

This is the third in a series of stories (most recently "The Haute Bourgeoisie," January 1980) about Ciely Blue, John Starfinder and his asteroid-sized space whale with the ability to travel through space and time.

"The Mindanao Deep"

BY
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The man addressing the huge, hushed crowd in the gray light of the November day is tall, thin, black-bearded. He has removed his grotesque top hat and stands bare-headed in the damp cold. The ambient acres of the battlefield are no longer red with the blood of brothers under the skin; peace and quiet reign, where, mere months ago, the sound of musketry mingled with the screams of the dying and the shouts of the soon-to-be-dead.

In printed form, the never-to-be-forgotten words the man is uttering are familiar to Starfinder. But now their message is aborted by sporadic gusts of wind that blow most of them away.

Like so many other historical moments Starfinder has tuned in on the time screen in the belly of the spacewhale, the present one lacks the dramatic quality that irresponsible historians and even more irresponsible writers have invested it with, and once again he is disenchanted.

Dive, whale, he "says." He selects a place-time from a list lying on the arm of the lounge viewchair he is reclining in: *Long Island, North America, A.D. September 22nd, 1776.*

By now the whale has absorbed all of the computer's data and can locate and home in on any place-time in the entire Space-Time Sea on direct command; but its omni-audio-vision covers a vast area, and Starfinder still has to tune in manually the exact spatiotemporal coordinates of a given event — a process that sometimes involves exceedingly fine adjustments of the dials that flank the time screen.

When the whale resurfaces he tunes in the Hanging of Nathan Hale.

During the next hour he "attends" the Hanging, the Battle of Bunker Hill, and the May 29th, 1765, Meeting of the Virginia House of Burgesses. In the first instance he listens in vain for Hale to avow, "I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country"; in the second he listens with no more success for Colonel Prescott to shout, "Don't fire until you see the whites of their eyes!" and in the third he listens with the same lack of success for Patrick Henry to asseverate, "If this be treason, make the most of it!"

He is beginning to suspect that a great deal of recorded history is hype.

Anyway, watching past events all by himself is nowhere near as much fun as it was watching them with Ciely Bleu sitting beside him.

Ever since she left, the belly of the whale has seemed inordinately empty. The decks, when he walks upon them, give forth a hollow sound that he could swear was absent before.

Both of them had agreed that she should attend "Earth-school" some-when, somewhere, for a brief period of time. "Not to improve my mind," as she put it, but "to enhance my sensibilities with regard to personal relationships." But before budging an inch from the whale, she made him promise to visit her at least once each week and to order "Charles" (her name for the whale) to remain in synchronous orbit during each visit so that conversation could more easily be carried on "among the three of them."

"You're to meet me after school and walk home with me and maybe help me with my homework. You can carry my books, if you like."

The school they decided upon was a three-story solidly built structure located in a late-1970s U.S. town within convenient commuting distance of the city of Buffalo, N.Y. Actually it was Ciely who decided upon it, because she fell in love with its architecture and because it predates the federally subsidized modern school, which will come apart at the seams within a decade, that is destined to replace it. Armed with assets accumulated during a profitable pastback into the pre-1929 1920s, Starfinder had no trouble establishing her as a foreign-exchange student from France and placing her in a respectable

middle-class American household, where she is to remain for a single school year—a matter of about nine months.

He has not yet met her after school and carried her books home. There is no hurry. Time on board a spacewhale bears little or no relationship to time on a fixed celestial body, such as Earth; in fact he can, if he wishes, visit her every week throughout the school year within a matter of days and pick her up tomorrow. But he feels that this would be unfair to her, that he should allow some time at least to pass for himself before they are reunited. Not nine months of it, by any means, but *some*.

Meanwhile—

Ever since he repaired the whale's auxiliary ganglion in exchange for its indenturing itself to him for life, he has toyed with the idea of putting its ability to travel in the past to maximum use and ordering it to dive to the bottom of the Space-Time Sea. Before the coming of Ceily he did not quite dare, and while she was on board he would not have dreamed of embarking upon such a perilous adventure.

Does he dare now?

Anyway, how much risk is really involved?

If, as certain pundits still insist, the Cosmos is the result of a "primeval explosion," he could, should this become evident, order the whale to resurface and reverse its dive. He wouldn't even need to order it to: it would do so of its own accord. And if, as certain diehards still maintain, the cosmos sprang from Yahweh's fingertips over a span of seven days, the dive would automatically be aborted.

He deactivates the time screen, gets up from the viewchair and goes over to the lounge bar and mixes himself a Magellanic Cloud. He leans against the bar, sipping the drink thoughtfully, staring at the empty time screen. The screen is part of the "network" he established when he linked the whale's ganglion electromagnetically to the main computer so that the whale's omni-audio-vision could be made to function, among other things, as a chronograph and to facilitate finding place-times (a function which the whale's absorption of the computer's data has since rendered superfluous). The sensors of orthodox chronographs, such as those found on space-whaleboats, are popularly believed to be fixed on Earth and to derive their chronological input from the matrix world's meteorological changes. Such is not the case. They are calibrated in Earth years, months and days, which gives rise to the misconception, but they derive their data from the changes constantly taking place in the sun. The invisible, far-flung sensors of the whale's omni-audio-vision are far more sensitive than the most sophisticated of chronographs; and once Starfinder linked the computer to the whale's ganglion, he had merely to program the former with the then terrestrial date and let the whale take it from there. Now, whenever the whale-ship dives, the Earth-calibrated years it dives through flash across the bases of both the master viewscreen on the bridge and the time screen in the lounge; and whenever it resurfaces, the day, the month and the year then extant on Earth appear along the bases of both screens.

Starfinder finishes his Magellanic Cloud, but continues to lean against the bar. He cannot get the bottom of the Sea of (Space-Time) out of his mind. Oddly, he pictures it as an ocean floor, or rather, as the deepest part of a sort of cosmic Pacific: a Mariana Trench or a Mindanao Deep. More oddly yet, the absurd analogy adds to rather than subtracts from his fascination.

At this point the whale, to which his mind is an open book, interposes a hieroglyphic question:

I'm thinking of it, whale. Have you ever dived that deep? Has any spacewhale?

The answer is self-explanatory:

The bottom of the Sea, to this whale at least, is unknown territory.

Would you dive that deep if I asked you to?

The answer is a simple "statement" of their pact, wherein the whale agreed to obey the man's every

command in exchange for his repairing its auxiliary ganglion and freeing it from the Spacewhale Graveyard — the orbital Shipyards of Altair IV:

Starfinder leaves the lounge, walks down the main third-deck corridor to the forward companionway and ascends it to the bridge. He seats himself in the cushioned captain's chair and stares up at the master viewscreen. It still holds the stars that shone in the sky the night of the day Patrick Henry made his Stamp Act speech in the Virginia House of Burgesses.

Was that speech part of an overall pattern, or was it merely inserted willy-nilly, along with preceding and subsequent events, in the text of time?

Does history make sense? Does prehistory? Does anything?

Maybe, whale, the whole ball of wax constitutes a sort of Cosmic Book whose pages, when taken out of context, read like the ravings of a madman, but which, when read completely through, illuminates the meaning, the purpose of creation. Unveils the Grand Design....

If there is a Grand Design, where better to find its roots than at the bottom of the Space-Time Seal

His mind is made up. *Dive, whale, he "says." Dive to the bottom of the Sea. We'll plumb the depths of the Mindanao Deep!*

The whale girds itself. Crepitations from its 2-omicron-vii-activated drive-tissue reverberate throughout its belly. There is a faint tremor in its decks and bulkheads as the plunge begins.

Starfinder leans lazily back in the comfortable captain's chair and watches the years and the centuries flash by along the base of the viewscreen. A.D. 1699 ... A.D. 1345 ... A.D. 932 ... A.D. 419 ... B.C. 1....

The whale's momentum increases at an exponential rate as it dives even deeper into the Sea. There is no sense of motion, no indication of temporal retrogression, other than the accelerating readout and the subtle shifting of the stars. Ostensibly the whale is like "a painted ship upon a painted ocean."

Its seeming immobility has a soporific effect upon Starfinder. He did not sleep well last night. He tossed and turned and twisted. Worrying about Ciely. Did he do the right thing in sending her to Earth-school? Far from benefiting from the experience, she may suffer from it. And if she does, it will be his fault. De jure, she has parents, in the far future, on a Andromedae IX; but in freeing her from them, he automatically assumed their role. He is, to all intents and purposes, both her mother and her father—

—in the language of the whale. He is not accustomed to such responsibility. It lies like lead upon his shoulders and haunts his dreams.

Now the sleep he lost last night catches up to him, and he sinks into a dream of Ciely Bleu. He sees her as he saw her when they said good-by; sees her in the "contemporary" pre-washed jeans and Shaun Cassidy T-shirt the wardrobizer outfitted her with before she left the whale. He sees her azure eyes, wide with the wonder only the young can know; her thin and piquant face. He feels again the cool moist kiss she left upon his cheek.

He wakes with a start. The years catapulting past along the base of the viewscreen have become a blur, but one of them registers subliminally on his mind: B.C. 4,201,549,631!

In the viewscreen proper, stars swarm like angry bees.

He starts to his feet and steps close to the screen, staring at the multicolored maelstrom. To facilitate his thinking, he visualizes the Space-Time Sea as a cosmic infundibulum. He knows that it is nothing of the sort, but he also knows that, assuming the primeval-explosion theory to be correct, as would seem to be the case, any object moving backward to the beginning must follow a trajectory analogous to the inner slope of a funnel. If the whale continues its dive and the primeval-explosion theory *does* turn out to be correct, the leviathan will be incinerated long before it reaches the figurative bottom of the Sea, and he

will be incinerated along with it.

He is about to cry out, "*Resurface, whale!*" when he notices that the swarming stars are thinning out. Lowering his gaze to the screen's base, he notices something else: the rapid retrogression of years has ceased. The last one to be registered is B.C. 5,221,492,986.

The cessation admits of two possible answers, neither of which explains the thinning out of the stars: (1) the whale has resurfaced; or (2) it has dived past the moment the sun was born.

Have we resurfaced, whale?

The whale's response makes clear that they have not:

By this time the stars in the view-screen have thinned out to hardly a handful and have receded into distant pinpoints of light.

As Starfinder stares into the growing blackness, one of them vanishes. Another.

The situation of a few minutes ago has altered diametrically.

Should he order the whale to resurface? It cannot reverse its dive unless he does. Or should he let it proceed to the very bottom of the Space-Time Sea?

Theoretically the Sea is 15,000,000,000 years deep.

Only a far-flung scattering of stars are visible in the screen now. As he stares at them, they wink out one by one.

Total blackness.

Well, what else? Did he expect to find light in the Mindanano Deep?

No. But the Mindanao Deep is a mere metaphor. What we are discussing here, ladies and gentlemen, is page one of the Cosmic Book — the opening paragraph that deals with the "primeval atom" and the subsequent explosion whence sprang the Grand Design-

Starfinder laughs. *The Big Bang, whale — they made it up! It has no more scientific merit than Shu, son of Amon-Ra, holding his sister Nut, the sky, above his brother Keb, the Earth.*

As his laughter fades away, there is a grinding jar followed by a series of scraping sounds, and then silence. It is as though the whale has finally come to rest on the bottom of the Sea. The viewscreen vanishes before his eyes. The deck dissolves beneath him, the bulkheads from around him, the ceiling from above him. He finds himself standing in a little room with a picture window that frames a view of grass and trees and distant undulating hills.

The walls of the room are black. So is the ceiling. So is the floor. The dimensions suggest the interior of a cube.

There are two doors. One in the middle of the wall to his left, the other in the middle of the wall to his right. A gray desk with a matching swivel chair is positioned at right angles to the picture window. On the opposite wall is a fireplace.

Dazed, he stares through the picture window at the grass. It appears to have been newly mowed. The trees are shade trees but they throw no shade. The distant hills are just that. Above them, a brief expanse of blue sky is visible.

The light he is seeing by is of uniform consistency and fills every square inch of the room. Its source cannot possibly be ascribed to the picture window. It appears to be part of the ambience itself.

He faces the fireplace, which up till now he has only glanced at. It does not qualify as a light source, since there is no fire in it, but fireplaces are among the most fundamental factors of human civilization, and he is in desperate need of a handhold on reality.

It is built of rectangular red bricks, boasts a pair of brass — or brass-like — andirons across which lies a small log, and is surmounted by a marble — or marble-like — mantel. Here, however, orthodoxy ends, for lying on the mantel is an object that at first glance appears to be a large ovoid lump of coal, highly polished and with tiny apertures, through which nacreous light emanates, spaced at regular intervals along its surface.

When Starfinder brought the whale back to life and stole it from the Orbital Shipyards of Altair IV, it was ninety-percent converted. In addition to transforming its spelaeian interior into decks and

compartments and machining away its "skin" and burnishing its transsteel subtissue, conversion included streamlining its asymmetry into a semblance of symmetry. In the process, the whale's self-image was altered, and it thinks, when it refers to itself as that it is giving a reasonably accurate, though necessarily simplified, description of itself. It is not. In actuality, it looks very much like an asteroid-sized, highly polished ovoid lump of coal with windows.

Disbelievingly Starfinder stares at the "lump of coal" on the mantel.

Leaning forward, he closes one eye and peers with the other through one of the tiny apertures. He sees a tiny stateroom containing a tiny berth, a tiny vanity, a tiny bureau, a tiny chair and a tiny wardrobizer.

He peers through another aperture — no, not aperture, portscope — and sees a tiny compartment containing a built-in control console and a single chair.

The winch room. The nucleus for the loading and the unloading of the holds.

Another portscope, chosen at random, provides him with a giant's-eye view of the galley.

Through trial and error, he locates one of the portscopes of the bridge. He peers through it and sees himself standing in front of a tiny viewscreen, a doll less than a quarter of an inch tall.

The homunculus is leaning forward, staring into the screen.

Homunculus?

Starfinder straightens. He is sweating. *Where are you, whale?* he asks.

He does not expect an answer and is surprised when a hieroglyph promptly takes form in his mind:

At test, on the bottom of the Space-Time Sea. *Where am I?*

Again the whale responds without the slightest hesitation:

In the belly of the whale, on the bottom of the Space-Time Sea.

Starfinder wipes his forehead on the sleeve of his shirt.

If both the whale and he are on the bottom of the Space-Time Sea, how can the one, in miniature form, be on the mantel of a fireplace and the other be both in its belly and in the room that contains the fireplace?

All of this is a dream. It *must* be a dream. He is still sound asleep in the captain's chair. He merely dreamed that he awoke.

He tries to arouse himself, to bring himself out of sleep. But the ruse will not work. The reality of the room won't go away.

He finds himself staring at one of the two opposing doors. Very well, room. If *you* won't leave, *I* will.

He goes over to the door, opens it and steps into another room. The door is a swinging door and swings swiftly and silently shut behind him. The room he has just entered is a facsimile of the room he just stepped out of. It is identically furnished and its picture window frames an all-too-familiar view of grass and trees and distant undulating hills.

There is a door opposite the one he came in by. He crosses the room, opens it and steps into a third room. It is exactly like the other two.

*Myself when young did eagerly frequent
Doctor and Saint, and heard great argument
About it and about: but evermore
Came out by the same door as in I went.*

The ancient quatrain erupted unsolicited from his subconscious. It is not quite apropos, but it provides him with a clue.

The door he came in by has swung to behind him. Slyly he crosses the floor, opens the opposite door and makes as though to enter the room beyond. Then, standing in the doorway, he darts a quick glance over his shoulder at the other door. Sure enough, it is open, and there is another Starfinder standing in

that doorway darting a quick glance over *his* shoulder at the "first" Starfinder, who, for all the "third" Starfinder knows, may be darting a quick glance over *his* shoulder at still another Starfinder, and so on, *ad infinitum*.

He doesn't return to the "first" room. What would be the sense? There is only one. Instead, he goes over to the desk and sits down in the swivel chair.

For a while he gazes absently through the picture window at the green grass and the shadeless shade trees and the distant, undulating hills. He wonders wearily what lies beyond. Probably an identical expanse of grass and trees backgrounded by identical undulating hills.

The window has no sash. It doesn't even appear to be set into the wall. It merely begins where the wall leaves off and ends where the wall resumes.

On an impulse he removes one of his boots and slams its heel against the glass. The glass, if glass it is, gives forth a dull, hollow sound, but it does not break or even crack.

He bangs the boot-heel against the adjoining wall. He is rewarded with the same dull, hollow sound. He puts the boot back on.

The desktop next engages his attention. It is bare, save for a ream of paper surmounted by a black paperweight, and inset inkwell from which a quill pen protrudes, and a small framed holo-photo.

He picks the photo up and looks at it more closely. It is a hologram of a girl in her late teens or early twenties. There is a sad expression on her face, as though the first robin she saw that spring was dead. She has bobbed, brown hair bordering on black, dark eyebrows that somehow bring to mind blackbirds on the wing, blue eyes that make him think of the skies of Earth as they were when he pastbacked to the unpolluted 1920s. Her face is half in profile, and the graceful down-curve of the bridge of her nose and the nose itself seem joined to the line of her left eyebrow. Her mouth is a shade too wide, the lips too sensitive. Closer scrutiny reveals almost invisible hairline scars along her cheeks and across her forehead. Oddly, they add to, rather than detract from, her attractiveness. Written in white ink across the bottom of the photo, just above the frame, are the words:

To Starfinder, with all my Love.

By this time Starfinder is beyond surprise, a stranger to consternation. He returns the holo-photo to the exact spot he picked it up from and directs his attention toward the ream of paper. Perceiving that the topmost sheet is covered with slanted script, he pulls the ream closer to him and removes the black paperweight. Subsequent examination reveals that all the sheets of the ream are covered with the same slanted handwriting.

Whose handwriting is it?

God's?

He peers at it more closely. No, it isn't God's. It is his own.

The language employed appears to be Anglo-American, but when he tries to read the words they blur before his eyes and he cannot make out a single one of them. This does not surprise him either. Meticulously he arranges the pages exactly as they were and returns the manuscript — for manuscript it obviously is — to the same spot on the desktop he removed it from. He is about to replace the paperweight when he notices that it is a perfect cube and that there are a pair of diminutive hinges affixed to two of its adjoining sides.

It is a box, not a paperweight. Or perhaps it is a box and a paperweight both. Whichever, it can be opened.

Should he open it?

The question is an academic one, for he has already inserted a fingernail between the adjoining sides opposite the hinges. A modicum of pressure suffices, and the lid springs back with a click that seems to echo from the ceiling.

Even before he looks inside, Starfinder knows what he will see, and it is exactly what he does see: a tiny Starfinder sitting at a tiny desk in a tiny room looking down at something he is holding in his hands.

Looking down, no doubt, into the interior of an even tinier box at an even tinier Starfinder sitting at an

even tinier desk in an even tinier room looking down into the interior of an even tinier box at an even tinier Starfinder sitting at an even tinier desk in an even tinier room looking down into the interior of an even tinier room at an even tinier Starfinder, and so on, *ad infinitum*.

As Starfinder sits there staring down at the back of his tiny neck, he feels someone's gaze on the back of his own neck; and turning his head and glancing up, he sees, above the plane formerly occupied by the ceiling, a massive head turned sideways at exactly the same angle his own is turned. He grins, and returns his gaze quickly to the tiny Starfinder in *his* box, but not in time, of course, to catch the tiny Starfinder returning his gaze to the even tinier Starfinder in *his* box.

He closes the little lid, and the *click!* it makes is joined by a louder *click!* from above. He replaces the box on top of the manuscript. Glancing upward, he sees that the "ceiling" is back in place.

Starfinder puts on his thinking cap.

By dint of much mental hammering and sawing, he reassembles a small block of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, memorized when he was blind:

Space and Time are merely subjective conditions of all our intuitions, in relation to which all objects are therefore mere phenomena, and not things in themselves ... In respect to the form of phenomena, much may be said a priori, while of the thing-in-itself, which may lie at the foundation of these phenomena, it is impossible to say anything.

Granted, Kant wasn't talking about the Space-Time Sea. Nevertheless, his conclusions are pertinent to my predicament.

Given the existence of the bottom of that Sea, said bottom, by its very nature, would be bereft of both Space and Time.

But am I to believe that the infinite succession of rooms/boxes I appear to be inhabiting, when in actuality I am inhabiting only one — if indeed I am inhabiting any at all — constitutes the so-called thing-in-itself?

No. The rooms/boxes, plus their contents, plus the stereotyped scene framed by the "picture window," constitute my *interpretation* of the thing-in-itself.

The whole package is as close as my perceptions can get to the so-called foundation and probably bears little, if any, resemblance to it.

Past, present, future — I am existing in all three. And all three are one.

Maybe what my perceptions are trying to tell me is that there is no End and no Beginning: that man invests reality with both, just as he invests it with Space and Time.

Whatever the case, it is painfully evident that the "Cosmic Book," if such a book exists, contains no Grand Design.

At this point a familiar rebus brings his brown study to a close:

What do Ciely, myself and you sailing the Sea of Space and Time have to do with the price of eggs, whale?

Instead of answering, the whale repeats the rebus:

Starfinder frowns. Obviously the whale is trying to tell him something and he is too dense to get the message.

Its ganglion, uncluttered by lies and misconceptions, enables it to perceive the bottom of the Space-Time Sea in simplistic form. But it is simultaneously perceiving it through Starfinder's senses, and the same lack of "sophistication" that is responsible for its own version has enabled it to read the meaning behind his.

Again, the rebus,

and this time Starfinder understands.

In olden days on Earth, in finite form, the concept the whale is conveying wore the word "existentialism."

The whale is saying that in the absence of a macrocosmic design each individual must create a microcosmic design. But it is saying more than that.

It is saying that its and Ciely's and Starfinder's lives are inseparable and that therefore the three of them must collaborate — are collaborating — in creating a collective microcosmic design.

The manuscript on the desk bears this out. Although it is in Starfinder's handwriting, it is the work of three authors and can only be read collectively.

But who is the girl in the holophoto?

He asks the whale. *Who is she, whale?*

The whale does not answer. Either it doesn't know, or it isn't saying.

Obviously she is someone he is destined to meet in the future and who is destined to fall in love with him.

All right then, what is the significance of the "lump of coal" on the mantel?

The whale has already answered that. The "lump of coal" represents the microcosm as opposed to the macrocosm.

Starfinder gets up and goes over to look at it again. It isn't there. Neither is the mantel. Neither is the fireplace. He is standing on the bridge in the belly of the whale, staring into the blackness framed by the viewscreen.

In one sense, he has been standing there all along.

He grins. *Dive, whale, he "says." Dive back to A.D. September 12th, 1978. It's time for me to meet Ciely after school.* And the whale girds itself and crepitations resound throughout its belly as 2-omicron-vii fills its drive-tissue, and whale and man rebound from the bottom of the Space-Time Sea