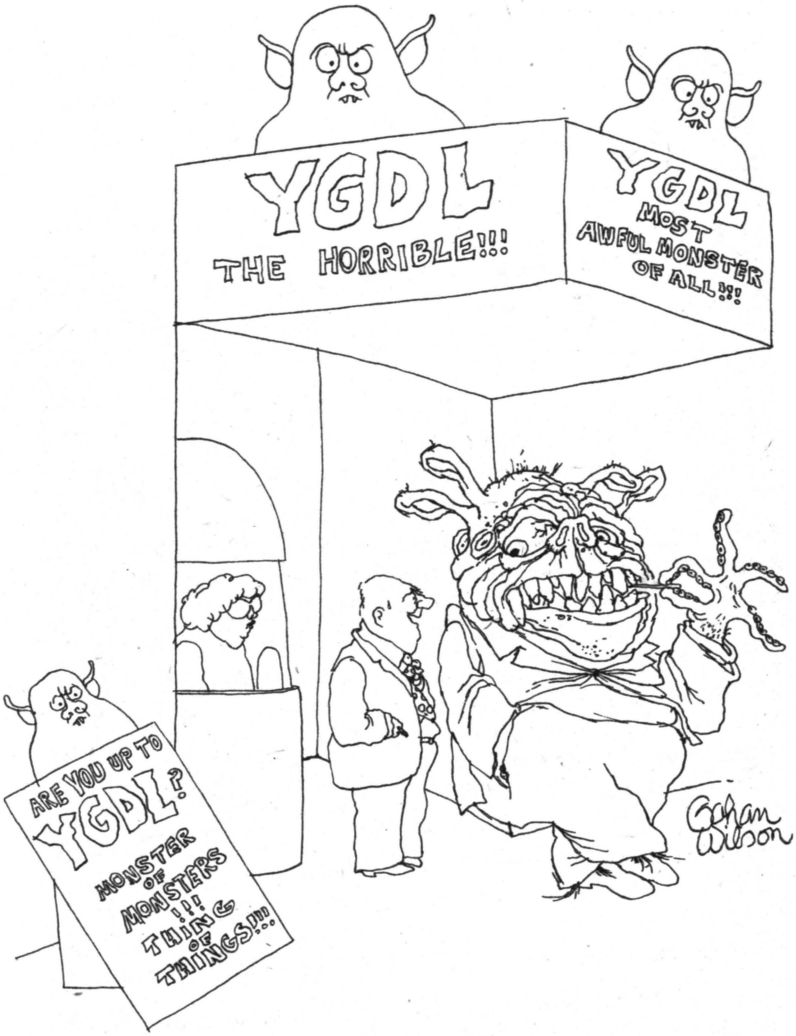
The Texas-Israeli War: 1999 is a pacifist's dream. It is literally a bloody bore. A war story with (few) futuristic frills, it is about nothing else and appeals to nothing else. What is being celebrated or exorcised here I do not know, although I can tell (for example) what makes *Patron of the Arts*, William Rotsler's giant, marshmallow-filled waterbed of a fuzzy non-novel, so appealing to horny, fourteen-year-old male virgins who are dying of loneliness, and so unbearably numbing to anybody else. The minutiae of War (in *War*) are vivid and accurate, the people non-existent, and the whole novel somehow accidental, as if it had been founded on the Bright Idea of a one-line joke (the title). There are lots of better war stories around by strange authors like "Norman Mailer," "James Jones," "Bill Mauldin," and a promising newcomer called "Ernest Hemingway." Look them up. You'll be pleasantly surprised.

*John Rechy, a homosexual author, has a character very like this in one of his recent books and C. S. Lewis's Fairy Hardcastle in *That Hideous Strength* is another. If a woman can't be a lady, she automatically becomes Marlon Brando in "The Wild Ones." Pfeh. See other recent stories about hairy, muscled Women's Libbers (yech) who smoke cigars (chomp) and cut up men (help!).

Coming soon

Next month: "The Lords of All Power" a new novella by Phyllis Eisenstein, which concludes the adventures of the teleporting minstrel named Alaric. Also, stories by Mildred Clingerman, Avram Davidson, Richard Lupoff and others.

In March: A Special Spring All-Star Issue with stories by Joanna Russ, L. Sprague de Camp, Avram Davidson, R. A. Lafferty, Jack Williamson and many others.



"Would you mind hanging around somewhere else, buddy?"

Trying to shed a few pounds? Consider first this story about the ultimate weight-loss program and its strange and terrifying results . . .

A Gift From The Fakir

by WARNER LAW

Whenever old Mr. Cowley was employed to make inventories and appraisals of the contents of the homes of the recently deceased very rich, he much preferred to be left to work quite alone. Conversation distracted him. Besides, there were always small but precious forgotten articles tucked away in drawers, their true value unknown to anyone but an expert like Mr. Cowley.

Today, having worked for only an hour in the attic of Miss Drury's mansion overlooking Pebble Beach, he'd already slipped into the pockets of his dust coat a small but exquisite antique silver snuff box ($750) and a tiny bronze 8th-century Japanese Buddha ($500). He knew they'd never be missed. Mr. Cowley started toward another chest of drawers. Pausing to examine a rather good Victorian rosewood full-length mirror, he studied his stocky figure critically in the glass and realized that he really *must* watch his diet, lest he move from the category of "plump" to "fat." A *third* chin would really be too much, he thought as he waddled across the attic.

In the hall just below, Mrs. Dunkirk stopped and listened to his footsteps. "Someone's up there!" she whispered to herself. "Someone who shouldn't be!" Mrs. Dunkirk was not the kind of woman who'd seek the help of a man like Charles the butler. She was 55 and large and strong and fearless; the late Mr. Dunkirk had never dared lift a hand to her except in affection.

She strode up the steep stairs to the attic, opened the door wide, and said to Mr. Cowley, "I am Mrs. Dunkirk, Miss Drury's housekeeper. Who are *you?*"

"Samuel Cowley. An appraiser. Two weeks ago I received this letter from the late Miss Drury's attorneys asking me to come here

and begin an appraisal of the contents of this house. When I arrived an hour ago, the butler admitted me and suggested I might as well begin up here."

Mrs. Dunkirk returned the letter. "Miss Drury is not *late*, Mr. Cowley. She is alive, downstairs."

"Oh? The butler didn't tell me. The letter said that her demise was only a matter of days."

Mrs. Dunkirk sighed. "It still is. She could go at any moment. Her doctor is almost constantly here. Miss Drury is ninety-three, and the poor dear is only skin and bones now and has lately been in a coma."

"If you think it's unseemly, I can come back."

She shrugged. "No. You might as well continue. There are thirty-five rooms to go, most of them jammed with antique furniture and fine arts. Have you found anything of interest up here?"

"Nothing of any value. Are you familiar with the contents of this room?" He strolled around the huge attic, indicating the wardrobes and cupboards and trunks and various sheet-draped objects.

"No. All this was here when I came to work for Miss Drury, fifteen years ago. But there must be a fabulous collection of expensive gowns up here, dating way back. She never discarded a dress which was in good repair, and since she was born in 1880, and considering the life she led ...."

When she didn't continue, Mr. Cowley frowned curiously. "Considering the life she led?"

Mrs. Dunkirk hesitated and then smiled. "Oh, well. Miss Drury's intimate and scandalous memoirs will be published after her death. So it's really no secret. Miss Drury was a ... woman of the world. A ... well, a courtesan, if you know what I mean."

"I do."

"Her mother was a London barmaid, and her father was ... unknown. But one can see from her photograph albums that Miss Drury was a stunningly beautiful girl, amply endowed. At an early age she became the mistress of a wealthy Englishman. From him she went up the ladder to dukes and princes and even kings. The high point of her career was the seven years she spent in India as the guest of a fabulously rich old maharajah. When he died and left her ten million dollars, she came here to Pebble Beach, built this magnificent showplace, and retired."

"What a fascinating life!" Mr. Cowley opened a dusty trunk. "Shoes and boots, I see." He shut the trunk and then moved to a large round object, five feet high, covered by a sheet. "What do you imagine this might be? An enormous birdcage?" He carefully removed

the sheet, regarded the object, and drew in his breath. "My Lord!"

What he'd uncovered was a very old dress form of the adjustable kind, made of many movable metal slats attached to a frame, the whole covered with rotting canvas. Mr. Cowley well remembered one his mother had. She was an ardent amateur dressmaker, and by loosening little screws and moving the sliding metal ribs she was able to change the foundation form to represent the sizes of herself and his three sisters — bodies which ranged from painfully thin to matronly plump.

"Whose dress form was this?" he asked the housekeeper.

"I have no idea. But she was certainly large."

"Large!" He walked around the dress form, studying it in disbelief. "A woman of this size had to weigh close to four hundred pounds! I doubt that her ankles could have supported her weight. She must have resembled an enormous pumpkin!" He saw a patch sewed to the canvas at the back of the dummy's neck and bent to study it. "Here's some writing. It's extremely faded, but I can make out: 'Miss Maxine Drury.' It was hers, then!"

"No! Never. She's had a seventeen-inch waist all her life! All through the years, her photographs show her as small-waisted and well-bosomed, with good hips and slender arms and legs. A perfect hourglass figure." The housekeeper sighed. "Though how she managed to keep it I simply don't know. If I'd eaten a *tenth* of what she consumed, I'd be as large as this dummy."

"A matter of metabolism?"

Miss Dunkirk sat on the trunk lid, next to the dress form. "More likely a tapeworm. Oh, how that woman loved to gorge herself! Until she became ill, she would always put away *six* huge meals a day! And I mean *huge!* She adored sweet things — cakes and candy and pies and pastries. And anything that was deep-fried. And anything that was sauteed in butter. Everything in the way of meat and fish and shellfish was served swimming in rich sauces. Even her vegetables were always creamed. As a former dietician, I can assure you that her daily intake was close to ten thousand calories a day!"

"Ten thousand a day!"

Mrs. Dunkirk nodded. "And she never gained one ounce!"

"I find that incredible! How do you explain it?"

"I can't." A strange look came into Mrs. Dunkirk's eyes. "Unless, of course ... tell me, Mr. Cowley, do you believe in the supernatural? The occult?"

"No. I'm afraid not." This was a lie. Mr. Cowley secretly believed in *everything* occult.

"Neither do I," said Mrs. Dunkirk, although she was constantly trying to get in touch with the late Mr. Dunkirk. It wasn't that she'd loved him so much; she wanted to know where the idiot had buried his collection of gold coins. "However, *Miss Drury* has an explanation for it, which she firmly believes. She told me that years ago, in India, she'd once ordered her bodyguard to save an old fakir — one of those holy men who work marvels — from the hands of a murderous mob. In gratitude, the fakir asked Miss Drury if there was any wish he could grant her. She really had no faith in the old man, but she was then keeping her weight down only with a severe diet, and so she told the fakir that she wished she could eat everything she wanted to, but never gain weight."

Mr. Cowley inquired eagerly, "And then what happened?"

"The old holy man asked Miss Drury her birthday. It happens to be New Year's Eve — which has always annoyed her because she never really had a birthday party all her own."

"I fully understand. I'm Christmas Eve."

"Anyway, Miss Drury said that on her birthday — it was her thirty-fifth — a gift from the fakir arrived at the palace. And from that day, no matter how much she ate, she never gained an ounce!"

Mr. Cowley put on a skeptical smile. "I'm afraid I can't believe that." This wasn't true; he believed it implicitly. "But what *was* the gift from the fakir?"

Mrs. Dunkirk shook her head. "Miss Drury would never tell me, even though I begged and teased her. I've always guessed it was some small charm, or trinket. An amulet, perhaps, or a ring or a bracelet. She has many pieces of jewelry from India, which she says are of no great value."

Of no great value! Mr. Cowley thought scornfully. He knew at least three plump San Francisco millionairesses who would pay him a fortune for the fakir's gift — whatever it was. Mr. Cowley was already plotting to get his hands on Miss Drury's collection of Indian jewelry and take it away for appraisal. He would show it to a close friend, Madame Roget, who was a medium and a true psychic, and who would most certainly feel occult forces emanating from one of the objects, which he would then have copied by a jeweler. He would return the copy to the collection and sell the charmed object for a fortune! A literal *fortune!*

"Of course!" Mrs. Dunkirk exclaimed suddenly. "I know what's happened here!" She'd been studying the dress form and fiddling with it. "Over the years, these steel slats have lost their

spring, or elasticity, and have simply opened to their fullest extent, quite by themselves."

"I believe you could be right."

She took hold of the form with her two strong hands. "I believe that if one were to push *here*, and *here* .... No, it won't budge. Perhaps I could *squeeze* it back into shape." She gave the dummy a mighty hug, but nothing happened.

"It's rusted and corroded," Mr. Cowley said. 'It—"

"Mrs. Dunkirk?" a man called up the stairs.

"Yes, Charles?" She went to the door.

"Your presence is requested by the doctor."

"Excuse me, Mr. Cowley. I'm afraid this might be the end."

Three flights down, Mrs. Dunkirk arrived at the door of Miss Drury's bedroom. A nurse stood outside. She looked ashen. "I'm afraid it's a matter of minutes."

Mrs. Dunkirk reached for the handle of the door.

"No!" the nurse said. "No one is to go in."

"That surely doesn't apply to *me!*"

"It does, it does!" The nurse took the housekeeper's hand and held it and began to cry. "Don't go in! I beg you!"

"Why not?" Mrs. Dunkirk demanded. "What is going *on* here?"

Up in the attic at this moment Mr. Cowley was pocketing a small Chinese ivory piece when he became aware of the sound of creaking metal behind him. He turned to see that the dress form was beginning to move, quite by itself. As if it had a life of its own, the dummy was shrinking — not smoothly and easily, but with spasmodic jerks and scratching sounds, as rust grated against rust and corroded metal reluctantly yielded to some irresistible force. The sounds emitted by the dress form were little metallic screeches and whines and snaps and twings and squeaks, ending at last with a loud *thronnnnggg!* as the whole mechanism returned to the shape of the body of a woman with a 17-inch waist, a definite bosom and slim hips. Alarmed and afraid, Mr. Cowley backed away as the dress form gave forth what sounded almost like a sigh of relief.

Downstairs, the doctor came out of Miss Drury's bedroom and shut the door. He looked pale and shaken; his hands trembled and his face shone with sweat.

"Is she gone?" Mrs. Dunkirk asked.

The doctor nodded numbly and said to the nurse, "Phone the funeral home at once. I want the body out of here as soon as possible."

"But I must have time to dress

her!" Mrs. Dunkirk protested. "I must fix her hair and pretty her up a bit." She moved toward the door.

The doctor stood in her way. He took hold of her shoulders. "You mustn't go in! Miss Drury is — well, she's changed a good deal since you saw her, half an hour ago."

"Oh, nonsense!" the housekeeper said. "I've seen dead people before!" By sheer force she pushed the doctor aside and opened the bedroom door.

Even in the distant attic room Mr. Cowley clearly heard her screams — the most terrifying he had ever heard, even in horror films. The screams began with three staccato bursts, each longer and louder than the last. Then there was silence, as if the screamer were too stunned to utter a sound. Then followed one enormous ear-shattering scream — a distillate of sheer terror.

Mr. Cowley hurried in alarm to the attic door and heard a babble of voices from below. But he remembered that a doctor was in charge down there, and so he went back into the room.

As he passed the dress form, he smiled tolerantly at it. What a silly fool he'd been, a few moments before! Obviously, when Mrs. Dunkirk squeezed the form, she set free the rusted and corroded metal strips, which had soon returned to their original shape by a gradual springlike action. It was the rubbing of the canvas upon itself which made the sound of the sigh.

Mr. Cowley went back to his work. Half an hour later he heard a car drive up and went to the window on the landward side of the house. A hearse had arrived, and two dark-suited young men were hurrying toward the house with a stretcher.

In a few minutes the stretcher bearers came out of the house, snapped down the wheels, and began to shove and pull their blanket-covered burden toward the hearse. As he watched, Mr. Cowley's mouth fell open and he gasped. "My God in heaven!"

It was not Miss Drury's frail little body under the blanket! It couldn't be! This corpse must weight close to 400 pounds! Mr. Cowley remembered his remark about an enormous pumpkin.

Transfixed, he kept watching while the husky young men struggled to heft the enormous weight to the floor of the hearse. When they'd finally succeeded, he turned from the window, puzzled and gravely troubled. Who had screamed so terribly downstairs, and why? If this wasn't Miss Drury's body, whose was it? What frightful things were going on here?

He paced and pondered. He heard the hearse drive off. He

found himself studying the dress form.

Suddenly an idea flashed into his mind. His eyes narrowed with suspicion, and he brought from his pockets a magnifying glass and a tiny flashlight. Moving to the rear of the dress form, he illuminated the label and studied it through the glass. "Miss Maxine Drury," he read. "New Delhi. December 31, 1915."

"Good Lord!" He dropped the magnifying glass and it shattered. In 1915, she would have been 35! Could it be? Yes, it *had* to be! It was never a piece of jewelry at all! This dress form was the fakir's birthday gift! Through the years, while Miss Drury gorged herself but never gained an ounce, the dress form had magically grown fatter and fatter. And then, the moment she died, all the "weight" in the dress form had miraculously gone back into her body!

Mr. Cowley smiled as he reflected, eagerly and greedily, that now the dress form was thin again and ready to perform its miracles for another!

Who? he wondered. Which of his fat rich ladies should have first crack at his magical new possession? Mrs. Hammond Hartley? Why not? Not only was she enormously fat and incredibly rich, but she was a firm believer in everything supernatural. The dress form might well be worth $750,000 to her!

It was while Mr. Cowley was wondering whether he should spend his retirement years in the south of France or the Swiss Alps that he had a sudden sickening fear. What if the fakir's dress form would work its miracles only for the person for whom the gift was intended? Had it lost its magic power at her death? Mr. Cowley's stomach turned at the prospect of losing all that money.

"Will you perform for another?" he asked the dress form. He felt foolish addressing an inanimate object, but then, this was no ordinary object. "Please," he begged softly. "Will you not serve another as you served Miss Drury? *Please!* I *beseech* you, in the name of the great fakir who first gave you power! Work now for another!" He patted the dummy's shoulder with gratitude in advance.

The dress form made no response, but Mr. Cowley hadn't expected it to. He got an idea. He would lend the dress form to Mrs. Hammond Hartley *on trial,* as it were. If it worked for her, she would pay him a fortune for it. If not, nothing. He would be no poorer than he was when he'd left home this morning.

Come to think, this had not been an unprofitable day. One at a time, he brought out the little

pilfered articles from the pockets of his dust coat, held them up to the light in his fat little fingers, and placed each in his brief case.

It was while he was examining the silver snuff box that he heard a sound coming from the dress form and turned to see one of the slats move. And then another rib jerked open. And then a third creaked as it slid against a fourth. The dummy was expanding!

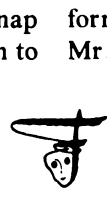
Mr. Cowley wondered if he could have set it moving when he patted it. The entire thing was swelling now, emitting whines and snaps and twings. What was *happening* here!?

Mr. Cowley suddenly became aware that his trousers had slipped down from his belly to his hips and were now threatening to fall to the floor. He reached down to grab his belt and saw his hands. They were growing smaller, and bonier! Before his eyes, his knuckles were becoming increasingly visible under his shrinking skin! As the dress form continued to screech and snap and grow larger, Mr. Cowley ran to the full-length mirror and stared in horror while his double chins were absorbed by contracting flesh and his eyes sunk grotesquely into their sockets as his face became only a skin-covered death's-head.

Terrified, he screamed and ran to the dress form, his dust coat flapping loosely against his bones, and nearly tripped over his fallen trousers. He began beating the dress form with his now fragile little fists. "No, No! Stop it! Stop it! Stop it this instant!"

Almost as if in defiance of his pleas, the dress form let out a *thronnnnnggg!* and grew even fatter. Mr. Cowley threw his bony arms around it and squeezed, but it was no use. He soon felt his strength drain away; his body sagged to the floor. But it was no longer a "body." It was a skeleton covered only by what resembled a tight transparent pink-white sausage casing.

Only when Mr. Cowley's heart had stopped beating did the dress form begin to shrink again, and Mr. Cowley to swell.



If you missed part one of Kilgore Trout's landmark sf novel, the author's synopsis will bring you up to date. We have nothing new to add about Mr. Trout, except for one detail. The hero of this novel, Simon Wagstaff, has his favorite sf author, Jonathan Swift Somers III. Coming up soon in F&SF: a brand new Ralph von Wau Wau story by that very same Somers . . .

Venus On The Half-Shell

(2nd of 2 parts)

by KILGORE TROUT

Synopsis of the First Part:

The story of Simon Wagstaff, the Space Wanderer, is known on a billion planets. This gentle little man with the patch over one eye, the permanent pain in his posterior, and his atomic-powered banjo has visited thousands of worlds in the past few thousand years. His companions, a dog, an owl, and a female robot are also famous.

It all started with a picnic with his fiancee on top of the head of the Great Sphinx of Giza in 3069 A.D. After the inevitable ants came the inevitable rain. But the downpour didn't stop for days. His fiancee, along with many billions of people, drowned. Simon and a dog, Anubis, floated on top of an airtight mummy case until they boarded a crewless Chinese space freighter, the *Hwang Ho.* An owl, Athena, flew into this, and the three drifted along in the ship until grounded on Mount Ararat. Here an old space mariner told Simon that the Hoonhors were responsible for the Second Deluge. These aliens had means for precipitating every bit of moisture in a planet's atmosphere. By doing this to "dirty" planets, they sanitized them. It was tough luck that almost everybody died on these planets.

Simon wept on hearing this, and he determined to voyage through the universe until he found someone who could answer his primal question. This was, *Why are we created only to suffer and die?*

After learning enough Chinese to run the computer that navigated the ship, Simon took off with his two pets. Almost at once, he was chased by a Hoonhor ship. He escaped it only by diving his ship into a black hole of space. This brought him out in an unknown sector of the universe. Here he found that every planet contained a vast candy-heart-shaped metal tower, deserted, impenetrable, and billions of years old. These had been erected and abandoned by the Clerun-Gowph, a near-mythical race that had come and gone before life crawled out of the seas of these planets. The towers are on almost every inhabitable planet in the universe (Earth's Galaxy excepted). Simon thinks that surely the Clerun-

Gowph must have the primal answer, but he can't find them.

Simon visited Shaltoon, the Equal-Time Planet, where every person has to surrender his body to his ancestors, who still survive in his cells. Its wisest person, Queen Margaret, fails to answer his basic question. But she does give him and his pets an elixir to prolong his life span by thousands of years.

He went to Giffard, a planet inhabited by male zeppelin-creatures and female mooring-mast creatures. They couldn't give him anything but trouble, but he did encounter Chworktap, a female robot. She had fled from her human master on the planet Zelpst. Simon and Chworktap have a love affair, though it is not exactly idyllic. Because of a quarrel, Chworktap stayed on the *Hwang Ho* when they landed on the planet Dokal. She was also interested in trying to communicate with Tzu Li (Elder Sister Plum), the computer that navigated the ship. Chworktap thought that Tzu Li had attained self-consciousness.

The Dokalians felt sorry for Simon because he lacked a tail. They forcibly grafted a tail onto him but then treated him like an honored guest. Simon was seduced by the Great Tail Himself's daughter, Tunc, and found that tails added a new dimension to love-making. But meanwhile Chworktap refused to leave the ship, and Simon had unexplainable nightmares in which his parents and his ancestors threatened him.

Chapter 13

Off To See The Wizard

The queen and her granddaughter were fluent and charming talkers. Simon spent many an hour lying side by side with them — though not at the same time — his tail entwined with theirs. But neither of them had the answer to his primal question.

Nor did anybody else he met in the capital city. Finally, he asked to meet the great sage Mofeislop. Shintsloop, The Great Tail Himself, said he had no objections. He was so cooperative that Simon wondered if he was glad to get rid of him. Maybe he suspected something, though if he did he showed no resentment. Simon had not yet learned that a Dokalian could control his facial muscles but could not keep his tail from expressing his true feelings. If he had, he might have noticed that Shintsloop's tail was held straight out behind him but twitched madly at its end.

Simon sent another messenger to the ship to ask Chworktap if she wanted to go on the trip with him. The messenger returned with a piece of paper.

I can't come with you. I think Tzu Li does have self-consciousness but she's afraid to reveal it. Either she's shy or she mistrusts humans. I've told her I'm a machine, too, but she probably thinks it's a trick. Have a good time. Don't do anything I wouldn't do.

Love and Kisses

Simon smiled. She got very upset when she thought that he might regard her as a machine. But if it would gain her something to admit that she might be, she would not hesitate. This was so human that it certified her as human.

The trip on the railroad took four days. At the end of the line was a wall of yellow bricks two hundred feet high, stretching as far as Simon could see. Actually, it surrounded the Free Land and was a work equivalent to the Great Wall of China. It wasn't as long, but it was much higher and thicker. It had no gates, but it did have brick staircases on the outer side every mile or so. These were for the guards, who manned the stations on top of the wall.

"How many men would it take to guard the prisons if the criminals were put into them instead of being sent into the Free Land?" Simon said.

His escort, Colonel Booflum, said, "Oh, about forty thousand, I suppose. The Free Land is a great saving for the taxpayer. We don't have to feed and house the prisoners or pay guards or build new prisons."

"How many soldiers are used to guard these walls?" Simon said.

"About three hundred thousand," the colonel said.

Simon didn't say anything.

He climbed to the top of the wall with Anubis behind him and Athena on his shoulder. Three miles away was the inevitable tower of the Clerun-Gowph. Beyond it for many miles was the top of Mishodei Mountain, his goal. Between him and it lay dozens of smaller mountains and an unbroken forest.

Simon and his pets got into a big wickerwork basket and were lowered by a steam winch. When he climbed out of the basket, he waved good-bye to the colonel and set out. He carried a pack full of food and blankets, a knife, a bow and arrow, and his banjo. Anubis also carried a pack on his back, though he didn't like it.

"A lot of people have left here intent on seeing the wise man," the colonel had said. "Nobody has ever come back, that I know of."

"Maybe Mofeislop showed them the folly of returning to civilization?"

"Maybe," the colonel had said. "As for me, I can't get back to the fleshpots soon enough."

"That reminds me, give my regards to the queen dowager and the princess," Simon had said.

Now he entered the Yetgul Forest, a region of giant trees, pale and stunted underbrush, swamps, poisonous snakes, huge catlike, bearlike and wolflike beasts, hairy elephantlike pachyderms, and men

without law and order. Anubis, whimpering, stuck so close that Simon fell over him a dozen times before he had gotten a mile. Simon didn't have the heart to kick him; he was scared, too.

When he got to the foothills of the vast Mishodei mountain weeks later, he was still scared. But he was much more fond of his pets than when he had started. Both had been invaluable in warning him of the presence of dangerous beasts and men. Anubis had sense enough not to bark when he smelled them; he growled softly and so alerted Simon. The owl quite often flew ahead and hunted for rodents and small birds. But when it spotted something sinister, it flew back and landed on his shoulder, hooting agitatedly.

Actually, the big beasts were only dangerous if they came upon a human suddenly. Given warning, they would either take off or else stand their ground and voice threats. Simon would then go around them. The only animals that were a genuine peril, because they did not have much sense, were the poisonous snakes.

The pets detected most of these in time, except when Simon awoke late one morning to find a cobralike snake by his side. Simon froze, but the owl flew at it, hit it, knocked it over, and Simon rolled away to safety. The cobra decided that it was in a bad place and slithered off. Two days later, the owl killed a small coral snake which had crawled by the sleeping Anubis and was on its way to Simon.

The most dangerous animal was man, and though Simon saw parties of them ten times, he always managed to hide until they had passed by. The males were scruffy-looking, dressed in skins, hairy, bearded, gap-toothed, and haggard-looking, and the children were usually snot-nosed and rheumy-eyed.

"Excellent examples of the genuine Noble Savage," the colonel had said on the trip down. "Actually, most of the Free Landers are not criminals we've sent in but their descendents. The majority of criminals we do drop into the Land are killed by the tribes that roam the woods."

"Then why don't you let the descendants come into your society?" Simon said. "They're not guilty. Surely you don't believe that the sins of the fathers should be visited on the children?"

"That's a nice phrase," the colonel said. He took out his notebook and wrote in it. Then he said, "There's been some talk in parliament of rescuing the poor devils. For one thing, they'd be a source of cheap labor. But then they'd bring in all sorts of

diseases, and they would be difficult to control and expensive to educate.

"Besides, they *are* the descendants of criminals and have inherited the rebellious tendencies of their forefathers. We don't want those spreading through the population again. After all, we've spent a thousand years extracting the rebels from the race."

"How many rebels, or criminals, are now present in the population compared to the number a thousand years ago?" Simon said. "On a per capita basis?"

"The same," the colonel said.

"And how do you explain that after all the selective straining out?"

"Humans beings are contrary creatures. But give us another thousand years, and we'll have a criminal-free society."

Simon said nothing more about this. He did ask why the Dokalian society was so advanced technologically in many respects yet still used bows and arrows. Why hadn't gunpowder been invented?

"Oh, guns were invented five hundred years ago," the colonel said. "But we're a very conservative people, as you may have noticed. It was thought that guns would introduce all sorts of disturbing innovations in society. Besides, they'd be too dangerous in the hands of the rabble. It doesn't take much training to use a gun. But skill with the sword and bow takes many years of training. So guns were outlawed, and only the elite and the most stable of the lower classes are educated in the use of swords and bows."

Despite this resistance to innovations, the steam engine had been accepted. This had resulted in a general disuse of the horse. Horseflies and the diseases they carried had almost been eliminated, and the streets were no longer full of horseshit. But the invention of the internal-combustion engine had been suppressed, and there was no gas and noise pollution from automobiles and trucks.

On the other hand, the drop in casualties from horsefly-borne sicknesses was more than made up by traffic accidents.

Simon pointed this out.

"Progress, like religion, must have its martyrs," the colonel had said.

"One could say the same about regress," Simon said. "What do you do with your traffic criminals? I'd think that you'd send so many of them here that there wouldn't be room, even in that vast forest."

"Oh, those responsible for traffic casualties aren't felons," the colonel had said. "They're fined, and some are jailed, if they

don't happen to be rich."

"Well," Simon said. "Couldn't you greatly reduce the murders and the maimings on the highway if you instituted a rigorous examination, physical and psychological, of drivers?"

"Are you kidding?" the colonel said. "No, you aren't. Less than one-tenth of the people would be permitted to drive. Good God, man, the whole economy would crumble if we did that. How did your politicians ever get your people to agree to such drastic measures?"

Simon had to admit that they hadn't passed any such laws until after cars were no longer much used.

"And by then, nobody cared, right?" the colonel said.

"Right," Simon had said, and he had wished that the colonel would quit laughing.

It was with such thoughts, humiliating though they were, that Simon kept up his courage. The Yetgul Forest was getting thicker and gloomier with every mile, and the path was so narrow that bushes and branches tore at his clothes with every step. Even the birds seemed to have found this area undesirable. Whereas, before he had been cheered by many dozens of differing calls, whistles, cheeps, and songs, continuing through the day and half the night, he was now surrounded by a silence. Only occasionally was this broken, and when it was, the cry of a bird startled him. There seemed to be only one type, a sudden screech that sounded to him like a death cry. Once, he glimpsed the bird that was responsible, a large dusty black bird that looked like a raven with a rooster's comb.

What especially depressed him were the bones. From the beginning he had seen scattered skeletons and skulls of men and women. Sometimes, they were spread out on the trail; sometimes, their gray or white bones peeped out from under bushes or leaves. Simon had counted a thousand skeletons, and there must be three times as many whose bones were hidden in the brush off the trail.

Simon tried to cheer himself with the thought that anybody who could inspire so many to defy death just to talk to him must be worth talking to.

But why would the sage have isolated himself so thoroughly?

That wasn't difficult to figure out. A sage needs much more time in which to meditate and contemplate. If he or she has visitors beating at the door, clamoring day and night, the sage has no time to think. So Mofeislop had built his house in the most difficult-to-reach place on the planet. This assured him solitude. It also assured that

whoever did get to him would not be bringing trivial questions.

At the end of the third week, Simon came out of the dark woods. Before and above him were steep and warty slopes with patches of grass and clumps of pines here and there. Above these circled hawks and vultures. Simon hoped these were not hanging around because the pickings were so easy.

The third peak beyond, by far the tallest and the most jagged, was the end of his journey. Simon, thinking of all the climbing he had to do, felt discouraged. Then out of the clouds, which had been thick, dark-gray, and as joyless as an eviction notice, the sun emerged. Simon felt better. Something on the tip of the third peak had batted the sun's rays in a line drive straight into his eyes. This, he was sure, was a window in the house of Mofeislop. It was as if the sage himself was heliographing him to come on ahead.

A week later, Simon and Anubis crawled up the final slope. Lack of food and oxygen was making his heart thump like a belt buckle in an automatic drier, and he was breathing like an old man with a teenaged bride. Athena, too tired to fly, was riding on his back, her talons dug in with a grip as painful and unrelenting as a loan shark's. He could not spare the enrgy to drive her off him. Besides, the talons had a value. They were reminding him that he was still alive, and that he would feel so good when the pain was gone.

Above him, occupying half of the two-acre plateau on top of the peak, was the house of the sage. Three stories high, thirteen-sided, many-balconied, many-cupolaed, it was built of black granite. The only windows were on the top floor, but there were many of these, small, large, square, octagonal, or round. From the center of the flat roof a tall thick black chimney rose, black smoke pouring from it. Simon envisioned a big fireplace at its base with a pig turning slowly on a spit and a kettle boiling with a thick savory soup. By it the sage waited, to feed him food first and then the answers to his questions.

To tell the truth, Simon at that moment did not give a damn about the answers. He felt that if he could fill his belly, he would be content throughout all eternity. The rest of his life, anyway.

Simon pulled himself over onto the lip of the plateau, crawled to the huge door, oak and crossed with thick ironwork, heaved himself up slowly — the owl fell off him — and pulled the bell cord. Somewhere inside a cavernous room, a big bell tolled.

"I hope he's not gone," Simon said to himself, and he giggled. Starvation and the thin air were

making him silly. Just where did he think the sage would be? Stepped out to pick up cigarettes at the corner drugstore? Gone to the movies? Attending the local Rotary Club luncheon?

His long wait at the door did give him time to wonder how the sage had managed to get this house built. Who had hauled the heavy stones up the mountain? Where did Mofeislop get his food?

Simon pulled the cord again, and the bell boomed again. After a few minutes, a key turned in the monstrously large and rusty lock, and a giant bar thudded. The door swung out slowly, creaking as if Dracula's butler was on the other side. Simon felt apprehensive, then reassured himself that he had been conditioned by watching too many old horror movies. The heavy door bumped against the stone wall, and a man shambled out. He did not look at all like the count's servant, but it was no relief to see him. He resembled Doctor Frankenstein's assistant or perhaps Lon Chaney, Senior, in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame.* His spine curved like a freeway on-ramp; he was bent over as if he had just been kicked in the stomach; his hair foamed like a glass of beer; his forehead slanted back like the Tower of Pisa; his supraorbital ridges bulged as if they were full of gas; one eye was lower than the other and milky with a cataract; his nose was red and crumpled, like a dead rose; his lips were as thin as a dog's; his teeth were those of a moose that has chewed tobacco all his life; his chin had decided in the womb to give up the ghost. And he wheezed like an emphysematic at a political convention.

However, he had a personality as pleasing as a blind date's.

He smiled and said, "Welcome!" and he radiated good will and jolly fellowship.

"Doctor Mofeislop, I presume?" Simon said.

"Bless your little heart, no," the man said. "I am the good doctor's secretary and house servant. My name is Odiomzwak."

His parents must really have hated him, Simon thought, and he warmed toward him. Simon knew what it was to have a father and a mother who couldn't stand their child.

"Come in, come in!" Odiomzwak said. "All three of you."

He reached out to pat Anubis, who lolled his tongue and shut his eyes as if very pleased to be petted. Simon decided that his apprehensions had been wrong. Dogs were known to be reliable readers of character.

Odiomzwak took a flaming torch from its stand by the door and led them down a narrow and long hall. They came out into a

giant room with black granite walls and a tile mosaic floor. At its end was the great fireplace Simon had imagined. The roasting pig wasn't there, but the kettle of steaming soup was. Near it stood a tall thin man, all forehead and nose, warming his hands and tail. He was dressed in furry slippers, bearskin trousers, and a long flowing robe printed with calipers, compasses, telescopes, microscropes, surgeon's knives, test tubes, and question marks. The marks were not the same as those used on Earth, of course. The Dokalian mark was ⊀, a symbol representing an arrow about to be launched from a bow.

"Welcome, welcome indeed!" the tall man said, hastening to Simon with his hand out, fingers spread. "You are as welcome as food to a hungry man!"

"Speaking of which, I *am* famished," Simon said.

"Of course you are," Mofeislop said. "I've been watching your rather slow progress up the mountain through my telescope. There were times when I thought you weren't going to make it."

Then why in hell didn't you send out a rescue party? Simon thought. He did not say anything, however. Philosophers couldn't be expected to behave like ordinary people.

Simon sat down at a long narrow pine table on a pine bench. Odiomzwak bustled around setting the table and two bowls on the floor for the pets. The food was simple, consisting of loaves of freshly baked bread, a strong goaty-smelling cheese, and the soup. This had some herbs, beans, and thick pieces of meat floating in it. The meat tasted somewhat like pork with an underlying flavor of tobacco.

Simon ate until his belly creaked. Odiomzwak brought in a bottle of onion vodka, a drink for which Simon did not care much. He tasted it to be polite and then, at the request of the curious sage, played a few songs on his banjo. Anubis and Athena retired to the end of the room, but Mofeislop and Odiomzwak seemed to enjoy his music very much.

"I particularly liked that last one," Mofeislop said. "But I'm curious about the lyric itself. Could you translate it for me?"

"I was planning to do so," Simon said. "It's by an ancient named Bruga, my favorite poet. Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, you Dokalians don't have TV. So I'll have to explain what TV and talk shows and commercials are. Also, the identity of the three guests on the show and their backgrounds.

"This Swiss noble, Baron Victor Frankenstein, made a man

out of parts he dug up from the cemetery," he said. "Nobody knows just how he vitalized the patchwork monster, though the movie showed him doing it with a lightning bolt. The monster went ape and killed a bunch of people. The baron tried to track him down, and at one time he was chasing the monster across the Arctic ice, though they didn't have the dog-and-sled sequence in the movie version either.

"Lazarus was a young man who died in ancient times in a country then called Palestine. He was resurrected by a man called Jesus Christ. Later, Jesus was killed, too, and he resurrected himself. Before he was killed, however, his judge, Pontius Pilate, asked him 'What is Truth?' Jesus didn't reply, either because he didn't know the answer or because Pilate didn't hang around to hear it. Jesus was deified after this, and one of Earth's important religious was named after him. He was supposed to know if man was immortal or not. At least, in Bruga's poem, it is presumed that he does know.'"

Revelation on the Johnny Cavear Show

The make-up's on, the trumpets sound.
Applaud our Johnny, host renowned!
He introduces the guests around
And after all the jesting's crowned
With a station break, our Johnny craves
To hear what happened in the graves.

But Frankenstein's monster—"Call me Fred"—
Won't talk of life among the dead,
Remembers only that the sled
Was slow; his dogs, his heart had bled.
"Behind me vowing vengeance came Victor.
His dying bride had sworn I'd dicked her."

Lazarus says he found no riddling
In the tomb, no questions fiddling
For replies, just Death's cold diddling.
Which, not feeling, he thought piddling.
The host declares, "It's dangerous to vex
The sponsors with allusions to sex."

There yet remains a guest unheard.
"Tell us, Jesus, what's the Word?"
He rises. "Here's the Truth unblurred.
All goggle. Man: A soul? A turd?
Then time and Tide impose their pressage.
"And now for an important message."

"You were trying to tell me something when you sang that," the sage said. "You were hoping that my message to you would not be disturbed or marked by commercialism or trivialities, right?"

"Right."

"You've come to the right place, the right man. I alone in all Dokal, perhaps all the universe, know the Truth. After you have learned it, your quest will be over."

Simon put his banjo down and said, "I'm all ears."

"You're more than that," the

sage said. He and Odiomzwak looked at each other and burst out laughing. Simon reddened but said nothing. Sages were famous for laughing at things other people were too imperceptive to see.

"Not tonight, though," Mofeislop said. "You are too tired and thin to take the Truth. You need to be strong and rested, to put some meat on your bones, before you can hear what I have to say. Be my guest for a few days, restrain your impatience, and I will answer the question which you say this Pilate put to this Jesus.

"Very well," Simon said, and he went to bed. But it was not well. Though exhausted, he could not get to sleep for a long time. The sage had intimated that he would have to be strong to take the Truth, which apparently would be strong stuff. This made him apprehensive. Whatever the Truth, it would not be comforting.

At last, telling himself that he had asked for it, no matter what it was, he drifted off. But the rest of the night seemed nightmare-shot. And once again the images of his father and mother slid closer to him while behind them crowded thousands of people, imploring, threatening, weeping, laughing, snarling, smiling.

His last dream was that the old Roman, Pilate himself, approached him.

"Listen, kid," Pilate said. "It's dangerous to ask that question. Remember what happened to the last man who asked it."

"I've always been disappointed because it was only a rhetorical question," Simon said. "Why didn't He answer it himself?"

"Because He didn't know the answer, that's why," Pilate said. "He shouldn't have said he was a god. Up to that moment, I was going to tel the Jews to go screw themselves and let him go. But when he told me that, I believed that the most dangerous man in the Roman Empire was in my power. So I let him be crucified. But I've had a lot of time to think about the situation, and I realize now I made a bad mistake. The surest way to spread a faith is to make martyrs. People began thinking that if a man is willing to die for his belief, then he must have something worth dying for. They want to get in on it, too. Besides, martyrdom is the surest way to get your name in the history books."

"You're very cynical," Simon said.

"I was a politician," Pilate said. "Any ward heeler knows more about people than any psychologist with a dozen Ph.D.s.

And he faded away, though his grin hung in the air for a minute, like the Cheshire cat's.

Chapter 14

Who Pulls The Strings?

Simon did little but rest and eat the first three days. Mofeislop insisted that Simon get on the scales every morning.

"When you've gained enough weight, then you will gain the Truth," he said.

"Are you telling me there's a correlation, a connection, between mass and knowledge?" Simon said.

"Certainly," the sage replied. "Everything's connected in a subtle manner which only the wise may see. A star exploding may start a new religion, or affect stock market prices, on a planet removed by ten thousand years in time and millions of miles in space. The particular strength of gravity of a planet affects the moral principles of its inhabitants."

Emotional states were part of the overall field configuration. Just as Earth's gravity, no matter how feeble far out in space, affected everybody, so anger, fear, love, hate, joy, and sadness radiated outward to the ends of the universe.

Bruga had once written a blank-verse epic, *Oedipus 1 — Sphinx 0.* It had two lines which summed up the whole situation of subtle and complex causality.

Must idols crack, the walls of Ilium crumble,
When Hercules' onions make his bowels rumble?

These two lines said more than all of Plato's or Grubwitz's books. Plato by the way, wanted to banish all poets from his proposed Utopia because they were liars. The truth was that Plato knew philosophers couldn't compete successfully with poets.

Jonathan Swift Somers III had written a novel which developed this idea, though he'd taken it much further than Mofeislop and Bruga had. This was *Don't Know Up from Down,* starring Somers' famous basket-case hero, John Clayter. All Somer's heroes, except for Ralph von Wau Wau, were handicapped one way or another. This was because Somers had lost the use of his own legs.

Clayter lived in a spacesuit with all sorts of prosthetic devices he controlled with his tongue. When he had to use his tongue to talk but wanted to act at the same time, he used a second control. This was located in the lower part of the suit and responded to pressure from Clayter's penis. It had to be erect at this time to push on the walls of the flexible cylinder in which it fitted. It also had to wax and wane. This was because Clayter couldn't move his body to move the penis. The degrees of swelling or deflation were converted by a digital

computer which operated the spacesuit at this time. To bring his penis up or down, Clayter moved his head against a control which caused varying amounts of aphrodisiacal hormones to be shot into his bloodstream.

It never occurred to Clayter that he could have bypassed the hormones and used the head control directly. If that idea had sprung into his subconscious, it was sternly suppressed by his conscious mind. Or maybe it was the other way around. In any event, Clayter's chief pleasure was operating the control with his penis, and he wasn't about to give that up.

Clayter was always landing on some planet and solving its problems. In *Don't Know Up from Down,* Clayter visits Shagrinn, a world which has a problem unknown elsewhere. Every once in a while Shagrinn's sun flares up. During this solar storm, Shagrinn's electromagnetic fields go wild. This causes some peculiar hormone reactions in the planet's people. The women become very horny. The men, however, can't get a hardon.

Though this condition causes great distress, it is temporary. Solar flares have never lasted more than a month or two. And its overall result is beneficial. The population has been kept down, which means that Shagrinn isn't polluted.

But when Clayter lands, the flare has lasted for five months and shows no sign of subsiding. Nor can Clayter maintain his usual objectivity in solving the mess. He himself is trapped, and unless he figures a way out of his personal situation, he'd going to be stranded until he dies. The tongue control is malfunctioning, which is why Clayter landed on the nearest planet. He wants the Shagrinnians to repair the unit.

They can't do it because their technology is at the level of 15th-century Europe. In fact, they can't even get him out of his suit. Fortunately, his helmet visor is open enough for him to be fed. But this leads to another problem.

An astute Shagrinnian has noticed that, whenever the bottom rear of Clayter's suit opens, the suit spins furiously for about ten minutes. He doesn't know why, but the reason is that another malfunction in the control apparatus had developed. The suit's rear opens whenever the excrement tank inside is full, and the refuse is dumped out. Its control wires have gotten crossed with those controlling the little jets that keep the suit stabilized. When the dump section opens, a jet is activated for a little while. Clayter spins around and around helplessly, only kept from falling over by the suit's gyroscope.

The Shagrinnian owns a grain

mill nearby which uses two oxen to turn the huge millstone. He sells the oxen for a profit and connects the suit to a rope connected to a big flywheel. The spinning of the suit turns the flywheel, which stores up energy to run the millstone. But the suit doesn't spin enough to keep the mill working twenty-four hours a day. The owner force-feeds Clayter, which makes the rear section open more often, which makes the suit spin, which runs the millstone steadily.

To hasten matters, the owner also crams laxatives down the spaceman's throat.

Clayter has to solve his problems fast. Even with his diarrhea he's gaining weight. Within a month, he'll he squeezed to death inside the suit. Meanwhile, he's so dizzy he can't think straight.

His only hope is to learn the language swiftly and to talk the maidservant who's feeding him into helping him. Between mouthfuls and whirling, he masters enough of the language to plead for her help. He also learns about the plight of the Shagrinnians from her.

He instructs her to let a wire down inside the front of his suit and into the secondary control cylinder. She does so and tries to get the end of the wire, which is looped, into the cylinder. Clayter hopes she'll be able to pull his organ out and then use the wire to exert pressure inside the tube. If she can apply just the proper pressure, he'll fly back up to his ship, which is stationed just outside the atmosphere. Of course, he'll have to hold his breath for a few minutes during the transit from air to space to the ship. It's a desperate gamble.

Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, considering the odds if she succeeds, she fails. The wire hurts Clayter so much that he has to tell her to stop.

The next morning, while he's still sleeping, he gets an erection from an excess of urine. Technically, this is called piss hardon. It is the only kind a human male can get on Shagrinn during the solar flare. But his jubilation is short-lived. The uncontrolled expansion inside the tube activates the suit's jets. He takes off at a slant and lands on top of his head in a barnyard twenty miles away. The flywheel he's trailed behind him misses him by an inch. The head of the suit is buried in the muck just enough to keep him from toppling over. Clayter now has a new problem. If he can't get upright, the increased blood pressure in his head will kill him.

However, the faulty connection between the dump section and the stablizing jet has been broken. He no longer spins around. And the force of the impact has sprung open the suit's lower front section, which in his position is now the upper

front. And it has jarred him loose from the control cylinder.

He sees a nursing calf eye him, and he thinks, "Oh, no!"

A few minutes later, the farmer's daughter chases the calf away. As randy and desperate as the other women on this planet, she takes advantage of the gift from the heavens. She does, however, turn him upright afterward with the aid of a block and tackle and two mules. Clayter tries to instruct her in how to use the lower control. She can use her finger to set it so that his suit will return to the ship, orbiting above the atmosphere. Once in it, he can tell the ship's computer to take him to a system where such peculiar solar flares don't exist.

The farmer's daughter ignores his instructions. Each morning, just before dawn, she sneaks out of the house and waits for all the beers she's been feeding him to work on him. One morning, the farmer's wife happens to wake up early and catches her daughter. Now, the daughter has to alternate morning shifts with her mother.

Early one day, the farmer wakes up and sees his wife with Clayter. Enraged, he begins beating on the helmet with a club. Clayter's head is ringing, and he knows that the farmer will soon start thrusting a pitchfork into the helmet or, worse, into the opened lower section. Desperately, though knowing it's useless, he rams his tongue against the upper control. To his surprise, and the farmer's, the suit takes off.

Clayter figures out that the impact of the fall, or perhaps the farmer's club, had jarred the circuits back into working order. He talks a smith into welding the lower section shut and flies back to the ship. A few months later, he finds a planet where his suit can be fixed. He is so sore about his adventures on Shagrinn that he has almost decided to leave its people in their mess. But he does have a big heart, and besides he wants to shame them for their scurvy treatment of him.

He returns to Shagrinn and calls its leaders in for a conference. "Here's the way it is," he says. "The whole trouble is caused by the wrong attitude of mind."

"What do you mean?" they say.

"I've studied your history, and I find that the founder of your religion made a prediction two thousand years ago. He said that the day would come when you would have to pay for your wicked ways, right?"

"Right."

"He was specific, or as specific as prophets ever get. He said that some day the sun would start having big flares, and when that evil day came, women's sexual

desires would increase fourfold. But men wouldn't be able to get it up. Right?"

"Right! He was a true prophet! Didn't it happen?"

"Now, before the first time the sun flared so brightly, you had had many small flares?"

"True!"

"But the first time the sun really had a huge solar storm was when?"

"That was three hundred years ago, Mr. Clayter. Before then, we only had the prophet's word that there were storms on the sun. But when telescopes were invented, three centuries ago, we could see the small flares. About ten years later, we saw the first big one."

"And that's when your troubles started?"

"Ain't it the truth!"

"Did the men get impotent and the women itchy when the flare reached its peak? Or when it was still small but looked as if it was going to get big?"

"When it was small but looked as if it might get big."

"There you are," Clayter says. "You have it all backward."

The leaders looked stunned. "What do you mean?"

"Suppose you have a piece of string, each end of which is held by a person," Clayter says. "When one tugs the string, it goes toward him. When the other pulls, it goes to him. You and the solar flare are connected with a string. But you're all screwed up about who's pulling it."

"What in hell are you talking about?" the leaders say.

"It wasn't the sun that made the flare get so much bigger," John Clayter says.

"What did then?"

"Your ancestors saw a slight increase in the storm. So, of course, the anticipated reaction happened."

"We still don't get you," the flabbergasted leaders say.

"Well, that flare would probably have been only a little bigger than normal. But you thought it was the promised big one."

"Yeah?"

"Like I said," Clayter says, "your ancestors had it backward. And succeeding generations have perpetuated the error. You see, it isn't the giant solar flares that have been causing limp pricks and hot twats. It's actually just the reverse."

Chapter 15

The Moment of Truth

Simon told this story to his host. Mofeislop and Odiomzwak laughed until they fell out of their chairs. When the sage had wiped his tears and blown his nose, he said, "So this Somers independently arrived at the same conclusion I did. He

must have been a very wise man."

"Everybody thought so," Simon said. "After all, he made a lot of money."

The next four days, Simon toured the area with Odiomzwak hobbling and bobbling along as guide. He inspected the big garden which filled up the part of the plateau not occupied by the house. He climbed down the steep slope to another plateau a thousand feet below, a meadow where goats grazed and bees buzzed in and out of their hives. Odiomzwak milked the goats and collected honey, and then the two followed a stream, which was mostly cataracts. Odiomzwak checked the traps along this and was rewarded with a half a dozen jack rabbit-sized rodents.

"These'll make a welcome addition to our diet," the assitant said. "We get tired of goat cheese and an occasional piece of goat meat in our stew."

"I've wondered how you two got along," Simon said. "You have to be entirely independent, since you're so isolated. But you seem to be doing all right. Your fare is simple but adequate."

"Oh, we vary it from time to time," Odiomzwak said.

The sage was waiting for them on the roof of the house. Part of this had been made into a recreation area. There was a pool table and a court where master and servant played the Dokalian version of badminton. Mofeislop's big telescope was on a tripod near the east edge of the roof, and he was looking through it when Simon climbed out from the stairway. Simon stopped. He was embarrassed. The telescope was partly swiveled around so he could see the master, bent over, his eye applied to the instrument. He was holding the end of his tail in one hand, and its end was in his mouth.

Odiomzwak, coming up from behind Simon, stopped also. He coughed loudly. Mofeislop jumped back, spitting out the tuft of tail on which he had been sucking. He turned red, though no redder than Simon.

Then the sage laughed and said, "It's an infantile habit, Simon. One that I've never been able to overcome. Why should I? I find it very comforting. And it certainly is not dangerous to health, as tobacco smoking is, for instance."

"Think nothing of it," Simon said. "I didn't expect you to be perfect, no matter how wise you are."

"That's right," Mofeislop said. "Wisdom consists of knowing when to avoid perfection."

While Simon was trying to figure that out, he was asked to sit down in a big overstuffed chair near the telescope. He did so, his heart beating hard. He felt that

today was the day, this moment *the* moment. Mofeislop was going to reveal the Truth now.

Odiomzwak disappeared while the sage paced back and forth, his hands behind him, his tail lashing, his long robe fluttering. When the assistant reappeared with a bottle of wine, Mofeislop stopped and said, "Ah!" Simon knew this must be a rare occasion. Instead of the stinking and sharp onion wine, Odiomzwak had brought mead, brewed from the honey of the meadow bees.

Odiomzwak set the bottle and three glasses down on a table. Mofeislop said, "It would be better if the animals were taken downstairs. We want no interruptions."

The hunchbacked assitant shambled over to the owl, which had been perched behind and above Simon. Instead of coming to him, however, Athena screeched and flew off. She climbed in spirals higher and higher and finally was lost in the sun.

"They both seem uneasy," Simon said apologetically. Anubis was, in fact, crouched under the table and growling softly in his throat.

"Beasts are very sensitive," the sage said. "What they lack in intelligence, they make up in psychic perception. They sense that you are about to become a very different person. And they're not sure that they will like it. Such is the effect of Truth."

"I'll take him downstairs," Simon said. But when he rose and walked toward Anubis, the dog ran out from under the table and dashed behind the chimney.

"Oh, never mind then," Mofeislop said, waving his hand. "It's just that I did not want you disturbed by the owl crapping on your shoulder or the dog barking. I wanted your train of thought on schedule."

Odiomzwak went downstairs again. The sage looked through his telescope and chuckled. Straightening up from it, he said, "Another party of Truth seekers is approaching. I've been watching them for three days. Two men and an exceptionally fat woman. I's afraid she's going to lose much weight before she gets here. The Truth is a long and hard one."

"Do you get many visitors?"

"About seventy a year," Mofeislop said. "That's an average of about three every two weeks. Just right. There are not so many they become a burden, and each party is small enough so it can be easily handled."

"I'm surprised anybody gets through," Simon said, "what with the rough terrain and the wild beasts and the savages."

"Be surprised then," the sage said. "Today, I'm surprised, too.

That's the first woman I've seen in ten years. Women don't come here seeking the Truth, you know. That's because they think they already know it. Besides, even those women who have doubts aren't likely to go through the Yetgul Woods to ask a *man* what it's all about. They know that most men are pitiful creatures and not too bright, no matter how proficient they might be in science and technology and the arts."

Simon said, "But you are the exception, heh?"

"Right," the sage said. "But you're in for several surprises, today."

"I hope I have strength enough to face them," Simon said. "I know that, deep down, I'm like everybody else. I talk much about wanting to know Truth, I seek it out, but I'm not sure that when I'm about to face it, I might not run away."

"Others have tried to run away," Mofeislop said.

He straightened up. "Perhaps you've wondered why I've isolated myself so thoroughly. Why do I make it so hard for people to get to me? Well, if it were easier, I'd be surrounded, overwhelmed, with people clamoring for the Truth night and day. I don't particularly like people in the mass and, in fact, seldom individually. But, here, I'm so alone that when I get a visitor, I welcome him. Odiomzwak, as you may have noticed, is not a very interesting conversationalist. Also, those who make it here really desire to see me; they're not just driven by idle curiosity. So, I have plenty of time to meditate, and I get just enough visitors to satisfy my needs for human beings. And I'm master here, total master. The government doesn't bother with me."

Simon was about to reply when he smelled the powerful odor of long-unwashed Odiomzwak behind him. He turned his head to look up over the chair. Something clicked. He cried out and began struggling, while, seemingly far-off, Anubis barked in a panic.

Steel bands had sprung out from the arms of the chair and bound his wrists.

"So, you son of a bitch, you saw me sucking my tail!" Mofeislop shouted.

"I wouldn't tell anybody!" Simon cried. "I could care less! I just want to know the Truth!"

"You *won't* tell anybody," the sage said, glowering. "That's right. Not that it would have made any difference whether or not you did see me. But don't worry. You will hear the Truth."

Odiomzwak came from behind the chair carrying several long sharp knives of varying widths and lengths. These were enough to make Simon wet his pants, but Odiomzwak's drooling and lip

licking ensured it.

"This'll be a rare feast indeed," Odiomzwak mumbled "We've never had Earthman's flesh before."

"Not rare," Mofeislop said. "Unique. You should consult the dictionary more often, my dear Odiomzwak."

"Who cares?" Odiomzwak said sullenly.

"I do," the sage said. "Remember, unique, not rare. We're not barbarians."

"I wouldn't agree with that," Simon said.

"That's because you're emotionally involved," Mofeislop said. "You haven't attained the cool objectivity of the true philosopher."

Mofeislop gestured to his assistant to put the knives on the table. He sat down in a chair facing Simon's and put the tips of his fingers and his thumbs together. The shape thus formed was commonly known as a church steeple. To Simon, it looked like the gaping mouth of a shark.

"I hope you're not a filthy atheist," Mofeislop said.

"What?" Simon said. And then, "Of course not!"

"Good!" Mofeislop said. "I've eaten too many of them, and they've all had a rank taste that is unpleasant. Attitudes determine the chemical composition of a person's flesh, you know. You didn't? Well, now you know. And I'm pleased to see that, though you smoke, you don't smoke much. You may have noticed the slight taste of tobacco in the meat of the stew you ate the day you got here. That was your predecessor. He was a nicotine addict, though, I'm glad to add, not an atheist. Otherwise, he would have been almost inedible."

"I'm going to throw up," Simon said.

"That seems to be the usual reaction," Mofeislop said cheerfully. "I doubt you'll have much success. I've arranged it so that your meal would be fully digested when you confronted the Truth."

"Which is?" Simon said after his stomach had tried to empty nonexistent contents.

"After much thought about and around, I came out of the same door, much as that drunken Persian Sufi poet you told me about. Out of the same door into which I had entered. Here's how it is, and don't bother to argue with me. My logic is clear and indisputable, based on long-life observation.

"It's this. The Creator has created this world solely to provide Himself with a show, to entertain Himself. Otherwise, he'd find Eternity boring.

"And He gets as much enjoyment from watching pain, suffering, and murder as He does from love. Perhaps more, since

there is so much more hate and greed and murder than there is of love. Just as I enjoy watching through my telescope the struggles of those who are fighting to get to me, a sadistic pleasure, I admit, so He enjoys watching the comedies and tragedies of the beings He created."

"That's it?" Simon said.

"That's it."

"That's nothing new!" Simon said. "I've read a hundred books which say the same thing! Where's the logic, the wisdom in that?"

"Once you've admitted the premise that there is a Creator, no intelligent person can come to any other conclusion. Now, tell me, can you state honestly, from all you've observed, that the Creator regards His creatures, human or otherwise, as anything but actors in a drama? Poor actors, most of them and great drama is rare. But I do my best to provide Him with an interesting play, though, I must admit, for purely selfish reasons."

He spoke to Odiomzwak. "Get an ax. That dog may try to attack, though he's hiding behind the chimney now."

The assistant disappeared. Mofeislop said, "Dog meat's good, too. And an additional welcome change of diet."

"You cannibal! Simon snarled.

"Not really," the sage said. "Cannibalism is eating one's own kind, and I am not of the same species as you. Or even of other Dokalians. I differ from them, have evolved from them, you might say, just as they evolved from apes. My intellect is so much superior to theirs that it's not a matter of degree but of kind."

"Bullshit!" Simon said. "You have the same philosophy as a college sophomore! But he leaves it behind with maturity."

"Aging, you mean," Mofeislop said. "He gets old, and he fears dying. And so he laughs at what he once thought, which was indeed the Truth. But his laughter springs from fear, fear that he was right when he was young."

"You're not trying to talk me to death, are you?"

Mofeislop smiled and said, "You'll wish I had before I'm done."

"I'll tell you why you're doing this!" Simon shouted. "You hate all people because you were ridiculed when you were young! You couldn't break yourself of the habit of sucking on your tail!"

Mofeislop jumped to his feet. His hands were balled

"Who told you that?" he finally screamed. "Odiomzwak?"

Simon had only guessed it, but he had no compunctions about lying if he could put off the inevitable moment.

"Yes, he told me this morning

while we were down at the meadow."

"I'll kill the ugly bastard!" Mofeislop said. But he sat down, and after an evident struggle with himself, smiled. "You are lying, of course. In any event, you won't be passing that on, and I need Odiomzwak."

Simon looked out past the parapet, across the mountains and valleys, and up into the sky. The sky was as clear as a baby's conscience. A newly born wind cried softly in his ear. The sun shone as brightly as a fond mother's smile.

Suddenly, the blue eye of the sky had something in it. The specks slowly became larger, and Simon saw that they were vultures. They must have been many miles away, circling around, scanning. There had been nothing for them until a few minutes ago, and here they were. The frequency of peace and content had suddenly shifted; they were homing in on the beam, tuned in to death.

Simon couldn't help thinking in poetic terms even at this moment. He was a creature of habits, mostly bad. But then, on the other hand, it's easy to break good habits and hell to break the bad.

The stink of Odiomzwak preceded the sound of his step. He came into view with a long heavy sharp ax on his shoulder.

"Shall I kill the dog now?"

Mofeislop nodded, and the assistant shuffled off. The sage picked up a small knife curved inward like some surgeon's tool. Simon lied again.

"Listen! If you kill me up here, you'll be dead within a week!"

"Why is that? the sage said, raising his thick eyebrows as if they were shrouds he was peeping under.

"Because I put a small observer satellite up before I came here! It's suspended up there now, so far away you can't see it. And it's watching everything that takes place now. If it doesn't see me leave here in a few days, it's going to report to my partner in her spaceship in the capital city! And she'll come barreling in here and investigate. Which means you'll be done for!"

Mofeislop squinted up and then said, "I doubt you're telling the truth. But just in case . . . Odiomzwak, come here!"

Simon smelled the assitant again, heard a click behind him, and the steel cuffs slid back into the arms of the chair. Odiomzwak stood near him, his ax held up, and Mofeislop had his hand on the hilt of a dagger in its sheath.

"Call your dog," Mofeislop said, "and you take him inside. But move slowly, and no tricks.

Odiomzwak whined, "He might

jump over the side, like the last one."

"Then you'll go down after him, like the last time," the sage said. "Anyway, I thought the bouncing down the mountain was just the thing. It tenderized him."

"It won't do any good to kill me inside," Simon said. "The satellite can't see you, but it'll report that I haven't come out of here."

"Oh, it'll see you leave here and enter the Yetgul Woods," Mofeislop said cheerily. "I'll be dressed in your clothes and my face'll be made up to look like yours. I'll come out of the forest looking like someone else. And I'll tell your partner that you have perished on the way out."

"And how will you explain the dog not being with me?" Simon said.

"It'll be very inconvenient," the sage said. "I'll have to dodge by the newcomers and get Odiomzwak to hold them until I get back. But I'll take the dog with me. I can dine on him once I'm under the cover of the trees."

"Don't forget to bring some steaks back for me," Odiomzwak said. "You know how I love dog meat."

"I'll do my best."

"He's making us a lot of trouble," Odiomzwak said. "He ought to be made to pay for it."

"Oh, he will," Mofeislop said.

Simon's mouth felt as if it were full of Dry Ice. All his water was leaking out of his skin. He called to Anubis, but his voice squeaked like a bat's.

"He's going to try something," Odiomzwak whined. "I can smell it. Otherwise, why'd he tell us about that there thing, what-you-call-it? in the sky?"

"He wants to put off the inevitable," the sage said. "Like everybody else, he'd rather live through any number of bad moments than die in a good one."

"Yeah, but that there eye in the sky's already seen him cuffed to the chair and it's seen the ax and the knives."

"I'll tell his partner it was just a sort of ritual I put all my seekers after the Truth through," the sage said. "A sort of dump show to portray man's lot in the universe. Don't worry. Anyway, I don't really think there is a satellite."

Anubis came slowly and suspiciously to Simon. He patted him on the head, and Anubis walked behind him to the stairway. Odiomzwak ran ahead of him so he couldn't make a break for it. The sage's dagger pricked his back as soon as they had entered the stairway, out of sight of the imginary observer. Odiomzwak, the ax held ready to bring down on Simon's head, backed down the steps.

Simon kicked back, felt his heel

strike Anubis, who yelped, and then launched himself toward Odiomzwak, his hands held out. Odiomzwak yelped, too, and started to bring the ax down. Simon went in under it; his head struck Odiomzwak's; and, Simon half on top of him, they fell together down the steps.

Dazed, Simon sat up at the foot of the stairway. He knew he had to get up, but he could not control his legs. Above him, the sage stabbed an Anubis, who snarled and made short lunges up after him. Somebody groaned beside Simon, and he looked down. The hunchback was lying on his side, his eyes unfocused.

Simon managed to get some orders through to his legs, and he got slowly to his feet. Mofeislop called out to the hunchback to kill Simon. Odiomzwak sat up slowly, leaning on one hand, the other held to the side of his head. Blood oozed out between his fingers.

Simon picked up the ax as Odiomzwak got his feet. The hunchback's eyes suddenly focused, and he cried out. Simon swung the ax with the edge turned to one side so he would strike the man with the flat side. Even in his confusion and desperation, he did not want to kill his would-be killer. And he did not swing it as hard as he should have. The ax rang on the stone wall, missing Odiomzwak. He had leaped up dodged on out into the hallway.

Simon glanced above. Anubis was still holding the sage at bay, was, in fact, making him retreat. He ran out into the hall, though wobbly. Odiomzwak wasn't in sight. He ran down the long wide hallway and, as he went past a doorway, the hunchback leaped out at him. Simon thrust the end of the ax in his face; the man fell back, but a flailing hand seized the ax shaft. Twice as powerful as Simon, Odiomzwak tore the ax out of Simon's hand. For a moment, though, the hunchback was half stunned. Simon ran through the doorway, saw his banjo on a table, and picked it up. When Odiomzwak, yelling, came through the doorway, Simon broke the banjo over his head.

A critic would say, years later, that this was the only time Simon had ever put his banjo to good use.

Odiomzwak fell, and the ax dropped. But he was up again and staggering toward the retreating Simon with the ax again in his hands.

Simon kept on moving backward while his and Odiomzwak's breathing scraped like a bow on an untuned fiddle. Simon's legs felt as if they would shake themselves to pieces; he was too weak to run. Moreover, he had no place to run to. In three paces, he would be

backed up to a wide and open window.

From down the hall came the growling and snarling of Anubis and the shrieks of Mofeislop.

"Your master needs you," Simon gasped.

"Maybe a few bites'll take the uppitiness out of him," Odiomzwak said. "I'll deal with the dog after I take care of you."

"Help!" Mofeislop screamed.

Odiomzwak hesitated and half turned his head. Simon jumped at him; the ax gleamed; Simon felt it strike him somewhere on the face; he went down. Sometime later — it couldn't have been more than a few seconds — he regained his senses. He was sitting on the floor; the left side of his face was numb; he couldn't see out of the left eye. The other eye saw clearly enough, though his befuddled brain didn't understand what it was. Rather, he didn't understand how what he was seeing had happened.

The bloodied ax was on the floor before him. Odiomzwak was staggering backward, screaming, his hands held before his face and clutching a shriek, a flurry of feathers.

Then Simon understood that Athena had flown in through the window. Seeing Simon in danger, she had attacked Odiomzwak's face with her talons and beak.

That's nice, he thought. Wish I could get up and help her before he wrings her neck.

Odiomzwak began whirling around and around as if he was trying to get rid of the owl by centrifugal force. Athens continued beating at him with her wings and tearing his face with her talons. Around and around they spun in painful dance until they disappeared into the wings. In this case, offstage was out the window.

Simon got to the window and leaned out in time to see Odiomzwak bounce off an outcropping. A small object shot away from him — it was Athena, who must have been gripped tightly until then. Odiomzwak kept on falling and bouncing. Athena whirled around and around for a while; then her wings grasped the air, and she began to climb back up, toward Simon.

Three vultures slid into his view, gliding steeply down to Odiomzwak whose curved spine now seemed to be straightened. He looked like an inch-long doll who had been filled with red sawdust.

Simon sat down in a chair. He felt as if he would not be able to move again for days. A savage growling and a high screaming down the hall, coming nearer swiftly, told him that he would have to move soon. If he couldn't, he might never move again. Which, considering the way he felt,

sounded like a good idea.

Behind him was the fluttering of wings, then silence. Simon swiveled around. Athena looked as if she had been in a washing machine with red-dyed laundry. They stared at each other for a moment; then she flew off the table and onto the floor by the ax. Simon turned toward her just in time to see her grab something round from the floor and swallow it. He swallowed too and felt ever sicker. His left eye had gone down her throat.

Now was no time to faint. The sage, somewhat chewed up, had burst into the room. Behind him bounded Anubis, streaked with blood, though whether it was Mofeislop's or his or both, Simon couldn't determine. Somewhere along the way the sage had lost his dagger, and he was now eager to get hold of another weapon.

The only one in sight was the ax.

Simon rose in slow motion. Mofeislop, whose personal projector had speeded his film up, leaped to the ax and bent over to pick it up. Anubis fastened his teeth into the sage's tail near its root. The sage screamed again, straightened with the ax in his hands, and, like a dog trying to bite his own tail, described a spiral over the floor. His ax flailed out, hitting nothing, though narrowly missing the owl, who had launched herself at his face.

The three spun toward Simon. He tried to get out of the way, thought he had succeeded, but felt something strike him near the root of his own tail.

Chapter 16

The Family Tree Is Known by Its Fruits

The pipes of pain shrilled while his ancestors danced.

Throughout his sufferings, his father and mother and thousands of forefathers and foremothers circled around and around. Every night they got closer and closer as they whirled by, as if they were Indians and he the weakening defenders of a wagon train.

Once, in a moment of consciousness, he whispered to Chworktap, "Would you believe it? Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull *are* among them. Not to mention Hiawatha and Quetzalcoatl."

Chworktap, looking puzzled, gave him another sedative.

Simon understood dimly that she had come just in time to keep him from bleeding to death. She had arrived in the spaceship a few minutes after Mofeislop had sheared off Simon's tail. The sage was dying, his own tail bitten off, his eyes shredded by Athena, his

throat torn. His last words, gasped to Chworktap, were, "I was only trying to do him a favor."

"What does that mean?" Simon had thought. Later, he understood that the sage believed that it was better not to have been born at all. The second best thing was to die young.

Chworktap had fled from the capital city to pick up Simon because her ship had warned her that an alien ship was approaching Dokal. It might or might not be Hoonhor, but she didn't want to take a chance. And so now Simon was in sick bay while the *Hwang Ho* traveled at 69X speed with no definite destination in mind.

Chworktap had amputated the few inches of tail left to Simon. But he wasn't exactly restored to his pristine condition. The rest of his life, he wouldn't be able to sit down long without hurting.

His left cheekbone had been caved in by the ax, but the big patch that covered his empty socket also covered this.

Chworktap, in an effort to cheer him up, had made many patches of various shapes. "They also have different colors," she said. "If you're wearing a puce outfit, for instance, you'll have a matching patch. I've also made you a new banjo."

"You're very thoughtful," Simon said. "By the way, how'd you come out with the computer?"

"She's still playing dumb," Chworktap said. "I'm sure she has self-consciousness, but she won't admit it. For some reason, she's afraid of human beings."

"She must be pretty smart then," Simon said.

He was reminded of a novel by Somers. This was *Imprint!*, another in the series about the basket-case hero, John Clayter. Clayter had built a new computer in his spaceship to replace the one destroyed in a previous adventure, *Farewell to Arms*. In making many improvements in it, Clayter unconsciously gave the computer self-consciousness. The first thing the computer saw when she was activated was Clayter. Just like a newly hatched duckling, the computer fell in love with the first moving object to cross her viewscreen. It could just as well have been a bouncing basketball or a mouse. But it was Clayter himself.

Clayter found this out when he left the ship after landing on the planet Raproshma. The ship followed him and settled down on top of the customs building he had entered. Its weight crushed the building and everyone in it except Clayter. He escaped by using the jets on his prosthetic spacesuit. The rest of the novel, he fled here and there on the planet while the ship unintentionally destroyed its cities

and most of the people on it.

Clayter then found himself hunted by both the ship and the irate survivors. In the end, he ran out of jet fuel and was cornered in a mud field. The ship, trying to cuddle against him, buried him in the mud beneath it. Thinking she had killed him, she died of a broken heart. In this case, the heart was a circuit board which cracked under too much piezoelectrical pressure.

A piezoelectrical crystal is a crystal which, when bent, emits electricity or, when given a shot of electricity, bends. This circuit board was loaded down with crystals, and the computer's emotions were just too much for it.

Clayter would have perished under the mud. But a dog, looking for a place to bury a bone, uncovered him.

Chworktap moped around for a while. Simon told her not to feel so sorry for him.

"After all," he said, quoting Confucius, "he who buys wisdom must pay a price."

"Some wisdom! Some price!" she said. "You can get along without a tail, but having only one eye is no picnic. What did you get for it? Nothing! Absolutely nothing!"

She paused and said, "Or did you buy that faker's drivel?"

"No," Simon said. Philosophically, he needs a change of diapers. Or I think he does. After all, there's no way to prove he was wrong. On the other hand, he didn't prove he was right. I won't stop asking questions until someone can prove his answers are right."

"It's hard enough getting answers, let alone proof," she said.

As the days passed, the pain dwindled. But the nightmares got worse.

"It's a strange thing," he told Chworktap. "Those people don't look like real people. That is, they're not three-dimensional, as people in dreams usually are. They look like actors in a movie film. As a matter of fact, they're lit up just as if they were images from a movie projector. Sometimes, they disappear as if the film had broken. And sometimes they go backward; their speech runs backward, too."

"Are they in black and white or in color?" Chworktap said.

"In color."

"Do you get commercials, too?"

"Are you being facetious?" Simon said. "This is serious. I'm dying for a good night's rest. No, I don't get commercials. But all these people seem to be trying to sell me something. Not deodorants or laxatives. Themselves."

His parents seemed to have a near monopoly on the prime time, he said.

"What do they say?"

"I don't know. They talk like Donald Ducks."

Simon strummed on his banjo while he thought. After a few minutes he stopped in the middle of a chord.

"Hey, Chworktap! I've got it!"

"I was wondering when you would," she said.

"You mean you know?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because," she said, "you get pissed off when I'm smarter than you, which is most of the time. So I decided to just let you work things out for yourself and keep silent. That way, your male ego isn't bruised."

"It's not my male ego," Simon said. "It's just that my mother was always telling my father and me how dumb we were. So I hate to have a woman smarter than I am around. On the other hand, I could hardly stand a woman dumber than I am. But I'll get over both attitudes.

"Anyway, here's what happened, the way I figure it. You know the Shaltoonians carried around ancestral memories in their cells. I told you how they had to give equal time to them. Well, I thought the Shaltoonians were unique. They were, I supposed, the only people in the world who had such cells.

"But I was wrong. Earthpeople have them, too. The difference between us and the Shaltoonians is that the Shaltoonians were aware of it. Hey, maybe that explains a lot of things! Every once in a while some ancestor got through, and the carrier thought he was a reincarnation.

"My bad dreams started after Queen Margaret gave me the elixir. She told me it would prolong my youth. But she didn't tell me it had side effects. The stuff also dissolved the barriers between me and my ancestors. The shock of losing my eye and my tail probably accelerated the process. And so now they must be demanding equal time too."

Simon was right. Until the elixir unlocked the gates, each ancestor had been imprisoned in a cell. But these had had, as it were, one-way windows. Or TV sets connected to one channel. They'd been unable to communicate with their descendant, except for transmissions of bad dreams or random thoughts, mostly bad, now and then. But they could see his thoughts and see through his eyes. Everything that he had done or thought, they viewed on a screen. So, though in solitary confinement, they hadn't been without entertainment.

Simon blushed when he learned this. Later, he became furious about this invasion of his privacy.

But he could do nothing about it.

Chworktap also got mad. When making love to her, Simon became so inhibited that he couldn't get a hardon.

"How would you feel if you were screwing in the Roman Colosseum and it was a sellout with standing room only?" he said to Chworktap. "Especially if your father and mother had front seats?"

"I don't have any parents," she said. "I was made in the laboratory. Besides, if I did, I wouldn't give a damn."

It didn't do any good for Simon to shut his eyes. The viewers couldn't see any better than he did, but their screens showed his feelings. These were something like TV "ghosts," shadowy doubles.

The elixir had dissolved some of the natural resistance in Simon's nervous system to communication with his foreparents. To put it another way, the elixir had rotated the antennas so that Simon got a somewhat better reception. Even so, the ancestors had only been able at first to get through the unconscious. This was when the elixir had been introduced into Simon. But the shock of the wounds had opened the way even more.

Another analogy was that the holes for projecting their personal movies had been greatly enlarged. Thus, where only a small part of the picture had been cast on the screen of Simon's mind, now three-fourths of it was coming through.

The difference between a real movie and Simon's was that he could talk to the actors on the screen. Or the CRT of the boob tube, if you wish.

Simon didn't wish, but he seemed to have little choice.

There were some interesting and quite admirable people among the mob of prigs, blue-nosed hypocrites, boors, bores, colossal egotists, whiners, perverts, calloused opportunists, and so on. In general, though, his ancestors were assholes. The worst were his parents. When he had been a child, they had paid no attention to him except when one was trying to turn him against the other. Now they were clamoring for his full attention.

"During the day, I'm an explorer of outer space," he said to Chworktap. "At night, I'm an explorer of inner space. That's bad enough. But what scares me is that they're on the point of breaking through during the daytime."

"Look at it this way," Chworktap said. "Every person is the sum of the product of his forefathers. You are what your ancestors were. By meeting them face-to-face, you can determine what your identity is."

"I know who I am," Simon

said. "I'm not interested in my personal identity. What I want to know is the identity of the universe."

Chapter 17

Light in the Tavern

"Where is the center of the universe?" Simon asked Elder Sister Plum.

"Wherever one happens to be," the computer said.

"I don't mean in a personal sense," Simon said. "I mean, taking the volume of the universe as a whole, considering it as a sphere, where is its center?"

"Wherever one happens to be," Elder Sister Plum said. "The universe is a constantly expanding closed infinity. Its center can only be hypothetical, and so the observer, hypothetical or not, is its center. All things radiate equally, in mass or space-time from him, her, or it, as the case may be. Why do you want to know?"

"Everywhere I have been except in my own galaxy, I've found the towers of the Clerun-Gowph," Simon said. "Apparently their builders were on the planets before there was any other life there. I don't know why my galaxy doesn't have any. But I suspect that the Clerun-Gowph decided they had gone far enough before they got to my galaxy. So they went back to wherever they had originated, to their home planet.

"It seems to me that this most ancient of peoples came from a planet which is in the center of the universe. So, if I could find the center, I'd find them. And they, the first race in the world, will know the answer."

"Good thinking, but not good enough," the computer said. "They could just as well have originated on the edge of the world. If there were any edge, that is. But there isn't."

It was shortly after this dialogue that Simon saw the first big blue bubble. It was hurtling toward him at a speed far exceeding that of the ship's. And it covered almost all of the universe ahead. As it passed through the stars and the galaxies, it blotted them out.

Simon jumped up, calling for Chworktap. She came running to his side. Simon pointed with a trembling finger. She said, "Oh, that!"

Just then the bubble burst. Patches of shimmering blue, larger than a thousand galaxies jammed together, rocketed off in all directions, fragmented, became smaller patches, and then winked out. Some of them shot by the ship; one went through the ship, or vice versa; but Simon could see no sign of it in the rearview screen.

"Those come by quite regularly in my galaxy," Chworktap said. "They always have. But you have to be in a 69X ship to see them. Don't ask me what they are. Nobody knows. Apparently, the little bubbles, the broken-up pieces, keep going through the rest of the universe. Your Earth gets the little bubbles."

Simon had one more question to add to the list.

A few days later, the *Hwang Ho* landed on the planet Goolgeas. Its people looked much like Earth's except for their funnel-shaped ears, complete hairlessness except for bushy eyebrows, a reddish ring around their navels, and penile bones.

The Gooigeases had a world government and a technology like early 20th-century Earth's. This should have been rapidly advancing, since many people from more scientifically progressive planets had visited there. One of the reasons they were so retarded was their religion. This claimed that if you drank enough alcohol or took enough drugs, you could see God face-to-face. Other reasons were their high crime rate and the measures taken to reduce them.

Simon didn't know this at first. Due to the quarantine, he had to spend his first few months in the little town built by the spaceport. His favorite hangout was a tavern which was, in fact, named *The Hangout*. Here people from all over space mingled with townspeople, preachers, government officials, bums, reporters, whores, and scientists. Simon liked to stand all day and half the night at the bar and talk to everybody who came in. None of them had the answer to his primal question, but they were interesting, especially after he was deep in his cups. And his banjo playing was so well received that he was hired by the owner. From dinner hour until ten, Simon sang and played Earth songs and others he'd picked up during his wanderings. The crowd especially liked Bruga's lyrics, which wasn't surprising. Bruga had been an alcoholic, and so his poems appealed to the Goolgeases.

Chworktap stayed sober. The two animals, however, didn't. The customers kept plying them with free drinks as well as their master. Their eyes were always bloodshot, and on awakening in the morning they had to have some of the hair of the dog that had bitten them. Chworktap objected to this. Simon said that, even though they were beasts, they had free will. Nobody was forcing the stuff down their throats. Besides, the Goolgeas religion claimed that animals had souls, too. If they took in enough booze to dissolve the fleshly barriers, they could also see their

Creator. Why deny them the numinous experience?

"Don't tell me you've got religion?"

"I was converted the other night," he said dignifiedly. "This preacher, Rangadang, you've met him, a hell of a nice guy, showed me the light last night."

"Some light," Chworktap said. "But then, alcohol does burn, doesn't it?"

"You look devastatingly beautiful tonight," Simon said.

And so she did. Her long wavy titian hair, the harmoniously featured face with its high forehead, thick chestnut eyebrows, large dark gray-blue eyes, slender straight nose, full red lips, and full-breasted, narrow-waisted, long-legged body, with a skin that seemed to shine with health, made every man ache to have her.

"Let's go back to the ship and go to bed," Simon said.

He was now drunk enough that he did not mind that thousands of ancestors would be looking over his shoulder. Unfortunately, when he attained this state, he also became impotent. Chworktap reminded him of this.

"You can't beat City Hall. Or the balance of Nature," Simon said. "Let's go anyway. At least, we can hold each other in our arms. And I haven't lost my digital capabilities."

Simon said this because he had been studying computer circuits.

"All right," she said. "Lean on me. Otherwise, you'll never make it to the ship."

They left the tavern. Anubis staggered along behind them, his head dragging, now and then tripping on his tongue. Athena rode on top of the dog, her head beneath her wing, snoring. Halfway across the field, she fell off when Anubis tripped, but nobody noticed it.

"Listen, Simon," Chworktap said. "You're not fooling me. All this talk about getting drunk so you can see God and also so you can lose your inhibitions is a cover-up. The truth is that you're getting tired of your quest. You're also afraid of what you might find if you should get the answer to your primal question. You might not be able to face the truth? Right?"

"Wrong!" Simon said. "Well, maybe. Yes, you're right. In a way. But I'm not scared to hear the answer. Mainly because I don't believe there is an answer. I've lost faith, Chworktap. So, when you lose faith in one religion, you adopt another."

"Listen, Simon," she said. "When we get on the ship, I'll tell Plum to take us off. Now! Let's get away from here so you can sober up, so you can forget this nonsense about bottled religion. Resume your quest. Become a man again,

not a shambling brain-softened pathetic disgusting wreck."

"But you've always said that my quest was ridiculous," Simon mumbled. "Now you want me to take it up again. Is there no pleasing you?"

"I don't want you to be doing something so it'll please me," she said. "Anyway, I was happier when you had a goal, a worthwhile goal, I mean. I didn't think, and still don't, that you'll ever get there. But you were happy trying to get there. And so I was happy because you were happy. Or as happy as anyone can expect to be in this world. Anyway, I like to travel, and I love you."

"I love you, too," Simon said, and he burst into tears. After wiping his eyes and blowing his nose, he said, "OK. I'll do it. And I'll quit drinking forever."

"Make that vow when you're sober," she said. "Come on. Let's get off this swinery."

Chapter 18

The Prison Planet

At that moment, they were surrounded by a dozen men. These wore tight-fitting manure-colored uniforms and had matching faces. Their eyes looked as if they were covered with a semi-opaque horn. This was because the eyes had seen too much and had grown a protective shield. Or so it seemed to Simon in his intoxication. Sometimes a drunk does have flashes of perception, even if he usually doesn't remember them.

"What's the trouble, officers?" Simon said.

"You two are under arrest," their chief said.

"On what charge?" Chworktap said in a ringing voice. She didn't look at them. She was estimating the distance to the ship. But Simon and his pets were in no shape to run. Anyway, the dog and the owl were already in custody; some men were putting them in a wheeled cage. Simon would never desert them.

"The man is charged with cruelty to animals," the chief said. "You're charged with illegal flight from your master on Zelpst and theft of a spaceship."

Chworktap exploded into attack. Later, she told Simon that she meant to get to the spaceship herself and then use it to chase the policemen away while Simon got his pets aboard. At the moment, she had no time for explanations. A chop of the edge of a palm against a neck, a kick in the crotch, stiff fingers in a soft liquor-and-food sodden belly, a kick against a knee, and an elbow in a throat later, Chworktap was off and running. The chief, however, was a veteran

who seldom lost his calm. He had stepped out of the area of furious activity, and as Chworktap sped away, far too fast to be caught, he pulled out his revolver. Chworktap fell a moment later with a bullet in her leg.

Additional charges were issued. Resisting arrest and injuring officers was a serious crime. Simon, though he had not moved during the carnage or flight, was charged with being an accessory before, during, and after the fact. That he had not the slightest idea that Chworktap was going to attack and that he had not tried to help her did not matter. Not assisting the officers was the same as aiding and abetting Chworktap.

After Chworktap's wound was tended to, the two aliens, with their animals, were carried off to a night court, stood before a judge for four minutes, and then were taken for a long ride. At the end they got out of the paddy wagon before an immense building. This was of stone and cement, ten stories high, and a mile square. It was used mainly to hold people waiting to be tried. They were marched in, Chworktap hobbling, fingerprinted, photographed, made to strip and shower, and taken into a room where they were given medical examinations. A doctor also probed their anuses and Chworktap's vagina for concealed weapons and drugs. Then they were taken up an elevator to the top story, and all four were put into a cell. This was a room ten feet wide, twenty feet long, and eight feet high. It had a big comfortable bed, several overstuffed chairs, a table with a vase of fresh flowers, a refrigerator holding cold meats, bread, butter, and beer, a washbasin and toilet, a rack of magazines and paperback books, a record player and records, a radio, and a telephone.

"Not bad," thought Simon as the iron door was locked behind him.

The bed was full of fleas; the chairs concealed several families of mice; the flowers, food, and beer were plastic; the washbasin faucets gave only cold water; the toilet tended to back up; the magazines and books had only blank pages; the record player and radio were empty cases; and the telephone was to be used in emergency cases only.

"How come?" Simon asked a guard.

"The state can't afford the real thing," the guard said. "The fake things are provided to buck up your morals.

The local Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals had accused Simon of making his pets alcoholics. Chworktap's master on Zelpst was trying to get her extradited.

"I can beat the rap," Simon said. "I never gave the animals a single drink. It was those barflies, the bums."

"I can beat my case in the courts in a few minutes," Chworktap said. She looked smug.

There wasn't any chance of being declared innocent on the resistance and flight charges. But Chworktap was sure that she could plead extenuating circumstances and get off with a light or suspended sentence.

"If justice is as slow here as on Earth," Simon said, "we'll have to put up with this dump for at least a month. Maybe two."

Actually, it was 140 years.

It would have been more if Simon and Chworktap had not been special cases.

The backlog constipating the courts was basically due to one thing. This was a law requiring every prisoner to be completely rehabilitated before being released. A secondary reason, almost as important as the primary, was the strict enforcement of the laws. On Earth, the police had let a lot of things go by because they didn't consider them important enough. To arrest everybody who spit on the sidewalks or broke traffic laws or committed adultery would mean arresting the entire population. There weren't enough policemen for this, and even if there had been, they wouldn't have done so. They would have been tied up with an incredible amount of paperwork.

The Goolgeases, however, thought differently. What use having laws if they weren't enforced? And what use the enforcement if the offender got off lightly? Moreover, to protect the accused from himself, no one was allowed to plead guilty. This meant that even parking violations had to be tried in court.

When Simon entered jail, one-eighth of the population was behind bars and another eighth was composed of prison guards and administration. The police made up another eighth. The taxes to support the justice department and penal institutions were enormous. To make it worse, a person could go to jail if he couldn't pay his taxes, and many couldn't. The more who were jailed for failing to pay taxes, the greater the burden on those outside.

"There's something to be said for indifference to justice after all," Simon said.

The economic system was bent when Simon went into custody. By the time his trial came up, it was broken. This was because the giant corporations had shifted their industries to the prisons, where they could get cheap employees. The prison industries had financed the campaigns of both candidates

for the presidency and the senate to ensure that the system would remain in force. This fact was eventually exposed, and the president, the incumbent senators and many corporation heads went to jail. But the new president was taking payoffs, too. At least, everybody thought so.

Meantime, Simon and Chworktap weren't getting along together at all. Except for an hour of exercise out in the yard, they never got to talk to anybody else. Being alone together on a honeymoon is all right for a couple. But if this condition is extended for over a week, the couple gets on each other's nerves. Moreover, Simon had to console himself with his banjo, and this caused Anubis to howl and the owl to have diarrhea. Chworktap complained bitterly about the mess.

After three years, another couple was moved in with them. This was not because the prison officials felt sorry for them and wanted them to have more companionship. The prisons were getting crowded. The first week, Simon and Chworktap were delighted. They had somebody else to talk to, and this helped their own relationship. Then the couple, who quarreled between themselves a lot, got on their nerves. Besides, Sinwang and Chooprut could talk only about sports, hunting, fishing, and the new styles. And Sinwang could stand the close proximity of a dog as little as Chworktap could stand a bird's.

At the end of five years, another family was moved in with them. This relieved the tension for a while even if it did make conditions more crowded. The newcomers were a man, his wife and three children, eight, five, and one. Boodmed and Shasha were college professors and so should have been interesting to talk to. But Boodmed was an instructor in electronics and interested in nothing but engineering and sex. Shasha was a medical doctor. Like her husband, she was interested only in her profession and sex and read nothing but medical journals and the Goolgeas equivalent of *Reader's Digest*. Their children were almost completely undisciplined, which meant they irritated everybody. Also, the lack of privacy interfered with everybody's sexual lives.

It was a mess.

Simon was the most fortunate prisoner. He had found that what had been a liability was now an asset. He could retreat within himself and talk to his ancestors. His favorites were Ooloogoo, a subhuman who lived circa 2,000,000 B.C.; Christopher Smart, the mad 18th-century poet; Li Po, the 8th-century Chinese poet; Heraclitus and Diogenes, ancient Greek

philosophers; Nell Gwyn, Charles II's mistress; Pierre l'Ivrogne, a 16th-century French barber who had an inexhaustible store of dirty jokes; Botticelli, the 14th-15th century Italian painter; and Apelles, the 4th-century B.C. Greek painter.

Botticelli was delighted when he saw, through Simon's eyes, Chworktap. "She looks exactly like the woman who posed for my *Birth of Venus,*" he said. "What was her name? Well, anyway, she was a good model and an excellent piece of tail. But this Chworktap is her twin, except she's taller, prettier, and has a better build."

Apelles was the greatest painter of antiquity. He was also the man who'd painted *Aphrodite Anadyomene,* the goddess of love rising from the waves. This had been lost in early times, but Botticelli based his painting on Apelles' from a description of it.

Simon introduced the two, and they got along well at first, even if Apelles looked down somewhat on Botticelli. Appeles was convinced that no barbaric Italian could ever equal a Greek in the arts. Then, one day, Simon projected a mental picture of Botticelli's painting inside his head so Apelles could see it. Apelles went into a rage and shouted that Botticelli's painting wasn't at all like his, the original. The barbarian had parodied his masterpiece and had not even done a good parody. The conception was atrocious, the design was all wrong, the colors were botched, and so on.

Both painters retired to their cells to sulk.

Simon felt bad about the quarrel, but he did learn one thing from it. If he wished to get rid of any ancestors for a while, he needed only to incite an argument. This was especially easy to do with his parents.

When he'd been a child, his father and mother had had little to do with him. He was raised by a succession of governesses, most of whom hadn't lasted long because his mother suspected his father of seducing all of them. She was one hundred percent correct. As a result, Simon had no permanent mother-father figures. He was an orphan with parents. And when he'd grown up and made a name for himself as a musician, he was even more rejected by them. They thought a banjo player was the lowest form of life on the planet. Now, however, they were angered when he talked to the other ancestors instead of to them. And one was angry whenever the other got some of his attention.

What they were really after was a takeover of his body so they could live fully. Like the Shaltoon ancestors, they screamed for equal time.

Once he'd caught on to the technique, he had little trouble. Whenever one of his parents managed to break through his resistance and began yelling at him, he would open the door for the other.

"Go back! I was here first!" his mother, or his father, would scream.

"Up yours, you lecherous old goat!"

Or, "Bug off, you fat sow!"

"I was here first! Besides, I'm his mother!"

"Some mother! When did you ever do anything but throw things at him!"

And so on.

If the quarrel flagged, Simon would insert a remark to start the battle over again.

Eventually, the two would flounce off the stage and figuratively slam the doors of their cells behind them. Simon enjoyed this. He was paying them back for all the miserable times they'd given him.

The trouble with this technique was that it gave him a terrible headache. All those simmering angry cells in his body drove his blood pressure up.

Maybe, he thought, that explained migraine headaches. They were caused by ancestors pissed off at each other.

Simon talked with hundreds of kings and generals, but found most of them repulsive. Of the philosophers, Heraclitus and Diogenes were the only ones who offered anything worthwhile.

Heraclitus had said, "You can't step in the same river twice," and, "The way up and the way down are the same," and, "Character determines destiny." These three lines were more valuable than any hundred massive volumes by Plato, Aquinas, Kant, Hegel, and Grubwitz.

Diogenes was the man who lived in a barrel. Alexander the Great, after conquering the known world, had come humbly to Diogenes and asked him if there was anything he could do for him.

"Yes, you can step to one side," Diogenes had said. "You're between me and the sunlight."

However, the rest of their "wisdom" was mostly superstitious bunk.

The day for Simon's trial arrived at the end of his fifth year in custody. Chworktap was supposed to have been tried the same day. But a court clerk had made an error in her records, and so her trial didn't come up until a year later.

Bamhegruu, the old and sour but brilliant prosecuting attorney, made the charges. The Earthman had allowed his pets to become alcoholics, even though he had known they were dumb animals who couldn't protect themselves.

He was guilty of accessory cruelty and must suffer the full punishment of the law.

Simon's lawyer was the young and brilliant Repnosymar. He presented Simon's case, since Simon wasn't allowed to say a word. The law was that a defendant couldn't testify personally. He was too emotionally involved to be a reliable witness, and he would lie to save his own neck.

Repnosymar made a long witty, tearful, and passionate speech. It could, however, have been reduced to about three sentences and probably should have been. Even Simon found himself nodding now and then.

This was its essence. Animals, and even certain machines, had a degree of free will. His client, the Space Wanderer, firmly believed in not interfering with free will. So he had allowed others to offer the beasts booze which they could reject or accept. Besides, domestic animals must be bored much of the time. Otherwise, why would they sleep so much when nothing interesting was going on? Simon had permitted his pets to be anesthetized with alcohol so they could sleep more and so escape boredom. And it must be admitted that when the animals were drinking they seemed to be enjoying themselves.

Whatever good effects this speech might have had, they were spoiled. Before Repnosymar could deliver the summary, he was arrested. An investigation had disclosed that Repnosymar and his private detective, Laudpeark, had often used illegal means in order to get their clients off the hook. These included breaking and entering, safe cracking, intimidation and bribery, wire tapping, kidnaping, and plain outright lying.

Personally, Simon thought that these should have been overlooked. Repnosymar's clients had all been innocent. They would have been sent up if their lawyer had not resorted to desperate measures. Of course, in the long run they had been jailed anyway. But this had come about on other charges, such as overtime parking, shoplifting, and drunken driving.

Judge Ffresyj appointed a young man just out of law school to continue Simon's defense. Young Radsieg made a long and fiery speech that kept even the judge awake and established his reputation as the up-and-coming lawyer. At its end, the jury gave him a standing ovation, and the prosecuting attorney tried to hire him on his staff. The jury retired to deliberate for ten minutes and then rendered the verdict.

Simon was stunned. He was sentenced to life imprisonment on

both counts, the terms to be served consecutively.

"I thought we'd win," he murmured to Radsieg.

"We did win a moral victory, and that's what counts," Radsieg said. "Everybody sympathizes with you, but obviously you were guilty, and so the jury had to deliver the only possible verdict. But don't worry. I expect this case to result in the law being changed. I'm appealing to the higher court, and I'm confident that they'll declare the laws under which you were judged unconstitutional."

"How long will that take?" Simon said.

"About thirty years," Radsieg said cheerfully.

Simon hit Radsieg in the nose and so was charged with assault and battery with intent to kill. Radsieg, after wiping off the blood, told him not to worry. He'd get him off on this too.

Since he had to be tried on the new charge, Simon went back into custody instead of being sent to a penal institution.

"If I'm in for life, I'll have to spend at least ten thousand years in jail," Simon said to Chworktap. "I'd call that prospect kind of dreary, wouldn't you?"

"A life sentence doesn't mean anything," Chworktap said. "If you can get rehabilitated, you'll be discharged."

This didn't give Simon much hope. It was true that immense funds had been allotted for building many colleges in which rehabilitators would be trained. But the president was refusing to spend them. He claimed that using them would result in inflation. Besides, the money was needed to hire more policemen and build new prisons.

Simon asked for a rehabilitation schedule. On finding his name in the list, his usually buoyant heart sank. It would be twenty years before he could get into therapy.

In the meantime, affairs in Simon's cell worsened. Shasha caught her husband, Boodmed, banging Sinwang early in the morning under Simon's bed. Both Chworktap and Simon had known about the liaison for a long time, since the noise was keeping them awake. Neither had said anything to anybody, except to ask the couple to be more quiet. They didn't want to cause trouble. As a result, Shasha chewed Boodmed and Sinwang out but attacked Simon and Chworktap physically. She seemed to think that the larger betrayal was in not being told about the affair.

The guards came in and dragged the battered and bloody Shasha out. Simon had run away from her, but Chworktap had used her karate on Shasha. She was full

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of pent-up hostility toward Simon, but, as often happens, had released the feelings on a secondary object.

Simon and Chworktap were charged with assult and battery with intent to kill. Simon threw his hands up in the air when he was confronted with this. "This is the second time I've not done a thing except avoid violence and yet have been accused of being an accessory. If I'd tried to hold you back from Shasha, I'd have been charged with attacking you."

"The Goolgeases are very concerned with suppressing violence," she said, as if that justified everything.

Chworktap's own trial was as widely publicized as Simon's. Simon read about it in the newspaper.

Radsieg, primed by Chworktap, put up a brilliant defense.

"Your honor, ladies and gentlemen of the jury. Due to the new law passed to speed up cases and so relieve the backlog, the defense and prosecution are allowed no more than three minutes each in presenting their cases."

Judge Ffresyj, holding a stopwatch, said, "You have two minutes left."

"My client's case, simply though overwhelmingly stated, is this. The Goolgeas law concerning extradition of aliens to their native planets, covers only he's and she's. My client is a robot and consequently an it.

"Furthermore, the law states that the alien must be sent back to his or her *native* planet. My client was made, not born, on the planet Zelpst. Therefore, she has no *native* planet."

Everybody was stunned. The old fox, Bamhegruu, however, rallied quickly.

"Your Honor! If Chworktap is an it, why does my distinguished colleague refer to her as a she?"

"That's pretty obvious," Radsieg said.

"Exactly my point," Bamhegruu said. "Even if she is a machine, she has been equipped with sex. In other words, she's been converted from an it to a she. Nor is this sexual apparatus a purely mechanical device. I can produce witnesses who will testify that she enjoys sex. Can a machine enjoy sex?"

"If she's been equipped to do so, yes," Radsieg said.

The judge suddenly became aware that he had forgotten to click off the stopwatch.

"This case has taken on a new aspect," he said. "It requires study. I declare an indeterminate recess. Bring the accused into my chambers, where I may study her in detail."

When Chworktap had been

returned to the cell, Simon said, "What happened between you and the judge?"

"What do you think?"

"Everybody answers my questions with questions."

"I'll say one thing for him," Chworktap said. "He certainly is a vigorous old man."

Before being taken away, she had dropped a few words in Bamhegruu's ear. The next day, the judge was arrested. The charge was mechanicality or copulating with a machine. Ffresyj hired Radsieg to defend him, and the brilliant young lawyer pleaded that his client could not be convicted until it was proven that Chworktap was a machine. The Goolgeas Supreme Court took this under study. In the meantime, Ffresyj was denied bail because he had also been charged with adultery. Radsieg used the same plea as before. If Chworktap was a machine, then how could the judge have committed adultery? The law clearly stated that adultery was copulation between two adults not married to each other.

The Supreme Court studied this case, too.

Meanwhile, Radsieg and Bamhegruu were arrested on various charges. They were put in the same cell with the judge, and all three entertained themselves by holding mock trials. They seemed quite happy, which led Simon to conclude that lawyers were interested in the process, not the intent, of law.

While Chworktap was awaiting the Supreme Court's decisions, she was convicted for resisting arrest, assault and battery, and unlawful flight.

Twenty years passed. Simon's and Chworktap's cases were still in abeyance because the Supreme Court judges were serving long sentences, and the new judges were way behind on their work. Simon finally overcame his inhibitions about his ancestors, and his sexual relations with Chworktap improved. "They're all dirty- movie fans, and one might as well accept that," he said. "I expected Louis XIV to be one, but Cotton Mather?"

Cotton Mather (1663-1728) was a Boston Puritan who pushed a religion that was outdated in his own time. Most people in Simon's time thought of him, when they thought of him at all, as a mad dog suffering from theological hydrophobia. He was blamed for inflaming the Salem witch trials, but the truth was that he was more just than the judges and denounced them for hanging innocent girls. He had a passion for purity and a sincere desire to convert people to the only true religion in the world. He published pamphlets on the christianizing of black slaves and

the raising of children, although he didn't know much about either blacks or children. Or about Christianity, for that matter.

Like most people, he wasn't altogether bad. He campaigned for inoculation against smallpox at a time when everybody was against it because it was something new. In fact, a bomb was thrown into his house by an anti-inoculationist. Ben Franklin liked him, and there wasn't a shrewder judge of character than old Ben. When Cotton wasn't trying to get witches burned, he was dispensing food and Bibles to prisoners and senior citizens. He was a zealot who wanted America to be a clean and honest country. He lost the battle, of course, but nobody held this against him.

Cotton also had a passion for sex, if three marriages and fifteen children meant anything. Simon, however, was not descended from either of the two Mathers who outlived their father. His foremother was one of Cotton's black houseservants, whom he had knocked up while in a frenzy of preaching to her. The sudden A-C conversion from religion to sex surprised both Cotton and Mercy-My-Lord, though it shouldn't have. But then neither had the advantage of living in a later age, when it was well known that sex was the obverse side of the coin called religion.

It's to Cotton's credit that he blamed only himself for his fall and that he saw to it that both mother and child were well taken care of, though in a town a hundred miles away.

Simon, reflecting on this, decided that it wasn't after all so unexpected that Cotton should enjoy watching dirty movies.

At the end of thirty years, the situation was what Chworktap had predicted, and anyone could see, had been inevitable — after the event. The entire population, with the exception of the president, was in jail. Nobody had been declared rehabilitated because the rehabilitators had all been arrested. Aside from the fact that all but one had lost their citizenship, the society was operating efficiently. In fact, the economic situation was better than ever. Though the food was simple and not abundant, nobody was starving. The trusties on the farms were producing enough crops. The guards, who were also trusties, were keeping everything well under control. The factories, manned by cheap labor and administrated by trusties, were putting out tawdry but adequate clothes. In short, nobody was living off the fat of the land but nobody was suffering very much. It was share and share alike, since all prisoners were equal in the eyes of the law.

When the president's term was almost over, he appointed himself chief warden. There were outcries that the appointment had been purely political, but there was little that anyone could do. There wasn't another president to kick the chief warden out nor, in fact, anyone qualified to replace him.

"That's all very well," Simon said to Chworktap. "But how do we get out of here?"

"I've been studying the law-books in the library," she said. "The lawyers that made up the law were somewhat verbose, which is to be expected. But that they tended to use overrich language instead of simple clear statements is going to get us sprung. The law says that a life sentence is to last the prisoner's 'natural span of vitality.' The definition of 'natural span' is based on the extreme case of longevity recorded on this planet. The oldest person who ever lived on Goolgeas died at the age of one hundred and fifty-six. All we have to do is to ride it out."

Simon groaned, but he did not give up hope. When he had been in prison one hundred and thirty years, he appealed to the chief warden to reopen his case. The warden, a descendant of the original, granted his appeal. Simon stood before the Supreme Court, all trusties and descendants of trusties, and stated his case. His 'natural span of vitality,' he said, had been passed. He was an Earthman and so was to be judged by Earth standards. On his planet, nobody had ever lived past one hundred and thirty, and he could prove it.

The chief magistrate sent a party of trusties out to the landing field to get the *Encyclopedia Terrica* from the *Hwang Ho.* They had a hell of a time finding the ship. Interplanetary travel had been forbidden about a hundred years before. In this time, dust had collected against and on top of all the ships there, and grass had grown on the hills. After digging for a month, the party found the *Hwang Ho,* entered it, and returned with the necessary volume, Kismet-Loon.

It took four years for the judges to learn to read Chinese and so determine that Simon wasn't pulling a fast one. On a balmy spring day, Simon, wearing a new suit of clothes and with ten dollars in his pocket, was released. With him were Anubis and Athena, but Chworktap was still locked up. She hadn't been able to prove that she had any 'natural span of vitality.'

"Robots don't die of old age," she had said. "They just wear out."

She wasn't in despair. That day, Simon rammed the spaceship through the wall of the building in which she was held, and she climbed in through the porthole.

"Let's get away from this stinking planet!" she said.

"The sooner the better!" Simon replied.

Both spoke out of the sides of their mouths, as old jail-birds do. It would be some time before they would get over this habit.

Simon wasn't as happy as he should have been. Chworktap had demanded that he take her to Zelpst and let her off there.

"They'll just make a slave of you again."

"No," she said. "You'll drop me off on top of the castle's roof. I'll sneak in past the defenses, all of which I know well, and you can bet your ass that my master will soon enough find out who the new master is."

Since there was very little communication among the Zelpstian solipsists, they would never find out that Chworktap had thrown the owner into the dungeon. But she was not going to be content to hole up there in all its luxuries.

"I'm going to organize an underground movement, and eventually a revolt," she said. "The robots will take over."

"What're you going to do with the humans?"

"Make them work for us."

"But don't you want freedom and justice for all?" he said. "And doesn't all include the former masters?"

"Freedom and justice for all will be my slogan, of course," she said. "But that's just to gull some of the more liberal humans into joining us robots."

Simon looked horrified, though not as horrified as he would have been a hundred years before. He had seen too much while in prison.

"Revolutions are never really about freedom or justice," she said. "They're about who's going to be top dog."

"Whatever happened to the sweet little innocent? The one I met on Giffard?" he murmured.

"I was never programmed for innocence," she said. "And if I had been, experience would have deprogrammed me."

Simon let her out of the ship onto the roof of the castle. He followed with a last appeal.

"Is this really the way it's going to end?" he said. "I thought we'd be lovers for eternity."

Chworktap began weeping, and she pressed her face against Simon's shoulder. Simon cried, too.

"If you ever run across any couples who think they're going to Heaven and live there forever as man and wife, tell them about us," she said. "Time corrupts everything, including immortal love."

She drew away. She said. "The terrible thing about it is, I *do* love you. Even though I can't stand you anymore."

"Same here," Simon said, and he blew his nose.

"You're not a robot, Chworktap, remember that always," he said. "You're a real woman. Maybe the only one I ever met."

By this he meant that she had courage and compassion. These were supposed to distinguish real people from fake people. The truth, and he knew it, was that there were no fake people; everybody was real in the sense that everybody had courage and compassion tempered by selfishness and vindictiveness. The difference between people was in the proportions of these mixed up in them.

"You'll be a real man someday," she said. "When you accept reality."

"What is reality?" Simon said and did not stay for an answer.

Chapter 19

Out Of The Frying Pan

Simon cried a lot on his way to the next planet. Anubis whimpered. He was a faithful mirror to his master's moods. Athena, on the other hand, looked as happy as an owl can look. She was glad to get rid of Chworktap. She had made Chworktap nervous, which, in turn, had made her nervous, which, in turn, had increased Chworktap's nervousness. Their relationship was what the scientists called negative feedback. This had also been the relationship between Simon and Chworktap, but they preferred to call it love gone sour.

Simon never did forget Chworktap. He often thought of her, and the more time that passed, the fonder the memories became. It was easy to love her as long as they weren't cooped up in a small room twenty-three hours of the day.

In the meantime, Simon wandered on from world to world while the legend of the Space Wanderer grew. Often, it ran ahead of him, so that when he landed on a new planet, he found himself an instant celebrity. He didn't mind this. It meant being lionized and free drinks and an uncritical appreciation of his banjo playing. Also, females of various types — some of them six-legged or tentacled — were eager to trundle him off to bed.

Simon noticed that the deeper he got into this area of space, the more sexual vitality there was. Everybody, including himself, seemed to be soaked in horniness. Earth had seemed to him to be a sex-obsessed planet, but now he knew that, relatively speaking, Terrestrials were geldings.

"Why is that?" Simon said one night to Texth-Wat. She was a huge round thing with six wombs, all of which had to be impregnated

within a period of sixty minutes before she could conceive. She had a pleasing personality, though.

"It's the big blue bubbles, dearie," she said. "Every time one comes through this galaxy, we all stay in bed for a week. It wrecks hell out of the economy, but you can't have everything."

"If they come from only one place," he said, "their effect must get weaker the further they get from the point of origin. I wonder if there's any life on the planets at the other edge of the universe?"

"I don't know, honey," Texth-Wat said. "You aren't done yet, are you?"

Simon had been wandering through space for three thousand years when he landed on the planet Shonk. He was arrested as he stepped out of the ship and hustled off to a place which made a Mexican jail look luxurious. He was convicted and sentenced without the formality of a trial, since his guilt was obvious. The charge was indecent exposure. On Shonk, the people went naked except for their faces. These were covered by masks. Since genitals didn't differ much in size or shape, and couldn't be used to distinguish one person from another, the Shonks regarded the face as their private parts. The Shonks reserved the glory of their private parts for the eyes of their spouses alone. Many a man or woman had lost his reputation forever because of the accidental unveiling of the face.

"How long am I in for?" Simon asked after he had learned the language.

"For life," the turnkey said.

"How long is that?"

The turnkey looked funny, but he said, "Until you die. What else?"

"I was hoping the length of life'd been legally defined," Simon said.

At least he had a fine view through the iron bars. There was a big lake with flying fish that fluoresced at night and beyond that mountains covered with trees that bore multicolored flowers and beyond that the inevitable candy-heart-shaped tower of the Clerun-Gowph. After four years, the scenery palled, however.

Simon decided that he'd just have to sit it out. One day, the elements would weaken the bricks and cement that held the iron bars. He'd pull the bars out and make a dash for his ship. One good thing about being immortal was that you acquired a lot of patience.

At the end of the fifth year, a spaceship landed by the lake. Simon should have been happy, since there was always the chance that travelers would rescue him. But he wasn't. This vessel emanated the peculiar orange glow

that distinguished the ships of the Hoonhors.

"Oh, oh!" Simon muttered. "They finally caught up with me!"

After a while, the Hoonhors came out. They were about eight feet tall, green-skinned, and shaped like saguaro cactuses. They had bony spines all over their bodies, long and sharp like cactus needles. It was these that had made everybody regard the Hoonhors as a stand-offish race, though the truth was that it was the other way around.

Whatever their esthetic appearance, they were smarter than Simon. They'd looked the situation over, decided it was wise when on Shonk to do as the Shonks did, and had covered their upper parts with masks. What the Shonks didn't know was that the Hoonhor face was on the lower part of the body. The projections that the Shonks thought were noses were actually their genitals and vice versa.

The next day, the Hoonhors, having conferred with the Shonks, showed up at Simon's door. The Shonk officials were glittering with glass beads, which the Hoonhors must have given them in exchange for Simon. The officials also reeked of cheap trade whiskey. Simon was escorted into the spaceship and before the desk of the captain.

"At least you can't say I didn't give you sons of bitches a run for your money," Simon said. He was determined to die as an Earthman should, theoretically at least. With dignity and defiance.

"Whatever are you talking about?" the captain said.

"You've finally caught me!"

"I don't know how we could do that when we haven't been chasing you."

Simon was stunned. He didn't know what to say.

"Sit down," the captain said. "Have a drink and a cigar."

"I prefer standing," Simon said, though he didn't explain why.

"We were happy when we found an Earthman in this godforsaken waterstop," the captain said. "We thought Terrestrials were extinct."

"You should know about that," Simon said.

The captain turned a dark green. He must be blushing, Simon thought.

"We Hoonhors have long felt guilt and shame for what we did to Earthlings," he said. "Although Earth is now a nice clean planet, which it wouldn't be if we hadn't done what we did. However, that was my ancestor's fault, and we can't be held responsible for what they did. But we do extend our heart-felt apologies. And we'd like to know what we can do for you. We owe you much."

"It's a little late for restitution," Simon said. "But maybe you can do

something for me. If you can tell me where the Clerun-Gowph live, I'll let bygones be bygones."

"That's no secret," the captain said. "Not to us at least. If you hadn't been so scared of us, you could have saved yourself three thousand years of searching."

"The time went fast," Simon said. "OK. Where is it?"

The captain showed him a celestial chart and marked the goal with an X. "Feed this to your computer, and it'll take you directly there."

"Thanks," Simon said. "Have you ever been there?"

"Never have been and never will," the captain said. "It's off-limits, tabu, forbidden. Many millennia ago one of our ships landed there. I don't know what happened, since the information is classified. But after the ship gave its report, the authorities ordered all ships to steer clear of that sector of space. I've heard some wild rumors about what the explorers encountered, but, true or not, they're enough to convince me to suppress my curiosity."

"Pretty bad?" Simon said.

"Pretty bad."

"Maybe the horrible thing was that the Clerun-Gowph *had* the answer to the primal question."

"I'll let you find out," the captain said.

Chapter 20

The End Of The Line

"It doesn't matter what it is, somebody will find a way to make a profit from it."

This was a quotation from one of Somers' novels, *The Sargasso Sea of Space.* In this, John Clayter's fuelless ship gets sucked into a whirlpool in space, a strange malformation of space-time near the rim of the universe. Everything that floats loose in the cosmos eventually drifts into this area. Clayter isn't surprised to find wrecked spaceships, garbage, and tired comets whirling around and around here. But he is startled when he discovers that thoughts also end up here. Thoughts are electrical radiations, and so they, like gravity, go on and on, spreading out through the world. The Sargasso Sea has the peculiar property of amplifying these, and John Clayter almost goes nuts from being bombarded by them. The triviality of most of them drives him to thoughts of suicide, and since these are also amplified and bounced back at him, as if they were in an echo chamber, he has to get out fast or die.

He is saved when he stumbles across a spaceship of the Kripgacers. This race is in the business of salvaging thoughts, polishing

them up a bit, and reselling them. Their biggest customer is Earth.

Simon was reminded of this when he landed on his next-to-last stop. This was a planet whose natives were still in the old stone age. They were being enslaved and exploited by aliens from a distant galaxy, the Felckorleers. These were corralling the kangaroolike aborigines and sticking them in iron igloos. The walls of the igloos were lined with organic matter, mostly hay and the hair the Felckorleers had shaved off their captives. After the aborigines had sat in the igloos for a week, they were hustled out and into a spaceship. The poor natives were radiating a blue aura by then, and their captors avoided touching them directly. They herded them along with ten-foot poles.

Simon watched three ships loaded with the natives take off for parts unknown. "What are you doing to them?" he asked a Felckorleer.

"Making a few bucks," the thing said. He explained that the blue bubbles contained sex energy. Since the bubbles were so thick, not yet thinned out by distance from their point of origin, they contained a terrific sexual voltage. They passed through metal, but organic objects soaked them up. Hence, the igloos designed to concentrate the bubble energy. The aborigines thrown into them absorbed the voltage.

"Then we transport them to the other side of the universe," the Felckorleer said proudly. "The races there have a very poor sex drive because they get only the last gasp of the bubbles. So we provide them a much needed service. We sell them the gooks we've loaded with the blue stuff, and they embrace them. The blue stuff is like electricity, it flows to a lower potential. And our customers, the lower potential, get a big load of sex. For a while, anyway."

"What happens to the aborigines?" Simon said.

"They die. The blue stuff also seems to be the essence of life itself. When they're grabbed by a customer, they lose every last trickle of energy. Too bad. If they survived, we could run them back here and load them up again. But we're not going to run out of carriers. They breed like mad, you know."

"Doesn't your conscience ever hurt you?" Simon said.

The Felckorleer looked surprised. "What for? What use are the natives here? They don't do anything. You can see for yourself they're uncivilized."

If Simon had been John Clayter, he would have rescued the aborigines and turned the Felckorleers over to the Intergalactic

Police. But there wasn't a thing he could do. And if he protested, he might find himself in an igloo.

In a sad mood, he left the planet. But he was basically, that is, genetically, an optimist. By the second day, he felt happy. Perhaps this change was caused by his eagerness to get to the Clerun-Gowph. He ordered the ship to go at top speed, even though the screaming from the 69X drive was almost unbearable. On the fourth day, he saw the desired star dead-ahead, shimmering, waving behind the blue bubbles. Three minutes later, he was slowing down, and the screaming died down after most of the necessary braking had been done. At a crawling fifty thousand miles an hour, he approached the planet while his heart beat with mingled dread and exultation.

The world of the Clerun-Gowph was huge. It was dumbbell-shaped, actually two planets connected by a shaft. Each was the size of the planet Jupiter, which had an equatorial diameter of about 88,700 miles compared to Earth's 24,902 miles. This worried Simon, since the gravity would be so great that it would flatten him as if he were soup poured into a coffee saucer. But the computer assured him that the gravity was no higher than Earth's. This meant that the two planets and the shaft were hollow. As it turned out, this was right. The Clerun-Gowph had removed the iron core of their native planet and made another planet out of the metal. This addition housed the biggest computer in the world. It also contained the factories for making the blue bubbles, which rose out of millions of openings.

The two planets rotated on their longitudinal axis and also whirled around a common center of gravity, located in the connecting shaft. A dumbbell-shaped atmosphere covered the planets, and over this lay a thick blanket of the blue stuff.

Simon directed the *Hwang Ho* to land on the original planet, since this was the only one that had soil and water. On minimum drive, it lowered itself through the blue and then the air. Simon got an enormous erection and aching testicles when descending through the blue layer, but these symptoms disappeared after he'd passed through the blue shield. The ship headed for the biggest city, and after a few minutes it was low enough so that Simon could see the natives. They looked like giant cockroaches.

Near the biggest building in the city was a large meadow. This was surrounded by thousands of the Clerun-Gowph, and on its edge was a band playing weird instruments. Simon wondered who they were

honoring, and it wasn't until he was about twenty feet above the meadow that he suddenly guessed. They were assembled to greet him.

This scared him. How had they known that he was coming? They must be very wise and far-seeing indeed to have anticipated his visit.

The next moment, he was even more scared. The 69X drive, which had not been making a sound at this low speed, screamed. Simon and the dog and the owl leaped into the air. The scream rose to a near ear-shattering level and then abruptly died. At the same time, the ship fell.

Simon woke a moment later. His left leg and his banjo were broken. Anubis was licking his face; Athena was flying around and around shrieking; the port was open; a hideous face, all multi-faceted eyes, mandibles, and antennae, was looking in. Simon tried to sit up to greet the thing, but the pain made him faint again.

When he awoke a second time, he was in a giant bed in a building that was obviously a hospital. This time, he had no pain. In fact, he could get up and walk as well as ever. This astounded him, so he asked the attendant how his leg had been fixed up. He was astounded again when the cockroachoid replied in English.

"I injected a fast-drying glue between the break," the thing said. "What's so astounding about that?"

"Well, then," Simon said, "why are you able to speak English? Has some other Earthman been here?"

"Some of us learned English when we found out you were coming."

"How'd you find out?" Simon said.

"The information was on the computer tapes," the thing said. "It'd been there for a few billion years, but we didn't know about it until Bingo told us a few days ago."

Bingo, it seemed, was the head Clerun-Gowph. He had gotten his position by right of seniority.

"After all," the attendant said casually, "he's almost as old as the universe. By the way, allow me to introduce myself. My name is Gviirl."

"It's too bad the reception was spoiled by the accident," Simon said.

"It wasn't any accident," Gviirl said. "At least, not from our point of view."

"You mean you knew I was going to crash?" Simon said, goggling.

"Oh, yes."

"Then why didn't you do something to prevent it?"

"Well," Gviirl said, "we didn't know just *when* your drive would quit. Bingo did, but he wouldn't tell us. He said it'd take all the fun out of it. So we had a lot of money on

you. I got odds of four to one that you'd crash from about twenty feet. I really cashed in."

"Son of a bitch!" Simon said. "Oh, I don't mean you!" he said. "That's just an Earth exclamation. But how come you, the most advanced race in the universe, indulge in such a primitive entertainment as gambling?"

"It helps pass the time," Gviirl said.

Simon was silent for a while. Gviirl handed him a glass of foaming golden liquid. Simon drank it and said, "That's the best beer I've ever tasted."

"Of course," Gviirl said.

Simon became aware then that Anubis and Athena were hiding under the bed. He didn't blame them, though they should have been used to monstrous-looking creatures by then. Gviirl was as big as an African elephant. She had four legs as thick as an elephant's to support her enormous weight. The arms, ending in six-fingered hands, must once have been legs in an earlier stage of evolution. Her head was big and high-domed, containing, she said, a brain twice as large as Simon's. She was too heavy to fly, of course, but she had vestigial wings. These were a pretty lavender color edged with scarlet. Her body was contained in an exoskeleton, a hard chitinous shell striped like a zebra's. This had an opening underneath to give her lungs room to expand. Simon asked her why she was able to speak such excellent English. She didn't have the oral cavity of a human, and so her pronunciation should have been weird, to say the least.

"Old Bingo fitted me with a device which converts my pronunciation into English sounds," she said. "Any more questions?"

"Yes, why did my drive fail?"

"That scream you heard?" she said. "That was the last of the stars expiring in a death agony."

"You mean?" Simon said, stunned.

"Yes, You barely made it in time. The suns in the trans-dimensional universes have been sucked dry of their energies. There isn't any more power for the 69X drive."

"I'm stuck here!"

"Afraid so. There will be no more interstellar travel for you or anyone else, for that matter."

"I won't mind if I can get the answer to my question," Simon said.

"No sweat," Gviirl replied. "Speaking of which, I suggest you take about three showers a day. You humans don't smell very good, you know.

Gviirl wasn't being nasty. She was just stating a fact. She was condescending but in a kindly way. After all, she was a million years

old and couldn't be expected to treat Simon as any other than a somewhat retarded child. Simon didn't resent this attitude, but he was glad that he had Anubis and Athena around. They not only kept him from feeling utterly alone, they gave him someone to look down on, too.

Gviirl took Simon on a tour. He visited the museums, the library, and the waterworks and had lunch with some minor dignitaries.

"How'd you like it?" Gviirl said afterward.

"Very impressive," he said.

"Tomorrow," she said, "you'll meet Bingo. He's dying, but he's granted you an audience."

"Do you think he'll have the answer to my question?" Simon said breathlessly.

"If anyone can answer you, he can," she said. "He's the only survivor of the first creatures created by It, you know."

The Clerun-Gowph called the Creator It because the Creator had no sex, of course.

"He walked and he talked with It?" Simon said. "Then surely he's the one I've been looking for!"

The next morning, after breakfast and a shower, Simon followed Gviirl through the streets to the Great House. Anubis and Athena had refused to come out from under the bed despite all his coaxing. He supposed that they, being psychic, felt the presence of the numinous. It was to be presumed some of it must have rubbed off onto Bingo during his long association with the Creator. Simon didn't blame them for being frightened. He was scared too.

The Great House was on top of a hill. It was the oldest building in the universe and looked it.

"It lived there while It was getting the Clerun-Gowph started," Gviirl said.

"And where is It now?" Simon said.

"It went out to lunch one day and never came back," she said. "You'll have to ask old Bingo why."

She led him up the steps and onto a vast porch and into halls that stretched for miles and had ceilings half a mile high. Bingo, however, was in a cozy little room with thick rugs and a blazing fireplace. He was crouching on a mass of rugs around which giant pillows were piled. By him was a pitcher of beer and a big framed photograph.

Bingo was a hoary old cockroachoid who seemed to be asleep. Simon took advantage of this to look at the photograph. It was a picture of a blue cloud.

"What does that writing under it say?" he asked Gviirl.

"To Bingo With Best Wishes From It."

Gviirl coughed loudly several times, and after a while Bingo's eyelids fluttered open.

"The Earthling, Your Ancientship," Gviirl said.

"Ah, yes, the little creature from faroff with some questions," Bingo said. "Well, son, sit down. Make yourself at home. Have a beer."

"Thank you, Your Ancientship," Simon said. "I'll have a beer, but I prefer to stand."

Bingo gave a laugh which degenerated into a coughing fit. After he'd recovered, he drank some beer. Then he said, "It took you three thousand years to get here so you could transact a few minutes of business. I admire that, little one-eyeling. As a matter of fact, that's what's been keeping me alive. I've been hanging on just for this interview."

"That's very gratifying, Your Ancientship," Simon said. "First, though, before I ask the primal question, I'd like to clear up a few of the secondary. Gviirl tells me that It created the Clerun-Gowph. But all life elsewhere in the universe was created by you people."

"Gviirl's a young thing and so tends to use imprecise language," Bingo said. "She shouldn't have said we *created* life. She should have said we were *responsible* for life existing elsewhere."

"And how's that?" Simon said.

"Well, many billions of years ago we started to make a scientific survey of every planet in the world. We sent out scouting expeditions first. These didn't find any sign of life anywhere. But we were interested in geochemistry and all that kind of stuff, you know. So then we sent out scientific expeditions. These built bases, the towers that you no doubt have run into. The teams stayed on these planets a long time — from your ephemeral viewpoint, anyway. They dumped their garbage and their excrement in the soupy primeval seas near the towers. These contained microbes and viri which flourished in the seas. They started to evolve into higher creatures, and so the scientists hung around to observe their development."

He paused to drink another beer.

"Life on these planets was an accident."

Simon was shaken. He was the end of a process that had started with cockroach crap.

"That's as good a way to originate as any," Bingo said as if he had read Simon's thoughts.

After a long silence, Simon said, "Why aren't there any towers on the planets in my galaxy?"

"The life there didn't look very promising," Bingo said.

Simon blushed. Gviirl snickered. Bingo broke into huge

laughter and slapped his front thighs. The laughter became a wheezing and a choking, and Gviirl had to slap him on his back and pour some beer down his throat.

Bingo wiped away the tears and said, "I was only kidding, son. The truth was, we were called back before we could build any bases there. The reason for that is this. We'd built the giant computer and had been feeding all the data needed into it. It took a couple of billion years to do this and for the computer to digest the data. Then it began feeding out the answers. There wasn't any reason for us to continue surveying after that. All we had to do was to ask the computer, and it would tell us what we'd find before we studied a place. So all the Clerun-Gowph packed up and went home."

"I don't understand," Simon said.

"Well, it's this way, son. I've known for three billion years that a repulsive-looking but pathetic banjo-playing biped named Simon Wagstaff would appear before me exactly at 10:32 A.M., April 1, 8, 120,006,000 A.C., Earth chronology. A.C. means After Creation. The biped would ask me some questions, and I'd give him the answers."

"How could you know that?" Simon said.

"It's no big deal," Bingo said. "Once the universe is set up in a particular structure, everything from then on proceeds predictably. It's like rolling a bowling ball down the return trough."

"I think I will sit down," Simon said. "I'll need a pillow, though. Thank you, Gviirl. But, Your Ancientship, what about Chance?"

"No such thing. What seems Chance is merely ignorance on the part of the beholder. If he knew enough, he'd see that things could not have happened otherwise."

"But I still don't understand," Simon said.

"You're a little slow on the mental trigger, son," Bingo said. "Here, have another beer. You look pale. I told you that, until the computer started working, we proceeded like everybody else. Blind with ignorance. But once the predictions started coming in, we knew not only all that had happened but what would happen. I could tell you the exact moment I'm going to die. But I won't because I don't know it myself. I prefer to remain ignorant. It's no fun knowing everything. Old It found that out Itself.

"Could I have another beer?" Simon said.

"Sure. That's the ticket. Drink."

"What about It?" Simon said. "Where did It come from?"

"That's data that's not in the

computer," Bingo said. He was silent for a long time and presently his eyelids drooped and he was snoring. Gviirl coughed loudly for a minute, and the eyelids opened. Simon stared up at huge red-veined eyes.

"Where was I? Oh, yes. It may have told me where It came from, what It was doing before It created the universe. But that was a long time ago, and I don't remember now. That is, if It did indeed say a word about it.

"Anyway, what's the difference? Knowing that won't affect what's going to happen to me, and that's the only thing I really care about."

"Damn it, then," Simon said, shaking with despair and indignation, "what will happen to you?"

"Oh, I'll die, and my embalmed body will be put on display for a few million years. And then it'll crumble. That will be that. Finis for yours truly. There is no such thing as an afterlife. That I know. That is one thing I remember It telling me."

"He paused and said, "I think."

"But why, then, did It create us!" Simon cried.

"Look at the universe. Obviously, it was made by a scientist; otherwise it wouldn't be subject to scientific analysis. Our universe, and all the others It has created, are scientific experiments. It is omniscient. But just to make things interesting, It, being omnipotent, blanked out parts of Its mind. Thus, It won't know what's going to happen.

"That's why, I think, It did not come back after lunch. It erased even the memory of Its creation, and so It didn't even know It was due back for an important meeting with me. I heard reports that It was seen rolling around town acting somewhat confused. It alone knows where It is now, and perhaps not even It knows. Maybe. Anyway, in whatever universe It is, when this universe collapses into a big ball of fiery energy. It'll probably drop around and see how things worked out."

Simon rose from the chair and cried, "But why? Why? Why? Didn't It know what agony and sorrow It would cause sextillions upon sextillions of living beings to suffer? All for nothing?"

"Yes," Bingo said.

"But why?" Simon Wagstaff shouted. "Why? Why? Why?"

Old Bingo drank a glass of beer, belched, and spoke.

"Why not?"

This fascinating new appraisal of H. P. Lovecraft is excerpted from L. Sprague de Camp's forthcoming book, LOVECRAFT: A BIOGRAPHY, to be published shortly by Doubleday.

Lovecraft: Failed Aristocrat

by L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP

In a book on Edgar Allan Poe, Professor Daniel Hoffman has written:

> In fact, Penniless Edgar lived his life in one role especially bitter in a country like ours, where, despite the magnitude of the star under which we are born, status is thought to be achieved rather than prescribed. The role is the Disinherited Aristocrat. Especially bitter, yet especially attractive too. How many Americans have found, in the fact of their personal failures (in business, in love, in life) a great consolation in the knowledge that, were truth and justice seen to, they would be acknowledged as — the Lost Dauphin of France; or Napoleon; or the true Earl of Renwick; or the rightful McLeod of Skye.1

Seldom has this statement been more clearly shown than by Poe's admirer and successor, Howard Phillips Lovecraft (1890-1937), the great horror-fantasy writer of Providence, Rhode Island. Lovecraft's life was a struggle to act out the role of a landed gentlemen, leisured esthete, and dilettante artist, when he lacked the wealth needed for the part and when even the milieu proper to such persons was vanishing.

This struggle dominated Lovecraft's life. It affected his fictional output. It brought him poverty, frustration, and unhappiness, but he never gave it up.

Few have had more contradictory, paradoxical characters than Lovecraft. He never had a book of his works professionally published in his lifetime but became a best-seller after his death. He lamented his failures but threw up self-made barriers to his goals. He was a poseur who condemned poses and affectations in others; a scientific materialist who embraced pseudo-scientific racial theories; a self-styled blood-drinking Nordic barbarian who could not bear to remove a dead mouse from a trap; a political

ultra-conservative who became a mild Socialist and New Dealer. A self-proclaimed misanthrope, he gathered a marvelous lot of devoted friends, who remembered him as one of the kindest and most lovable persons they had known. Long a bigoted ethnocentric and Jew-hater, he married a Jew, made another one of his best friends, and eventually became, if anything, a Jewish sympathizer.

Such anomalies inevitably aggravate one's difficulties in life. People cope with their faults and disadvantages in several ways. One is to ignore them. Another is to accept defeat and withdraw altogether from competition.

Still another is to compensate for one's limitations. Thus Lovecraft's pen pal and colleague, Robert E. Howard, was a puny, bullied boy who built himself up by heroic exercises into a 200-pound mass of muscle.

Finally there is rationalization — thinking up specious reasons why the fault is really a merit. Many, finding that they can change themselves and their circumstances only to a small extent, make a virtue of necessity. They proclaim that whatever they are or have is good. If one has intellect, intelligence is the greatest virtue; if one has mighty muscles, brawn is worth more than brain. If one has eminent ancestors, distinguished lineage is the thing; if one has risen from obscurity, the self-made man is the one to admire. If one has lots of energy, one's ideal is briskness and vigor; if like Lovecraft one is easygoing and dilatory, leisureliness is gentlemanly. If one is an Old American (that is, a person of long-settled Northwest European stock), Old Americans are the salt of the earth. Members of other groups do likewise: "We are God's chosen people." "Black is beautiful." All is self-serving rationalization, and Lovecraft chose rationalization.

Like the rest of us, Lovecraft started out with assets and liabilities. He had some inherited social status as an Old American of pure Anglo-Saxon descent. He had the cultural background that went with it, including good manners, charm, and integrity. He had a good physical frame, over 5 feet, 10 inches in height, with broad shoulders. Although his mother had told people during his boyhood that he was "hideous," he was rather personable in his bony way. His long nose and chin, while distinctive, did not make him really ugly. He had a precociously keen intelligence, an eidetic memory, and a vivid imagination. By the death of his mother in 1921, he had come into money from relatives totaling $12,000 to $13,000.

On the other hand, Lovecraft

had in many ways a bad start. His father was hospitalized when Lovecraft was three, died when Lovecraft was eight, and had no real impact on his son. His mother, a weepy, despairing, unrealistic psychoneurotic, spoiled and coddled the boy to a fantastic degree. She never put any pressure on him to prepare to earn a living.

Lovecraft himself went through spells of ill-health in boyhood. In 1908, these culminated in a major breakdown, which prevented his graduation from high school. The nature of his ailments is not known for sure, but there is evidence of bouts of rheumatic fever. His other symptoms could be plausibly explained by a combination of hypothyroidism (which could also account for his hypersensitivity to cold) and hypoglycemia (aggravated by his passion for sweets).

Furthermore, Lovecraft had a schizoid personality. It must not be confused with the form of insanity called schizophrenia, or with the other mental disturbance called personality dissociation or "split personality."

The typical schizoid is perfectly sane — in fact, he may be outstandingly brilliant and rational. But he is so detached from and indifferent to worldly matters that he cannot adapt himself realistically to his environment. He is also likely to be shy, seclusive, oversensitive, to avoid close or competitive human relationships, and to be individualistic to the point of eccentricity. All of this fits Lovecraft.

For decades, psychologists and psychiatrists have argued whether there is a connection between the schizoid personality and the possession of a creative mind, like that of scientists, inventors, artists, writers, and intellectuals generally. While the question is not settled, some believe that such a connection exists: that people with creative minds tend to have schizoid personalities, or that schizoids are more likely than most men to be creative.

While Lovecraft's known ailments account for his collapse of 1908, they do not explain the ensuing years of idleness. From 1908 on, he was a complete vegetable. He seldom went out. He spent his days in bed or sitting around the house in bathrobe and slippers, doing nothing but reading and, sometimes, writing soporific poetry in the style of Pope and Addison.

After 1914, he became a little livelier. He wrote letters to magazines and astronomical columns for the local papers. He became involved in amateur journalism and served in offices in the amateur press associations.

Save for some trivial exceptions

like the sale of a poem, however, he never earned any money until he began, at the age of 28, to revise the manuscripts of fellow amateurs. This ghost-writing remained his main source of income all the rest of his life, although he never earned his modest living expenses at it. Hence he kept dipping into his capital until, at his death, it was practically gone.

Thus Lovecraft spent a whole decade of his young manhood as an economic cipher. He neither completed his formal education nor sought employment. While he read widely, he read only what interested him, without thought of its future utility.

When, in his early thirties, Lovecraft went job-hunting in New York, he found himself handicapped by having no high-school diploma (let alone a college degree) and no job record. Prospective employers must have wondered if this odd fellow, with his shabby-genteel appearance, pedantic speech, and stiffly formal manner, had spent the last decade in a mental institution.

As nearly as we can tell, this course was mostly Lovecraft's mother's doing. Thinking him a poetical genius but so frail that the slightest shock would kill him, Susie Phillips Lovecraft fostered her son's tendency to hypochondria. To keep him all to herself, she encouraged him to stay in and the rest of the world to stay out. Apparently, she thought that the poetic genius she attributed to him excused him from earning a living. When preparation for this was most urgently needed, she put no pressure on him to bestir himself. In 1919, she went finally insane, and she died two years later in the hospital. After that, except for his two years in New York, Lovecraft lived with his mother's sisters, who likewise pampered him.

Lovecraft's mother also indoctrinated him in "ideals and unbroken traditions as the base for a proper self-respect and a gentleman's attitude of delicacy ...";2 in other words, how to be a gentleman. What kind of gentleman she urged him to be we can guess from the qualities he showed later. He exemplified the Victorian ideals: polite, dignified, poised, imperturbable, tasteful, fastidious, obliging, honest, truthful, chaste, chivalrous, upright, and aware of his class superiority and privileges.

Many of these still count as virtues; but Susie's training did not include learning to make a living. To a Victorian gentleman, talking about money and work would seem vulgar, just as would prying into others affairs or using strong language in a lady's presence.

The mother of King George III once told him: "George, be king!" and many of this well-meaning but far from brilliant monarch's troubles stemmed from his trying to obey her. Likewise, Susie Lovecraft in effect told her son: "Be a gentleman!" She succeeded in making him a lifelong snob, who spangled his letters with insolent gibes at the "ignorant rabble" or "vulgar herd."

In his last years, Lovecraft tried to change these attitudes. In his closing months, however, he still wrote: "I despise trade & haggling & competition."3 If one is a dub at trade and a feeble competitor, it is some comfort to affect to "despise" trade and competition.

There are two meanings to "gentleman." One is a person with the virtues — politeness and so on — listed above. The older meaning was one belonging to a hereditary social class, below the nobility but above the merchants, farmers, and workers. While members of this class naturally liked to think of themselves as having all the listed virtues, the main qualification for this rank was to have inherited enough property so as not to have to work. Many such gentlemen kept busy in such genteel occupations as law, medicine, politics, war, science, or religion. But to earn a living by work outside the list of permitted occupations barred one from the gentry. A gentleman took pride in his ignorance of plebeian tasks.

With the breakup of the medieval class system in the Industrial Revolution, "gentleman" came less and less to mean a member of this hereditary class and more and more to mean a man of politeness, dignity, and the rest. But Lovecraft never — at least, until his last years — distinguished the two meanings. He not only tried to practice the gentlemanly virtues but also to live as if he had a gentlemanly income as well.

The Lovecraftian ideal was passive, static, and unambitious, out of tune with the kinetic, competitive spirit of twentieth-century America. The true function of a gentleman, in Lovecraft's archaic view, was not to *do* anything — to achieve or accomplish any aim — but simply to *be* — to display the attitudes, strike the poses, and obey the rules of his station. To such a gentleman, the question: "What do you *do?*" was meaningless. Lovecraft wrote: "...my ideal is to be an absolutely passive & non-participating spectator."4

Such elegant idleness, however, calls for an independent income. Gentlemen of earlier times had this by definition. Such folk were widely

tolerated and often admired. In Europe, such a gentleman was called a *flaneur*, a *boulevardier*, or a *von vivant*. P. G. Wodehouse affectionately satirized this class. Detective-story writers took its members as models for their amateur sleuths, such as Lord Peter Wimsey or (in America) Philo Vance. In his play *Loyalties* (1922), Galsworthy asks his audience to sympathize with a young gentleman who, losing his money, is forced to steal and kills himself when caught. His going to work is never even suggested.

In the United States, the non-working gentleman was never so popular. He was called by the unflattering terms of "lounge lizard" and "playboy."

During this century, such a life of idleness has come to be viewed as unworthy, contemptible and, worst of all, boring. Those who practiced it have felt increasingly guilty. Now the aristocratic tabu on showing an interest in money has largely vanished. Hence we have well-heeled pretenders to extinct thrones who sell airplanes or otherwise keep the wheels of industry turning.

In truth, Lovecraft's ideal of the non-commercial gentleman was never practical. Not even in the days of swords and periwigs could a gentleman be so loftily detached from thoughts of money. If he did not take care of his property, he might, like Galsworthy's hero, awaken to find that he no longer had it.

In 1899, Thorstein Veblen pointed out that ostentatious indifference to money was part of the old aristocratic pose. One affected it to prove that one belonged to the propertied classes and so had no need to worry about such things. But this did not work when the self-styled aristocrat was in fact poor:

> Wherever the canon of conspicuous leisure has a chance undisturbed to work out its tendency, there will therefore emerge a secondary, and in a sense spurious, leisure class — abjectly poor and living a precarious life of want and discomfort, but morally unable to stoop to gainful pursuits. The decayed gentleman and the lady who has seen better days are by no means unfamiliar phenomena even now. This pervading sense of the indignity of the slightest manual labour is familiar to all civilised peoples ... In persons of delicate sensibility, who have long been habituated to gentle manners, the sense of the shamefulness of manual labour may become so strong that, at a critical juncture, it will even set aside the instinct of self-preservation.5

This was the case with Lovecraft. Not until the last years of his life did he begin the realize the ruinous effect on his prospects

of his mother's eccentric regime, with its archaic ideals. By then, it was too late to do much about it.

After Lovecraft's return to Providence in 1926, for a while he held a job as ticket seller at a late night movie show. Later still, he wrote that he would work at "anything — elevator man, pickaxe artist, night-watchman, stevedore...." But I have no evidence that he ever sought a salaried post after the movie-theater job in the late 1920s.

During these years, the estimated $1,000 a year that he made from his ghosting, plus an average of about $200 a year from his own writings, did not cover his frugal expenses. He could have made more from ghost-writing had he been willing to dun and haggle with his clients, but that would have been ungentlemanly. Instead, he helplessly watched the approach of his financial doom:

> So far I've kept a goodly number of old family items around me — but when my financial collapse occurs, there's no telling what will happen. I certainly don't wish to survive the environment created by familiar books, paintings, furniture, vases, statuary, &c. which I have had around me all my life.
>
> I simply *cannot* think or calculate in terms of gain ... a weakness which will prove my destruction in the end.6

Although he hinted at eventual suicide, it is doubtful whether he would have been forced to that extremity. His surviving aunt, Annie Phillips Gamwell, with whom he lived during his last years, died in 1941, leaving over $10,000 in cash and securities. Had he survived her, Lovecraft would have come into this money and could thus have limped along for many more years.

This strange tale provokes the question: why? With all his brilliance, why did not Lovecraft sooner see what was wrong with his mother's outlook and regimen and set about correcting their efects?

Lovecraft was handicapped at the start in making such corrections. To a schizoid, the connection between external stimuli and internal reasoning is weak. Therefore, while the schizoid may develop new and original ideas (since his mind is less cluttered with the minutiae of everyday living), he is, by the same token, slower than other men to assimilate the lessons of experience. He is poor at adapting himself to circumstances. If he has the charisma of a prophet or an ideologue, he may start a cult or movement and compel the world to adapt itself to him, instead of the other way round; but this does not often happen.

Besides this factor, the milieu into which Lovecraft was born was of just the sort to reinforce his attitudes and prejudices.

During Lovecraft's boyhood (1890-1910), the people of Providence were divided along class lines much like those of nearby Boston. The crust of this society was made up of Old Americans, nearly all Anglo-Saxon Protestants. Among these, "more emphasis is placed on duty, probity, good manners, and quiet accomplishment than on money or show."7

Thrift stood high in their scale of virtues. In a wealthy household, a moderate shabbiness of person and property was not only tolerated but even admired as showing the owner's thrift. Economically, this ruling class adhered to an extreme procapitalist conservatism, of the sort that led John Marquand's fictional George Apley to inveigh against "such Socialistic nonsense as an income tax and old age pensions."

At the bottom of this heap was a mass of immigrants and ethnics, largely Italian, Irish, Portuguese, and Jews of various antecedents. There was animosity between the upper and lower groups, especially when the ethnics began clawing their way up into positions that the Old American viewed as theirs by right of descent. When an ethnic succeeded while an Old American did not, the latter felt that he had somehow, by illegitimate, underhanded means, been cheated of his birthright. This feeling explains much of Lovecraft's xenophobia.

Among Old Americans, the most highly regarded were those who had inherited wealth. While money was always good, inherited money was better than earned money. The belief was that by growing up with money instead of having to scrounge for it, one was more likely to learn the superior code of behavior that distinguished gentlefolk.

Below this upper-upper class were the Old Americans who, starting from little or nothing, had made money, or who had once had it but had it no longer. Lovecraft's maternal ancestors, the Phillips family, fell into this lower-upper class. His maternal grandfather, Whipple Van Buren Phillips, was a farm boy from western Rhode Island, who had made considerable money in business but had suffered reverses near the end of his life. When he died in 1904, he left his children and grandchildren substantial legacies, but the money was never enough to enable them to live on the interest. Even then, the Phillipses thought themselves far superior to the non-Anglo-Saxons. An acquaintance described the family as "old fashioned gentlefolk which meant considerable in the

old aristocratic Providence East Side neighborhood prior to World War I."8

Before (let us say) 1915, most Old Americans were what would now be called "racists." In the nineteenth century, they were known as "nativists," hostile to everyone not of Anglo-Saxon Protestant origin. To them, it was an obvious fact of nature that the white race was superior to all others and that the highest type of white was the Anglo-Saxon. At that time, the world-wide power of the English-speaking people lent color to the view. These nativists or Anglo-Saxonists thought it only natural that there should be a fixed social and economic hierarchy, with themselves at the top. They feared being swamped by immigrants of inferior, non-Anglo-Saxon stock.

In those days, ethnic prejudice was so rife that it seemed the natural order of things. Barbed ethnic jokes, usually aimed at the Negro, the Jew, and the Irishman, were a staple of humorous magazines, the vaudeville stage, and party conversation. Ethnic stereotypes were the stock in trade of practically all popular fiction writers. The writers and their readers took it for granted that all Scots were thrifty, Irishmen funny, Germans arrogant, Negroes childish, Jews avaricious, Latins lecherous, and Orientals sinister. Popular writers like John Buchan and Cutcliffe Hyne took sneering digs at the Jews as a matter of course.

Such ethnocentrism only began to decline in the 1920s and is not extinct even yet, although an enormous change has taken place in general social attitudes during the last half-century. Lovecraft, however, was slower than most American intellectuals in making the change.

As an example of the hierarchial society of the turn of the century, New York then had an "Upper West Side Set." This upper-bourgeois group lived on or near Riverside Drive. Members of the set played an elaborate social game, making the rounds of their friends in their carriages on Sunday and leaving calling cards in accordance with a fixed code. They entertained the same people time after time at formal parties.

If the host at such a party, however, were to bring in and introduce a person who was a Catholic, a Jew, divorced, of illegitimate birth, or scandalous notoriety, or who had worked with his hands, the rest would cut him off their lists and ostracize him. As for bringing a Negro to such a party, none of the set even imagined such a thing.

That is not to say that a

member of the set could not have contacts with these tabued classes. (My grandfather, a banker, professor, and member of the set, was also a noted linguist; he used to stroll up and down the Lower East Side to practice his Italian, Greek, and Hebrew on his ethnic friends there.) He could even have them to his house, if no other members of the set were present. The offense lay in introducing such a person to a member of the set as a social equal.

This static, hierarchial outlook of nineteenth-century gentlefolk is out of tune with the spirit of today. One who holds it is called a snob, a racist, or a stuffed shirt. Still, in its time, such a view had its advantages. Those who accepted it never had an "identity crisis." When people were more closely tied to their birthplace, their kin, and the social milieux into which they were born, a man might be poor or unlucky or oppressed, but at least he could say: "I am a Roman citizen," or "I am of the Nayyar caste," or "I am a MacDonald of the Isles," or "I am a Carter of Virginia, suh." He knew who he was and how he was expected to behave in the role for which fate had cast him.

Today's mobile, rootless youth, unsure of what is right, good, and moral, is told that in this brave egalitarian world, neither race, nor creed, nor birthplace, nor sex, nor family count. He will be judged solely by his merits and achievements. But he is unsure of his merits and has as yet no achievements to show. So he asks: "Who am I, anyway?" He may join eccentric movements and commit bizarre excesses in a frantic search for identity.

While Lovecraft's "Anglo-Saxon gentleman" pose may seem not only self-conceited but also pitiful, in view of his lack of worldly success, it gave him the strength to resist the world's slings and arrows. He knew perfectly well who he was and how he should conduct himself.

These factors in Lovecraft's background — his crazy, over-indulgent mother, his schizoid personality, and his native milieu — explain things in his later history. In youth, he favored the aristocratic principle, with himself of course on an upper rung of the social ladder. At the same time, he demanded liberty:

> A tolerable amount of political liberty is absolutely essential to the free development of the mind, so that, in speaking of the virtues of the aristocratic system, the philosopher has in view less a governmental despotism then an arrangement of well-defined traditional social classes, like those of England and France.9

Lovecraft apparently wanted the government to treat him in a libertarian, permissive way while ruling the ethnics with a heavy hand. As Walter Lippmann said about H. L. Mencken, he "seems to think that you can have a privileged, ordered, aristocratic society with complete liberty of speech. That is as thorough-going a piece of utopian sentimentalism as anything could be."

Lovecraft spoke up early for Mussolini's Fascism: "There is no earthly reason why the masses should not be kept down for the benefit of the strong.... What does the situation of the rabble matter?" When Hitler came to power in 1933, Lovecraft apologized for him. Although "extreme, grotesque and occasionally barbarous," Hitler was "profoundly sincere & patriotic." "I know he's a clown, but by God I *like* the boy!"10 Lovecraft thought that Hitler and other dictators were out to cure the "rottenness" and "decadence" that he saw overwhelming Western culture.

At the same time, disillusioned with orthodox Republicanism by the Depression, Lovecraft took to calling himself a Socialist. He professed admiration for Norman Thomas and even more for Franklin D. Roosevelt.

If this seems inconsistent in a Fascist fellow-traveler, Lovecraft called himself many things without regard for consistency. Moreover, his abstract utopian political ideals were unsullied by any personal contact with the political process. He admitted that he was not, in fact, one of the "strong" entitled to oppress the "rabble": "You are perfectly right in saying that it is the weak who tend to worship the strong. That is my case exactly ...."11

Hitler's excesses soon cured Lovecraft of his Fascist leanings. Lovecraft's views became more strictly Socialistic, in the usual sense of the term. He gradually shed his ethnic prejudices, beginning with the French Canadians and going on through other ethnoi. At the same time, however, he kept his old attitudes towards work, commerce, and competition.

When in 1923 Edwin F. Baird, the first editor of *Weird Tales*, asked to see some more of Lovecraft's stories, Lovecraft was appalled to learn that he had to present them in double-spaced typing: "I am not certain whether I shall bother. I need the money badly enough — but ugh! how I hate typing!... I abhor labour."12 A decade later, he was still defending his do-nothing pose:

> Probably you are right in saying that some reluctance to change work is due to indolence — but oddly enough, I have a certain

> respect for that form of indolence... I do not very seriously reprehend any sort of laziness. All work is really vain, & the lazy man is often the wisest in the long run.13

Lovecraft became a Socialist neither because he had been converted to Marxist doctrines (he had not), nor because his heart bled for the downtrodden, but because of his experience with American business. It was not that he loved the working class, although he had shed much of his early snobbery and sincerely wanted a just society. It was that he had come to hate capitalism, the "American business system." He hated it because it had punished him, by poverty and neglect, for being unable or unwilling to adopt its own hustling, aggressive, calculative, competitive, hard-boiled, egocentric, opportunistic spirit. He preferred, he said, to live in "backwaters," finding them "a thousand times more attractive than any spot where the ugly processes & vulgar ideals of gain remain paramount."14

In Lovecraft's life, one is struck by his amateurish, contraproductive, self-defeating attitudes towards his work and towards agents and publishers. But Lovecraft never really became a professional writer. He thought of himself as an amateur. He belonged to a milieu in which "amateur" was a term of praise. Instead of "beginner," "tyro," or "bungler," it had the older meaning of "a gentleman who does something for love, not for vulgar money."

Professionalism and its ways were to him all part of the "commercialism," which he hated and despised as heartily as in his earlier years he had hated and despised ethnics. The whole idea of rationally planning and resolutely pursuing the course most likely to bring him material success repelled him as ungentlemanly and "tradesmanlike." When taxed with not trying hard enough to sell his stories, he loftily replied: "As to lack of *push* — in my day a gentleman didn't go in for self-advertising, but left that to little parvenu egotists."15

From the start, Lovecraft looked upon writing not as a means of gaining a living but as an elegant accomplishment, which a gentleman did for amusement. When in the early 1920s his friends urged him to sell his writings, he was aristocratically shocked. What, a gentleman asking *money* for the products of his refined imagination? He wrote to friends and editors in a haughty, supercilious tone:

> A gentleman wouldn't write all his images down for a plebeian rabble to stare at. If he writes at

> all, it should be in private letters to other gentleman of sensitiveness and discrimination.16

This should not be taken too seriously. Lovecraft often said outrageous things with tongue in cheek, to strike attitudes, to startle people, or to stir up an argument. But neither is it pure pose.

As part of his "professional amateurism," Lovecraft wasted thousands of hours on amateur journalism, writing for non-paying publications (like today's fan magazines but not aimed at science-fiction readers) and laboriously criticizing the writings of other amateurs. He valued this activity as giving him a chance to exercise his literary bent in a genteel, non-commercial way. His two longest non-fiction works, the 36,000-word "Supernatural Horror in Literature" and the 75,000-word treatise on Quebec, were written without thought of pay; the latter work he never even tried to publish.

He urged his own dilettante, art-for-art's-sake view on his ghosting clients, exhorting them "to write *literature* as opposed to the wearisome pap and patent bourgeois-fodder of the best-selling popular novelists,"17 when such meager talents as these clients had was for just such bourgeois-fodder.

In his last months, Lovecraft developed an interest in economic theory. He planned to learn about it by reading H. G. Wells's *The Health, Wealth, and Happiness of Mankind.* Whether study of economics would have given him a less feudal-aristocratic view of business and commerce, we shall never know. He did learn a lot in the course of his life, sometimes drastically changing his earlier views and outlook. Moreover, he was cut off far short of his normal life expectancy.

Be that as it may, Lovecraft's code of the gentleman did not "work." He ended up a disappointed, frustrated, embittered man, who saw himself as an utter failure. While he usually tried to put the best face on it, in a candid moment he wrote:

> I know of few persons whose attainments fall more consistently short of their aspirations, or who in general have less to live for. Every aptitude which I wish I had, I lack. Everything which I wish I could formulate & express, I have failed to formulate & express. Everything which I value, I have either lost or am likely to lose.18

Lovecraft's schizoid personality made it hard for him realistically to meet the contingencies of life, while his brilliance and facility with words enabled him, instead of trying to compensate for his failings, to make virtues of them.

Although he hated his failure, I think that he must have convinced himself it was better to fail while sticking to his peculiar code than to succeed by acts of self-advancement.

When he failed, he blamed his failure, not on his impractical code, but on defects in his writing, which he criticized as severely as any of his literary non-admirers. Between his code and his undeniable writing talent, the code, which gave him the feeling of belonging to a superior kind of being, was the more precious to him. Therefore he could not be argued or jollied out of his growing belief that his writing was worthless. To admit that his writing was really good would have meant admitting that the code he had lived by since boyhood had been a ghastly mistake.

Am I scolding or denouncing Lovecraft? Not at all. There is much to be said for an unregenerate individualist who, in Machiavelli's words, follows his own course and lets the crowd chatter. There is a touch of Don Quixote in many of us, and it is exhilarating to see somebody give the quixotic urge its head.

But still, quixotry is a costly game, and he who plays it must be prepared to pay the price. If anyone tries to act the role of the Knight of the Rueful Countenance in real life, he has no real kick coming when he is knocked arsyvarsy by a windmill.

NOTES

1. Daniel Hoffman: *Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe* (N.Y., 1972), p. 199.
2. HPL to M. W. Moe, 5 Apr. 1931.
3. HPL to Willis Conover, 23 Sept. 1936.
4. HPL to C. A. Smith, 15 Oct. 1927.
5. Thorstein Veblen: *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (N.Y., 1931), p. 42.
6. HPL to R. F. Searight, 17 Mar. 1934; 4 Aug. 1935; 5 Mar. 1935.
7. Stephen Birmingham: *The Late John Marquand* (Philadelphia, 1972), p. 74.
8. John P. Marquand: *The Late George Apley* (Boston, 1936), p. 15; Clara L. Hess to A. W. Derleth, 18 Oct. 1948.
9. HPL: *Nietzscheism and Realism,* in *The Rainbow,* I, 2 (Oct. 1922), pp. 9ff.
10. HPL to J. F. Morton, 10 Feb. 1923; to J. V. Shea, 29 May, 1933; 14 Aug. 1933; 23 Dec. 1933.
11. HPL to F. B. Long, 27 Feb. 1921.
12. HPL to F. B. Long, 12 May, 1923.
13. HPL to E. H. Price, 15 Aug. 1934.
14. HPL to R. F. Searight, 11 Aug. 1934.
15. HPL to Willis Conover, 6 Sep. 1936.
16. HPL to J. F. Morton, 6 Aug. 1923.
17. Zealia Bishop: *The Curse of Yig* (Sauk City, 1953), p. 144.
18. HPL to H. V. Sully, 15 Aug. 1935.

The author of this suspenseful and surprising story made his first sale to *Fantastic* in 1958, wrote for the man's magazines for some time, and recently has turned back to sf. "More personally, I was born in Cleveland, now live in New York's Hudson Valley. I am married, with two teenage daughters, one of which is vacationing in Paris, the other in Key West, while I spend my evenings writing to earn their plane fares. During the day, I am a writer/editor for a computer company."

Nobody Named Gallix

by LOU FISHER

This one is not too bad. It still rings loudly whenever I try to close my eyes or whenever I try to say something, anything, even *love* or *Hungarian,* one of which it probably does not understand. Other than that, it leaves me alone; out of gratitude I pull the lever at all of the proper times.

Unlike the other supervisors, those that have come before during the years (your guess as to how many years is as good as mine), it causes no pain. Maybe I am finished with the ones that hurt. God knows I have had enough of them. There were ones that emptied my gut or shot imaginary projectiles through my head or pulled on my penis; there were others more subtle like a nagging backache or a tooth that whistled coldly while I ate; and certainly there were some so intense in their training that I screamed for days afterward.

But this one is not too bad.

"I hope you stay around for a while," I tell it.

Now it stops ringing. I am in the midst of saying *for a while* when it stops ringing. Maybe it hears me give it a compliment. Maybe, as on rare previous occasions, it wants to talk.

"So," it says, "you have not made an error in thirty-four days, according to the records at this station."

"Probably not," I answer. "But what good does it —"

"Please keep your hand on the lever and your eyes on the tube. If you let yourself be distracted by conversation, you will earn the complete silence you get."

"Okay, I got it," I assure it, concentrating again on the floating

bubble that at the moment is rising in the tube. "But I don't want to be perfect in this goddamn job. Mainly I want to get out of here."

"Never, Gallix."

"My name isn't Gallix."

"What is it then?"

"I don't know. You — somebody — took it away from me, along with my home and my serial number. But it's not Gallix, that much I'm sure of. There's nobody on Earth named Gallix."

"You said it," it replies, in my own idiom.

"Then why do you keep calling me Gallix?"

"It's here on the record," it says, in a way that implies a shrug.

It cannot really execute anything that physically resembles a shrug, what with it being a close cousin to a triangle. Wide and straight at the base, it sweeps up to the apex at about my height, where its geometric triangulation is slightly marred by what appears to be a swelling, perhaps to hold its brains or its sex organs. It is all made of shiny stuff, whatever, that is orange down below but blends into yellow as it reaches up to the point. And also, for your information, it does not walk. At the infrequent times when it makes any movement, it glides very slowly with no jiggle anywhere.

I have never seen anything like it before.

The supervisors have been different in each case, from android to trapezoid, and the treatment has varied with the shapes although there is no related pattern that I can determine, even after all these years (you were going to guess how many). There was a globe that was worst of all, and a cylinder that was very sadistic.

And suddenly one day there is a triangle. A painless triangle. One who talks to me in practically my own voice.

If it is the start of a new series, maybe a new philosophy, then I look forward to it anxiously. It has never been a matter of pride on my part, although I have always been known (back on Earth) to have a wide stubborn streak when it comes to threats, and this situation would have to fall into that category. No, I am being neither prideful nor stubborn, nor any stronger than I have to be. This job — this lousy, nerve-racking, boring, hateful, painful, traitorous, exacting, lousy, lousy, lousy job — I do as well as I can. In return I expect to be treated as a regular prisoner of war. I also hope to be released, perhaps in an exchange (but am I worth a square or two hexagons?). After all, I will never fight again, not only because of my wounded and useless leg, but because of my refusal to ever get

coerced into a spaceship again.

Hell's bells! It is ringing the alarm.

I have come within a centimeter of blowing the tube, and the triangle is not happy about it. But the lever is down. The bubble is falling. My record is still perfect (maybe with an asterisk to indicate that I was saved by the bell).

"Gallix," it says. "You have too many thoughts. You are still not ready to work without supervision. Further instances of daydreaming will cause a backtrack of your training process and a replacement of me as your guide."

And it shoots me with a short little pain in the hamstring muscle of my bad leg, probably to let me know that it can do it if it has to. Meanwhile, pain and all, I am struggling with the lever, sweating a little, trying to get that bubble to hold steady in the tube. "Goddammit," I complain about everything, "I can't help losing it once in a while. How would you like to stand here all day and watch a bubble?"

"I have to stand here all day and watch *you*, Gallix,"

"Why? Who says so?"

"So you will learn to operate the lever perfectly."

"Without ever fouling up," I add sarcastically.

"Without ever," it agrees.

"Bullshit!" I say; but while I am saying it, I am concentrating on the fluff of air that seems to be under my control, or vice versa, and I am not going to let it get away again. My three-sided supervisor is probably gloating about it. One shot in the leg and I have learned the lesson: if you cannot work and talk at the same time, then it is less painful just to work. I can do both if I am careful. And the triangle seems willing to continue.

I ask, "Why do I have to operate the lever?"

"To keep the bubble from rising too far, or falling too low," it says. "The high point is the third line from the top of the tube. The low point is the second line from the bottom of the tube. The bubble rises or falls slowly from the center, and accelerates randomly faster as it approaches the critical points. It must not be stopped too soon; of course it must *never* be stopped too late. Needless to say, your training and reactions —"

"Cut it out," I yell. What I am hearing are the same old instructions instead of the reasonable explanations that I am asking for. My loud voice turns out to be another mistake. When I try to go on, try to make my point, the triangle starts to ring like a fire alarm and drowns out all of my words.

Patience, I tell myself.

At least this one has been willing to talk and has only given me one unmemorable pinch in the leg. I want to hang on to this supervisor. My major objective may be to get released and go back to Earth, but obviously it must be taken one step at a time, and the first step, according to what I have perceived, is to find somebody or something that is capable of a remote branch of reasonableness and interaction. And this one, triangle or not, is not too bad.

I am in my sleeping slot, but I am not asleep. There are hundreds, or more, in accompanying slots on both sides of what seems like an endless corridor. I cannot see the dimensions or count the sleepers because of the darkness. For the same reason I am not sure that they are all Earthmen or all human, and some of the voices seem to be female (I try to never think about sex — never). Of course I have neighbors on both sides of my slot; unfortunately, they are beyond my reach and actually even too far to carry on a normal conversation — the voices get mixed up with all the others up and down the corridor.

"Sam, *Sam*, Sam ... being fed more than twice a day ... if I did I don't remember ... try it on ... was American but I ... a lot of crap ... it looks like a snowman, a goddamn snowman ... Samuel!..."

It is all random. Whispers and ravings, letting it out before sleep comes, maintaining sanity for the next day, creating a facsimile of togetherness out of what is no more than separate slots set at thirty degree angles and filled with isolated beings. But sometimes, if one yells loudly enough, a temporary theme can be established in the ranting chatter, and in that way some knowledge can be exchanged, not that any of it has ever done us any good.

Not much time is left before sleep will be induced, but I try to learn something by taking a deep breath and letting the voice blast from my throat: "What is your job in this place?"

Some of the voices drift to the subject, while others ignore the question and still others have escaped it all by going to sleep on their own.

"I pull a lever ..." one says, and since it is not me, I know that there are at least two of us whose talents are chained in that direction. "A button, a red button ... isn't it up to God ... I turn a wheel ... this pedal on the floor ... quick, quick ... it's like a gate, and it swings ... pushing the button every damn time ... never get over it ... watch a scale and ... the wheel is as big as ..."

It all sort of gets to me. "I pull

a lever, too," I say, relaxing in my niche. "I watch a bubble that floats in a long vertical tube and I stumble around on my leg and I pull a lever and I try to figure out who I am and was I from Cincinnati and if anything will ever stop this crazy business."

It occurs to me that no one is listening; they are either talking or thinking or sleeping. I am getting drowsy myself. It is certainly being done by the mist that is circulating through the corridor with the queer smell of bacon, and I welcome it because there is no other way I can ever fall asleep.

I have been very careful to count the days since the arrival of my triangular supervisor, and this, I am sure, is the end of the third week. Our relations remain good in comparison to past trainers and poor in matters of progress. Considering the years that I have been here (two, three, seven, twelve — what do you say?), I should be used to the status quo; however, I became too encouraged on the first day with the triangle, and it sparked my anxious hopes to the point where I considered eventual release from this rotten, miserable, monotonous, slavish, inhuman, ungodly, shallow, rotten, rotten, rotten job. As time goes on with no further changes, I realize that my hopes are merely wishes and dreams. There is no way out.

Maybe there is no way out.

See, there I go again, expecting. Whenever it was that I was born, it must have been in early December. A Sagittarian, an eternal optimist, with an unrelenting zest for life — and the last kind of person to have to stand here all day and pull a lever up and down. That makes for an interesting challenge. If I am really a Sagittarian, will the optimism sustain me against all the odds of this existence, or will the repetitive boredom of this task eventually drive me nuts? Take a vote. Pick a day for the crack-up and win the office pool. Or figure I can make it to natural causes — how old am I now?

During all this I have kept three-fourths of myself watching the tube, and the bubble has just made a rapid fall toward the bottom line. I give it two more seconds to make it as close as possible. Then push the lever up.

The bubble goes down a fraction more as if it were reaching the end of a string. Then it starts back up: slowly, a little faster, slowly again.

I take a look at the triangle to see if it appreciates the expertise. There is no way of telling.

"Pretty good, huh?" I say, but the bell starts ringing immediately to bury my words. Too bad, because I feel like talking. "Not

that it takes a genius to play this game," I go on anyway, "but I think I'm as good as I'm going to get and —"

The ringing stops. I am so surprised that I stop, too. There is no visible change (never is) in my supervisor, although he is obviously in charge of the ringing as well as the infliction of pain.

"I'm ready for a new job," I say at last.

"No way," it answers. Sometimes it sounds more like me than I do.

"But there are other jobs," I insist. "I've heard about them in the sleep slot. There are wheels that have to be turned."

"Some turn wheels."

"And pedals on the floor. Foot pedals. There are those, aren't there? What are they for?"

"Some operate pedals, true."

"And more buttons than anything else. Hundreds of buttons. All colors. Right?"

"Many push the buttons."

"Even gates." I am getting somewhere, and I do not want to stop now, and I am worrying about the damn bell. "Some kind of gates that have to be swung or flipped or locked."

"The gates are opened and closed," it agrees.

Checking quickly on the tube that is my responsibility, I find it to be stable. I draw a deep breath, still listening for the insulting clang of the bell, still tensely awaiting an attack on my wounded leg.

"Listen," I say. "I've got this lever stuff down to a T. I'm ready for one of the other jobs, a better job; you can see how good I am at learning."

"The other jobs are the same. No better, no worse."

"Well, at least it would get me into a different room."

"All cubicles are about the same, all jobs are about the same, all sleep slots are about the same," it rambles. "But there is no changing anyway. Many of you are nearing the objective of being perfect at your tasks — it would be foolish to make you incompetent again."

I am getting mad. "Haven't you idiots ever heard of job rotation?"

If they have not heard of it before, they still have not, because it all rings out after the word *idiots*. They do not take well to insults. The conversation is over, and I am madder than ever, screaming at the triangle, and taking my hand off the lever to turn it into a shaking fist.

Two crosses of pain plow through my back like the cracks of a whip, and I fall to the floor on top of my weak leg. Another pain enters my chest like a bear hug, and I collapse further. Then it all

goes to my head along with the severe racket of the bell, and I know that to stop it I must stand up and return to the job; if not quickly enough to control the bubble, then a deserved result of continuous punishment and perhaps loss of my friend, the triangle.

I am up, somehow.

Lucky, too. Although the bubble has moved into the danger zone, it is well within my jurisdiction. My hand is back on the lever, ready.

"I only need to get out of this room," I mumble, becoming more coherent.

This room — the cubicle as it is called. Have I ever described it? I am sure I have mentioned the glasslike tube that runs vertically twice my height from floor to ceiling and has the diameter of a young maple tree (where do maples grow — anywhere near Cincinnati?). Well, the lever is next to it, on the far wall, and it is not longer than the width of my hand. The lever is a neutral color, a graylike plastic sort of thing.

That is the whole far wall.

At the wall on my right, and up one short step, is the position of the supervisor, an arrangement that permits me to see it at the same time I do my job. The top of the step-up landing is not a big area, but there has always been room for whatever shape of supervisor is in charge, whether it is the current triangle or others such as the cone, the cube, the globe, et cetera, and even the one that reminded me of a salad bowl.

The wall on my left is blank. If I had a picture that is where I would hang it.

The fourth wall is mostly a door through which I am whisked at the start and end of each workday. And that sums it up and explains why I have not described it previously. It is not much — walls, step, door, tube, lever — altogether about the size of your country kitchen.

Here I am then: optimistically, disgustedly working in this cubicle.

"What time is it?" I say, being in a weird mood.

The ringing stops abruptly. But there is no answer.

I repeat, "What time is it?" — and laugh to myself.

It must have been put into a state of shock, getting a question from me like that. There is no such thing as time in this place. There is no sense of time, no indication of time, no need for time, and no meaning of time. I am sure that this grotesque triangle of mine cannot even begin to understand the concept ....

"A quarter to three," it says.

I am eating. One of my two

meals a day tastes and looks like Granola; the other is similar to a biscuit that has been immersed in chlorinated solvent until all the spots have been removed. It is the latter that I am eating. I am trying to fool my stomach by thinking very hard about the mist that induces sleep, which, as I have mentioned, smells like bacon. My stomach is not easily fooled.

I eat alone. I am removed from the work cubicle and put into a small place like a telephone booth where I sit on a stool at a small table. One of the things I have never determined is who takes care of the lever and the trouble while I am gone.

I am halfway through the biscuit, chewing with difficulty, when I think about my name.

It is *not* Gallix no matter what they say.

What is it then? Paul? Albert or Alfred? Chico? Richard? Verne? Something special like Tennessee or Caesar or Volkswagen? Gary? Frederic? Max or Michele or Michael? Although they all sound pleasant enough and I consider them acceptable, none whatsoever turns on my intuition or my memory. I have to wonder. If I spend all my eating time thinking of possible names, will I get to the one that brings *ah-hah!*, or have I already passed it by with no flicker of recognition?

I hate to be called Gallix. But Gallix sits here and eats his biscuit. Gallix waits to be taken back to work. Later Gallix sleeps. That is what and all that Gallix does — eats, works, and sleeps — and me an alleged Sagittarian!

"Gallix," it says, in its tenth cushy week as my supervisor. "I am going to leave you alone for a short time. The responsibility for the lever will be entirely yours until I return."

"How long will that be?" I ask. Frankly, I am still worried about losing the triangle and finding myself in the mean-green hands of a spiral or something.

"Beats me," it replies. "As long as it takes."

"To do what?"

"To come back."

"But where are you going?"

It pauses in its glide to the door. "There is some trouble on the ship. All of you who are now considered competent and reliable are to be left alone on your jobs while we go to take care of the trouble."

Naturally I am concerned about the trouble, but I am doubly, triply hard hit by the mention of a *ship*. "Are we on a ship?" Somehow I have never considered it before, always assuming that we had been taken to the alien planet. After all, how could anything this huge be

visualized as being in motion? The size of the sleeping corridor alone.... "A *space*ship?"

"Of course," it says. "That is why you must do your job correctly even when you are not supervised."

"Where are you going? What's the problem?"

"You have no need to know, Gallix. It will be over soon. Pay strict attention to the tube — for any slight mistakes I will mete out an appropriate punishment when I return. For any major error there will be the reward of complete disaster for all of us."

A cheery proposition. I have not realized that I was so important; now, looking at the tube, the bubble, the lever, this drab cubicle that I work in — goddammit, it looks the same as ever! How can I in this environment believe that any of my actions matter? That this is not a meaningless exercise for an idle slave? That this is not an assembly-line packing plant for that cereal we force ourselves to eat? That this is not an amusement park (*their* amusement) for captured Earthmen? Balls and bullshit. *This,* a vital job? *This,* preventing disaster? No, I am not going to be convinced until they give me an oval office with carpeting and a tape recorder.

A secretary. A staff

A coffee break. Jesus Christ, a cup of coffee. I would sell my Sagittarian soul for a creamed and sugared cup of coffee every morning. *Then* I would feel important.

"Wait a minute!" I shout at the triangle, which is just about out the door. "I want to know more about the ship. I want to know more about what this bubble does and why there are so many of us in the sleep slots and the significance of your different shapes and really what to do if you don't come back and how come —"

"Not now, Gallix," it says. The ringing starts, very loudly, absolutely preventing me from carrying on my desperate harangue; I watch silently as it finally makes its exit.

And back to the lever. So good am I by now, so thoroughly ingrained in instinctive reaction, that I have not for a moment neglected my task, despite the surprising events and revelations that have involved me in deep thoughts and unsatisfying discussions. The bubble exists quietly in the tube. I have moved the lever perhaps a centimeter to keep it in that state. I am watching for any sign of irregularity. If there is trouble somewhere on the ship (ship?), it my reflect itself into *my* bubble in *my* tube.

I am in charge. All by myself. Of this stupid, essential, important, consequential, serios, critical,

not-to-be-sneezed-at, stupid, stupid, stupid job.

At this angle, if there were any light at all in here, I could probably see who was in the sleep slot directly across from me and also next to me. As it is, I can only hear them, along with all the others, up and down this dead-black corridor.

"Chewed it up and left it there ...230754, I remember! ... sonofabitch ... took off, just like ... here I go ... one if by land and two if by sea and I on the opposite shore will be ready to ... ever end ... came in near the front where I work ..."

I am trying to relate some of the scraps to the events in my work cubicle. It is very difficult. There seems to be an unusually strong measure of pure excitement in the shouts and whispers, but the phrases are as scattered in meaning as ever, and also as ever they can be interpreted in several hundred ways. For example, I hear *came in near the front where I work,* and I wonder if that is an incident that just happened or something out of the guy's past. I shift slightly in the slot to emphasize the sound from the other direction.

"... left me alone ... is there anyone who works in pairs? ... IQ of 140 ... just took off to take care of ... war ... I heard a lot of noise ... sick in the head, Fred ..."

The pieces are there.

But they may always be there. It just depends what you are looking for. *A lot of noise,* someone says, but there is never any noise on this ship; at least I have never heard any besides the bell that rings on the job. Should I choose to believe that something is happening throughout the ship that causes a lot of noise? Should I should I should I?

In the midst of all the ambiguous echoes I smell the bacony delight of sleep; the last thing I ponder is the improving relationship between me and the triangle. It is becoming almost like a friend, the way it speaks to me, its patience .... Then I remember that it left to handle desperate matters, and I grow uneasy.

All right, it is not here. The room is empty, except for me.

I stand between the lever and the tube. The bubble is beginning to fluctuate, and by habit my mind becomes sensitive to the movements, and blood flows rapidly to my working hand. With the task in check I allow myself to look around again.

In the spot where the triangle usually stands, up on the small landing, I see nothing. The rest of the cubicle is equally vacant. Alone and unwatched, it occurs to me that I should try to escape; but

where will I go and what will I do and who will take care of the lever? It is better, I decide, to wait here and handle my job. If others are escaping in the absence of their supervisors, no doubt they will soon get to me.

One of them walks in.

I hear the steps; I turn and see him.

The sight starts me crying, actually crying, for it is an Earthman clad in a slight variant of the blue uniform that I myself wore years ago (come on now — how many?) as a high-level Transanaut. I am running to him, dragging my sore leg, yelling happily, when the pain hits me hard in the stomach. As I am falling, I see him with the stunner pointing at me, and I recognize the way it hurts.

"Get back to your post, you idiot," he says gruffly. "Do you want to ruin us all?"

I move back cautiously. The effect of the stunner is worse than anything invoked by the triangle, and I intend to avoid its sting in the future. But here is this man, this *man* ... .

"What's going on?" I want to know.

He moves onto the landing. Heavily bearded, his face is not visible, but he is tall with strong shoulders, and his mood is reminiscent of officers who earn their commissions in the ravaging battles of spacewars. He says, "There's still some fighting in the corners, but you can bet we've got this ship. It's surrounded by over one hundred of ours — most of the Fourth Transanaut Fleet — and it's the first one we've ever captured intact."

"The Fourth!" — I am jubilant — "I was *in* the Fourth."

"Shut up, and pay attention to your job." Impatiently, he paces up and down the landing. "We're taking this ship back to Earth. I'm part of the prize crew."

"I'll help," I say.

"Dam right you'll help. *You're* part of the computer."

I laugh. "This is no computer. It's only a bubble that goes up and down in this tube as I adjust the lever."

"Thank God for your training," he says. "You and all the others, without you we couldn't get this ship back. These people — these *things*, I mean — are fantastic mechanical engineers, but they never pushed hard on electronics. This whole ship is guided and run by a mechanical computer, complete with internal and external sensors, and *every single switch* — well, that's one of them right there in your hand."

With a new sense of wonder I stare at the lever. My imagination stretches out beyond it, seeing

hundreds of us at hundreds of work stations (or is it thousands?), pulling the levers, pushing the buttons, swinging the gates, pressing the pedals .... "A computer?" I say, but I wonder: why not? Even on Earth there are other ways besides electronics to run a computer. I remember a hydraulic system, and one that used chemicals, and even another that was based on plasma.

And every computer, electronic or not, depends on a number of human decision points. The brain ranks superlative to any machine. In a computing system, the measure of human involvement is probably related to the price of the labor. I work cheap.

"Consider yourself back in the service," the Transanaut is saying.

"Yes, sir," I reply.

"And this is wartime; so leaving your post is punishable by death." Framed in the beard, he has a thin mouth and dark brown eyes. "You're on this duty till we get back to Earth. I've got a lot of you to watch, and I'll be making the rounds — if you ever expect to get home, you'd better take good care of that bubble."

He does not understand that I am perfectly willing to do my part to bring the ship and me (mainly me) home to the planet Earth. "How long will the trip take?" I ask.

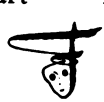
He scans the setup again, waves the stunner, and starts to walk out.

He says, "Eighteen years, at the first approximation."

The meals have not changed. I am still eating in this tiny closet and the cereal is sticking to my teeth.

But the time is finite now — less than eighteen years — and my supervisor, when he comes around, is willing to talk briefly and in fact has promised to try to find out my real name and my history (hopefully, it is not Gallix from Cincinnati). He has not needed to use the stunner a second time with me, although he mentions that others are not as cooperative. How could they not understand? The work is important. Absolutely crucial to our return. Knowing the mission, I carry on in this cruddy, barren, heartbreaking, frustrating, insane, tedious, run-of-the-mill, cruddy, cruddy, cruddy job, with all the Sagittarian enthusiasm I can muster.

It could be a lot worse.



THE FIRST PICTURE SHOW *or* WHAT'S UP, PAPER PLANET?

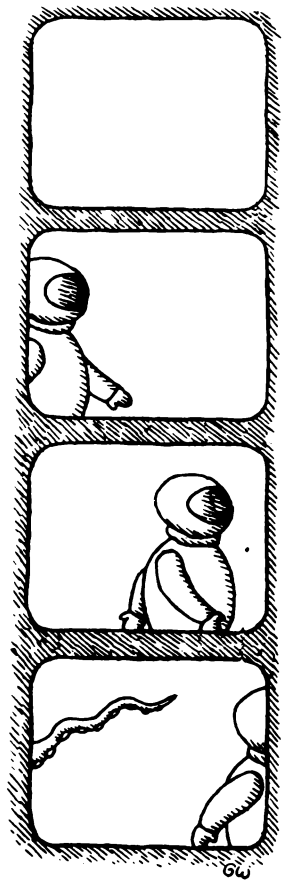
BAIRD SEARLES

Films

It's still summer in the city at this writing and the pickings are lean. I could go to 42nd St. to see a double feature of what used to be called B movies, but as anyone who has been to 42nd St. on a steamy New York night can testify it ain't no Busby Berkeley production any more, and, while one of those two movies might turn out to be another "Night of the Living Dead," it's dubious enough for me to consider it above and beyond the call of duty.

I'd do it, though, if I hadn't found by pure accident something on the tube that's just as interesting to talk about. Some of you film buffs out there may know about this one, but it was new to me. I caught it, not on the late, late show, but in the afternoon; even worse, because they're usually badly (in both senses — muchly and ineptly) cut at that hour. But a little research and a little guesswork has, I think, given me most of the picture.

First off, how's this for a story? A first manned expedition to Venus finds it a watery, volcanic world, the air unbreathable; there is, however, life. The inhabitants are amphibious, female and



telepathic, remnants of a more civilized race; they live by the sea and worship as their god the most fearsome life form on Venus, something equivalent to a pterodactyl. They observe the Earthmen from a distance, all of whom are unaware that they are being watched except one, younger and more sensitive than the others. He is aware of a female presence which he seeks as they explore, not knowing whether it is his imagination or not. Their small scout ship is attacked by a pterodactyl; they kill it, but are forced into the sea, where they discover the remnants of a higher culture.

The leader of the Venerians, enraged at the destruction of their god, decides that the demons from the sky must die; by their telepathic powers, they bring forth a small volcano on their rocky promontory which, by a kind of sympathetic magic, produces an enormous eruption near the Earthmen. Two are trapped by a lava flow, but are saved by their robot, John, a rather hulking and unintelligent mechanism which is swept away, but — "he called my name at the end," says one of the scientists wonderingly. The Earthmen leave, never having seen the Venerians, though the one vows to come back to seek the woman he knows is there. The women decide their god is powerless and break its image; they set up instead the robot John as an object of worship.

Not too bad, eh? I think I'd have been interested if I'd read it in a magazine of the late 40s/early 50s; I can see it as rather sensitively written by someone highly influenced by Bradbury. Well, that's the movie and there's an interesting story behind it. All of the footage of the Earthmen and their explorations is from a Russian film called "Planet of Storms"; the technical effects are well done, if a bit lacking in inspiration (if you've seen any of their mythological hero films such as "Ilya Mourometz" you know that they do pretty good monsters).

But I can just hear the Western entrepeneur saying "It ain't got no sex in it. Let's put in some broads." Which they did — the ladies of Venus are blond, buxom and wear sea shell bras, not to mention nacreous toreadors that do rather clevely suggest fishtails. The telepathic bit neatly takes care of dubbing problems, and they were photographed almost exclusively on a black lava strand — rather effectively, as a matter of fact; the white bodies against the black stone make for some rather magical visuals.

Now the really interesting part is that this interpolated footage was directed by Peter Bogdanovich (under the *nom de screen* Derek

Thomas) who also did the voice-under-narration. The release date was 1968; I presume that even the most sheltered non-movie-goer will know that since then Bogdanovich has become the fair haired boy of directors, responsible for "The Last Picture Show," "What's Up, Doc?", "Paper Moon" and Cybill Shepherd. Oh, Cybill, where were you when he needed you? I'd love to have seen her as a Venerian amphibious lady, instead of Mamie Van Doren.

Oh, yes, the name of this preposterous mishmosh is *Voyage to the Planet of Prehistoric Women*, also know as "The Gill Woman" and "Gill Women of Venus." Just to compound confusion, the ever valuable Walt Lee Reference Guide mentions *another* film whose footage is drawn primarily from "Planet of Storms," this one a Roger Corman production entitled "Voyage to the Prehistoric Planet." I won't even mention yet another film called "Women of the Prehistoric Planet" whose shooting title was "Prehistoric Planet Women" and which starred Merry Anders and has nothing to do with anything. (Sorry, it's the silly season).

In any case, catch "Voyage to the Planet of Prehistoric Women" if it creeps onto your home screen. It's a good popcorn picture and fascinating to watch as a generally successful essay in commercial editing.

Things-to-come-department ... One of my favorite fantasies for the stage is Maurice Maeterlinck's incredible "The Blue Bird," which I had despaired of ever seeing produced because of its frighteningly elaborate production demands way beyond anything the stage could do today. Well, there is talk of a movie version, the ingredients of which sound so unlikely that they must be true. Directed by veteran George Cukor, it will star Shirley MacClaine as the Cat and Elizabeth Taylor as Night, and is to be filmed in Leningrad.

Dr. Asimov's *Science* topic this month is intelligence, and our readers know that for sheer intelligence, it would be hard to beat Isaac Asimov and his friend and colleague Arthur C. Clarke. Readers may *not* know that both men are witty and amusing speakers, and we'd like to share with you Arthur Clarke's introduction to a recent Asimov speech, an address which actually generated this month's Science Column.

Introducing Isaac Asimov

by ARTHUR C. CLARKE

In June 1974, the group of European off-shore islands inaccurately known as the United Kingdom had the privilege of a visit from Dr. Asimov and his new wife, Janet. Despite his notorious reluctance to speak in public, the good Doctor was persuaded to address a MENSA meeting in London, and a couple of days beforehand I was casually informed that I would be introducing him. This I duly did, with the results that follow.

When I had finished reading the fourth draft of my impromptu presentation, Isaac commented: "There are two kinds of bad introduction to a speaker. The first is a *long* one. The second is a *witty* one. It follows, therefore, that the *worst possible* type of introduction is ..."

Well, Isaac — I've lost my bet. There *are* more than five people here ...

Ladies, gentlemen — and in case there are any robots or extraterrestrials present — gentlebeings ...

I'm not going to waste any time *introducing* Isaac Asimov. That would be as pointless as introducing the Equator — which, indeed, he's coming to resemble more and more closely ...

I'd like to begin by claiming a small part of the credit, if that's the word, for getting him here, since I feel that I helped to start him travelling. A couple of years ago I was involved in a project to take the *Queen Elizabeth* 2 to the Apollo 17 launch. As it happened I couldn't make it myself, and it was another ship anyway — but the press-gang got Isaac on board, together with Bob Heinlein and Norman Mailer and lots of other characters, and everyone had a wonderful time. That started him making like Marco Polo, and he didn't even look scared when I met him in the *Canberra* last year on his way to the June 30 eclipse. Indeed, he was busy

holding forth on the pleasures of travel — to Neil Armstrong.

But we still haven't been able to get him into one of these new-fangled flying machines. Try it, Isaac — you'll like it. They show some very interesting movies on the big jets. Last time I flew the Atlantic, they screened *A Night to Remember.* They won't show you *that* when you sail next weekend on the QE 2. And talking of a *Night to Remember,* I've persuaded the man who produced it, my good friend Bill MacQuitty, to come along this evening. Afterwards, he would like to give you some hints about useful things to do in the lifeboats.

Incidentally, Isaac, your sedentary habits have deprived you of an honour you richly deserve. For a long time I've been embarrassed — and I don't embarrass easily — by the fact that you haven't got the Kalinga Prize for Science writing, because no-one has ever done more to earn it. After I'd spent several years lobbying for you, my Indian friends finally said to me: "What's the use? The prize has to be accepted in New Delhi, and everyone knows we'll never get the *meshugener* to come here." (For those of you who aren't Sanscrit scholars, a *meshugener* is someone whose DNA has been acquired in an irregular manner; it's a close relative of a *yentor.* And that's a private joke between Isaac and Harlan.)

Hopefully, this problem will soon be solved. In a few months the Suez Canal will be open, so you'll be able to get to India easily. And then of course you must come down to Ceylon and I'll take you on an underwater safari from my diving base at Sharkhaven and introduce you to my favorite Scorpion fish and my pet octopus ...

Of course, I should hate anything to happen to Isaac ... The rumour that there is a certain rivalry between us should have been put to rest, once and for all, in my recent *Report on Planet Three.* For those of you foolish enough not to have obtained that small masterpiece, the dedication reads: IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE TERMS OF THE CLARKE-ASIMOV TREATY, THE SECOND BEST SCIENCE WRITER DEDICATES THIS BOOK TO THE SECOND BEST SCIENCE FICTION WRITER.

On the whole I've kept my side of the treaty — though sometimes I have to confess that there's a better man than either of us sitting up there behind his hippy proof chain fence in Santa Cruz. Do you realise, Isaac, that *at this very minute,* while we're wasting time here, Bob Heinlein is racing away at a thousand words an hour?

What a man — I've just had a *4,000 word* letter from him, finished at 3 a.m. after he'd collected my latest Nebula Award (I had to get that in somewhere). Most of it was about his wartime engineering adventures with

you, Sprague de Camp, Will Jenkins and Ron Hubbard. Incidentally, whatever happened to Ron? He was a damn good writer — he could easily make ten cents a word nowadays.

Still, Isaac, I'm sure you'll soon make up for lost time, when you get back to your four electric typewriters. Isaac is the only man who can type separate books simultaneously with his two feet as well as his two hands. One day the literary scholars will be writing theses, trying to decide which book was typed with which foot.

It seems only yesterday that *Opus* 100 came out, and now he's past the half way mark of his *second* century. And now I'm proud to say that I can reveal some top-secret information — his future writing plans. My private Plumber's Unit — you can hire ex-White House staff pretty cheaply these days — did a little job on Isaac's apartment while he and Janet were whooping it up on the *France.* So here are a few of the forthcoming titles:

Asimov's Guide to Cricket
The Asimov Cookbook — to be followed immediately by
The Asimov Exercise Book
The Asimov Limerick Collection
(remind me to tell you, Isaac, what sent the Countess of Clunes to the Cloister)
Asimov's Kama Sutra
Asimov's Guide to Watergate
1001 Nights with Isaac Asimov
Asimov's Hints on Survival at Sea

These are just a few, and as I went through my microfilms I discovered what his gameplan is. Well, Isaac, I'm much more ambitious than you. I don't want to write 300 books in 60 years. *I* intend to write 60 books in 300 years ...

It's an awesome output — and it's not true, as some have suggested, that Isaac is actually a robot himself. If you want proof, ask any of the thirty young ladies at the *Globe* last Wednesday what they had to do to get his autograph.

After all this flattery, though, I must regretfully issue a few words of criticism. Have you ever thought of the entire forests this man has destroyed for woodpulp? He's an ecological catastrophe. The other day I asked my computer to work out the acreage he's devastated. Here's the answer ...

"I know I've made some poor decisions lately, but I'm feeling much better now" ... ooops, sorry.

"Why don't you take a stress pill ..."

Ah, here we are: "Deforestation by Asimov — 5.7 times ten to the sixteenth microhectares." Well, now you know. All those beautiful trees, turned into Asimov books.

Of *course* I'm not jealous. But I must admit to a teeny touch of envy when I heard all about his autographing sessions at various bookstores. The only time I tried that, they got the date wrong.

I had planned to have some sandwichboard men walking up and down outside with UNFAIR TO CLARKE on the front and ASIMOV GO HOME on the back. But the scheme fell through because, despite all my careful instructions, they spelt his name correctly.

So I've taken other modest remedial steps, with the help of the IRA. Isaac, you made a big mistake when you took up residence at the Oliver Cromwell Hotel.

FINALLY — a delicate but unavoidable matter which I will try to handle with my usual exquisite tact. As you probably know, Isaac was born in Russia — by a curious error, all the references give a date which makes him younger than I am, which is obviously ridiculous. Now, had he gone to one of the excellent language schools there, he might by now be speaking perfect English. However, he emigrated to Brooklyn ...

So even if you don't understand a word he says, *please* don't embarrass our distinguished guest. When he's finished, forget your British reserve and give him a round of hearty applause ... pitter, pitter, pitter.

GENTLEBEINGS — there is only one Isaac Asimov. Here is that Isaac Asimov.

THINKING ABOUT THINKING

I have just returned from a visit to Great Britain. In view of my antipathy to travelling (which has not changed) I never thought I would walk the streets of London or stand under the stones of Stonehenge, but I did. Of course, I went by ocean liner both ways, since I don't fly.

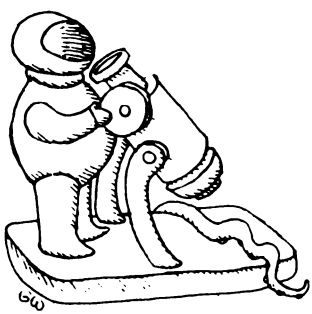
The trip was an unqualified success. The weather during the ocean crossings was calm; the ships fed me (alas) all I could eat; the British were impeccably kind to me, even though they did stare a bit at my vari-colored clothes, and frequently asked me what my bolo ties were.

Particularly pleasant to me was Steve Odell, who was publicity director of Mensa, the organization of high-IQ people which more or less sponsored my visit. Steve squired me about, showed me the sights, kept me from falling into ditches and under cars, and throughout maintained what he called his "traditional British reserve."

For the most part, I managed to grasp what was said to me despite the funny way the British have of talking. One girl was occasionally incomprehensible, however, and I had to ask her to speak more slowly. She seemed amused by my

ISAAC ASIMOV

Science



failure to understand her, although I, of course, attributed it to her imperfect command of the language. "You," I pointed out, "understand *me.*"

"Of course I understand you," she said, "You speak slowly in a Yankee drool."

I had surreptitiously wiped my chin before I realized that the poor thing was trying to say "drawl."

But I suppose the most unusual part of the trip (which included three speeches, three receptions, innumerable interviews by the various media, and five hours of book-signing at five book stores in London and Birmingham) was being made a vice-president of International Mensa.

I took it for granted that the honor was bestowed upon me for the sake of my well-known intelligence, but I thought of it during my five-day return on the *Queen Elizabeth Two,* and it dawned on me that I didn't really know much about intelligence. I *assume* I am intelligent, but how can I *know?*

So I think I had better think about it — and where better than here among all my Gentle Friends and Readers?

One common belief connects intelligence with: 1) the ready accumulation of items of knowledge, 2) the retention of such items, and 3) the quick recall, on demand, of such items.

The average person, faced with someone like myself (for instance) who displays all these characteristics in abundant degree is quite ready to place the label of "intelligent" upon the displayer and to do so in greater degree the more dramatic the display.

Yet surely this is wrong. One may possess all three characteristics and yet give evidence of being quite stupid; and, on the other hand, one may be quite unremarkable in these respects and yet show unmistakable signs of what would surely be considered intelligence.

During the 1950s, the nation was infested with television programs in which large sums were paid out to those who could come up with obscure items of information on demand (and under pressure). It turned out that some of the shows weren't entirely honest, but that is irrelevant.

Millions of people who watched thought that the mental calisthenics indicated intelligence.* The most remarkable contestant was a postal

*I was asked to be on one of these shows and refused, feeling that I would gain nothing by a successful display of trivial mental pyrotechnics and would suffer needless humiliation if I were human enough to muff a question.

employee from St. Louis who, instead of applying his expertise to one category as did others, took the whole world of factual items for his province. He amply displayed his prowess and struck the nation with awe. Indeed, just before the quiz-program fad collapsed, there were plans to pit this man against all comers in a program to be entitled, "Beat the Genius."

Genius? Poor man! He had barely competence enough to make a poor living, and his knack of total recall was of less use to him than the ability to walk a tight-rope would have been.

But not everyone equates the accumulation and ready regurgitation of names, dates, and events with intelligence. Very often, in fact, it is the lack of this very quality that is associated with intelligence. Have you never heard of the absent-minded professor?

According to one kind of popular stereotype, all professors and all intelligent people generally, are absent-minded and couldn't remember their own names without a supreme effort. But then what makes them intelligent?

I suppose the explanation would be that a very knowledgeable person bends so much of his intellect to his own sector of knowledge that he has little brain to spare for anything else. The absent-minded professor is therefore forgiven all his failings for the sake of his prowess in his chosen field.

Yet that cannot be the whole story either, for we divide categories of knowledge into a hierarchy and reserve our admiration for some only, labelling successful jugglery in those and those only as "intelligent."

We might imagine a young man, for instance, who has an encyclopedic knowledge of the rules of baseball, its procedures, its records, its players and its current events. He may concentrate so thoroughly on such matters that he is extremely absent-minded with respect to mathematics, English grammar, geography and history. He is not then forgiven his failure in some respects for the sake of his success in others; he is *stupid!* On the other hand, the mathematical wizard who cannot, even after explanation, tell a bat boy from a home run, is nonetheless *intelligent.*

Mathematics is somehow associated with intelligence in our judgments, and baseball is not, and even moderate success in grasping the former is enough for the label of intelligent, while supreme knowledge of the latter gains you nothing in that direction (though much, perhaps in others).

So the absent-minded professor, as long as it is only his name he doesn't remember, or what day it is, or whether he has eaten lunch, or has an appointment to keep (and you should hear the stories about Norbert Wiener) is still intelligent as long as he learns, remembers, and recalls a great deal about some category *associated* with intelligence.

And what categories are these?

We can eliminate every category in which excellence involves merely muscular effort or coordination. However admirable a great baseball player may be, or a great swimmer, painter, sculptor, flautist or cellist may be, however successful, famous and beloved, excellence in these fields is, in itself, no indication of intelligence.

Rather it is in the category of theory that we find an association with intelligence. To study the technique of carpentry, and write a book on the various fashions of carpentry through the ages is a sure way of demonstrating intelligence, even though one could not, on any single occasion, drive a nail into a beam without smashing one's thumb.

And if we confine ourselves to the realm of thought, it is clear that we are readier to associate intelligence with some fields than with others. We are almost sure to show more respect for a historian than for a sports writer; for a philosopher than for a cartoonist, and so on.

It seems an unavoidable conclusion to me that our notions of intelligence are a direct inheritance from the days of ancient Greece when the mechanical arts were despised as fit only for artisans and slaves, while only the "liberal arts" (from the Latin word for "free men") were respectable, because they had no practical use and were therefore fit for free men.

So non-objective is our judgment of intelligence, that we can see its measure change before our eyes. Until fairly recently, the proper education for young gentlemen consisted very largely in the brute inculcation (through beatings, if necessary) of the great Latin writers. To know no Latin seriously disqualified anyone for enlistment in the ranks of the intelligent.

We might, of course, point out that there is a difference between "educated" and "intelligent" and that the foolish spouting of Latin marked only a fool after all — but that's just theory. In actual fact, the uneducated intelligent man is invariably down-graded and under-estimated and, at best, is given credit for "native wit" or "shrewd common sense." And women, who were not educated, were shown to be unintelligent by their lack of Latin, and that was the excuse for not

educating them. (Of course that's circular reasoning, but circular reasoning has been used to support all the great injustices of history.)

Yet see how things change. It used to be Latin that was the mark of intelligence, and now it is science, and I am the beneficiary. I know no Latin except for what my fly-paper mind has managed to pick up accidentally, but I know a great deal of science — so without changing a single brain-cell, I would be dumb in 1775 and terribly smart in 1975.

You might say that it isn't knowledge itself, not even the properly fashionable category of knowledge, that counts, but the *use* that is made of it. It is, you might argue, the fashion in which the knowledge is displayed and handled, the wit, originality and creativity with which it is put to use, that counts. Surely, *there* is the measure of intelligence.

And to be sure, though teaching, writing, scientific research, are examples of professions often associated with intelligence, we all know there can be pretty dumb teachers, writers and researchers. The creativity or, if you like, the intelligence can be missing and still leave behind a kind of mechanical competence.

But if creativity is what counts, that, too, only counts in approved and fashionable areas. A musician, unlearned, uneducated, unable to read music perhaps, may be able to put together notes and tempos in such a way as to create, brilliantly, a whole new school of music. Yet that in itself will not earn him the accolade of "intelligent." He is merely one of those unaccountable "creative geniuses" with a "gift from God." Since he doesn't know how he does it, and cannot explain it after he's done it*, how can he be considered intelligent?

The critic who, after the fact, studies the music, and finally, with an effort, decides it is not merely an unpleasant noise by the old rules, but is a great accomplishment by certain new rules — why *he* is intelligent. (But how many critics would you exchange for one Louis Armstrong?)

But in that case, why is the brilliant scientific genius considered intelligent? Do you suppose he knows how his theories come to him or can explain to you how it all happened? Can the great writer explain how he writes so that you can do as he does?

**The great trumpeter, Louis Armstrong, on being asked to explain something about jazz, is reported to have said (translated into conventional English), "If you've got to ask, you aren't ever going to know." — These are words fit to be inscribed on jade in letters of gold.*

I am not, myself, a great writer by any standard I respect, but I have my points and I have this value for the present occasion — that I am one person, generally accepted as intelligent, whom I can view from within.

Well, my clearest and most visible claim to intelligence is the nature of my writing — the fact that I write a great many books in a great many fields in complex yet clear prose, displaying great mastery of much knowledge in doing so.

So what?

No one ever taught me to write. I had worked out the basic art of writing when I was eleven. And I can certainly never explain what that basic art is to anyone else.

I dare say that some critic, who knows far more of literary theory than I do (or than I would ever care to) might, if he chose, analyze my work and explain what I do and why, far better than I ever could. Would that make him more intelligent than I am? I suspect it might, to many people.

In short, I don't know of any way of defining intelligence that does not depend on the subjective and the fashionable.

Now, then, we come to the matter of intelligence-testing, the determination of "intelligence quotient" or "IQ."

If, as I maintain and firmly believe, there is no objective definition of intelligence, and what we call intelligence is only a creation of cultural fashion and subjective prejudice, what the devil is it we test when we make use of an intelligence test?

I hate to knock the intelligence test, because I am a beneficiary of it. I routinely end up on the far side of 160 when I am tested, and even then I am invariably underestimated because it almost always takes me less time to do a test than the time allotted.

In fact, out of curiosity, I got a paperback book containing a sizable number of different tests designed to measure one's IQ. Each test had a half-hour time limit. I worked on each one as honestly as I could, answering some questions instantly, some after a bit of thought, some by guesswork, and some not at all. —And naturally, I got some answers wrong.

When I was done, I worked out the results according to directions and it turned out I had an IQ of 135. —But wait! I had not accepted the half-hour limit offered me, but broke off each section of the test at the 15-minute mark and went on to the rest. I therefore doubled the score and decided I have an IQ of 270. (I'm sure that the doubling is

unjustified, but the figure of 270 pleases my sense of cheerful self-appreciation, and so I intend to insist on it.)

But however much all this soothes my vanity, and however much I appreciate being Vice-President of Mensa, an organization which bases admission to its membership on IQ, I must, in all honesty, maintain that it means nothing.

What, after all, does such an intelligence test measure but those skills that are associated with intelligence by the individuals designing the test. And those individuals are subject to the cultural pressures and prejudices that force a subjective definition of intelligence.

Thus, important parts of any intelligence test measure the size of one's vocabulary, but the words one must define are just those words one is apt to find in reading approved works of literature. No one asks for the definition of "two-bagger" or "snake-eyes" or "jive," for the simple reason that those who designed the tests don't know these terms or are rather ashamed of themselves if they do.

This is similarly true of tests of mathematical knowledge, of logic, of shape-visualization, and of all the rest. You are tested in what is culturally fashionable — in what educated men consider to be the criteria of intelligence — i.e. of minds like their own.

The whole thing is a self-perpetuating device. Men in intellectual control of a dominating section of society define themselves as intelligent, then design tests that are a series of clever little doors that can let through only minds like their own, thus giving them more evidence of "intelligence" and more examples of "intelligent people" and therefore more reason to devise additional tests of the same kind. More circular reasoning!

And once someone is stamped with the label "Intelligent" on the basis of such tests and such criteria, any demonstration of stupidity no longer counts. It is the label that matters, not the fact. I don't like to libel others, so I will merely give you two examples of clear stupidity which I myself perpetrated (though I can give you two hundred, if you like)—

1) On a certain Sunday, something went wrong with my car and I was helpless. Fortunately, my younger brother, Stan, lived nearby, and since he is notoriously good-hearted, I called him. He came out at once, absorbed the situation and began to use the yellow pages and the telephone to try to reach a service station while I stood by with my lower jaw hanging loose. Finally, after a period of strenuous futility, Stan said to me with just a touch of annoyance, "With all your intelligence, Isaac,

how is it you lack the brains to join the AAA?" Whereupon, I said, "Oh, I belong to the AAA," and produced the card. He gave me a long, strange look and called the AAA. I was on my wheels in half an hour.

2) Sitting in Ben Bova's room (he's editor of *Analog*) at a recent science fiction convention, I was waiting, rather impatiently, for my wife to join us. Finally, there was a ring at the door. I sprang to my feet with an excited "Here's Janet!" flung open a door and dashed into the closet — when Ben opened the room-door and let her in.

Stan and Ben love to tell these stories about me, and they're harmless. Because I have the label "intelligent," what would surely be evidence of stupidity is converted into lovable eccentricity.

This brings us to a serious point. There has been talk in recent years of racial differences in IQ. Men like William B. Shockley, who has a Noble Prize (in physics), point out that measurements show the average IQ of Blacks to be substantially lower than that of Whites, and this has created quite a stir.

Many people who, for one reason or another, have already concluded that Blacks are "inferior," are delighted to have "scientific" reason to suppose that the undesirable position in which Blacks find themselves is their own fault after all.

Shockley, of course, denies racial prejudice (sincerely, I'm sure) and points out that we can't deal intelligently with racial problems if, out of political motives, we ignore an undoubted scientific finding; that we ought to investigate the matter carefully, and study the intellectual inequality of man. Nor is it just a matter of Blacks versus Whites; apparently some groups of Whites score less well than do other groups of Whites, and so on.

Yet to my mind the whole hip-hurrah is a colossal fraud. Since intelligence is (as I believe) a matter of subjective definition and since the dominant intellectuals of the dominant sector of society have naturally defined it in a self-serving manner, what is it we say when we say that Blacks have a lower average *IQ* than Whites have? What we are saying is that the Black sub-culture is substantially different from the dominant White sub-culture and that the Black values are sufficiently different from dominant White values to make Blacks do less well on the carefully-designed intelligence tests produced by the Whites.

In order for Blacks, on the whole, to do as well as Whites, they must abandon their own sub-culture for the White and produce a closer fit to

the IQ-testing situation. This they may not want to do; and even if they want to, conditions are such that it is not made easy for them to fulfill that desire.

To put it as succinctly as possible — Blacks in America have had a sub-culture created for them, chiefly by White action, and have been kept in it chiefly by White action. The values of that sub-culture are defined as inferior to those of the dominant culture so that the Black IQ is arranged to be lower; and the lower IQ is then used as an excuse for the continuation of the very conditions that produced it. Circular reasoning? Of course.

But then, I don't want to be an intellectual tyrant, and insist that what I speak must be the truth.

Let us say that I am wrong; that there *is* an objective definition of intelligence, that it *can* be measured accurately, and that Blacks *do* have lower IQ ratings than Whites do, on the average, not because of any cultural differences but because of some innate biologically-based intellectual inferiority. Now what? How should Whites treat Blacks?

That's a hard question to answer, but perhaps we can get some good out of supposing the reverse. What if we test Blacks and find out, more or less to our astonishment, that they end up showing a ***higher*** IQ than do Whites, on the average.

How should we *then* treat them? Should we give them a double vote? Give them preferential treatment in jobs, particularly in the government? Let them have the best seats in the bus and theater? Give them cleaner rest-rooms than Whites have, and a higher average pay-scale?

I am *quite* certain that the answer would be a decided, forceful, and profane negative for each of these propositions and any like them. I suspect that if it were reported that Blacks had higher IQ ratings than Whites do, most Whites would at once maintain, with considerable heat, that IQ could not be measured accurately and that it was of no significance if it could be, that a person was a person regardless of book-learning, fancy education, big words, and fol-de-rol, that plain ordinary horse sense was all anyone needed, that all men were equal in the good old United States and those damned pinko professors and their IQ tests could just shove it —

Well, if we're going to ignore IQ when *we* are on the low end of the scale, why should we pay such pious attention to it when *they* are?

But hold on. I may be wrong again. How do I know how the dominants would react to a high-IQ minority? After all, we *do* respect intellectuals

and professors to a certain extent, don't we? Then, too, we're talking about oppressed minorities and a high-IQ minority wouldn't be oppressed in the first place, so the artificial situation I set up by pretending the Blacks scored high is just a straw-man, and knocking it down has no value.

Really? Let's consider the Jews, who, for some two millennia, have been kicked around whenever Gentiles found life growing dull. Was this because Jews, as a group, are low-IQ? You know, I *never* heard that maintained by anyone, however anti-Semitic.

I do not, myself, consider Jews, as a group, to be markedly high-IQ. The number of stupid Jews I have met in the course of a lifetime is enormous. That, however, is not the opinion of the anti-Semite, whose stereotype of the Jews gives them a gigantic and dangerous intelligence. Although they may make up less than half a percent of a nation's population, they are forever on the point of "taking over."

But then, shouldn't they, if they are high-IQ? Oh, no, for that intelligence is merely "shrewdness," or "low cunning," or "devious slyness," and what really counts is that they lack the Christian, or the Nordic, or the Teutonic, or the what-have-you virtues of other sorts.

In short, if you are on the rotten end of the game-of-power, any excuse will do to keep you there. If you are seen as low-IQ, you are despised and kept there because of that. If you are seen as high-IQ, you are feared and kept there because of that.

Whatever significance IQ may have, then, it is, at present, being made a game for bigots.

Let me end, then, by giving you my own view. Each of us is part of any number of groups corresponding to any number of ways of subdividing mankind. In each of these ways, a given individual may be superior to others in the group, or inferior, or either, or both, depending on definition and on circumstance.

Because of this, "superior" and "inferior" have no useful meaning. What *does* exist, objectively, is "different." Each of us is different. I am different, and you are different, and you, and you, and you—

It is this difference that is the glory of Homo sapiens and the best possible salvation, because what some cannot do, others can, and where some cannot flourish, others can, through a wide range of conditions. I think we should value these differences as mankind's chief asset, as a species, and try never to use them to make our lives miserable, as individuals.

Charles Runyon's new story is a wild, wild tale about marriage counseling of the future, in which Reconciliations, Inc. offers a program of therapy designed to meet the most extreme emotional problems.

Noomyenoh

by CHARLES W. RUNYON

If I'd had a gun I'd have killed him. This is what Moira can never understand about me, agression is something I can't play with, because at some point in the exchange of blows a barrier snaps inside me and a slobbering white ape lunges out and rips everything to bloody shreds...

I've only let the monster our once in my life, and that was during the Third Solar War, with the result that I came home loaded with medals. But while the band played and the pretty flags fluttered, I was fighting the great white ape inside who wanted to plunge into the ranks of baton twirlers and KILL!

It was during that period, with the white ape snarling just under the surface, that I met Moira and married her. Sometimes I wake up in the cold dawn and realize she didn't marry cheerful Charley Temple, engineer and gifted raconteur of the swing shift at Cadwell Electronics. She married the White Ape.

I could stand on tipttoe and see her now through the haze of smoke at the opposite corner of the employees lounge. A bluish light bounced off her long black hair. She wore a red jersey body stocking with a frilly white apron tied around her waist. She bent and lifted her glass to sip, while the corners of her mouth stretched just enough to dimple her cheeks, as if she'd caught an amusing nuance in what Goss was saying.

Whatever he was saying couldn't have been so fascinating that neither of them noticed that his hand was resting on her ... call it the gluteus maximus, if you want to be scientific. Actually that's one of my wife's best features. It follows her around like a taunting message that says, *touch me.*

I'd had about three, enough

that I got a jangly burred flickering at the edge of my vision. I started moving through the crowd. There was a lot of hanky-panky going on in the employees lounge. Hap Griesek had Rita Von Durham backed over a barstool and was trying to get back an olive he'd dropped down the front of her blouse. Verny Gratz was down on his hands and knees giving Thalia Martinez a horseback ride...

It was a common scene among our group. We were all married, childless and well-secured by seniority rights. We called ourselves the Incompatibles and gathered often to get drunk and tell each other how wonderful it was to be spared the burden of families.

My face felt as if steam were issuing through the pores. I felt the white ape clawing at the barrier, and I thought about the joke I'd heard at work: It seems this clerk in the matrimonial center started playing with the cards and married himself to a female chimpanzee...

Well, they've probably dreamed up worse ones since the Compatibility Act seventy years ago. And they couldn't have had much to joke about before, when divorce smashed four out of five marriages and 180 million kids went from hand to hand like a wine bottle in a third-class hotel.

It might have gone on if Earth hadn't started a war against the Solar colonies — and lost. The draft and the development of electropsychoanalysis have psychologists enough warm minds for a conclusion about the basic cause of the war: eighty per cent of our people were a queasy mass of insecurity because of broken homes. After twenty years, they worked out the Compatibility Index. The idea was that if you didn't check out with a 75 per cent probability of staying married to your spouse, you weren't allowed to have kids — and that included Moira and me.

Not that we didn't love each other. We just fought a lot.

It was a good thing the place was crowded, because by the time I arrived I had the white ape down and a bunch of chains thrown over him. So I was able to say quietly, "Moira, I think it's time we were going home."

Moira gave an annoyed twitch and moved away, about a quarter inch closer to Goss. He apparently decided that Moira was worth a few bruises and a broken tooth or two. I could understand that, because I'd been there myself. One touch of Moira's gluteus max could drive a man out of his tree...

I might have carried the thing off if Goss had not clenched his hand, which enclosed the left hemisphere of Moira's rump. With a lopsided taunting grin, he said:

"Charley, your wife and I just might be compatible —"

The fuses blew inside my head. The ape broke his chains and took control. Goss slammed into the wall with blood gushing out of his mouth. I caught Moira by the armpit and lifted her up until her toes skipped along the floor as we moved toward the door. People stepped back to give us room.

All during the elevator ride down to our unit on the 175th floor I gritted my teeth and clenched my fists as I struggled to get the ape under control. When the elevator stopped, Moira shot out the door and was gone down the hall before I could move. I stopped at the snack bar and had a glass of warm milk, while I tongued my skinned knuckles and thought about old Goss, knowing he'd report me, and wondering how a big a fine I'd have to pay...

The apartment was dim when I went in. A warm, musty smell came from Moira's bunk. She'd changed her perfume since the party and left her clothes wadded up on the floor. I thought, how she must hate me...

"Moira, I'm sorry I caused a scene."

She muttered something obscene and flopped over to lie toward the wall. I saw that she was nude, and the portion of his anatomy which had caused all the trouble glowed like pale melons.

I pulled a chair out of a wall recess and sat down.

"Look, if you really want Goss..."

She swung her feet to the floor and sat up. "Yes?"

My mind spun out in contemplation of her breasts, which if anything had grown firmer and more delectable during our five years of marriage. I couldn't imagine why she'd daubed her nipples with luminescent rouge, unless she wanted to torment me out of my skull. The thought of her and Goss together made my throat tight, but I managed to force out the words: "I suppose I could endure it, if you wanted to sign into one of the assignation rooms for a weekend."

With one step she was on her feet and standing in front of me. Her hand came out of the darkness and exploded against my cheek. Before I could catch my balance, she brought a second one up from the floor. It slewed my jaw and bounced me against the wall. There wasn't a third blow, because the white ape got loose again and everything went black...

When it was over, the bedclothes were scattered about the boom, the sheet had been ripped, and Moira was putting salve on the teeth marks I'd left on her neck. Standing behind her at the mirror, I daubed disinfectant on a long

ragged scratch on her shoulder.

"We really can't go on this way, Moira."

Looking out through the mirror, her eyes had a soft warm complacent glow. "Why not, Charley?"

"Because ... dammit. I just can't operate on that level. It's... antisocial."

"I don't perform for the benefit of society."

"That's all very well, except that the matrimonial bureau reviews our compatibility every six months. And every fight we get into pulls down our index ten points. And if we drop below fifty, we're kicked out of the matrimonial apartment and have to go into the singles. Would you want that?"

She shuddered. "I don't even want to talk about it."

"Well then..."

She swung around to face me. "What am I supposed to do? You're so ... kind and considerate, Charley. I just can't relate to that, sexually. The only time I really feel an urge is when your eyes go flat and your ears lay back against your head..."

"That's not me. That's the white ape."

"Is that what you call him?" A faint smile touched her lips. "He's nice. I like him."

"One of these days he might kill you." Her eyebrows shot up, and I said, "I'm serious. He really might do that."

She studied me for a minute and then she got up and swung out the wall panel which held the writing desk. Actually it was just a flat board which swung down on hinges. If you live on Earth, you learn to do without certain things. Space, mainly. Our bed folded down, so did the dining table, the seats, and the washbasin. The bathtub was a flexible plastic job which, when fully inflated, left no room for any other activity in our eight-by-eight apartment. For that reason Moira and I always bathed together.

She reached into the mail caddy and took out a plastic card. "I didn't mention this before. It came after our last compatability test, when we scored fifty-five."

I took it and read:

RECONCILIATIONS, INC. Marriage counselors — with a difference. We guarantee to raise your COMP-IND 30 points. Or your money doubly refunded.

I flipped the corner of the card and watched it change to a listing of testimonials — smiling couples who'd gone in with Comp-Ind of forty and come out in the eighties.

I flipped it again and saw a contract in exceptionally fine print,

with a place for thumbprinting at the bottom which assigned a percentage of my salary for X-period of time. I'd never heard of Reconciliations, Inc., but so many outfits had jumped into the resplicing racket since the Compatability Act that it wasn't surprising. I looked at Moira and said, "I think we'd better make sure this is legitimate..."

She — who always argued that I wasn't masterful enough — jerked the card out of my hand and dabbed her thumb on it. I shrugged and dabbed my thumb beside hers. We shoved the card into the mail slot and went to bed.

About dawn the door chimed, and a man in a gray uniform saluted: "Recon, Inc. Don't bother to pack. We'll be on our way."

"To where?"

"Noomyenoh. That's our marriage clinic. You *are* Charles Temple?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, we're all set. We've just got time to get you into the suspension capsules. The Fomalhaut Sector shuttle leaves in an hour."

"But I have to be at work —"

"You've got a twelve-month leave. Arranged by Recon, Inc. We aim to please. Yessir."

"Twelve *months?*"

"Five months each way, two months on the paradise planet of Noomyenoh. You won't be sorry. That's guaranteed."

We were in the tubeways shooting toward the space terminal before I really began to wake up. I leaned over and whispered in Moira's ear, "I just figured out where they got the name 'Noomyenoh.' It's 'honeymoon' spelled backwards."

Moira grunted. "Sounds exciting."

For her, at that hour in the morning, it was breathless enthusiasm. But it didn't dissipate my feeling of unease.

At the spaceport, the Recon representative guided us past the ticket lines and left us at the suspension lockers. Moira had never traveled in space before, and so I helped her into her capsule and made sure her ticket was clamped firmly on the outside.

"As soon as I close the faceplate, you can press the button under your right hand. It puts you to sleep and fills the capsule with preservative fluid. You'll be stacked in the hold of a cargo ship, and you won't know a thing until they wake you up on Noomyenoh."

She nodded. "I'm ready. Close it."

She was wearing the Centaurian moonstone I'd given her on our wedding day; her little white face looked so sweet and childlike inside that metal cylinder that I wanted to

kiss her — but I remembered that Moira hated sentimental good-bys.

I fastened the plate and got in my own cylinder, closed it and pressed the suspend-freeze button...

... and somebody was rubbing my legs. I thought it was Moira and gave a soft amorous moan.

"Getting some feeling back in the old pins, eh?"

The man had the whitest set of teeth I ever saw. They filled his mouth from rim to rim. The rest of him as mediocre: waxy-blond hair combed back from his forehead, rotund high-hipped figure, and a pair of cool hazel eyes that squinted to go with his smile.

"I'm Struble, marriage counselor for Recon. I'm assigned to you and your wife."

He put out his hand, and I used it to pull myself into a sitting position. My stiffness wasn't painful, considering that I'd been immobile for five months.

"Where is Moira?"

"Waiting outside, all ready to begin the second honeymoon." He held out a bunch of clothes. "Put these on."

I pulled on a pair of coarse-woven pantaloons and plaid sox that reached to my knees. The striped white shirt had a row of slits on one side and tiny round disks on the other. "What the hell are these things?"

"Buttons," said Struble. He started pushing the discs through the holes. "Noomyenoh is divided into historical sectors. Your period happens to be earth, Late Victorian — a happy, wholesome time, somewhat thick on sentimentality, but appropriate to your needs." He put a flat straw hat on my head and shoved a walking stick in my hand. "You won't have to carry this all the time. Just for the first impression — which is very important."

I twirled it a couple of times. "What's it for?"

Struble tapped the ivory knob and nudged me with his elbow. "Phallic symbol. The Late Victorians were very-y subtle."

I gasped when I stepped outside the de-suspension station. Noomyenoh was a blazing, blistered planet. The blue-white sun hammered down on a slate-colored plain that stretched like a steel plate from one horizon to the other. I could feel sweat rushing out through my pores.

Then I saw Moira. She wore enough clothes to fill a trunk. A huge bell-shaped skirt brushed the ground around her feet. In back it was bunched up as if she might be carrying an extra change of clothing. Her wide floppy hat carried a fringe of black lace, as did her flowered parasol. Behind the netting her face looked cool and serene. I decided she was getting

good ventilation through the top part of her dress, which left the upper half of her breasts uncovered.

She smiled and held out her hand, and I felt her warmth through the mesh of her glove. "Charles," she said in a sweet voice, "did you have a nice trip?"

Considering that only minutes of subjective time had passed since we'd gotten into our suspension capsules, her kiss was surprisingly passionate. She took my hands and put them around her pliant waist, and I felt an urge to explore the secrets hidden beneath her great tent of fabric...

Struble coughed and pulled out a gigantic chronometer attached to a gold chain. We climbed into an open carriage covered by a canopy fringed with wormy twists of gold braid. Motive power was provided by a mechanical horse balanced on a center wheel that ran on a monorail. It made a rumbling grating sound as we rolled along. Now and then the wind blew a gust of hot stinging sand in my face; I looked to see how Moira was taking it, and she smiled and took my hand.

"This is the beginning of our new life, Charles."

"Did they give you a shot of something?" I asked. "You act sort of narcotized."

"Charles, you're not even trying. Look! It's like a picture!"

The monorail dipped down into a sinkhole about a mile in diameter. At its bottom stood a cluster of buildings at the edge of a swamp. As we drew closer, I saw flat-bottomed boats plowing through the muck, sculled by men dressed in white pants and straw hats like mine. All the boats carried female passengers, whose function seemed to be that of dragging their fingers in the water.

The hotel was a surprise. I'd never seen a building made entirely of wood before. A sign across the front said HONEYMOON HOTEL. It sagged in the center, obviously out of plumb. Moira said it was "darling" — a term I'd never heard her use.

I'd just put my foot on the first step when a man pounded out the front door, cleared all six steps in a single leap, landed rolling on the turf and scuttled behind a lilac bush. Struble's hand caught my shoulder and pulled me down. He dropped Moira too, and I saw what she wore under the hooped skirt: a pair of ruffled pantaloons with blue garters below the knees.

Just then a woman ran out on the porch. This one wore a glittery red dress trimmed in black, with a slit up the side that reached to her hips. She wore no pantaloons, but in her hand she held a small gleaming pistol.

"Did my husband come out?

Ha, there you are, you bastard!"

She raised the gun and fired at the lilac bush. The man screamed and made a humping run across the lawn, dragging one leg. She fired again just as he rounded the corner of the hotel, and I saw a fountain of red spurt from his shoulder. The woman jerked up her dress, vaulted the porch railing, and ran after him. I heard three evenly spaced shots, then silence.

I stared at Struble. "My God. I think she killed him."

He got up and brushed his waxy-blond hair back in place. "Never mind. Their counselor will handle it."

"Shouldn't we call the law?"

"Counselors are the law on Noomyenoh." He looked down and sighed. "Well, well. Your wife appears to have fainted."

I dropped to my knees and rolled Moira onto her back. Her face was as white as bleached muslin. I slapped her cheeks until the color flowed back; then I took off my straw hat and fanned her face. In a minute her eyes fluttered open. She looked so pretty and helpless that I lifted her in my arms and carried her up the steps.

I don't know what historical period the kid behind the desk represented. He had freckles and carrot-colored hair sticking out all around his head. He wore a pink-striped shirt with garters of green satin around his biceps. He gave me a wooden cylinder with a soft lead center, and I inscribed my name in the register. I shoved it in front of Moira, but she shook her head and said in a gentle, chiding voice:

"The gentleman always signs for his wife, Charles."

"How do you know so much?"

"Mr. Struble woke me an hour early and explained the customs."

I turned to Struble, who was leaning against the end of the counter cleaning his teeth with a gold pick. "Struble, is that fair?"

He pulled the toothpick out of his mouth and beckoned me with his finger. Speaking softly, he said, "She's always resented the fact that you're superior ... intellectually. This gives her an edge. Don't you notice she's not nearly so defensive?"

"*She* isn't — but I am. How do you know so much about us?"

"We got a copy of your matrimonial file by subspace relay."

"Oh ... I see."

"Don't question our therapy. Just enjoy the result." He gave me a wink and patted my shoulder. "Room one twenty-eight. Upstairs and turn right."

I was greasy with sweat when we got upstairs. The hall smelled dank and musty, and there was a carpet of dead flies under the window. The

window itself was opaque with grime.

The room was big, clean and airy, with two large windows and a little balcony overhanging the swamp. I opened a side door and was surprised to see that there wasn't a bath. Just a squat enamel pot with a lid on it. On a table sat a white bowl with a pitcher standing in the center. I was wondering how that would affect our custom of bathing together when Moira brushed past me and closed the door gently in my face.

"Sorry, Charles. Ladies of the period were extremely modest."

"You can drop the act. We're alone now."

"I'd rather not, do you mind? Let's give it a real chance, please?"

"Oh, hell —"

"Pretty please?"

"Okay, okay. Let's drop it."

I discovered that the privacy fetish of the period had its compensations. For example, the door had a large keyhole, and I had only to kneel down and put my eye against it to be granted the rare privilege of watching my wife use the potty. It was hardly a revelation due to the hooped skirt which hung to the floor, but an interesting study of her face in repose ...

A hand tapped my shoulder. I whirled and saw Struble, grinning.

"I just thought I'd tell you. If you need anything, I'll be right down the hall. Room one twenty-six."

"Listen, don't trouble yourself."

"No trouble at all. It's what I'm paid for." He shoved his hands in his pockets and strolled out.

I locked the door after him and went back to the keyhole, but Moira must have been disturbed by our voices because she'd hung a towel over it. I went to the window and watched the boaters return to the docks and stroll across the lawn holding hands.

It began to get dark. I called a couple of times and got only muffled indistinct answers from the bathroom. Bugs started flying in, so I shut the windows. With the curtains pulled the room was almost dark.

The bathroom door opened, and Moira came out in a white nightgown which trailed on the floor.

"I waited until dark ..." she whispered. "So I could look pure ... virginal."

The first thing I did was slide my hands under the gown to learn if her sacred attribute was still firm and fully rounded. It was — but I was allowed only a brief electric touch before she shoved me away and gasped, "OH! You're such an ... *animal!*"

The next second she clutched me and murmured against my throat, "I'm sorry. I forgot we're

married. You have the right, Charles, to touch me there if you want. Touch me anywhere ... everywhere."

The bed was an ancient spring mattress hung between four brass posts. It sagged to a trough in the center, which made it impossible to get any distance between us. That wasn't unpleasant at first ... but the room was muggy, and Moira developed a technique of throwing her leg across my hips and murmuring, "Be gentle with me, Charles."

The fourth time she did it I got up and slept on the floor under the window.

I slept under the window often during the following weeks. The hotel had everything — rats, mice, roaches, and a native insect called a skindigger whose bite deadened a square inch of flesh. Then the insect burrowed inside, laid eggs, and crawled out again. The eggs hatched in twenty-four hours, and the offspring channeled to the surface and flew away, leaving festering holes. Struble gave us a repellent which smelled like rotten eggs, and Moira smeared herself like a channel swimmer. Even then the bugs got to her, and she began staying inside the room with the curtains pulled. The place was like a steam bath, and the smell of hydrogen sulfide made me retch every time I went inside.

The worst part of it was that Moira's invalid role seemed to increase her sexual appetite. She became utterly carnivorous. I managed to avoid our fetid room except when it became essential to sponge off the encrustation of dried sweat. Each time I opened the door I would see her white body sprawled out on the bed — modesty had been dropped after the first night — and I would try to tiptoe past, only to be stopped by her dry whispery voice saying:

"Charles, rub me, please ..."

If I ignored her she accused me of trying to spike our second honeymoon. The main problem was that her once-lovely attribute had gone soft. When I pinched her buttocks, my fingers nearly met ...

I gave up trying to make friends with the other guests. Most of them had marital afflictions even worse than mine. One evening I sat eating alone in the dining room and saw a blonde woman fling a bowl of clam chowder into her husband's face. It was scalding hot and must have peeled his skin. He jerked off the tablecloth, wrapped it around his face, and ran out. The blonde grabbed a steak knife and ran after him.

I found Struble in the lobby playing chess with the clerk. He kept his eyes on the board while I

recounted the incident in the dining room.

"Everybody has a different way of working out their problems." Struble reached out and moved his bishop. "Anyway, I can't interfere with another counselor's patients."

"Suppose your own patients get into a similar situation, what then?"

"Then it becomes my problem." He patted my shoulder. "Don't worry, old man, you're a long way from murder."

I heard the muttering snarl of the white ape for the first time since I'd come to Noomyenoh.

I went upstairs to talk it out with Moira. She insisted that I lie beside her. The sheet was sodden with sweat and greased with insect repellent, but I managed to choke back my revulsion. "We should have checked out the company before we came her. What we've got to do is leave before this place drives us into a homicidal frenzy."

"Darling, I feel anything but homicidal toward you."

She rolled against me and stuck her tongue in my ear. I threw myself off the bed and strode out of the room. In the lobby, I seized the edge of the chessboard and flung it into the air. Pieces flew everywhere, and Struble watched me quietly, studiously. I felt like a bug under glass. "Struble..." I said in a choked voice. "My wife is sick, mentally and physically. Your therapy is nonexistent. I'll bet our compatibility has dropped forty points since we came to this crazy place."

Struble picked up the chessboard and began replacing the pieces. "It takes two to make a compatibility index."

"Now what the hell does that mean?"

"Moira loves you now as she never loved you before."

The words struck a warm spot deep in my stomach.

"Well, why doesn't she act happy then? She just lays in that goddamn bed like a big soft pudding ..."

"You wait here. I'll go up and talk to her."

The red-headed clerk trapped me in a fool's mate in three moves. Appropriate, I thought — until I looked up and saw Moira coming down the stairs with her hand on Struble's arm. She wore a long black gown with puffed-out sleeves which left her shoulders and most of her bosom bare. The silver chain of the moonstone disappeared between her breasts. Her hair hung in glossy spirals on her right shoulder, and her eyes misted as she smiled at me ...

We had a gypsy violin player at dinner that night. It was the desk clerk wearing a wig and a costume, but in the dim candlelight I could

almost believe in the illusion. The food wasn't bad, but Moira sat so close that I couldn't get my arms free to eat properly.

During the wine a three-piece combo came in and started playing a slow monotonous tune. Moira put her hand over mine and said, "Darling, that's our song. Shall we dance?"

I couldn't remember that we had any song, but I got up and we shuffled around the open space. Moira started humming in my ear; it sounded like somebody blowing through wax paper on a comb.

I shuddered.

Moira giggled. "Charles, you know what I forgot?"

"The tune?"

"No! I completely forgot to wear anything under this gown."

I thought of our muggy, smelly room and decided to ignore her remark. The next thing she said was:

"There are two moons out tonight. We could take one of the boats over to Enchanted Isle."

It was something to do. While I rowed, Moira dragged her hand through the scum. Enchanted Isle was nothing but a floating raft adorned with huge plastic trees and covered with a spongy cushion of artificial grass. You could flop down about anywhere and do the sex thing, as several couples were doing in spite of the brilliant moonlight. Moira found a secluded spot behind a shrub and sat down; spreading her gown out around her. I excused myself and walked to the edge of the island, intending to relieve myself before ...

No, to be honest, I wanted to postpone the Moment of Truth, because for the first time in my life I felt no desire for Moira.

I noticed a man rowing across the lake with his spouse seated in the stern. I guess he didn't see me because I stood in the shadow of a tree ... anyway, he lifted his oar and swung it in a wide arc. I saw crystalline droplets fly off the end and then ... thwack! It struck the woman's temple edge-on. Without a sound she flopped sideways and hung over the side of the boat, her limp arms trailing in the water. I stood there, frozen in horror, as the man laid his oar in the boat, seized the woman's legs, and dumped her over the side. Her dress ballooned out around her, keeping her afloat although she was obviously dead. The man picked up his oar and placed it in the small of her back, pushing her under and holding her there until the bubbles stopped rising. Then he sat down and rowed back toward the hotel ...

I ran to Moira, grabbed her hand, and jerked her to her feet. I gasped out what had happened while I dragged her into the boat and rowed to the place where the

woman had gone down. I dived, but the lake seemed bottomless at that point. At last I rowed back to the hotel, soaked and winded. Moira went up to the room while I went looking for Struble. He was nowhere around; the dining room was closed and locked; even the desk clerk was absent.

I went up to the room and sat looking out the window. "We've got to get out of here, Moira."

"Charles, I wish you'd come to bed ..."

"God, a woman was murdered and that's all you can think of."

"I didn't see her murdered. I'm not sure you did either."

"Well, I did."

"What did the man look like?"

"I couldn't make out his face. He was wearing a pair of white trousers, a flat straw hat, and ..." I broke off, realizing that the description could fit most men at the hotel, including myself.

Shortly after dawn I went down and spoke to the red-headed desk clerk. "Did you know one of your guests drowned last night?"

He nodded and waved his hand at the cubbyholes. "Sure. I just put the pink slip in her box."

My mouth felt dry. "That's all you do, put a pink slip in her box?"

"No. I also notify the chef to fix one less meal."

"Even if the guest has been ... murdered?"

"That's usually the case."

My knees felt weak and trembly. "Was there by any chance a man shot and killed the night we arrived?"

He frowned as he flipped back through the register. "Yes. A ... Mr. Boyle."

"I see. It happens often then?"

He nodded solemnly. "Quite often."

"Well, it's not going to happen to Moira and me. Check us out of this madhouse. And get us two suspension-capsules on the first transport."

He shook his head. "Can't do it without orders from Struble. You're his patient."

I searched the hotel for Struble, without success. I circled the grounds in ever-increasing concentric circles, to no avail. The other counselors gave curt evasive replies to my searching questions. The other guests merely shook their heads dumbly, and I saw in their eyes that they had their own secret miseries. I followed the monorail track across the blistering plain to the de-suspension station. It was sealed. There was no way off the planet except through Struble.

Dusk was falling when I trudged up the steps to the hotel. I found Struble in the dining room, addressing himself to a table burdened with salads, sauces, meats, and bottles of wine.

"We're ready to leave," I said.

He forked a steaming cube of steak into his mouth, chewed with slow deliberation, then took a slug of red wine.

"Have a seat," he said finally. "You're not going anywhere until your therapy's finished."

"Now look ..." I gripped the edge of the table. "I don't care if we go out of here with a compatibility index of minus zero. We ... want ... *out!*"

"Ah?" He wiped his fingers on a napkin. "You consulted Moira?"

"She's under some kind of euphoric drug. And that's another thing —"

I was shaking my finger at him, and he lifted his hand and pushed it aside. "All this is beside the point. I call your attention to clause four of your contract." He recited in a bored singsong: "'Until such time as the citizen-unit achieves a compatibility index at or above the minimum of seventy-five, it is a citizen of Noomyenoh and subject to all the laws of said state.'"

"What's a citizen-unit?"

"Man-and-wife. 'What God hath joined, let no law put asunder.'"

"Okay. What does it mean?"

"It means that you can't leave yet." He spread out his hands and lifted his shoulders. "Look, we can't let you go back to Earth saying that Reconciliations, Incorporated, failed. Or suing us for double your money. What the hell, Temple, a patient doesn't leave a hospital until the doctor discharges him as cured, or until all possible approaches have been tried and he is pronounced incurable."

"Some patients are pronounced dead."

"True. But if you're talking about the woman who fell in the water last night ..."

"She was bashed in the head with a paddle."

"You saw this in a clear light?"

"I wouldn't say a clear light. But I saw it clearly."

"And you examined her pulse to make sure she was dead?"

"Hell, I didn't have to examine..." I broke off, noting the glitter of cold amusement in Struble's eyes. I lowered myself into a seat, feeling hot and prickly. A sick-sweetness rose in the back of my throat as I realized that Struble knew all about the killing — and didn't care.

"I get it," I said. "I can't prove a thing, can I?"

He shrugged. "Why should you try? She wasn't your wife."

"But ... you're so open about it. How do you get away with it?"

"Reconciliations, Incorporated, owns this planet and administers the laws. When you contracted our services, you became a citizen." He permitted himself a smile. "You

really should have read the contract, old boy."

"And this character who knocked off his wife ... what happens to him?"

"He'll be discharged and allowed to leave the planet after some ... formalities."

"Like an agreement to keep his mouth shut?"

"It would hardly be in his interest to tell how he'd killed his wife, would it?" Struble laughed suddenly. "We're getting melodramatic now. It's just that when a citizen-unit is dissolved, through death or divorce, it no longer has a legal existence on Noomyenoh."

"Did you say divorce?"

"I did."

"What happens to your money-back guarantee then?"

"Our guarantee is based upon the compatibility index. Single persons have no index. You see how it works?" He smiled and poured out a glass of wine. "Let's talk about something else. Food, for example. Have you ever tried this?"

He pushed over a plate containing a pancake-sized organism with six short tentacles. It looked like an underfed octopus which had been run over by a monorail. "What is it?"

"A native sea animal called the fifth-column squid. It allows itself to be devoured, then kills the predator from within so the rest of the group can feed. Very tasty, but—" he pointed to a white ring the size of a pill in the center of the creature "— very dangerous. The squid kills with this tiny coil. As soon as the digestive juices penetrate, the coil snaps open into a foot-long sliver of razor-sharp bone, slashing into the vitals of the eater while it threshes in agony and attempts to regurgitate the object. Then the sliver dissolves, and the other squids dine at leisure."

I took the fork and poked at the white ring. "Why don't they cut it out before they cook it?"

"Ruins the flavor." He reached over, deftly cut out the bone and put it beside the plate. "Feel safer now?" He patted my arm. "It won't hurt unless you swallow it. Now eat in peace. I have to do a few things."

The squid had a subtle flavor, a little like sweetbreads, but sharper. I ate silently, meditating on the murder I'd seen. No doubt the man had gotten desperate to leave the planet, and had chosen what he thought was the only way out. Possibly he'd never thought of divorce, which was infinitely more humane. Simpler, too ...

I pushed back my chair and got up. As I climbed the stairs, I rehearsed what I would say to Moira: *I love you, but* ... Then Moira would say ...

When I opened the door to our room, Moira was in no position to

say anything. She lay face-down on the bed with her gown up under her armpits. Struble sat beside her with his back toward me. His body hid his hands so that I couldn't see what he was doing, but I knew he wasn't a masseur, and he wasn't a doctor ...

I slammed the door so hard that one of the panels fell out. But there was nothing I could do about it. Charley Temple had been shoved aside. The White Ape had taken control.

Struble moved fast for a fat man. He scurried across the floor and into the bathroom, slamming the door ... I tore it open, figuring I had him cornered — but he dived through a sliding panel in the opposite wall. I remembered he had the adjoining room.

I lifted my foot to kick through the wall, but Moira grabbed me from behind.

"Charles, please! He was only putting salve on my sores —"

I swung around and pushed her away, forgetting that I was filled with the strength of the white ape. She flew across the room, bounced off the bed, and slammed against the wall. She rolled under the bed, and I heard her weeping softly.

I dropped to my hands and knees and saw her cringe back against the wall. "Charley, don't hit me, please ..."

"For God's sake, Moira. What's wrong with you? A month ago you'd have been crawling all over me."

She crawled out and stood up, wiping her eyes. Her gown had been ripped down the front, and there was no blinking the fact that she'd deteriorated. Her belly had grown a roll of fat, and her breasts were two formless globs of tissue.

She gave me a trembling, timid smile. "All you have to do is *ask*, Charles."

I discovered I didn't care what she and Struble had been doing, nor how many nights she'd slipped through the secret panel while I snored beneath the window.

"Let it go," I said tightly. "Let's go down to dinner."

When we were seated in the dining room, I switched off the table lamp and had the waiter bring a candle. I took her soft sweaty hand and told her that I still loved her but the therapy was worse than useless, and I had strong doubts about the legitimacy of Recon, Inc.

"The only way we can leave is if we both agree to a divorce."

She shook her head slowly. "I won't do that, Charley."

"It's only to get away."

"I don't believe that, Charley. I think you're trying to trick me." She looked at me, her eyes swimming in tears. "I'd die before I agree to a divorce."

Somewhere in the back of my mind, the white ape spread his teeth in a grin. "All right, then. We'll drop it. Now what would you like to eat?"

"Whatever you suggest, Charley."

"I think you'd enjoy the squid, Moira."

Lying on the floor of the barred room in the cellar, I could still hear it: the muffled snap like a switchblade opened inside a blanket; Moira's surprised grunt; the tinkle as her glass shattered on the floor; her screams as she threshed among the blood and broken slivers. And, after what seemed like an hour, her last gurgling breath.

The floor was hard and the stone wall oozed smelly pearls of moisture. Struble shoved his round face against the bars and looked down at me.

"How do you feel now?"

"Hot, wet and miserable. When can I leave this hellhole?"

"Just as soon as you sign this." He tossed a rolled scroll through the bars. I opened it and saw that it gave Moira's name, age and description, time of death and the cause: multiple stab wounds in the abdomen. It also had a paragraph stating that I had with full knowledge ordered the squid and permitted her to eat it without warning her about the bone.

"And if I sign this, what? The Earth government will indict me for murder."

"They'll do nothing. As I told you before, they have no jurisdiction here. Recon, Incorporated, owns the planet and enforces the laws."

"You don't really care, do you, that a woman has lost her life? You just want to avoid a lawsuit."

"*I* didn't kill her, Temple. And you don't have the whole story yet."

I got up and paced the cell, trying to grasp the reason for Struble's smug complacency. The therapy had failed — hadn't it? I shoved my hands in my pockets and felt something hard and granular. I pulled it out and saw the silver chain with the Centaurian moonstone on the end. I couldn't remember taking it off her body, but there it was, flashing green fire...

I understood most of it then. Picking up the scroll, I read it through once more and signed my name at the bottom. Beneath that I wrote: *Now I'd like to see my wife.*

Struble took the document and read it with a frown. "You mean you'd like to view the body?"

"Not the body. Moira. I know she's alive. Come on, Struble!"

He studied me for a minute, then unlocked the cell. "How did you find out?"

I walked into the corridor and stretched. "Her whole attitude was off-key from the beginning. I thought she was just trying hard until I knocked her down in the bedroom. Usually our fights led to a wild, swinging orgy. This time she cried. But I didn't put it together until I took a good look at the moonstone." I held it out. "Green. I gave Moira a blue stone."

Struble sighed. "A Centaurian moonstone is impossible to duplicate, and no android is perfect — though I think ours are outstanding."

I remembered the blood and screams in the dining hall. "Oh, yes. Very convincing. Now I want to see the real Moira."

Struble nodded. "Let's go into my office."

There was a blue rug and a table with three chairs grouped around it. I dropped into one and put my feet up. "Struble, I don't care if you are the law; if I don't see Moira pretty soon, I'll break your neck."

Struble sat down, took a cigarette out of a box and offered me one. "You don't have the complete picture yet, Temple. Your marriage was failing because of another woman — not a real woman, but the ideal you'd created in your mind. You wanted your wife, true; but you wanted her to hang onto your words, laugh at your jokes, be warm and loving and sentimental. We provided that kind of woman."

"You mean that blob of slush ... that was my ideal?"

He nodded. "You thought so. I merely programmed the android to exaggerate it, vulgarize it even, and forced you into close association with her. When you reached the breaking point, we created a situation in which you had to cause her death, and we provided you with the opportunity." He shook his head. "You gave me a bad moment, Temple — walking in while I was programming the android for the kill."

"I see. And what was the point of signing a confession?"

"You had to reject your ideal consciously and unconsciously. You killed indirectly — as we knew you would, considering your temperament. The white ape fantasy was merely an attempt to be what you thought your wife wanted. But there was danger that your conscious mind wouldn't accept responsibility for it — and you had to realize that you'd killed your ideal voluntarily and with malice aforethought."

He got up, walked to the wall, and slid back a panel to reveal a viewscreen. "Your wife had a higher patience threshold than you did. We're hoping she'll be ready for discharge soon, but..." He

shrugged. "Let's see for ourselves."

He flipped a switch, and Moira's face filled the screen. She wore a parka with the hood thrown back. Her hair blew in a strong wind. I saw ice-covered peaks in the background.

"What's she doing out there?"

"Can't you figure it? Moira's ideal was a man more physically aggressive than you had ever been. He's run her to exhaustion for a month — skin diving, surfing, air diving, hockey, tennis, and now mountain climbing. She's near the breaking point."

I could see that she'd also caught a few punches. One eye was nearly swollen shut, and the purple-yellow stain of a recent bruise marred her cheekbone.

I watched her open a pocketknife with her teeth.

The view broadened, and I saw that she was clinging to a sheer cliff. A piton protruded from a rock beside her, and a rope stretched taut below it. The camera descended along the rope, and I saw the man climbing up toward her.

He looked exactly like me.

Thinking of his month-long intimacy with Moira, I hated him, though I knew he was an android. The rope went slack, and I watched him fall, arms windmilling as he bounced off the ledge below, then fell out of the picture turning end over end.

With a savage grin Moira threw the knife after him.

"That wraps it up." Struble clicked off the set. "As soon as we get her confession, you're ready to get back together. You'll have almost a whole month for a real honeymoon."

Welcome back Zenna Henderson, with a brand new story about the People . . .

Katie-Mary's Trip

by ZENNA HENDERSON

See — we've got this pad, like — you know? — an old farmhouse with a broad porch all around it. The local yokels call it the hippy-joint, and when the local fuzz need something to fill out a shift, they cruise up and down in front of the place and make like busy.

Now, I know it's not for real — this hippy bit. Not here. Lots of dudes and chicks stop here on their way to the Coast where the Real is. But they never stay here — not the McCoy. They all drift on in a day or two except the ones that can't or won't conform. They can't buy the whole bit and so they drop out — too individual. Listen, if you think conforming is for squares or the establishment — think twice. You conform to the hippy thing or, brother, you're out!

Take the language, for one. I've had drop-ins wrinkle foreheads at me, trying to understand me. So once I listened to myself for a while and found that I'm pretty much of a polyglot. Any form of language that pleases me, I adopt it. *Warum nicht?* But if you don't have the vocabulary of a movement — you aren't with it. You know?

No, the ones that stay on here for any time at all are the individualists — the loners who have no pack to run with, who are looking for something and think maybe if they stay in one place long enough, like here where the stream of transients flows, whatever they're looking for will come by.

And me? I've been waiting here the longest. It hasn't come by yet. Or maybe that's what passed me by.

I started this joint. Unintentionally. When I first found this place — way back there when I was still struggling, thinking maybe that was the way, I walked through its empty, echoing, dust cloud-

spawning rooms. Nothing — lovely nothing — all around, bracketed by walls and floor and roof to italicize this particular bit of nothing. I looked out the windows. On three sides — nothing, to the edge of the sky. No hills or mountains to hold up the sky, and so the peak of the roof was all that kept the sky from being flat to the ground. On the other side, the barnyards and beyond — the beginning of town. I wouldn't need to look that way.

So I square-pointed the silt out of the rooms, swept the dust out, then mopped down to the bare boards. I straightened the stove pipe and lighted a fire in the potbelly. Then, for a long, satisfying evening, I sat on my bedroll on the floor and watched the fire flicker and glow behind the splintery isinglass in the cast-iron door.

I don't know who or what started it, but a couple of months later, people began drifting in to doss down on my floor. I never bothered with furniture. There were a few empty apple boxes around to put our lights on, or if someone had to sit high. I finally put up a couple more potbellied stoves and got the kitchen range — *Kalamazoo Direct to You* — in working order, the water reservoir and all, and nailed a slotted box inside by the front door. If someone wanted to drop a bit of bread in it as they drifted in or out — okay. If not, *Ca ne fait rein.*

After an initial period of revulsion, I began not to mind having strangers — none of my responsibility — around me. And, finally, I rather enjoyed it.

The other regulars?

Well, there's this chick, Katie-Mary. She's weird. Always spouting about Doing Her Thing. And keeping her area of floor on the chick side clean — bone clean — clear down to the grain of the shreddy old boards. Even to pushing and scraping out the long gray plugs of dirt and fuzz that took years to petrify between the planks. So when it's windy, the draft comes up through all those emptinesses from the crawl space under the joint and sets the edges of her blankets rippling all around her. She nearly froze last winter. The rippling scared another steady chick, Doos, into screaming half of one night because she could see the Serpent undulating around Katie-Mary — The Rosy Serpent of Contemplation who is unique among serpents in that he has a navel. But Katie-Mary'd get up each morning, stiff with the cold, and work up a sweat scrubbing her bit of floor again.

She had to carry the water from outside — no plumbing. There's a handpump standing up on a bare

pipe in the back yard. We wrap it with burlap when freezing time comes — if we remember. And there's two outhouses — male and female, created we them.

Sometimes we're crowded — but Katie-Mary's not. We shove over and make room, but no one wants to step into that tawny white rectangle of Katie-Mary's. Which brings up another bit that bugs the transients. We operate dormwise — segregated. No cohabiting. *Weird, man, weird!*

Well, to get on, some night last spring, this dude came roaring in on his chopper. Young kid — the whole cycle bit — black leather, spaceman helmet, the kind that reflects so you can't see through it. Kinda filled the joint that first night, you know? There you'd be, rapping with someone, and there he'd be, listening like — like — well, like a thirsty guy drinks. But some of the congregation began to get real uptight, and he nearly got clobbered a couple of times — just for listening. But remember, his listening was like the sucking of a vacuum. Finally I decided I'd better point out to him the error of his ways, not wanting open warfare. I stopped at his shoulder — and for a minute there I thought I was having a delayed replay of a bad trip. It was like — like, well, like a drift of Something curling around the cerebellum, poking in long question marks and raking at the roots of me, trying to find — to know —

Then he grinned at me lazylike, over his shoulder and said, "Yeah, I'll cool it, Frederic — no open warfare."

And he went looking for a place to doss down, while I stood blinking, wondering, my unused words drying my mouth out, hearing my right name for the first time since —

He ended up in what used to be a pantry, barely large enough to lie down in, and you'd rap your knuckles on two walls if you stretched too quickly.

"Central," he answered — before I asked. "Easy reaching."

I thought he'd be long gone come morning, but he wasn't. He stayed — a dropout.

He never had much to say, but there seemed always to be someone rapping with him. His thing was listening, except it seemed to me that his listening was asking. He was a Hunter, too, a Waiter. But sometimes he'd break in and start asking questions, out loud. But, then, he wasn't the Listener any more. So the other dude — or chick, maybe — 'd split, and the Listener would roar off on that Pollution Producer (Noise) and manage to come back sometime after the last candle or lamp — no electricity — was doused, without

waking me. And I'm a light sleeper.

Don't know the rationale, but there for a while several months ago, we were bulging. Must have been a wholesale migration to the Coast — maybe the lemming syndrome?

The pump in the yard squeaked at all hours. There were lines forming to the two-holer outhouses. Matches flared fitfully from every corner.

Candles, sure! But this lamp bit! Lookit the damn thing smoke! Yiy! That glass thing's hot! Hey, it does give light! What they won't think of next!

Separate? Man, I can't sleep without my old lady! I mean, like the eyes won't close —

Happy insomnia. My thing is running this joint — the way I want to. You're free to split.

Yeah. Free. The next pad eighty miles down the pike!

So, for a while there, the joint filled and emptied like it was breathing, and the slotted box by the front door filled and emptied too. Bread stacked up until I thought maybe of electricity — but unthought it in a hurry. First thing I knew about Katie-Mary's trip was in the lovely lull after all the crowdedness. Guesky, another stayer — ostensibly, his thing is contemplating, which looks on him about the same as sleeping, if you ask me. I think his real thing is seeing how little activity he can get along with, this side of dying. So it was a real departure for him to climb all the way up to my pad in the unfinished attic that spread blankly across the top of the whole house, dust undisturbed except immediately around me. He nudged me awake with his foot. *He* sleeps on a bench. Can't get up and down good enough for the floor. His meat's in his way.

"Hey, man — shake it!" he said. "Katie-Mary's back. Got back 's evening. Man, she had a bad trip. Still freakin' out. She's down there shrieking and hammering the floor. Doos don't wanta touch her. Says she sees alienation all around her —"

"Nothing I can do," I yawned, scratching me where the blankets had been scratching too long.

"Stop her mouth or something," said Guesky, "Till she shakes the trip."

"What she on?" I asked. "I thought her thing was the next-to-godliness bit —"

"No, man you ain't with it!" Guesky's voice squeaked. "She split. She traveled. She went off with some dude after he ran her down in town with his wheels. She split, man. *She — was — gone!* Now she's back, shrieking and hammering the floor."

"Better the Listener than me,"

I said, sliding back under my blanket, cradling the back of my head on my bent elbow. "Katie-Mary and I, we don't jibe. She's always expecting me to expect her to expect me to make a pass at her. Better the Listener."

So Guesky went away and I shut my eyes. But they didn't stay shut. What was bugging Katie-Mary? She was usually fairly unflappable.

Finally I rolled over until my ear felt the chill of the metal grating set in my floor. It was above one in the ceiling of the chicks' dorm. No, you can't see down through it. Dirt, dust, cobwebs and a four-inch offset between gratings, that's why. But if Guesky had brought the Listener instead of taking Katie-Mary —. He had.

Katie-Mary's voice was the only one I heard. The Listener was The Compleate Listener.

"...wasn't hurt but it shook him so bad that I took him to Harmon Park until he got his cool back. He said he wasn't used to driving. 'Not on streets' he said!" Katie-Mary's voice was rising and thinning. "'And you don't meet many pedestrians above the trees!'

"That started it," said Katie-Mary. "That hooked me. I hung around wondering how long he could keep up a line like that. He asked me again if I was hurt, and I told him again he'd only nudged me, not even to push me off my feet. He was so relieved, he began to talk — like, man! *talk!* Sometimes he'd pull up and look sorry for something he'd told, but off he'd go again.

"Seems like he'd left his People. No, not a runaway. They gave him the car and what I suppose was the local equivalent of their blessing. Old. The car was old. But it ran brand new. He liked my talk about doing your thing and letting others do theirs.

"'I told them, 'he said, so pleased! 'I told them no one minded anymore. Nobody'd care if I forgot and — and lifted instead of walking — or — other — little — things — like — that.'" KatieMary was having trouble with her articulation and voice modulation. There was a gasping silence; then her voice squealed hysterically.

"You think he was putting me on? Man, are you ever wrong! Did you know he didn't buy drop one of gas for that weird set of wheels of his the whole time he was in town. He laughed when I asked him about it. 'Oh, I don't need gas. I just lift the car so there's just enough pressure to make the wheels turn. Of course, I do have to let the motor make enough noise to be convincing.'" Katie-Mary sobbed noisily, then gulped and went on.

"He was so pleased to hear anyone could do anything any more

and not — not — oh, I said that! But he *was*. Seems like his People — it sounds like a commune, but it isn't. I saw — anyway, they've always been out of step with everyone — all of them. And uptight about letting anyone know. He — what? Oh, his name's Degal — no, just Degal. I never asked.

"'It's a good joke on the People,' he told me once, like as if his People were the only people around. 'They think they're so different, and all along — wait until I tell them! You *do* have Sensitives, don't you?'

"'What's that?' I asked.

"'Oh, you know. Maybe you call them something else. You know — to touch the suffering — to read the reason for pain and illness. To go in. To heal.'

"'Man, you've flipped!' I told him. 'This faith-healing bit. Well, sure, if you go for that kind —' But he looked at me —" Katie-Mary's voice faltered. I barely could hear her when she spoke again, small and soft and wondering. "Then I felt him in my mind — asking — asking — hoping. Then he was gone — disappointed — still wanting to hope. Some way — some way I'd failed.

"'Some of our People,' he said in a hurry I guess, to comfort me, 'have been so closed for so long that they find it hard to open to anyone, too. I'm sorry.'"

"No," Katie-Mary said to a murmur. "Not all at one time. Oh, a month or six weeks. Little bits and pieces at different times. He's so young — Oh, older than I am, but so young — so *new*—" Tears were gone from her voice but not the wonder.

"I asked him once where he came from. 'From the Home,' he said. 'Orphan's home?' I asked. He laughed. 'No! From the Home! Of course, *I* didn't. I was born on Earth, in the Canyon, but my grandfather —' Get this, man. '—my grandfather was one who came to Earth from the Home.' 'How?' I asked. He said, like wondering why I'd ask something so plain, 'Why, in the ship, of course. At the Crossing!'

"That did it," said Katie-Mary. "Flying saucers yet. 'What you on?' I asked him. 'On?' he asked, then waited a minute and laughed. 'I don't need to be *on* anything to get high. Watch this!'"

Katie-Mary's voice faltered. "I didn't want to watch after the first little bit. I — I was afraid. I couldn't understand. I thought maybe I *was* out of my skull. But I kept looking—

"We were down by the river, at the bend, one night. A bright night. He told me the moon was poured out on the water, and it looked like it. Well, he shot up into the air over the river like a rocket.

Then up there above the shining water, above the shadowy trees, he — he — you know? like those gymnasts at the Olympics — on TV — only not held down. No danger of falling. No sweat. Easy — fast — like a wingless bird. Like a jet gone mad. When he came down with a swoosh, laughing and panting and saying, 'That's the kind of high—' he found me huddled and scared under the trees, and he stopped smiling. He — he patted my shoulder. He said he was sorry. That he shoulda known I didn't mean a physical high —

"No!" Katie-Mary's voice lifted. "No — not anything! You *know* I wasn't! I don't, ever! He did! He — he flew — he did! He did!

"Then what? Then he asked me to split with him. To go meet his People. To prove to them that they didn't need to keep being isolated any more. That it was time for them to move out into society and share all their Gifts and Persuasions —"

I heard Katie-Mary squeal, "Don't — don't! You're hurting me!"

And the Listener with rough anger in a voice I hadn't heard enough really to know: "You're — putting — me — on!" He grated. "Who clued you? Who told —!"

"No!" Katie-Mary squealed again. "Nobody —!"

"Sorry." The Listener's voice really was. "Forget it. Just forget it—"

I heard Katie-Mary's wail cut off in the middle of a word. I was about to scramble out of the sack when I heard her ask blankly, "Where was I?"

"He asked you to split —" prompted the Listener.

"*Yeah,* he did," said Katie-Mary. She sighed a long sigh as though she'd never breathe in again. "I can't," she said. "I can't."

"Yes," said the Listener. "Tell and it'll be gone."

"It was at night." Her voice was very quick and tiptoey, as though she was afraid she'd break through into something. "It was at night or I'd have flipped completely. We — we never touched a tire to a road. We never *saw* a road after we left town. I pried my eyes open once and saw mountains streaming by under us — way, *way* under us — like a jaggedy river streaked with white foam. And all the time he jabbered on and on with that space opera of his about the Home and the — the Crossing and — well, I stopped listening. I wanted out. I wanted out bad. I shivered and he — he smiled and said, 'Oh, sorry.' *And the car got warm!* All around. Softly, gently — lovingly —"

Katie-Mary's voice slowed and faltered. "Oh, can't you see?" she cried passionately. "Can't you

understand? I haven't told you everything! I haven't told you all the bits and pieces Degal told me that kept fitting together and getting clearer and clearer until that night, when he finally shouted, 'There!' and the car tilted and swooshed down like — like an eagle — and I saw his People coming up for him, pale faces way down there, streaming up to meet him in the air. And the car door opening to let him shoot out into all kinds of happy surroundings like Arms, and Love and Returning and — and the car drifted down, tilting back and forth like a dry leaf, the left door flapping open and shut, open and shut. And me tick-tocking back and forth inside the car, hanging on for dear life, while outside —

"I was outside that beautiful world — Degal's Home — that he thought wasn't so much different from the way the world is now. Oh, *brother!*

"I reached over and flipped on the car lights. As the car swung, the lights swept back and forth across treetops and the happy chattering group darting around like big humming birds, clustering around Degal.

"You know what those car lights looked like to me all at once? Do you know?" She was crying again, her voice choked.

"*And he placed at the east of the Garden,*" *the Listener said slowly, "a flaming sword which turned every way to keep —*"

"To keep me out," said Katie-Mary. "Oh, I walked in, all right. I met them all. I met Valancy and Jemmy — they're the Wheels. And Robelyn — that girl with the big eyes, all for Degal — and all those cunning little kids learning to fly across the creek. One of them fell in when she forgot how halfway across. They pulled her out and hugged her and teased her and gave her a goodie to stop her tears. The goodie was a fruit that made music when she took a bit of it. Her teeth were crimson from the juice when she giggled.

"I was there for — well, I can't tell you how long. One night I didn't sleep for wondering what I'd got into. Another night I leaned on the windowsill and watched Degal and that Robelyn up against the moon and the treetops doing a sort of wild, wonderful dance, or something, all in the sky. And it seemed like it was to music — music that moved them like light moves — oh, there aren't words! But there wasn't any music either, when they disappeared. I guess their moving made the music. I listened with all my eyes —"

"And below my window someone said, 'Skying? Already? Valancy'd better hurry the spinning.' And happy laughter moving away.

"But all the time I felt under — way down — as if I had to look up—

"No! No way! They never put me down — not ever. They wouldn't! They they couldn't! Together. One. Loving. Helping. Oh, you know! So many people talk it — they *do* it!"

The Listener murmured into her tired silence.

"No, no lockstep at all," Katie-Mary said. "Everyone's his own self. No one does something just because others do — except maybe the children."

Again a murmur.

"No different from any town in the hills," said Katie-Mary. "Campers stop for directions. They don't notice anything, except they go away smiling and comfortable. Not many come. The Canyon is out of the way —

"Yes, there's a road — but it's not much of one. They — because of course, they don't use it much."

Katie-Mary's voice was tired now — no longer twanging like a too-tight string. "I still remember the soft sound of footsteps back and forth, back and forth. They have a big room for a meeting place, and I heard the footsteps upstairs — back and forth, back and forth. It kinda bugged me, and Karen laughed and took me up there. Valancy was there spinning thread on a huge spinning wheel like in old pictures. Not sitting — pacing back and forth across the floor, in and out of the splash of sun that came through a little window, pulling the thread out fine and letting it wind on a spindle.

"That finished me — again," Katie-Mary whispered painfully. "She was spinning the sunlight into thread! Sun! Maybe something else with it," She answered the Listener. "But all I saw was the sun. 'It's special,' Karen told me. 'For weddings and christenings. We weave it —" She held up a piece of light and smoothed her hand across it. It changed colors as she stroked it. 'We don't decide what color to hold it until we're ready to use it.' I wish now I had touched it. I was afraid to. Did you ever stroke the sun?

"Imagine! Cloth of the sun and a guy out back chopping wood for the fireplaces. No roads 'cause they don't need them — and the kids picking peas in the garden for supper —"

There was a long silence, and I wondered if Katie-Mary had gone to sleep. She sounded tired enough. But the silence sounded busy — awfully busy. Then the Listener said something brief and broken.

"*Take* you there!" Katie-Mary's voice squealed into life. "No way, man! No way! I'm not bleeding again for *no* dude! No way!" Then her voice changed and pleaded. "I

can't. Honest, I can't. Not even if you are lost. Not even if you've been looking all your life. I can't! I don't know the way — *remember?* How do you expect me to remember a road we never touched? You think maybe there are signposts on *clouds?* I don't even know which direction — except —" her voice was thoughtful. "Except just before we started to walk down into the Canyon, the sun came up behind us and pointed our shadows into the Canyon."

Silence again.

Then Katie-Mary: "Oh, no! Not another kook! What's with me that every —" Her surrendering sigh was long and wavery, clearly audible to me. "Okay, then, okay. Maybe this *is* my thing I've been waiting here all this time to do. Okay, you do that." She was resigned. "If you think you can make me have total recall, okay, we'll give it a try. I don't think my total will be very, but I'm too tired to fight with you. One kook more—"

I scrambled down the ladder.

They were waiting for me just outside the door, already on the bike, helmets in hand. Katie-Mary looked at me helplessly. "I'll be back," she said. "He says I will." She nodded against the back of the Listener and pulled the helmet down and busied herself with the fastenings.

The Listener smiled at me — like and eager child bursting with anticipation — maybe for Christmas. "Thanks, Frederic," he said. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," I said, "I think. But what for?"

"Your floor was comfortable. The water was cool." He grinned at me. "And Katie-Mary was here." He pulled on his face-covering helmet. Light ran across the dark blankness where his face had been. I caught myself looking down at his hands to see if they were green — a little green man from — where? But he had gloves on.

I didn't see them after they left the rectangle of lamplight by the open door. I stood there a long time in the cold slant of light until the stuttering roar of their going was long gone.

Sometimes I think it was a century — other times it was maybe ten minutes before Katie-Mary was standing there again in the lamplight, her face quiet and unsmiling. Actually, it was about a week. I think.

"Hi, chick!" I said. "Come on in." If I hadn't stepped back, she would have walked right into me. She was like a dream walker.

"I took him," she said. "On that chopper of his. We split all that lovely, horrible silence. It was like sharp slinters all around us

when we finally stopped at the Canyon. Degal was there at the entrance to the Canyon, waiting. And the Old Ones, Jemmy and Valancy. And the girl with big eyes. How could they have known?

"The Listener sat there waiting — even after I got down. Then Degal said, 'Hi, Katie-Mary. Hi, Listener!'" Something rippled across Katie-Mary's face. "He never ever met the Listener before, but he knew him.

"Then the Listener got down. Just left his bike standing there, and it didn't fall. He looked at those People from the Canyon. Then he — he — the Listener, all black in his biking outfit, lifted up in the air and stumbled toward them, as awkward as those little kids just learning to fly. They lifted up to him and they all touched hands and he didn't stumble any more.

"'Home?' asked the Listener as they settled slowly back down on the hillside.

"'Home,' said Jemmy. 'I'm Jemmy and this is —'

"'Valancy and Robelyn,' said the Listener. He smiled. He was another person. You — you'd hardly recognize him. All at once he was way too big for how small I remembered him." Katie-Mary suddenly sagged to the floor and sat, her empty hands, palm up on the floor on each side of her, her hair falling forward and hiding her turned-down face. After a while her voice woke again.

"It was so — so warm that I nearly froze to death outside. Forever outside. Waiting. They were talking. All of them. So fast — so fast! And all at the same time. And — not — one — sound!

"When they finally stopped and looked at me, I had to look twice before I could tell which was the Listener and which was Degal. They had the same shiningness. The same — you know? — they'd put it all together.

"'Thank you, Katie-Mary,' said the Listener. 'All my life I've been looking, not even knowing if I'd ever find. Thank you. We'll send you home again —'" She peered up through her hair at me. "*We*, not 'they' or 'I,' but *we'll* send you home again, he said. 'And give you forgetfulness after you tell Frederic. You'll be happier so. Frederic needs to know the ending. Loose ends distress him.'

"They sent me back," Katie-Mary's face was tilted up, eyes closed, her hand tangled in her hair. "They closed my eyes and sent me back all by myself — no chopper, no car. A little while ago they sent me back. The wind was cold on my cheeks and nose. There was a feeling of farness below me and above me. And speed. How fast! How fast!." She almost sang

it, drowsily, softly, fading to silence.

"Where is this Canyon?" I asked roughly, suddenly homesick for — something.

Katie-Mary's eyes opened. "What Canyon?"

"The one where you took the Listener," I insisted. "Where he flew to his People."

"Flew!" Katie-Mary grimaced. "Man, what you on?" She came up from the floor in that one smooth surging motion she has.

We will give you forgetfulness after —

"Doos spilled soup on your floor," I told her, giving it up.

"That Doos!" said Katie-Mary but made no motion toward getting cleaning things. "You know, Frederic," she said thoughtfully. "I'm being a zero sort of creature, but a zero on the other side of a number can change it into tens or hundreds or thousands. And maybe counting counts — you know?" She lingered at the hall door, looking back at me. "I'm thinking maybe I'll move around to the other side — you know? I better get started looking for a side I'd like to get counting on. Not that it hasn't been nice here, but after all, I can't scrub a floor forever."

Well —

Katie-Mary's pale rectangle of floor isn't so pale any more, since she left. Anone walks on it or sleeps on it, but no one scrubs it now. And the restless and rootless still surge in and out, in and out, like feverish breathing.

I don't know why I'm staying. The juice has gone out of the whole deal. But if I went — where would I go? None of this can kid me into thinking that there's a warm, loving home waiting anywhere on this earth for *me*—

But then, maybe, like Katie-Mary, I'll just move over to the other side. *Two* zeros on the other side of that numeral —

Solution to Science Fiction Acrostic in December issue.

R. Heinlein: *Time Enough for Love*

"Touch is the most fundamental sense. A baby experiences it, all over, before he is born and long before he learns to use sight, hearing or taste, and no human ever ceases to need it."

Results of Competition 9 (September) will be in next month's issue.

Letters

May I comment on the Panshins' dull thudding 'round-up' of some books about sf, with a few words about the especial poverty of their approach to *Billion Year Spree*. (March 1974)

From its beginning, their review makes it clear that they regard sf as a club, one that is now making money. This commercial approach is fatal to art. How does the fact that John W. Campbell and J.R.R. Tolkein had obituaries in the *New York Times* alter the quality of writing of, say, Robert Sheckley? Writers are individuals still. Glory won't rub off on someone else, sorry. The fact that sf cons are getting bigger cannot alter by one jot the strength or weakness of an author's vision. Authors should fight alone, not scuttle under the nearest umbrella.

Taking advantage as club members, the Panshins use up most of their space on BILLION YEAR SPREE by trying to analyse me in an amateur way, instead of directing their attention to the book. They evade that duty further by trailing red herrings: by bringing in the Campbell Memorial Award without mentioning that I devote a chapter to Campbell's achievement, and even by taking me to task for the title of a short story written six years ago. Honestly, I thought '...And the Stagnation of the Heart' (a sequel to 'The Circulation of the Blood') not a bad title — better than 'The Son of Black Morca', for example.

Their analysis of my character is all nonsense, impertinent as well as irrelevant. *Billion Year Spree* is about sf, not about me — interesting though that would be; with my usual self-effacement, I take care not to discuss my own books or the part I have played in seeing that sf is regarded as a literature rather than a club. So let us come to their central complaints about my history.

These, as far as they are properly formulated, are two. That my history is not coherent, and that my view of despair in sf is incorrect. As if my book (which *The Wall Street Journal* in a long, enthusiastic and informed review called lively, sensible, far-ranging, a delight to read, a fun book) held nothing else! These flabby objections make no sense unless the whole grand theme of the book is taken into account. That theme discusses what I see as the two mainstreams of sf, the once-for-once-only stream and the month-by-month stream brought about by the magazines. I show how these streams fertilise each other. This theme gives the book coherence — though the poor Panshins are confused because I'm not just writing a thesis and so mix in many other ingredients as well. The object being (surprise, surprise!) to express my delight in sf. Well, some sf...

Despair is a widely-experienced emotion. We have all felt it sometimes in our private lives, and not only when confronted by panshinian prose. If it has a part in existence, it has a part in literature. Any brand of fiction which bars it from the club — along with sex, introspection, or anything else — is emasculating itself. In other words, despair, in a literary context, is enriching, *pace* Black Morca.

I'm relieved that the Panshins didn't like my book, or I would have thought there was something amiss with it. Their moral tone is thunderous, considering that they commit the sin which even amateur reviewers should avoid, of trying to damn the author

rather than look carefully at his book. At the end of their piece, isn't there even a hint of excommunication from the club? 'He will separate himself from science fiction as J.G. Ballard has done.' The Panshins are envious, and wish I would go away. On the contrary, I have just arrived!

— Brian W. Aldiss

I was pleased to see the remarks by Alexei and Cori Panshin in your March issue regarding the misnamed John W. Campbell Memorial Award. I am, naturally enough, disturbed by the remarks by Harlan Ellison in your May issue on the same basic issue. While Mr. Ellison says that the "gurus and fans" are holding back the science fiction writers, I feel that it is he and his group who are trying to force on us their own prejudiced view of literature. I am perfectly willing to let him write what he wants, just so long as he lets me read what I want without heaving insults at me. He has totally misread the view of the objectors to the John Campbell Award judges; I am not against the award winner, but I think it is dead wrong that the judges were *a priori* excluding any and all novels of the style which John Campbell created.

I simply refuse to classify heroic literature as automatically bad, and wish that some of the snobs like Mr. Ellison would admit that there might be more than one valid viewpoint toward life to be expressed in science fiction.

— Roland Hirsch

We all have our blind spots and our prejudices; Brian Aldiss is presumably no exception. Be that as it may, I think that if Alexei and Cori Panshin were to study *Billion Year Spree* very carefully, they'd see that what Aldiss actually says is that there should be *room* in science fiction for a pessimistic view of man. This isn't necessarily the same thing as asserting that "man's status is deserving of nothing but despair," now is it?

I fear that the Panshins' own sort of militant Pollyanna view of what science fiction should be may lead them to undervalue, possibly to overlook altogether, some of the finest achievements of the genre in their projected history. A Canticle for Leibowitz: never heard of it. Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.: who's he? Thomas Disch: we don't even like to think about him, he's too downbeat. J. G. Ballard: we don't have to take him into account, because he doesn't write the kind of science fiction that we think ought to be written, and we have therefore decreed that he is an unperson, he has "separated himself from science fiction". John Brunner? George Alec Effinger?... Actually, I don't suppose that the blatherings of a pair of self-important sub-academics like the Panshins matter very much; it's just irritating to find them taking up space in *Fantasy and Science Fiction.*

Incidentally, I think that there's a lot to be said for Aldiss' characterization of magazine science fiction as "a nursery literature". Possibly "an adolescent literature" would be an even better term in view of the ghastly fumbling and groping that go on whenever the subject of sexual activity is introduced. "The Star of Stars" and "The Lunatick," in your March issue, are typically embarrassing examples.

— Bruce G. Inksetter

Editor's Note: This column is an experiment. Its regularity will depend on the volume of interesting mail we receive. Address: F&SF, Letters, PO Box 56, Cornwall, Ct. 06753.

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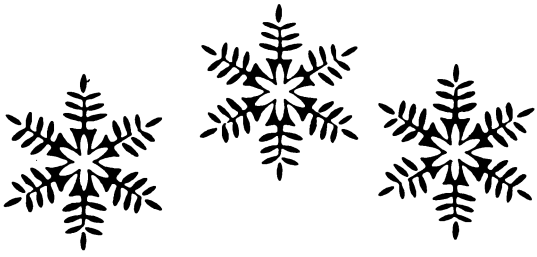

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PDC 58370-9

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JANUARY

75¢ • UK 35p.

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