

THE CABINET OF OLIVER NAYLOR

by Barrington J. Bayley

We have a suspicion that there are more original ideas tossed into this one novelette than one is likely to encounter in entire issues of some sf magazines. Bayley does not write as much as he ought to, but when he does he comes up with some surprising premises. This tale, for instance, besides carrying original inventive concepts, accepts no borders for humanity—even when it is, as Bayley depicts, still very provincial in taste and outlook. If that seems contradictory, read the story yourself.

Nayland's world was a world of falling rain, dancing on streaming tarmac, drumming on the roofs of big black cars, soaking the grey and buff masonry of the dignified buildings that lined the streets of the town. Behind the faded gold lettering of office windows, constantly awash, tense laconic conversations took place, accompanied by the pouring, pattering sound of rain, and the rushing of water from the gutterings.

Beneath the pressing grey sky, all was humid. Nayland, his feet up on his desk, looked down through the window to where the slow-moving traffic drove through the deluge and splashed the kerbs. Nay-land Investigations Inc., read the window's bowed gold lettering. The rain fell, too, on the black and white screen of the TV set flickering away in the corner of the office. It fell steadily, unremit-

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tingly, permanently. Humphrey Bogart and Barbara Stanwyck fled together in a big black car, quarrelling tersely in an enclosed little world smelling of rain and seat leather.

They stopped at a crossroads. The argument resumed in clipped, deadpan tones, while Bogart gripped the steering wheel and scowled. The windscreen wipers were barely able to clear away the rain; on the outside camera shots their faces were seen blurrily, intermittently, cut off from external contact.

In the office, the telephone rang. Nayland picked it up. He heard a voice that essentially was his own; yet with an accent that was British rather than American.

Is that Oliver Nayland, private detective?'

'Frank Nayland/ Nayland corrected.

'Frank Nayland/

The voice paused, as if for reflection. 'I would like to call on your services, Mr Nayland. I want someone to investigate your world for me. Follow the couple in the black car. Where are they fleeing to? What are they fleeing from? Does it ever stop raining?'

Nayland replied in a professional neutral tone. 'I charge two hundred dollars a week, plus expenses/ he said. To investigate physical world phenomena, however—gravitation, rain, formation of the elements—my usual fee is doubled/

While speaking he moved to the TV and twiddled the tuning knob. The black car idling at the crossroads vanished, was replaced by a man's face talking into a telephone. Essentially the face was Nayland's own. Younger, perhaps; less knowing, not world-weary. There was no pencil-line moustache, and the client sported a boyish haircut Nayland wouldn't have been seen dead in.

The client looked straight at him out of the screen. 'I think I can afford it. Please begin your investigations.'

The picture faded, giving way to Gene Kelly singing 'Dancing in the Rain'. Nayland returned to the window. He picked up a pair of binoculars from his desk and trained them on a black car that was momentarily stopped at the traffic lights. He glimpsed the face of Barbara Stanwyck through the side window of the car. She was sitting stiffly in the front passenger seat, speaking rapidly, her proud face vibrant with restrained, angry passion. By her side Bogart was tapping the driving wheel and snarling back curt replies.

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The lights changed, the car swept on, splashing rain water over the kerb. Nayland put down his binoculars and became thoughtful.

For a few minutes longer Oliver Naylor watched the private dick's activities on his thespitron screen. Nayland held tense, laconic interviews in seedy city offices, swept through wet streets in a black car, talked in gloomy bars while the rain pattered against the windows, visited the mansion of Mrs Van der Loon, and had a brief shoot-out with a local mobster.

Eventually Naylor faded out the scene, holding down the 'retain in store' key. At the same time he keyed the 'credible sequence' button back in. The thespitron started up again, and with a restrained fanfare began to unfold an elaborate tale of sea schooners on a watery world.

Naylor ignored it, turning down the sound so that the saga would not distract him, and rose from his chair to pace the living room of his mobile habitat. How interesting, he thought, that the drama machine, the thespitron as he called it, should invent a character so close to himself in name and appearance. True, the background was different. *Frank Nayland* was a 20th century American, perfectly adapted to his world of the private eye, circa 1950, whereas *Oliver Naylor* was a 22nd century Englishman, a different type altogether.

The thespitron had an unlimited repertoire and in principle one could expect a random dramatic output from it. But in practice it showed a predilection for Elizabethan tragedy—worthy, Naylor thought, of the immortal Bill himself—and for Hollywood thrillers of the 1930S-50S period. Both of these were firm favourites of Naylor, the thespitron's creator. Clearly he had unintentionally built some bias into it and would need to locate its source.

The existence of Frank Nayland probably had a similar explanation, he concluded. It was probably due to the optical extra he had built into the machine, namely the facility by which the viewer could talk to the characters portrayed on the thespitron screen. The thespitron exhibited an admirable degree of adaptability—it was perfectly delightful, for instance, to see how it had automatically translated his stick-mike into a big, unwieldy 1950s telephone. Similarly, it must have absorbed his *persona* from earlier intrusions, fashioning it into the world of Frank Nayland.

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Just the same, it was eerie to be able to talk to himself, albeit in this fictional guise. A soupçon, perhaps, of 'identity crisis'.

He strolled to the living room window and gazed out. Millions of galaxies were speeding past in the endless depths, presenting the appearance of a sidewise fall of tiny snowflakes. The habitat was speeding through the universe at a velocity of c^{186} , heading into infinity.

At length Naylor sighed, turned from the window and crossed the room to settle himself in a comfortable armchair, switching on the vodor lecturer which he had stocked with all relevant material before leaving Cambridge. Selecting the subject he wanted, he rested his head against the leather upholstery and listened, letting the lecture sink into his mind much as one might enjoy a piece of music.

The vodor began to speak.

IDENTITY. The logical law of identity is expressed by the formula $A \text{ — } A$, or $A \text{ is } A$. This law is a necessary law of self-conscious thought, and without thinking would be impossible. It is in fact merely the positive expression of the law of contradiction, which states that the same attribute cannot at the same time be affirmed and denied of the same subject.

'Philosophically, the exact meaning of the term "identity", and the ways in which it can be predicated, remain undecided. Some hold that identity excludes difference; others that it actually implies, connoting "differential likeness". See B. Bosanquet, *Essays and Addresses*, 1889. The question is one of whether identity can be posited only of an object's attributes, or whether it refers uniquely to an object regardless of its attributes . . .'

Naylor looked up as Watson-Smythe, his passenger, emerged from an adjoining bedroom where he had been sleeping. The young man stretched and yawned.

'*Haw!* Sleep knits up the ravelled sleeve, and all that. Hello there, old chap. Still plugging away, I see?'

Naylor switched off the vodor. 'Not getting very far, I'm afraid/ he admitted shyly. 'In fact, I haven't made any real progress for weeks.'

'Never mind. Early days, I expect.' Watson-Smythe yawned again, tapping his mouth with his hand. 'Fancy a cup of

char? I'll brew up/

'Yes, that would be excellent.'

Watson-Smythe had affable blue eyes. He was fair-skinned and

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athletic-looking. Although only just out of bed he had taken the trouble to comb his hair before entering the habitat's main room, arranging his shining blond curls on either side of a neat parting.

Naylor had no real idea of who he was. He had met him at one of those temporary habitat villages that sprang up all over space. He was, it seemed, one of those rash of adventurous people who chose to travel without their own velocitator habitat, hitching lifts here and there, bumming their way around infinity. Apparently he was trying to find some little-known artist called Corngold (the name was faintly familiar to Naylor). Having discovered his whereabouts at the village, he had asked Naylor to take him there and Naylor, who had nowhere in particular to go, had thought it impolite to refuse.

Watson-Smythe moved to the utility cupboard and set some water to boil, idly whistling a tune by Haydn. While waiting, he glanced through the window at the speeding galaxies, then crossed to the velocitator control board and peered at the speedometer, tapping at the glass-covered dial.

'Will we get there soon, do you think? Is 186 your top speed?'

'We could do nearly 300, if pushed/ Naylor said. 'But any faster than 186 and we'd probably go past the target area without noticing it/

"Ah, that wouldn't do at all, would it?'

The kettle whistled. Watson-Smythe rushed to it and busied himself with warming the teapot, brewing the tea and pouring it, after a proper interval into bone-china cups.

Naylor accepted a cup, but declined a share of the toast and marmalade which Watson-Smythe prepared for himself.

'This fellow Corngold/ he asked hesitantly while his guest ate, Is he much of an artist?'

Watson-Smythe looked doubtful. 'Couldn't say, really. Don't know much about it myself. Don't know Corngold personally either, as a matter of fact.'

Watson-Smythe wagged a finger at the thespitron, which was still playing out its black-and-white shadow show (Naylor had deliberately eschewed colour; monochrome seemed to impart a more bare-boned sense of drama). 'Got the old telly going again, I see—the automated telly. You ought to put that into production, old chap. It would be a boon to habitat travellers. Much better than carrying a whole library of playback tapes/

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'Yes, I dare say it would/

'Not in the same class as this other project of yours, if it comes off, of course. That will be something/

Naylor smiled in embarrassment. He almost regretted having told his companion about the scheme he was working on. It was, possibly, much too ambitious.

After his breakfast Watson-Smythe disappeared back into his bedroom to practise calisthenics—though Naylor couldn't imagine what anyone so obsessed with keeping trim was doing space travelling. Habitat life, by its enclosed nature, was not conducive to good health.

His passenger's presence could be what had been blocking his progress, Naylor thought. After all, he had come out here for solitude, originally.

He switched on the vodor again and settled down to try to put his thoughts back on the problem once more.

The modern dilemma (continued the vodor) is perhaps admirably expressed in an ancient Buddhist tale. An enlightened master one day announced to his disciples that he wished to enter into contemplation. Reposing himself, he closed his eyes and withdrew his consciousness.

Tor thirty years he remained thus, while his disciples took care of his body and kept it clean.

'At the end of thirty years he opened his eyes and looked about him. The disciples gathered round. "Can the noble master tell us," they asked, "what has engaged his attention all this time?" The master told them: "I have been considering whether, in all the deserts of the world, there could conceivably be two grains of sand identical in every particular'

"The disciples were puzzled. "Surely," they said, "that is a small matter to occupy a mind such as yours?"

⁴ "Small it may be," the master replied, "but it was too great for me. I still do not know the answer."

In the 20th century a striking *scientific* use of the concept of identity seemed for a while as though it would cut right across many logical and philosophical definitions and answer the Buddhist master's question. To explain paradoxical findings resulting from experiments in electron diffraction, equations were devised which, in math-

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mathematical terms, removed from electrons their individual identities. It was pointed out that electrons are so alike to one another as to be, to all intents and purposes, identical. The equations therefore described electrons as exchanging identities with one another in a rhythmic oscillation, without any transfer of energy or position . . . /

Naylor's first love had been logic machines. He had begun as a boy by reconstructing the early devices of the 18th and the 19th centuries: the deceptively simple Stanhope Demonstrator, with its calibrated window and two cursors (invented by an English earl, probably the very first genuine logic machine, though working out the identities was a tedious business); Venn diagrams—which in common with the Jevons Logic Machine (the first to solve complicated problems faster than the unaided logician) made use of the logic algebra of George Boole. He had quickly progressed to the type of machine developed in the 20th century and known generically as the 'computer', although only later had it developed into an instrument of pure logic for its own sake. By the time he was twenty he had become fully conversant with proper 'thinking machines' able to handle multivalued logic, and had begun to design models of his own. His crowning achievement, a couple of years ago, had been the construction of what he had reason to believe was the entire universe of discourse.

It was then that he had conceived the idea of the thespitron, a device which if marketed would without doubt put all writers of dramatic fiction out of business for once and all. Its basic hardware consisted of the above-mentioned logic machine, plus a comprehensive store and various ancillaries. After his past efforts, he had found the arrangement surprisingly easy to accomplish. In appearance the machine resembled an over-large, old-fashioned television set, with perhaps rather too many controls; but whereas an ordinary television receiver picked up its programmes from some far away transmitter, the thespitron generated them internally. Essentially it was a super-plotting device; it began with bare logical identities, and combined and recombined them into ever more complex structures, until by this process it was able to plot an endless variety of stories and characters, displaying them complete with dialogue, settings and incidental music.

Naylor had watched the plays and films generated by the thespi-

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tron for several months now, and he could pronounce himself well pleased with the result of his labours. The thespitron was perpetual motion: because the logical categories could be permuted endlessly, its dramatic inventiveness was inexhaustible. Left to its own devices, it would eventually run through all possible dramatic situations.

Philosophically Naylor held fast to the tradition of British empiricism (without descending, of course, to American pragmatism) and saw himself as a child of the 19th century, favouring, perhaps for reasons of nostalgia, the flavour of thought of that period—though the doctrines of J. S. Mill had been much updated, naturally, by the thoroughgoing materialist empiricists of Naylor's own time. It would have gone totally against the grain, therefore, to ascribe the logical categories to any supernatural or non-material cause. Yet he had once heard a theological argument which, because of his possession of the thespitron, afforded him a great deal of secret, if perverse, pleasure.

This argument was that God had created the universe for its theatrical content alone, simply in order to view the innumerable dramatic histories it generated. By this notion all ethical parameters, all poignancies, triumphs, tragedies and meaningless sufferings, were, so to speak, literary devices.

Was not the thespitron a *private* cosmic theatre? The cosmos in miniature? Complete in itself, as the greater cosmos was, self-acting, containing its own logical laws? Furthermore it had a creator and observer—Naylor himself, who was thus elevated to the status of a god. The only god that existed, possibly, since the idea of an original transcendental God was, of course, absurd.

The alluring impression that the thespitron had some sort of cosmic significance was heightened by its present location here in in-tergalactic space, googols of light years from Earth. Despite his empiricist philosophical upbringing Naylor could not rid his mind of the fascinating fiction that there might be, at the source of existence, a preternatural logic machine—the transcendental archetype of his own—which ground out logical identities in pure form. He pictured to himself an immensely long, dark corridor down which the identities and categories passed, combining and recombining until eventu-

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ally they permuted themselves into concrete substance to become the physical universe and all its contents.

Naylor smiled, shaking his head, reminding himself how corrupting to philosophy were all such idealist fancies. He was well aware of how fallacious it was to imagine that logic was antecedent to matter,

Naylor was by no means alone in regarding himself as a product of 19th century values; most educated Englishmen of his time did. The qualities of a rational civilisation were epitomised, it was commonly believed, by the great Victorian age, with its prolific inventiveness, its love of 'projects', its advocacy of 'progress' combined with its innate conservatism. Nostalgia was not the sole cause, however, of the 22nd century's respect for past endeavours. The renaissance in Victorian sentiment, in Britain at least, was genuine.

As often happens, economic forces were in some measure responsible for the change. During the 21st century it gradually became clear that the advantages of global trade were at last being outweighed by the disadvantages; the international division of labour was taking on the aspect of a destructive natural force which could impoverish entire peoples. The notion of economic progress took on another meaning. It came to signify, not the ability to dominate world markets, but the science of how a small nation might become wealthy without any foreign trade whatsoever. Britain, always a pioneer, was the first to discover this new direction. With the help of novel technologies she reversed what had been axiomatic since the days of Adam Smith, and for a time was once again the wealthiest power on Earth, aloof from the world trade storm, reaping through refusal to trade all the benefits she had once gained through trade.

It was a time of innovation, of surprising, often fantastic invention, of which the Harkham velocitator, a unit of which was now powering Naylor's habitat through infinity, was perhaps the outstanding example. The boffin had come into his own again, outwitting the expensively equipped teams of professional research scientists. Yet in some respects it was a cautious period, alert to the dangers of too precipitous use of every new-fangled gadget, and keeping alive the spirit of the red flag that had once been required to precede every horseless carriage. For that reason advantage was not always taken of every advance in productive methods.

Two methods in particular were forbidden. The first, an all-pur-

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pose domestic provider commonly known as the matter-bank, was technically called the hylc potentiator. It worked by holding in store a mass of amorphous, non-particulate matter, or hyle, to use the classical term. Hylc matter from this store could be instantly converted into any object, artifact or substance for which the machine was programmed, and returned to store if the utility was no longer needed or had not been consumed. Because the hylc store consisted essentially of a single gigantic shaped neutron, very high energies were involved, which had led to the device being deemed too dangerous for use on Earth. Models were still to be found here and there in space, however.

The second banned production method was a process whereby artifacts were able to reproduce themselves after the manner of viruses if brought into contact with simple materials. The creation of self-replicating artifacts had become subject to world prohibition after the islands of Japan became buried beneath growing mounds of still-multiplying TV sets, audvid recorders, cameras, autos, motor-bikes, refrigerators, helicopters, pocket computers, transistor radios, port-phones, light airplanes, speedboats, furniture, sex aids, hearing aids, artificial limbs and organs, massage machines, golf clubs, zip fasteners, toys, typewriters, graphic reproduction machines, electron microscopes, house

plumbing and electrical systems, machine tools, industrial robots, earthmovers, drilling rigs, prefabricated dwellings, ships, submersibles, fast-access transit vehicles, rocket launchers, lifting bodies, extraterrestrial exploration vehicles, X-ray machines, radio, video, microwave, X-ray and laser transmitters, modems, reading machines, and innumerable other conveniences.

Of all innovations, the invention to have most impact on the modern British mind was undoubtedly the Harkham velocitator, which had abolished the impediment of distance and opened up infinity to the interested traveller. Theoretically the velocitator principle could give access to any velocity, however high, except one: it was not possible to travel a measured distance in zero time, or an infinite distance in any measured time. But in practice, a velocitator unit's top speed depended on the size of its armature. After a while designing bigger and bigger armatures had become almost a redundant exercise. Infinity was infinity was infinity.

Velocitator speeds were expressed in powers of the velocity of light. Thus 186, Naylor's present pace, indicated the speed of light multiplied by itself 186 times. Infinity was now littered, if littered

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was a word that could be predicated of such a concept, with velocitator explorers, most of them British, finding in worlds without end their darkest Africas, their South American jungles, their Tibets and Outer Mongolias.

In point of fact the greater number of them did precious little exploring. Infinity, as it turned out, was not as definable as Africa. Early on the discovery had been made that until one actually *arrived* at some galaxy or planet, infinite space had a soothing, prosaic uniformity (provided one successfully avoided the matterless lakes), a bland sameness of fleeting mushy glints. It was a perfect setting for peace and solitude. This, perhaps, as much as the outward urge, had drawn Englishmen into the anonymous universe. The velocitator habitat offered a perfect opportunity to 'get away from it all', to find a spot of quiet, possibly, to work on one's book or thesis, or to avoid some troublesome social or emotional problem.

This was roughly Naylor's position. The success of the thespitron had emboldened him to consider taking up the life of an inventor. He had ventured into the macrocosm to mull over, in its peace and silence, a certain stubborn technical problem which velocitator travel itself entailed.

The problem had been advertised many times, but so far it had defeated all attempts at a solution. It was, quite simply, the problem of how to get home again. Every Harkham traveller faced the risk of becoming totally, irrevocably lost, it being impossible to maintain a sense of direction over the vast distances involved. The scale was simply too large. Space bent and twisted, presenting, in terms of spatial curvature, mountains and mazes, hills and serpentine tunnels. A gyroscope naturally followed this bending and twisting; all gyroscopic compasses were therefore useless. Neither, on such a vast and featureless scale, was there any possibility of making a map.

(Indeed a simple theorem showed that large-scale sidereal mapping was inherently an untenable proposition. *Mapping* consists of recording relationships between locations or objects. In a three-dimensional continuum this is only really practicable by means of data storage. However, the number of possible relationships between a set of objects rises exponentially with the number of objects. The number of possible connections between the 10,000 million neurons of the human brain actually exceeds the number of particles within Olbers' Sphere (which, before the invention of the velocitator, was

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thought of as the universe). Obviously no machine, however compact, could contain the information necessary to map the relationships between objects whose number was without limit, even when those objects were entire galaxies.

Every velocitator habitat carried a type of inertial navigation recording system, which enabled the traveller to retrace his steps and, hopefully, arrive back at the place he had started from. This, to date, was the only homing method available; but the device was delicate and occasionally given to error—only a small displacement in the inertial record was enough to turn the Milky Way galaxy into an unfindable grain of sand in an endless desert. Furthermore, Harkham travellers were apt, sometimes unwittingly, to pass through powerful magnetic fields which distorted and compromised the information on their recorders, or even wiped the tapes clean.

Naylor's approach to the problem was, as far as he knew, original. He had adopted a concept that both philosophy and science had at various times picked up, argued over, even used, then dropped again only to resume the argument later: the concept of *identity*.

If every entity, object and being had its own unique identity which differentiated it from the rest of existence, then Naylor reasoned that it ought to be uniquely findable in some Active framework that was independent of space, time

and number. Ironically the theoretical tools he was using were less typical of empiricist thought than of its traditional enemy, rationalism, the school that saw existence as arising, not from material occasions, but from abstract categories and identities; but he was sufficiently undogmatic not to be troubled by that. He was aware that empirical materialists had striven many times to argue away the concept of identity altogether, but they had never, quite, succeeded.

Naylor imagined each individual object resulting from a combining, or focusing together, of universal logic classes (or universal identities), much as the colour components of a picture are focused on to one another to form a perfect image. It was necessary to suppose that each act of focusing was unique, that is to say, that each particle of matter was created only once. It would mean, for instance, that each planet had a unique identity: that a sample of iron taken from the Earth was subtly different from a sample of iron taken from the Moon, and it was this difference that Naylor's projected directionfinder would be able to locate.

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But was it a warrantable assumption, he wondered?

"Ah, the famous question of identity/ he said aloud.

The vodur lecture, heard many times before, became a drone. He turned it off and opened his notebook to scan one section of his notes.

IDENTITY AND NUMBERS:-The natural numbers, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 ... are pure abstractions, lacking identity in the philosophical meaning of the word. That is to say, there is no such entity as "five". Identity in a set of five objects appertains only to each object taken singly . . . "Fiveness" is a process, accomplished by matching each member of a set against members of another set (i.e. the fingers of a hand) until the set being counted is exhausted. Only material objects have identity . . . /

In his fevered imagination it had seemed to Naylor that he need but make one more conceptual leap and he would be there with a sketch model of the device that would find the Milky Way Galaxy from no matter where in infinity. He believed, in fact, that he already had the primitive beginnings of the device in the thespitron. For although no *physical* mapping of the universe was possible, the thespitron *had* achieved a *dramatic* mapping of it, demonstrating that the cosmos was not entirely proof against definition.

But the vital leap, from a calculus of theatre to a calculus of identities, had not come, and Naylor was left wondering if he should be chiding himself for his lapse into dubious rationalist tenets.

Dammit, he thought wryly, if an enlightened master had no luck, how the devil can I?

Gloomily he wrote a footnote: 'It may be that the question of identity is too basic to be subject to experiment, or to be susceptible to instrumentation/

His thoughts were interrupted by the ringing of the alarm bell. The control panel flashed, signalling that the habitat was slowing down in response to danger ahead. In seconds it had reduced speed until it was cruising at only a few tens of powers of the velocity of light.

At the same time an announcement gong sounded, informing them that they had arrived within beacon range of someone else's habitat—presumably Corngold's.

As Naylor crossed to the panel to switch off the alarm Watson-Smythe appeared from the bedroom. He had put on a gleaming

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white suit which set off his good looks perfectly. 'What a racket!' he exclaimed genially. 'Everything going off at once!'

Naylor was examining the dials. 'We are approaching a matterless lake/

'Are we, by God?'

'And your friend Corngold is evidently living on the shores of it. Can you think of any reason why he would do that?'

Watson-Smythe chuckled, with a hint of rancour. 'Just the place where the swine would choose to set himself up. Discourages visitors, you see.'

'You can say that again. Do I take it we are likely to be unwelcome? What you would call a recluse, is he?'

The younger man tugged at his lower lip. 'Look here, old chap, if you feel uneasy about this you can just drop me off at Corngold's and shoot off again. I don't want to impose on you or anything/

By now Naylor was intrigued. 'Oh, that's all right. I don't mind hanging about for a bit/

Watson-Smythe peered out of the window. They were close to a large spiral galaxy which blazed across his field of vision, swinging majestically past his line of sight as they went by it.

'We'll get a better view on this/ Naylor said. He pressed a small lever and a six-foot screen unfolded at the front end of the living room, conveniently placed for the control panel. He traversed the view to get an all-round picture of their surroundings. The spiral galaxy had already receded to become the average smudged point of light, and in all directions the aspect was the usual one of darkness relieved by faintly luminous sleet—except for directly ahead.

There, the screen of galaxies was thin. Behind it stretched an utter blackness: it was a specimen of that awesome phenomenon, the matterless lake.

The distribution of matter in the universe was not, quite, uniform. It thinned and condensed a bit here and there. But its non-uniformity mainly manifested in great holes, gaps—lakes, as they were called—where no matter was to be found at all. Although of no great size where the distances that went to make up infinity were concerned, in mundane terms their dimensions were enormous, several trillion times larger than Olbers' Sphere (the criterion of cosmic size in pre-Harkham times and still used as a rough measure of magnitude).

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Any Harkham traveller knew that it was fatal to penetrate more than the fringes of such a lake, for should anyone be so foolhardy as to pass out of sight of its shore (and many had been) he would find it just about impossible to get out again. When not conditioned by the presence of matter, space lacked many of the properties normally associated with it. Even such elementary characteristics as direction, distance and dimension were lent to space, physicists now knew, by the signposts of matter; the depths of the lakes were out of range of these signposts. Thus it would do the velocitator rider no good merely to fix a direction and travel in the belief that he must sooner or later strike the lake's limit, for he would be unlikely ever to do so. He was lost in an inconceivable nowhere, in space that was structureless and uninformed.

As they neared the shore the boundary of the lake spread and expanded before them like a solid black wall sealing off the universe. 'Will Corngold be in the open, do you think, or in a galaxy somewhere?' Naylor asked.

'I'd guess he's snuggled away in some spiral; harder to find that way, eh? There's a likely-looking bunch over there.' Watson-Smythe pointed to a cluster of galaxies ahead and to their right. 'Right on the edge of the lake, too. What do the indicators say?'

'Looks hopeful.' Naylor turned the habitat towards the cluster, speeding up a little. The galaxies brightened until their internal structures became visible. The beacon signal came through more strongly; soon they were close enough to get a definite fix.

Watson-Smythe's guess had been right. They eventually found Corngold's habitat floating just inside the outermost spiral turn of the cluster's largest member. The habitat looked like two or three eskimo igloos squashed together, humped and rounded. Behind it the local galaxy glittered in countless colours like a giant Christmas tree.

Watson-Smythe clapped his hands in delight. 'Got him!'

Naylor nudged close to the structure at walking pace. The legally standardised coupling rings clinked together as he matched up the outer doors.

'Jolly good. Time to pay a visit/ his passenger said.

'Shouldn't we raise him on the communicator first?'

'Rather not.' Watson-Smythe made for the door, then paused, turning to him. 'If you'd prefer to wait until . . . well, just as you please/

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He first opened the inner door, then both outer doors which were conjoined now and moved as one, and then the inner door of the other habitat. Naylor wondered why he didn't even bother to knock. Personally he would never have had the gall just to walk into someone else's living room.

With tentative steps he followed Watson-Smythe into the short tunnel. Bright light shone through from the other habitat. He heard a man's voice, raised in a berating, bullying tone.

The door swung wide open.

The inside of Corngold's dwelling reminded Naylor of an egg-shaped cave, painted bright yellow. Walls and ceiling consisted of the same ovoid curve, and lacked windows. The yellow was streaked and spattered with oil colours and unidentifiable dirt; the lower parts of the walls were piled with canvases, paintings, boxes, shelves and assorted junk. The furniture was sparse: a bare board table, a mattress, three rickety straight-backed chairs and a mouldy couch. An artist's easel stood in the middle of the floor. Against the wall opposite to the door was the source of Corngold's provender and probably everything else he used: a matter-bank, shiny in its moulded plastic casing.

Corngold was a fat man, a little below medium height. He was wearing a green silk chemise, square-cut about the neck and shoulders and decorated with orange fringes and tassels, and baggy flannel trousers. He had remarkably vivid green eyes; his hair had been cropped short and now had grown so that it bristled like a crown of thorns.

He reminded Naylor of early Hollywood versions of Nero or Caligula. He did not, it seemed, live alone. He was in the act of browbeating a girl, aged perhaps thirty, who for her dowdiness was as prominent as Corngold was for his brilliant green shirt. Corngold had her arm twisted behind her back, forcing her partly over. Her face wore the blank sullenness that comes from long bullying: it was totally submissive, wholly drab, the left eye slightly puffy and discoloured from a recent bruise. She did not even react to the entry of visitors.

Corngold, however, eased his grip slightly and turned to greet Watson-Smythe indignantly. 'What the bloody hell do you mean barging in here!' he bellowed. 'Bugger off!' His accent sounded

northern to Naylor's ears; Yorkshire, perhaps.

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'Are you Walter Corngold?' Watson-Smythe countered. To Nay-lor's faint surprise his tone was cold and professional.

'You heard me! Bugger off! This is private property/

Watson-Smythe reached into his jacket and produced a slim Has-king stun beamer. With his other hand he took a document from his pocket. 'Watson-Smythe of M.I. 19/ he announced. 'I have here a warrant for your arrest, Corngold. I'm taking you back to Earth/

So that was it! Naylor wondered why he hadn't guessed it before. Now that he thought of it, Watson-Smythe was almost a caricature of the type of young man one expected to find in the 'infinity police', as it was jocularly called—M.I. 19, the branch of security entrusted with law enforcement among habitat travellers.

'What are the charges?' he asked, mildly amused.

Watson-Smythe inclined his head slightly to answer him, keeping the Hasking trained on Corngold. 'Two charges: theft, and the abduction of Lady Cadogan's maid, who unless I am very much mistaken is the young lady you are now mistreating, Corngold. Take your hands off her at once/

Corngold released the girl and shoved her roughly towards the couch, where she sat staring at the floor.

'Ridiculous,' he snorted. 'Betty's here of her own sweet will, aren't you, dearest?' His voice was heavy with irony.

She glanced up like a frightened mouse, darting what might have been a look of hope at Watson-Smythe. Then she retreated into herself again, nodding meekly.

Corngold sighed with satisfaction. 'Well that's that, then. Sod off, the two of you, and leave us in peace/ He strolled to the easel, picked up a brush and started to daub the canvas, as though he had banished them from existence.

Watson-Smythe laughed, showing clean white teeth. 'They said you were a bit of a character. But you're due for a court appearance in London just the same/ He turned politely to Naylor. 'Thanks for your assistance, Naylor old boy. You can cast off now if you're inclined, and I'll take Corngold's habitat back to Earth/

'Can't,' Corngold said, giving them a brief sidewise glance. 'My inertial navigator's bust. I was stuck here, in fact, until you turned up. Not that it bothers me at all/

Watson-Smythe frowned. 'Well. . /

'Is it a malfunction?' Naylor queried, 'or just a faulty record?'

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Corngold shrugged. 'It's bugged up, I tell you/

'I might be able to do something with it/ Naylor said to the M.L19 agent. 'Til have a look at it, anyway. If it's only the record we can simply take a copy of our own one.'

Corngold flung down his brush. 'In that case you might as well stay to dinner. And put that gun away, for Chrissake. What do you think this is, a shooting gallery?'

'After all, he can't go anywhere/ Naylor observed when Watson-Smythe wavered. 'Without us he'll *never* get home.'

'All right.' He turned his gun to its shoulder holster. 'But don't think you're going to wriggle out of this, Corngold. Kidnapping's a pretty serious offence.'

Corngold's eyes twinkled. He pointed to a clock hung askew on the wall. 'Dinner's at nine. Don't be late.'

Wearily Naylor slumped in his armchair in his own living room. He had spent an hour on Corngold's inertial navigator, enough to tell him that the gyros were precessing and the whole system would need to be re-tuned. It would be a day's work at least and he had decided to make a fresh start tomorrow. If he couldn't put the device back in order they would all have to travel back to Earth in Naylor's habitat—as an M.I.19 officer Watson-Smythe had the power to require his co-operation over that. At the moment he was in his bedroom, bringing his duty log up to date.

The business with the navigator had brought home anew to Naylor the desirability of inventing some different type of homing mechanism. He was becoming irritated that the problem was so intractable, and felt a fresh, if frustrating, urge to get to grips with it.

Remembering that he had left the vodor lecture unfinished, he switched on the machine again, listening closely to the evenly-intoned words, even though he knew them almost by heart.

The question of *personal* identity was raised by Locke, and later occupied the attentions of Hume and Butler. Latterly the so-called 'theorem of universal identity' has gained some prominence. In this theorem, personal identity (or *self*-identity) is defined as *having knowledge* of one's identity, a statement which also serves to define consciousness. Conscious beings are said to differ from inanimate objects only in that they have knowledge of their identity, while inani-

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mate objects, though possessing their own identity, have no knowledge of it.

To be conscious, however, means to be able to perceive. But in order to perceive there must be an "identification" between the subject (self-identity, or consciousness) and the perceived object. Therefore there is a paradoxical "sharing" of identity between subject and object, similar, perhaps, to the exchange of identity once posited between electrons. This reasoning leads to the concept of a "universal identity" according to which all identity, both of conscious beings and inanimate objects, belongs to the same universal transcendental identity, or "self". This conclusion is a recurring one in the history of human thought, known at various times as "the infinite self", "the transcendental self" and "the universal self" of Vedantic teachings. "I am you", the mystic will proclaim, however impudently, meaning that the same basic identity is shared by everyone.

'Such conceptions are not admitted by the empirical materialist philosophers, who subject them to the most withering

criticism. To the empiricist, every occasion is unique; therefore its identity is unique. Hume declared that he could not even discover self-identity in himself; introspection yielded only a stream of objects in the form of percepts; a "person" is therefore a "bundle" of percepts. Neither can the fact that two entities may share a *logical* identity in any way detract from their basic separateness, since logic itself is not admitted as having any *a priori* foundation.

The modern British school rejects the concept of identity altogether as a mere verbalism, without objective application. Even the notion of electron identity exchange is now accepted to be a mathematical fiction, having been largely superseded by the concept of "unique velocity" which is incorporated in the Harkham velocitator. It is still applied, however, to a few quantum problems for which no other mathematical tools exist/

Naylor rose and went to the window, gazing out at the blazing spiral galaxy which was visible over the humped shape of Corngold's habitat. 'Ah, the famous question of identity/ he murmured.

He knew why the question continued to perplex him. It was because of the thespitron. The thespitron, with its unexpected tricks and properties, had blurred his feeling of self-identity, just as the identity of electrons had been blurred by the 20th century quantum

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equations. And at the same time, the thoughts occurring to him attacked materialist empiricism at its weakest point: the very same question of identity.

There came to him again the image of the categories of identity proceeding and permutating down a dark, immensely long corridor. He felt dizzy, elated. Here, in his habitat living room, his domain was small but complete; he and the thespitron reproduced between them, on a minute scale, the ancient mystical image of created universe and observing source, of phenomenon and noumenon; even without him here to watch it, the thespitron was the transcendental machine concretised, a microcosm to reflect the macrocosm, a private universe of discourse, a mirror of infinity in a veneered cabinet.

Could the characters and worlds within the thespitron, shadows though they were, be said to possess *reality*? The properties of matter itself could be reduced to purely logical definitions, heretical though the operation was from the point of view of empiricism. The entities generated by the machine, obeying those same logical definitions, could never know that they lacked concrete substance.

Was there identity in the universe? Was that all there was?

Now he understood what had made him include a communication facility in the thespitron; why he had further felt impelled to talk to Frank Nayland, his near-double. He had identified himself with Nay-land; he had tried to enlighten him as to the nature of his fictional world, prompted by some irrational notion that, by confronting him, he could somehow prod Nayland into having a consciousness of his own.

Who am I? Naylor wondered. Does my identity, my consciousness, belong to myself, or does it belong to this—he made a gesture taking in all that lay beyond the walls of the habitat—to infinity?

Sitting down again, he switched on the thespitron.

Naylor's sense of having duplicated the logical development of the universe was further heightened by the inclusion of the 'credible sequence⁷ button. This optional control engaged circuits which performed, in fact, no more than the last stage of the plotting process, arranging that the machine's presentations, in terms of construction, settings and event-structure, were consonant, if not quite with the real world, at least with a dramatist's imitation of it.

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With the button disengaged, however, the criterion of mundane credibility vanished. The thespitron proceeded to construct odd, abbreviated worlds, sometimes from only a small number of dramatic elements, worlds in which processes, once begun, were apt to continue forever without interruption or exhaustion; in which actions, once embarked upon, became a binding force upon the actor and required permanent reiteration.

The world of Frank Nayland, private investigator, was one of these: a world put together from bare components lifted from the Hollywood thriller *genre*, bereft of the background of any larger world, and moving according to an

obsessive, abstract logic. A compact world with only a small repertoire of events, the terse fictional world of the private dick, a world in which rain was increasing.

Summoning up Nayland from store, Naylor watched him pursue his investigations, rain dripping from the brim of his hat, his gabardine raincoat permanently damp. So absorbed did he become in the dick's adventures that he did not see Watson-Smythe until the M.I.19 officer tapped him on the shoulder.

'It's nine o'clock/ Watson-Smythe said. Time we were calling on Corngold.'

'Oh, yes.' Naylor rose, rubbing his eyes. He left the thespitron running as they went through the connecting tunnel, tapping on Corn-gold's door before entering.

A measure of camaraderie had grown up during the hour they had earlier spent with the artist. Naylor had come to look on him more as an eccentric rascal than a real villain, and even Watson-Smythe had mollified his hostility a little. He had still tried to persuade Betty Cooper, the maid allegedly abducted from the home of Lady Cado-gan (from whom Corngold had also stolen a valuable antique bracelet), to move in with them pending the journey back to Earth, but so great was Corngold's hold over her (the hold of a sadist, Watson-Smythe said) that she would obey only him.

There was no sign of the promised dinner party. Corngold was before his easel, legs astraddle, while Betty posed in the nude, sitting demurely on a chair. Though still a sullen frump, Naylor thought that when naked she had some redeeming features; her body tended to flop, was pale and too fleshy, but it was pleasantly substantial in a trollopy sort of way.

Corngold turned his head. Well?? he glared.

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Watson-Smythe coughed. 'You invited us to dinner, I seem to remember/

'Did I? Oh/ Comgold himself didn't seem to remember. He continued plying the paint on to the canvas, a square palette of mingled colour in his other hand. Naylor was fascinated. The man was an artist after all. His concentration, his raptness, were there, divided between the canvas and the living girl.

Naylor moved a few paces so he could get a glimpse of the portrait. But he did not see what he expected. Instead of a nude, Corn-gold had painted an automobile.

Corngold looked at him, his eyes twinkling with mirth. 'Well, it's how I see her, you see/

Naylor was baffled. He could not see how in any way the picture could represent Betty, not even as a metaphor. The auto was sleek and flashy, covered with glittering trim; quite the opposite of Betty's qualities, in fact.

He strolled to the other end of the egg-shaped room, glancing at the stacked canvases. Corngold had a bit of a following, he believed, among some of the avant-garde. Naylor took no interest in art, but even he could see the fellow was talented. The paintings were individualistic, many of them in bright but cleverly toned colours.

Corngold laid down his brush and moved aside the easel, gesturing to Betty to rise and dress. 'Dinner, then/ he said in the tone of one whose hospitality may be presumed upon. 'Frankly Fd hoped you two would have got tired of hanging around by now and cleared off/

'That would have left you in a bit of a spot/ Naylor said. 'You have no way of finding your way home/

'So what? Who the hell wants to go to Earth anyway—eh? Tve got everything I need here/ Corngold winked at him obscenely, and, to the extreme embarrassment of both Naylor and Watson-Smythe, stuck his finger in Betty's vulva, wriggling it vigorously. Betty became the picture of humiliation, looking distressfully this way and that. But she made no move to draw back.

Naylor bristled. 'I say—you are British, aren't you?' he demanded heatedly.

Corngold withdrew his finger, whereupon Betty turned and snatched for her clothes. He looked askance at Naylor.

'And why shouldn't I be?' he challenged, his manner suddenly aggressive.

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'Dammit, no Englishman would treat a woman this way'

Corngold giggled, his mouth agape, looking first at Betty and then at Naylor. 'Fuck me, I must be a Welshman!'

Perhaps the best thing *would* be to leave you here/ Watson-Smythe commented, his tone voicing the coldest disapproval. It might be the punishment you deserve. Corngold/

'Do it, then! You'd never have got to me at all, you bastards, if Fd found a way to turn off the fucking beacon/

'It can't be done/ Naylor pointed out. It would be typical of such a character, he thought, not to know that. The beacon signal was imprinted on every velocitator manufactured, as a legal requirement. Otherwise habitats would never be able to vector in on one another.

Corngold grunted, and dragged the board table to the centre of the room, arranging around it the three chairs his dwelling boasted. With a casual gesture he invited his guests to sit down. When they had taken their places he banged on the tabletop. 'What's all this "Corngold", anyway? Have I yet agreed that I am Corngold? Establish the identity of the culprit—that's the first thing in law/

'I am satisfied you are Walter Corngold/ Watson-Smythe said smoothly.

'Supposition, supposition! Establish the identity!' Corngold was shouting.

He laughed, then turned to Betty, who was clothed now and standing by in the attitude of a waitress. 'Well, let's eat. Indian curry suit you? How do you like it? Mine's good and hot.'

While Corngold discussed the details of the meal Betty went to the matter-bank and returned with a large flagon of bright red wine and four glasses. Corngold sloshed wine into them, indicating to her that she should knock hers straight back. As soon as she had done so he emptied his own glass, instantly refilling it.

'One good hot vindaloo, one lamb biriani and a lamb kurma/ he instructed curtly.

Betty moved back to the matter-bank and twisted dials. Spicy aromas filled the room as she transferred bowls of food from the delivery transom to a tray. Naylor turned to Corngold. 'You can't seriously contemplate spending the rest of your life in this habitat? Cut off from humanity?'

'Humanity can go jump in a lake/ Corngold jerked his thumb towards the great nothingness that lay beyond the local galaxy. 'Any-

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way who says Fm habitat-bound? You forget there are other races, other worlds. As a matter of fact I've got a pretty good set-up here. I've discovered a simply fascinating civilisation on the planet of a nearby star. Here, let me show you/

Rising, he pushed aside a pile of cardboard cartons to reveal the habitat's control board. A small golden ring of stars appeared, glowing like a bracelet, as he switched on an opal-glowing viewscreen.

Corngold pointed out the largest of the stars. This is the place. A really inventive lifeform, not hard to get to know, really, and with the most extraordinary technology. I commute there regularly/

Tet you always bring your habitat back out here again? You must love solitude/ Naylor remarked.

I do love it indeed, but you misunderstand me. The habitat stays here. I commute to Zordem by means of a clever little gadget they gave me/

Heavily he sat down at the table, licking his lips. His visitors tried to ask him more about these revelations, their curiosity intense; but when the food was served he became deaf to their questions.

Taking up a whole spoonful of the pungent-smelling curry Betty served him, and without even tempering it with rice, he rolled it thoughtfully round his mouth. Then he suddenly spluttered and spat it all out.

This isn't vindaloo, you shitty-arsed cow. It's fucking Madras!'

With a roar Corngold picked up the bowl and flung it at Betty, missing her and hitting the wall. The brown muck made a dribbling trail down the yellow.

'You must excuse my common-law wife,' he said, his expression changing from fury to politeness as he turned to Watson-Smythe. 'Unfortunately she is a completely useless pig/

'But I don't dare dial vindaloo,' Betty protested in a whining, tearful voice. 'The bank's been going funny again. On vindaloo—'

'Get me my dinner!' Corngold bellowed, cutting off her explanations. Submissively she returned to the machine, operating it again.

As she turned the knobs an acrid blue smoke rose from the matter-bank, coming not from the transom but from the seams of the casing. Naylor, glancing at Watson-Smythe in alarm, made as if to rise, forming the intention of retreating to his own habitat and casting off with all haste. But Corngold sprang to his feet with a cry of

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exasperation and marched over to the ailing bank, giving it a hefty kick, at which the smoke stopped.

'It's always giving trouble/ he explained gruffly as he rejoined them. That's what comes of buying second-hand junk/

Watson-Smythe replied in a tone that Naylor thought remarkably even and calm. 'You do realise, don't you, that that thing can go off like a nuclear bomb?'

'So can my arse after one of these curries. Ah, here it comes. Better be right this time.'

Corngold's vindaloo was *very* hot. The sweat started out of his forehead as he ate it, grunting and groaning, deep in concentration. He was a man of lusty nature, Naylor decided, carrying his enjoyment of life to the limit. Afterwards he sat panting like a dog, calling for more wine and swallowing it in grateful gulps.

The meal over, Corngold became expansive. He described, with a wealth of boastful details, his contacts with the inhabitants of the planet Zordem. Their whole science is based on the idea of a certain kind of ray/ he told them. They call them *zom* rays. They have some quite remarkable effects. Let me show you, for instance—'

He opened one of the egg-shaped room's four doors, disclosing a cupboard whose shelves contained a number of unfamiliar objects. Corngold picked one up. It was a smooth, rounded shape, easily held in one hand, about three times as long as it was broad, with a flat underside. He carried it to the viewscreen and slapped it against the side of the casing, where it stuck as if by suckers.

On the screen, the ring of stars vanished. In its place was in-tergalactic space, and in the foreground a long, fully-equipped spaceship of impressive size, the ring-like protuberance about her middle indicating the massiveness of her velocitator armature. They all recognised her as a Royal Navy cruiser, one of several on permanent patrol.

'Rule Britannia!' crowed Corngold. 'It's the *Prince Andrew*. Ostensibly making sure we habitat travellers don't mistreat the natives, but really, of course, trying to have a go at a second British Empire. I should ko-ko!'

There have been quite a few incidents/ Watson-Smythe said sternly. 'It's no joking matter. I dare say your own relations with Zordem will be subject to scrutiny in good time/

Is she close?' Naylor asked.

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'No, she's quite a way off/ Corngold said, glancing at a meter. 'Roughly a googol olbers.'

'Your gadget can see *that* far? But good God—how do you find a single object at that distance?'

'The Zordems put a trace on it the day I arrived. To make me feel at home, I suppose. Don't ask me how. They did it with *zom* rays!'

Naylor was stunned. Then *these* are the people who are the true masters of infinity/ he breathed.

'Masters of infinity?' Corngold sat down at the table again, placing his bare, fat arms among the empty dishes. He wiped up a trace of curry sauce with his fingers and licked it, looking at Naylor with heavy irony. 'You really are a clown. The Zordems are nowhere into infinity, any more than we are. That's a lot of crap newspaper talk. The whole spread any of us have gone from Earth is no more than a spot. Okay, build a velocitator armature a light year across and ride on it for a billion years. You'll still only have gone the length of a spot on infinity. That's what infinity means, doesn't it?—that there's no end to it.'

'Just the same, you've been misleading us with this talk of being stranded/ Watson-Smythe accused. 'With equipment like this you can obviously find your way to anywhere.'

'Afraid not. This gadget gives the range but not the direction. The range *is* limited, too, to about fifty googol olbers. The Zordems have hit on a lot of angles we've missed, but they're not that much in advance of us overall.'

'But it must still be based on a completely new principle/ Naylor said, intensely excited. 'Don't you see, Corngold? This might give us what everybody's been looking for—a reliable homing device! It might even/ he ended shyly, 'mean a reduction of sentence for you.'

He blushed at the emerald malevolence that brimmed for a moment from Corngold's eyes. If he were honest, he was beginning to find the man frightening. There was something solid, immovable and dangerous about him. His knowledge of an alien technology, and his obvious intelligence which came through despite his outrageous behaviour, had dispelled the earlier impression of him as an amusing crank. All Watson-Smythe's trained smoothness had failed to make the slightest dent in his self-confidence; Betty remained his slave, and Naylor privately doubted if the charge of abduction could be made *to* stick. There was something ritualistic in Corngold's bru-

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tal treatment of her, and in her corresponding misery. It looked to Naylor as though they were matched souls.

'I thought I had dropped plenty of hints/ Corngold said, 'that I don't really want to come back to Earth. Betty and I want nothing more than to remain here, thank you/

Watson-Smythe seemed amused. 'I'm afraid the law isn't subject to your whims, Corngold/

'No?' Corngold's expression was bland, his eyebrows raised. 'I thought I might be able to bribe you. How would you both like to screw Betty? She's all right in her way—just lies there like a piece of putty and lets you do which and whatever to her/

Watson-Smythe snorted.

Corngold became annoyed. 'What is it you want, then? The fucking bracelet? Here—have it!' He went to the mattress on the floor, lifted it and brought out a gold ornament, flinging it at Watson-Smythe. 'It's a piece of sodding crap anyway—I only took it because Betty had a fancy for it/

Watson-Smythe picked up the bracelet, examined it briefly, wrapped it in a handkerchief and tucked it away in an inside pocket. 'Thanks for the evidence/

Corngold sighed. He reached for the flagon of wine and drained the dregs, ending with a belch.

'Well, it's not the end of the world. I expect Betty will be glad to see London again. Before you retire for the night, gentlemen, let me answer your earlier question—how I make the transition between here and Zordem. It's quite simple, really—done by zom rays again, but a different brand this time/

He went to the cupboard and brought out something that looked like a large hologram plate camera with a square, hooded shutter about a foot on the side. 'This is really a most astonishing gadget,' he said. 'It accomplishes long-distance travel without the use of a vehicle. I believe essentially the forces it employs may not be dissimilar to those of the velocitator—but instead of the generator moving, it moves whatever the zom rays are trained on. All you do is align it with wherever you want to go and step into the beam—provided you have a device at the other end to detranslate your velocity. Neat, isn't it? The speed is fast enough to push you right through walls as though they weren't there/

'Why, it's a matter transmitter/ Naylor exclaimed admiringly.

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'As good as/

Watson-Smythe had already guessed his danger and reached for his gun. But Comgold was too quick for him. He trained the camera-device on the agent and pressed a lever. The black frontal plate flickered, exactly as if a shutter had operated—as indeed one probably had. Watson-Smythe vanished. Aghast, Naylor staggered back. '*Christ!* You've murdered him!' 'Yes! For trying to disturb our domestic harmony!' Flustered and scared, Naylor stuttered: 'You've gone too far this time, Corngold. You won't get away with this . . . too far.'

He scrambled for the exit. He scampered through the tunnel, slamming shut the outer doors and disengaging the clutches so that the two habitats drifted apart, then slamming the inner door and rushing to the control board.

In the egg-shaped room, Corngold had quickly set up the Zordem projector on a tripod. Focusing it on the intruding habitat a few yards away through the wall, he sighted the instrument carefully and opened the shutter for an instant. Naylor and his habitat were away, projected out into the matterless lake.

Through the communicator on the control board came a faint voice. 'I'm falling, Corngold! Help me!'

'I'll help you,' Corngold crowed, grinning his peculiar open-mouthed grin. 'I'll help you fall some more!'

He opened the shutter again. Naylor accelerated further trillions of light years per second, carried by the irresistible force of zom rays,

'That's him out of the way,' Corngold exclaimed with satisfaction, turning to Betty. 'Bring on the booze!'

Pale and obedient, Betty withdrew a flagon of cerise fluid and two glasses from the matter-bank. She poured a full measure for Corn-gold, a smaller one for herself, and sat crouching on the couch, sipping it.

'We'll move on from here pretty soon,' Corngold murmured. 'If they could find us others can.'

He turned the opal-glowing viewscreen into the lake and surveyed the unrelieved emptiness, drinking his wine with gusto.

Corngold's mocking farewell was the last message Naylor's habitat received from the world of materiality, whether by way of artificial

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communication, electromagnetic energy, gravitational attraction or indeed any other emanation. These signposts, which normally informed space of direction, distance and dimension, were now left far behind.

There had been no time to engage the velocitator, and now it was too late. Corngold had had the jump on them from the beginning. At the first discharge of the Zordem projector Naylor's speedometer had registered c^{413} and his velocitator did not have the capacity to cancel such a velocity, even though the lake's shore, in the first few moments, had still been accessible. At the second discharge the meter registered c^{826} and unencumbered, total space had swallowed him up. He was now surrounded by nothing but complete and utter darkness.

Within the walls of the habitat, however, his domain was small but complete. He had, in the thespitron, a complete universe of discourse; a universe which, though nearly lacking in objective mass, conformed to familiar laws of drama and logic, and on the display screen of which, at this moment, Frank Nayland was pursuing his endless life.

Naylor's mind became filled again with the vision of the long, dark corridor down which the logical identities passed as they permutated themselves into concretisation. Who was to say that out here, removed from the constraints of external matter, the laws of identity might not find a freedom that otherwise was impossible? Might, indeed, produce reality out of thought?

'The famous question of identity/ he muttered feverishly and sat down before the flickering thespitron, wondering how it might be made to guide him, if not to his own world, at least to some world.

As the big black car swept to a stop at the intersection Frank Nayland emerged from the darkness and leaped for the

rear door, wrenching it open and hustling himself inside. His gat was in his hand. He let them see it, resting his forearm on the front seat support and leaning forward.

Rainwater dripped from him on to the leather upholstery. Ahead, the red traffic lights shone blurrily through the falling rain and the streaming sweep of the windscreen wipers.

Bogart peered round at Nayland, his face slack with fear.

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'Let's get out and take a walk/ Nayland said. 'I know a nice little place where we can talk things over/

Bogart's hand gripped the steering wheel convulsively. 'You know we can't leave here/

'No . . . that's right/ Nayland said thoughtfully. 'You have to keep going. You have to keep driving, running—'

The engine of the car was ticking over. The lights had changed and Bogart started coughing asthmatically. Stanwyck put her hand on his arm, a rare show of compassion. 'Oh, why don't you let him go?' she said passionately. 'He's done nothing to you.'

Nayland clambered out of the car, slamming the door behind him, and stood on the kerb while the gears ground and the vehicle shot off into the night. He walked through the rain to where his own car was hidden in a culvert and drove for a while until he spotted a phone booth.

Rain beat at the windows of the booth. Water dripped from his low-brimmed hat as Nayland dialled the number. While the tone rang he dug into his raincoat pocket, came up with a book of matches, flicked one alight and lit a cigarette with a cupped hand.

'Mr Naylor? Nayland here. This is my final report/

A pause, while the client on the other end spoke anxiously. Finally Nayland resumed. 'You wanted to know about the couple in the car. Bogart is wanted for the snatch of the Heskin tiara from the mansion of Mrs Van der Loon. It was the Stanwyck woman got him into it, of course—she was Mrs Van der Loon's paid companion. The usual sad caper. But here's the rub: there's a fake set of the Heskin rocks—or was. Mrs Van der Loon had a legal exchange of identity carried out between the real jewels and the paste set. A real cute switcheroo. It's the paste that's genuine now, and Bogart is stuck with a pocketful of worthless rocks and a broad who's nothing but trouble/

'Can that be done?' Naylor asked wonderingly.

'Sure. Identities are legally exchangeable/

Staring at the thespitron screen, the stick-mike in his hand, Naylor was thinking frantically. He watched a plume of smoke drift up the side of Nayland's face, causing the dick to screw up one eye.

Something seemed to be happening to the thespitron. The image was becoming scratchy, the sound indistinct.

'Why does it never stop raining?' he demanded.

'No reason for it to stop/

Barrington J. Bayley

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'But are you *red?*' Naylor insisted. 'Do you *exist?*'

Nayland looked straight at him out of the screen. The awareness in his eyes was unmistakable. 'This is *our* world, Mr Naylor. You can't come in. It's all a question of identity/

'But it will work—you just said so/ Naylor said desperately. "The switcheroo—the fake me and the real me-

'Goodbye, Mr Naylor/ Nayland said heavily. He put down the phone.

Without Naylor as much as touching the controls, the thespitron ground to a halt. The picture dwindled and the screen went blank.

'Ah, the famous question of identity!' boomed the thespitron, and was silent.

Naylor fingered the restart button, but the set was dead. He fell back in his chair, realising his mistake. He realised how foolish had been his abandonment of the solid wisdom of materialist empiricism, how erroneous his sudden hysterical belief, based on fear, that logic and identity could be antecedent to matter, when in fact they were suppositions merely, derived from material relations. Deprived of the massy presence of numerous galaxies, the signposts of reality, the thespitron had ceased to function.

The closing circles were getting smaller. Now there was only the shell of the habitat, analogue of a skull, and within it his own skull, that lonely fortress of identity. Naylor sat staring at a blank screen, wondering how long it would take for the light of self-knowledge to go out.