

*This is the fourth and final story in the series about John Starfinder, the girl — here grown to woman — Ciely Bleu, and the organic space-time ship, the spacewhale. Mr. Young and the spacewhale provide what has gone before, and so it is not necessary to have read the earlier stories to enjoy this one. However, for your information, the previous tales are: "The Star Eel," June 1977; "The Haute Bourgeoisie," January 1980; "The Mindanao Deep," March 1980. The series will soon be published in book form by Pocket Books.*

# *As A Man Has A Whale A Love Story*

BY  
ROBERT F. YOUNG

**A**n importunate hieroglyph appears in Starfinder's sleeping mind:

He turns on his side, hoping the hieroglyph will go away. It does, but another almost like it takes its place:

Annoyed, he sits up in his bunk. *Yes, whale, I know I'm supposed to meet Ciely after school this afternoon. But it's only* — he glances at the clock inset in the footboard — *it's only a little after ten, and school doesn't let out until three.*

Nevertheless it is time to get going, and he knows it. Meeting his ward after school isn't merely a matter of jumping into the Archaeopteryx (her whimsical nickname for the lifeboat, since shortened to the "Arc"), dashing down through Earth's atmosphere and landing on the school's front lawn. Not unless he wants to turn the little town of Muncieville, N.Y. into a magnet for the news media and a mecca for the curious. The people of the 1970s have a thing about "UFOs," and the Archaeopteryx automatically qualifies as one. Moreover, its anti-photon field, being only fifty percent effective in the daytime, will add to rather than detract from the craft's mystique. Furthermore, the school isn't a rustic little red building out in the sticks, as the space whale's simplistic glyph implies, but a staunch three-story brick structure located smack-dab in the center of town. Circumspection, therefore, is a must. He will have to land the Arc in an outlying woods — preferably the same woods he made use of before — and proceed the rest of the way to his destination on foot.

Still and all, though, even such a roundabout route shouldn't require as much time as the whole seems to think.

Grumpily, feeling twice his thirty-three years, he divests himself of his pajamas and enters the lavatory-shower adjoining the cabin. The cabin is the captain's cabin and he is the self-appointed captain of the spacewhale, an asteroid-like life-form that has been converted into a spaceship. He is also its crew, and, now that Ciely is no longer on board, its only occupant. He is about to actuate the shower when another "little red schoolhouse" and Ciely appear in his mind. The whale, apparently, doesn't think

he has time to take a shower. Well, he supposes, it's not imperative that he take one; he just took one last night. A shave will suffice. He steps over to the wall cabinet and is about to reach for his automatic razor when still another "little red schoolhouse" and Ciely etch themselves in his mind.

He peers into the cabinet's holomirror. A faint stubble is visible on his cheeks and chin — hardly worth bothering with, and not nearly as noticeable anyway as the star-shaped 2-omicron-vii scar on his right cheek. *Okay, whale, since you're in such an all-fired hurry, I suppose I can skip shaving too.* He splashes cold water on his face and leaves the lavatory.

Back in the cabin, he starts to step into the wardrobizer. A fifth "little red schoolhouse" and Ciely sear his mental retina. Well, maybe he doesn't need a new suit after all. Maybe the one he wore before will do. After all, only a week has gone by on Earth; fashions don't change *that* fast. Now where did he put it? After considerable rummaging about, he finds it under the bunk. It is a handsome \$500 pinstripe, on the conservative side, but sharp as they come. The shirt and tie he wore with it are also under the bunk, as are the executive boots.

Fully dressed, he surveys himself in the full-length holo-mirror beside the wardrobizer.

Meet M. Jean D'etoiles, Independent International PR man *extraordinaire*, specializing in the placement of foreign-exchange students.

Satisfied, Starfinder leaves the cabin and heads for the galley.

*Damn it, whale! — don't I even have time to eat breakfast?*

For answer, he receives an even more emphatic "little red schoolhouse" and Ciely glyph.

*Dive back an hour then. Then I'll have plenty of time.*

He listens for the drive-tissue crepitations and waits for the faint tremor that will indicate the execution of his command. He hears and feels nothing.

Well, no, not quite nothing. He feels the whale's mounting impatience.

*You're pressing your luck, whale. I know that in your book she made the sun, the Earth and the stars and that you can't wait to see her through my eyes, but what difference would one measly little hour make?*

Silence.

Angrily he about-faces, stomps back down the passageway, enters the boat bay and climbs on board the Arc. The right sleeve of his suitcoat catches on a protruding screwhead as he slides into the cockpit, and instead of taking the time to disengage the sleeve, he jerks it free. Result: a tear near the elbow.

*There! — you see what you made me do, whale?*

What bugs him more than being routed out of bed and rushed off to school like a tardy teen-ager is the fact that the whale could just as easily have resurfaced hours ago, or even yesterday, and have given him more time to rest up from his ordeal at the bottom of the Space-Time Sea. But perhaps it erred. Certainly it could have erred with respect to the time of day, for the chronograph wouldn't have been able to synchronize its clocks with Eastern Daylight Saving Time till *after* it resurfaced.

Just the same, it wouldn't hurt it to backtrack one measly hour.

He is about to open the outer lock when it opens by itself. *You just can't wait, can you, whale!* A touch on the controls propels the little craft out into space, and there "below" him lies Earth's blue-green western hemisphere. He informs the Arc's A.P. of Muncieville's co-ordinates, and the little craft begins the long descent.

That which has gone before can best be synopsisized in the pictographic language the spacewhale devised to communicate with the human race:

*(While undergoing conversion in the Orbital Shipyards of Altair IV, the whale — — indentured itself to Starfinder—one of the converters, in exchange for his saving its life, placing at his fingertips its ability to travel through both Space — — and Time—.*

*(Subsequently the whale was attacked by a star eel, which, like the whale, had been converted into a spaceship, and which had been stolen from the Orbital StarEel Shipyards of a Andromedae IX (Renascence) by an idealistic twelve-year-old girl named Ciely Bleu, who had fled from Renascence's proletarian society, whose members she referred to as the "Haute Bourgeoisie" because despite their egregious Philistinism they "put on airs.")*

*(After Starfinder talked Ciely into coming on board the whale and into ordering her "pet" to release its prey, the whale, its primitive instincts overriding Starfinder's command to let the eel go free, rammed its ancient enemy and destroyed it.)*

*(Contrite, the whale assuaged Ciely's grief by means of a series of ingratiating hieroglyphs, adopted her, and it and she and Starfinder became three comrades sailing the Sea.)*

*(After Ciely recovered from her loss, Starfinder returned her to a Andromedae IX and left her with her parents, despite the fact that they turned out to be a pair of beerdrunks dedicated to the popular proposition that all men and women are equal, provided they work with their backs and not with their brains.)*

*(The whale, outraged by Starfinder's callousness, refused to budge when he ordered it to de-orbit.)*

*(Starfinder, finally facing the fact that he'd overvalued his freedom and undervalued the love of a little girl, returned to Renascence and brought Ciely back.)*

*(whereupon the three comrades set sail once more on the Sea.)*

*(At a later date, Ciely and Starfinder agreed that she should attend "Earth-school" for one school year, "to enhance," as she put it, "my sensibilities with regard to personal relationships." After acquiring a number of key assets during the pre-1929 1920s by making use of his precognition, he had the whale dive ahead to the mid-1970s, where he converted the assets into "talking money," established himself as an "Independent International PR Man" and enrolled*

*Ciely in the school of her choice as a "foreign-exchange student" from "France.")*

*(He placed Ciely with the Runsteds, a respectable upper-middle-class couple with two daughters around her own age, opened a five-figure savings account in her name, promised to meet her after school every Friday afternoon and spend the evening with her, kissed her good-by, returned to the Arc and rejoined the whale in space.)*

*(Rather than have the whale immediately dive ahead to the first Friday and to successive Fridays thereafter, he decided that in fairness to Ciely he should allow at least some time to go by for himself between visits. Skeptical of the "Big Bang" cosmogony and curious to find out whether the "Cosmic Book" embraces a Grand Design, he resolved to descend to the bottom of the Sea. There, billions of years "beneath" the birth of Sol, he discovered that the universe has neither an end nor a beginning.)*

*(Now the whale has positioned itself in geosynchronous orbit off Earth's western hemisphere at a point in time that its computer, which, in liaison with its o.a.v. (omni-audio-vision), functions as a chronograph, demarcated as the "First Friday," and Starfinder is on his way down to Muncieville to meet Ciely after school.)*

His first inkling that all is not as it should be is the Arc's near-collision with one of the components of the "Artificial Satellite Belt." According to the little craft's computer, which absorbed the Belt's configuration and the vectors and velocities of its components during Starfinder's most recent passage through it, the object — a third-stage booster from the looks of it — simply should not have been in that particular place at that particular time.

His second inkling that all is not as it should be is the woods in which he landed the Arc during his previous 1970s visit and in which, after throwing in the manual override, he proceeds to land in now. If memory serves him right, the woods covered a larger area than it covers now, and moreover, the nearest human habitations appear to be both nearer and more numerous.

But perhaps memory doesn't serve him right, and perhaps the booster the Arc came close to occupying the same place at the same time with was jettisoned during the past week.

The Arc's clock, which the chronograph automatically synchronized with the whaleship's clocks, registers 12:02. Thanks to the whale, he is way ahead of time. He raises his left arm to reset the expensive wristwatch he bought to embellish his role as M. Jean D'etoiles, only to find that, thanks also to the whale, he was in such a hurry he left it behind.

He manages to take a philosophical view of the matter, though not without considerable effort (after all, if he needs to know what time it is and no clocks are available, he can always ask the whale), turns off the radar nullifier, leaves the anti-photon field on, steps out of the Arc and seals the lock behind him. Then he sets forth for Muncieville. The trees thin out almost at once, and he strikes off across a wide field toward the highway that leads into town. The field is planted with tomatoes. He frowns. It seems to him that last week it was planted with string beans. But perhaps he is mistaken. He was in a hurry to rejoin the whale in space and probably didn't pay too much attention.

The field has been picked at least once but is long overdue for another picking, and the vines are loaded with ripe tomatoes. Except for the people in the cars moving along the highway, the countryside, at least that part of it within his range of vision, is devoid of life. Prompted by his breakfastless stomach, he picks one of the tomatoes a great big red one — and bites into it. He has never before bitten into a

ripe tomato, or a green one either, for that matter, and is unprepared for the sudden eruption of juice and seeds. Since he forgot to bring a handkerchief, he is reduced to wiping his mouth and chin upon his coat sleeve.

Undaunted, he continues eating the tomato and resumes walking toward the highway. By taking small, fastidious bites he manages to avert further eruptions, but now a new peril calls itself to his attention. It rained hard, either during the night or that morning, and the rows between the vines are muddy and in places there are puddles of water. He has already walked through one of the puddles, and although he manages to avoid walking through any more of them, he cannot avoid the mud, and by the time he reaches the highway his executive boots and the cuffless cuffs of his suit-pants are a mess.

Oh, well, the sun is hot, and maybe the mud will have dried and fallen off when he gets to where he is going. He sets off along the shoulder in the direction of Muncieville. The little town is about two miles distant. He can get there easily in an hour — less, if one of the passing cars gives him a lift. He considers soliciting one. Although he has never hitchhiked, he is familiar with the technique, having observed it on several occasions during his previous twentieth-century sojourns on the planet. However, he decides against employing it. Thanks to the whale, he already has too much time to kill before school lets out. He may as well kill some of it walking.

As he trudges along the shoulder, the passing cars strike a discordant note in his mind. Not a loud one, but one that annoys him just the same. At length he realizes that there are fewer of them than there should be. Moreover, the majority of them appear to be "compacts" or "subcompacts," and those that are full-sized appear to be falling apart.

He reminds himself that he spent only a few days in the 1970s and that those few days were devoted to enrolling Ciely in school and in establishing her in the Runsted ménage, not in looking at automobiles. Chances are, the discordant note originated inside rather than outside his head.

**M**uncieville, unless defined by its city limits, does not begin abruptly; it comes gradually into being. The buildings along the highway multiply and the distances separating them shrink. At length a sign appears on the right-hand side of the highway. It reads, *30 M.P.H.* Finally, another sign denotes the village proper:

#### MUNCIEVILLE, NEW YORK

Pop. 4,204

The highway and the village's main drag are one, and since the high school is located on Main Street, all Starfinder has to do to reach his destination is continue on a straight course, or as straight a one as the street permits. Big sugar maples line both sides of the street. They reassure him that all's right with the world as he walks along the right-hand sidewalk in their postprandial shade. So do the pleasant houses and the pleasant lawns. So does the stuttering roar of power mowers. So does the simple fact that the grass is too wet to cut and the people are cutting it anyway.

His shirt is soaked with sweat from his two-mile hike, and he is tempted to remove his suitcoat and carry it over his arm and take maximum advantage of the coolness beneath the trees. But he refrains. Ciely has probably told her schoolmates, if she is running true to form, that a rich and influential businessman from France is going to meet her after school and carry her books home, and he must look the way both she and they will expect him to look. He must keep in mind that he is no longer John Starfinder, Space-bum, but M. Jean D'etoiles, Independent International PR Man *extraordinaire*.

He wishes, though, that he's had time to shave, and that there were some way he could get the mud off his pantlegs and executive boots.

Traffic is light, and there are but few pedestrians. Those he passes either do not look at him at all, or look at him and then look quickly away — the sort of mild xenophobia one encounters in most small American towns. He passes the street where the Runsteds live — Hill Street — but their house is too far up the hill for him to get a glimpse of it. Much too far up. In fact, they do not really live on Hill Street, but

on an exclusive extension of it called Alpine Terrace. "Alpine Terrace" looks better on letterheads and return-address labels than just plain "Hill Street" would.

At last he comes opposite the tract of land where the high school stands. Only the high school isn't standing there. A supermarket is. And where green grass once extended to halls of ivy, blistering blacktop and polished automobiles shimmer in the sun.

The near collision of the Arc with the booster rocket, the shrinkage of the woods, the tomato patch, the little cars, the fact that the high school wasn't due to be razed and a new one built on the outskirts of town for another two years — all join hands and dance a mocking chassé around "M. Jean D'etoiles, Independent International PR Man *extraordinaire*".

*You oversurfaced, didn't you, whale. You oversurfaced but good!*

The whale doesn't "say" anything.

Having viewed the supermarket through Starfinder's eyes, it is probably as flabbergasted as he is.

*You could have at least looked before you made me leap!*

Still no response.

Starfinder knows he is being unfair, that the whale didn't look, first of all, because it wanted its first glimpse of Ciely to be horizontal, through the man's eyes, rather than vertical, via its o.a.v.; and secondly because it assumed, just as Starfinder did, that it had hit the First Friday on the nose.

The possibility that diving "beneath" the birthdate of the sun might have thrown the chronograph off hadn't occurred to it any more than it had occurred to him.

But, clearly, that is what must have happened.

Basically, the chronograph is a calendar-clock, and when you pull the plug on a calendar-clock, the calendar-clock stops running and doesn't resume running till you plug it back in again.

The calendar-clock in this case is the liaison between the whale's o.a.v. and the computer-ganglion. Solar data is fed into the latter by the former, which then translates it into the year, the month and the day in progress on Earth. When the whale dived "beneath" Sol's birthdate, the data ceased and didn't resume till the whale dived "above" the birthdate.

Logically, the chronograph should have resumed functioning where it had left off. Obviously, it hadn't.

How many years did it lose? Two? Three?

There is an easy way to find out.

Starfinder picks his way through the parked cars to the supermarket and goes inside. The office is just to the right of the entrance. Stepping over to the counter, oblivious of the girl behind it, he scans the walls for a calendar. There is one hanging on the wall directly opposite him. The month is as it should be. September. But the year....

He stares horrified at the four black numerals.

No, the chronograph didn't lose two years. Nor three.

It lost eight.

"Can I help you, sir?"

He realizes that it is the second time the girl behind the counter has asked the question. "Yes," he says, patching his tattered thoughts together. "You can tell me what day this is."

Her gaze, which has lowered to his tie, flicks back to his face. "Friday."

*Well, anyway, we got the month and the day right, whale.* "I mean what date."

She blinks. "The twenty-fourth." Eight years and two weeks....

Presently he realizes that he has turned around and is leaning against the counter staring at the huge signs in the supermarket windows advertising this week's bargains. Absently he begins reading the for-sale items and the prices. This requires considerable concentration, since the letters and the numerals are facing the street and he has to read them backwards through the thin paper they are printed on. Apple juice is on sale. Corn is three cans for \$1.49. There is also a sale on tomato juice. A sale on just about everything, in fact, that recently was, is, or soon will be, in season. The time for the unloading of old canned goods is come, and the voice of the huckster can be heard in our land.

"Excuse me."

A short fat woman is edging him to one side. Quickly he walks around her and leaves the store, preceded by a haunted housewife pushing a heaped-up grocery cart and followed by another pushing an even more highly heaped-up one. He makes his way back across the blacktop to the street. While he was in the store, a clock must have crossed his line of vision and etched an image on his mental retina, because he keeps seeing one in his mind. Its little hand points to the numeral 2 and its big hand bisects the numeral 1.

Five minutes after two.

Somewhere in Muncieville stands the new high school that replaced the old, and in less than fifty-five minutes it is going to let out. But for him to find it will amount to an exercise in futility, because Ciely isn't going to come running down its walk and throw her arms around his neck and kiss him Hello.

She is not going to come running down its walk, period — unless she is taking a post-post-post-graduate course, in which case she is hardly likely to throw her arms around a stranger in an eight-year-old suit with mud on its pantlegs and with one sleeve torn and the other stained with tomato juice, and kiss *him* Hello.

*What am I going to do, whale? What are we going to do?*

The whale doesn't answer.

But it knows what they must do as well as he does. They must find Ciely. They must find her if for no other reason than to ascertain that she is all right. And the logical place to start looking is the Runsted's. If Ciely isn't there, Mr. or Mrs. Runsted can tell him where she went.

*Is she there, whale?*

No, but Mr. and Mrs. Runsted are.

*Look for her, whale. Look for her everywhere. Cover the whole planet, if you have to.*

It is a superfluous command, if ever there was one. The whale, no doubt, has been looking for her ever since it discovered that the high school she was supposed to be attending no longer exists, and realized the terrible truth. Looking for her like a frenzied nanny. But frenzied or not, it will find her, no matter where she may be. Its erstwhile rapport with her was such that in the unlikely event its o.a.v. shouldn't be up to the task, it will be able to single her out from the rest of the people on Earth by means of her thought pattern alone.

*Meanwhile, I'll pay the Runsted's a visit.*

He begins walking back along Main toward Hill Street.

Ideally, he could return to the Arc (or have the whale, which numbers psychokinesis among its other abilities, bring it to him), rejoin the whale in space, backtrack eight years and two weeks, return to Earth and meet Ciely when he was supposed to. That way, she would be spared the disappointment of being stood up that First Friday and wouldn't have to suffer the demoralizing heartbreak that must have been hers when it became evident that her beloved Starfinder and her even more beloved Charles (her name for the whale) had left her in the lurch. And he and the whale would not be confronted with a situation neither knows quite how to cope with.

Ideally, yes. Prdctically, no. Ciely's disappointment and heartbreak are *faits accompli*. And her continued presence on Earth is woven into the sleeve of Time. Time would not be apt to unravel that sleeve to accommodate a mere man and a mere whale. More likely, it would snip off the two loose threads the man and the whale would represent.

Alpine Terrace has not changed appreciably during the "eight years" since Starfinder last saw it. Oh, the trees are taller, but not noticeably so, and there are a number of small Schwedler's maples growing where only grass grew before, and probably there are new cracks in the sidewalk, and no doubt the street has been resurfaced at least once. But, basically, Alpine Terrace is still the same snobbish little adjunct he visited eight years/one week ago.

When he comes opposite the Runsted's, he pauses a moment before starting up the little walk that leads to the main entrance. The day, unusually warm for so late in the year, seems to have grown warmer, and he is sweating like a longshoreman. His shirt is soaked, and there are dark crescents under the arms of his suitcoat. Worse, his self-confidence has deteriorated along with his appearance.

The whale's extrapolated hieroglyph of the house and adjoining garage, while basically accurate, does neither justice. The house is Early American and in the \$50-75,000 range (probably in the \$100-150,000 range by now). The front door is aproned by a utilitarian veranda, and the windows are flanked by blue shutters (eight years ago, they were green). The walk that leads up to the veranda right-angles after reaching the steps and extends to a wide blacktop driveway. Mr. Runsted operates his business in his home, and there is a side entrance that provides direct access to his office. Above the door, a shingle reads *Runsted Realty*. The adjoining garage is just beyond the entrance, and its trim is painted the same shade of blue as the shutters. At the moment its overhead doors are recessed, and Mr. Runsted's prestige-mobile can be seen standing side by side with Mrs. Runsted's compact. It is a sign of the times that the former has shrunk to the dimensions of the latter.

Behind the house and garage lies the spacious backyard where, during the warm months, the Runsted's do most of their living — or did, anyway, at the time of Starfinder's previous visit. There is a big above-ground swimming pool, a brick barbecue, lawn furniture galore and a patio that runs the width of the house. The backyard is hidden by the house as Starfinder walks up the walk and climbs the veranda steps, but memory provides him with an unobstructed, if eight-year-old view. Before settling on the Runsted's as suitable hosts, he investigated not only their social and economic background but their habitat as well. Mr. and Mrs. Runsted had been eager to conduct him on a Grand Tour, in part because of the added prestige having an exchange student living with them would provide, and in part because of the \$5,000 that would be theirs if their abode passed muster. It failed to occur to them that so munificent a remuneration might be designed to dissuade them from having "M. Jean D'etoile's" credentials checked out, and from too deeply resenting Ciely's being enrolled in high school when their own two daughters, one of whom was four months and the other a year and a half older than she, were still in elementary school.

Starfinder was unimpressed, either by the habitat or its inhabitants. But both constituted the solid, if prosaic, ground Ciely would be safest on. Thus, when Ciely put forward no objections, he left her with the Runsted's.

**M**rs. Runsted answers the door. Eight years have not greatly altered her appearance. Oh, she has put on a few pounds here and there, and she has acquired that peculiar hardness of countenance he has come to associate with aging middle-class American housewives and that probably results less from disenchantment than from too much getting and spending. But essentially she is still the same Mrs. Runsted who beamed at him like a first-magnitude star when he observed that she and her two daughters, Linda and Lucy, resembled three sisters far more than they did "*mere et jeune filles*." He is somewhat disconcerted, however, by her mauve, mesh-like dress which conceals her body about as effectively as a fishnet would and whose justification is undermined by the background hum of an air conditioner.

After a measured look at him she starts to close the door in his face, which the eight years since she saw it last have apparently erased from her mnemonic slate. "I'm Jean D'etoiles," he says quickly. "I've come about Ciely Bleu."

The words function as a wedge. The door stops, mere inches from the jamb, then swings back. Recognition is immediately countered by disbelief. "You *can't* be. You're too young." The disbelief in her eyes dissolves. "But you are, aren't you. You're that awful brat's good-for-nothing Uncle John!"

Starfinder is indignant. "She's not an awful brat and I'm not her Uncle John. She's a fine, intelligent French girl who wanted to broaden her education, and I'm Jean D'etoiles, the Independent International PR Man who arranged for her to study in America. Circumstances over which I had no control prevented my returning for her till now."



Mrs. Runsted doesn't seem to have heard a word he said. "Fred," she calls over her shoulder, "guess who's here! Ciely's good-for-nothing Uncle John!" She looks Starfinder over, her gaze lingering on his tie and then on his mud-caked executive boots. He feels like a delivery boy who knocked on the wrong door. Finally, "I suppose you may as well come in," she says.

Warily he steps into a cool, carpeted anteroom. Mrs. Runsted closes the door behind him but doesn't extend her invitation to include the living room that adjoins the anteroom and is demarcated from it by subtleties of decor and color. A Moloch-like TV console squats on its haunches in a far corner. In its huge, polychromatic belly a young woman and a young man with blue-green complexions and orange hair are engaged in earnest conversation. "You can't do this to me, Bruce. I won't stand for it!" "Please listen to me, Tracy. Deborah and I—" "Deborah, my best friend! To think that she'd fuck you behind my back!" "Tracy, get hold of yourself! It's not the way you think. My love for Debbie and hers for me is on a noble plane neither of us knew existed till our eyes touched on that unforgettable afternoon over cocktails at Gimbetti's. We—"

Mr. Runsted's entry into the living room draws Starfinder's attention away from the intense American drama taking place before his very eyes. Mr. Runsted has withstood the years well. He is a bit thinner than he was, and his hairline has receded appreciably; but the thinness lends the illusion of youthful spryness, while the follicular recession is compensated for by the cultivation of sleek sideburns and a trim mustache.

He advances across the room to his wife's side, silencing the Molochian console on his way. Once, Starfinder was his sartorial equal. No more. The changes in men's fashions have been subtle; nevertheless, Mr. Runsted's neat pinstripe makes Starfinder's bedraggled one look like a Salvation Army handout.

The same disbelief that afflicted Mrs. Runsted now afflicts her husband. "This can't be him, Gladys. The phony Frenchman who foisted that ungrateful brat on us was our own age."

"Where is she?" Starfinder demands.

"Well she's not here — I can tell you that much." Mr. Runsted's gaze touches the 2-omicron-vii scar on Starfinder's right cheek. "Say, you really are him, aren't you. Well, I'll be damned! How'd you manage it? Vitamin E? Testosterone? Anaplasty? ... No, it couldn't have been anaplasty. You'd have gotten rid of that ghastly scar. How, then?"

"I asked you where Ciely is. I've come for her."

"You took your time!"

"I know. There was a mix-up. I apologize. Now, where is she?"

"How the devil should we know? She ran away seven years ago and we haven't seen her since."

Something slides down from Starfinder's chest and lands *plop!* in his stomach. It is his heart.

"You've got your nerve coming back for her after all this time!" Mrs. Runsted says.

"What I ought to do," says Mr. Runsted, "is call the police. They could arrest you on any number of charges. But probably there'd be a corresponding number of statutes of limitation you could hide behind."

Mrs. Runsted's lips, thin to begin with, have become thinner yet; and her long fingernails seem to have grown longer. "Monsters like you should be locked up! Treating a poor homeless waif the way you did! Oh, don't look so surprised, 'Monsieur Jean D'etoiles!' Your niece told us the whole story. About how you repeatedly sexually molested her after her parents passed away, leaving her in your charge. About how you decided to get rid of her and hit upon the scheme of passing her off as a foreign-exchange student from France. About how you bought us off with part of her inheritance and told her you were going to use the rest of it to finance an expedition to South Africa to mine diamonds so that you could become rich and you and her could spend your summers on the Riviera, and how what you really planned to do all along was to blow her parents' hard-earned money on wine, women and song. Oh, she told us everything, 'Monsieur Jean D'etoiles!'"

For a while Starfinder doesn't say anything. He can't. At length, "When did she tell you?" he asks weakly. "When did she tell you all that?"

"The day before she ran away. She'd finally realized, I guess, that you weren't *ever* going to come back for her and that there wasn't any point in keeping up the pretense any longer. She said she could

forgive you for everything except breaking your promise. Even for stealing her inheritance. And as for your sexually molesting her, she said she hadn't minded that, except a little bit at first, and that after a while she'd sort of got to like it."

"She said *that*?"

"She certainly did. Oh, that's some niece you've got, 'Monsieur Jean D'etoiles'! Or should I call you 'Uncle John'?"

"You might as well."

"To be honest," Mr. Runsted says, "we were glad when she did run away. She did nothing but give us a hard time from the day she got here till the day she left. Well, no, not quite from the day she got here," he amends. "For the first week or so she was, well, I guess you could almost say she was an angel. She did the dishes without being asked to, even when it wasn't her turn; she'd bring my slippers to me after I got done in the office; she never argued with Linda or Lucy about who was going to sit by the windows in the back seat when the five of us went for a ride; you could hear her singing in the bathroom when you got up in the morning, and when she went to school she'd go skipping down the street like a kid half her age. And talk? She talked all the time — talked and laughed as though talking and laughing were going out of style. She told us you were going to meet her after school every week and spend an evening with her, and we wondered about that, because we didn't know then that you were her Uncle John. Maybe the reason she changed from an angel into a brat was because you never showed up. She began sulking in her room, and for a while she wouldn't even come downstairs to dinner. It didn't do any good to ask her what was wrong because she wouldn't say two words to any of us. We began getting notes from her teachers saying she wasn't paying attention in class and complaining that when they reprimanded her she'd say something disparaging about their intelligence. She called Mr. Boem, her science teacher, a 'baboon in a test tube factory,' and he tried to get her expelled. He couldn't because her marks were so high. This sort of thing went on for about two months; then the notes stopped coming and she started to take her meanness out on us."

Mrs. Runsted: "She wouldn't have anything to do with Fred or me or Lucy or Linda. And whenever it was her turn to do the dishes, she'd say she was Cinderella and that she had to scrub pots and pans like a scullery maid while her two ugly stepsisters went out and had a good time. She told us the people who lived on Alpine Terrace were muzhiks and said that our house was an izba with aluminum siding. What she really had it in for, though, was our swimming pool. She kept making sarcastic remarks about it all the time, as though it was something to be ashamed of. She said it looked like a big outdoor bathtub with polka dots, and said that when summer came she wouldn't swim in it for a million dollars, because everybody peed in it — *her* word, not mine — and that most of the time the water was probably ninety percent urine. There was no end to her nasty remarks, and here Fred and I were, *supporting* her! Oh, we were glad when she ran away that July. And so were Linda and Lucy, who, incidentally, are both happily married now, and fine upstanding mothers in their own right."

Starfinder looks around for something to sit down on, but the nearest chair is a dozen steps distant, and Mrs. Runsted has already cast several meaningful glances at his mud-caked executive boots, and for all the good the chair is going to do him it might just as well be on Tau Ceti VII.

Somewhere along the line he'd forgot that Ciely was a rebel.

But her being a rebel had been only partly to blame for her conduct. She'd known as well as he had that the Runsteds were basically no different from her parents. That they were *haute* without the quotation marks. But she'd also known as well as he had that they were dependable, responsible people who could be relied upon to take good care of her while she was in their trust.

No, what seemed like a full-scale rebellion was less a rebellion than a futile attempt to fight back against the two beings she loved most and who had apparently abandoned her. Far from sulking in her room, she had probably cried in it. And the outrageous things she's said about her "Uncle John" had been pain killers — pain killers that probably hadn't worked. And her ultimate act — running away — had been designed to show Starfinder and the whale, if they should ever return for her, that she never wanted to see them again.

Mere histrionics, of course. Naturally she'd wanted to see them again.

Or had she?

More important, does she want to now?

Certainly by this time she must have outgrown her need for them, and if she'd really relegated them to the Dog House seven years ago, they must be still in it today.

The whale, which is monitoring Starfinder's activities and thoughts, apparently doesn't understand the expression.

it asks.

*When someone puts you in the Canis Majoris House, it means they're mad at you, whale. But Ciely's being mad at us doesn't change anything —we've still got to find her and make sure she's all right. So go on looking for her, whale.*

As though the whale would stop.

Meanwhile....

Starfinder picks up the scattered pieces of himself and puts them back together. "All right," he says to Mr. and Mrs. Runsted, "I admit I deceived you. But you were well paid for the deception. Now, when Ciely ran away, you must have made some effort at least to find her. If nothing else, you must have notified the police."

Mr. Runsted (indignantly): "Of course we notified them! But they never turned up a damned thing. Except that she'd drawn all the money out of her savings account."

"Nothing else?"

"They found out you were a phony," Mrs. Runsted says acidly, "but we already knew that from what she'd told us."

"What I don't understand," says Mr. Runsted, "is why you've come back for her after all these years."

"There's no need for you to understand."

"Maybe I *should* call the police. Maybe there *is* something they could get you on."

"Maybe there is. But the only justice you'd serve would be an injustice. To Ciely. Maybe she needs help, and you'd only delay my finding her."

"You've got a point there." Mr. Runsted gives Starfinder's suit a sympathetic once-over. "I hope you have better luck than you did mining diamonds."

Mrs. Runsted sniffs. "If you ask me, Fred, all he wants to do is sexually molest her some more!"

Starfinder lets himself out the door and slams it behind him.

The hieroglyph the whale beams down is that of an extrapolated city skyline:

Starfinder sits up straighter on the maple-shaded park bench he has been occupying for the past half hour. After he left the Runsteds', the village park was the only place he could think of to go.

*What city, whale?*

At first he mistakes the hieroglyph he receives in reply for a horse:

then, spreading out a mental map of the U.S. and pinpointing his location, he realizes tht what he mistook for a horse was meant to be a buffalo.

*Whereabouts in Buffalo, whale?*

The next glyph is of little help:

*The eighteenth floor of what building?*

*The extrapolated Buffalo skyline reappears in his mind, with an arrow added:*

*What's the name of the building?*

Starfinder frowns. "\$\$\$\$" represents "bank." No doubt about that.

And the stick figure with feathers represents an American Indian. An Amerind. But there are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Amerind tribes in the U.S. alone. To which of them does the whale's Amerind belong?

Logically, one of the local ones. A New York State bank would hardly have derived its name from an Amerind tribe endemic to Arizona or Utah.

Since the whale lifted the Amerind from his mind, the name of the tribe it lifted him from must be there also.

Suddenly Starfinder remembers tuning in the North American Stone Age in the time-screen and watching a Huron named Deganawida set forth in a white-birchbark canoe — later to become known as the "White Canoe" — to found the League of Five Nations. Early in his travels Deganawida came upon the hut of Hiawatha the cannibal and, climbing up onto the roof, looked down through the smoke hole, and Hiawatha, seeing the Huron's beatific face reflected in the gruesome contents of his cooking pot, forswore eating human flesh from that moment on and joined Deganawida in his mission. Together they established a confederacy comprising the Oneidas, the Onondagas, the Mohawks, the Cayugas and the Senecas. The members of the League were known as the Iroquois, and at a later date the Tuscaroras were taken into the fold.

Logically, the Senecas, being native to this part of the state, are the most likely Amerind candidates to have a bank building named after them.

Starfinder wonders if they have any money in it.

No matter. He now knows the name of the building Ciely is in. The Seneca Bank Building.

*Is she all right, whale?*

Affirmative.

But knowing she is physically okay is not enough.

*Is she happy?*

???

The whale doesn't know. Apparently it is keeping its "distance."

Mindful of being in the "Canis Majoris House," it is chary of contacting her.

It is up to Starfinder to do the job.

He sighs. His logical course of action would be to return to space and forget all about Ciely Bleu. Because the Ciely Bleu he and the whale knew is no more. She has been replaced by a twenty-year-old girl with a life of her own, and for him to disturb that life, to risk throwing it off course, will be to add insult to injury.

Nevertheless, he must take the risk. In all likelihood the new Ciely will be revolted by the mere thought of returning to the Sea, there to spend the rest of her life in the belly of a spacewhale with no one to keep her company but an old spacebum. But in fairness to the little girl she once was, who was stranded on Earth by the two beings she loved most, she must be given the option.

Finding the Seneca Bank Building shouldn't be difficult, once he gets to Buffalo. But the building is obviously an office building as well as a bank, which means that Ciely is probably working in an office and will be leaving in a few more hours. So unless he wants to go to the additional trouble of tracing her to where she lives, he must get to Buffalo fast.

Sitting on a park bench facing the one he is occupying are three shabbily dressed men in their late 30s or early 40s who, judging from their talk, are voluntary members of the local unemployed. During his brown study, they have been passing a bottle in a brown paper bag back and forth, every once in a while throwing curious glances in his direction. Now, apparently having concluded he is one of their ilk, the one in the middle proffers the conventionally camouflaged bottle. "Have a swig of Muskie, old buddy. You look like you could stand one."

Starfinder could, but he decides to forego it. He shakes his head. "Thanks, anyway." Then: "How far's Buffalo?"

"Forty-some miles."

"I need to get there in a hurry. How soon d'you think I could get a bus?"

"Where you from, old buddy? Mars? Only two busses for Buffalo come through here a day. One's long gone, and the other won't be around till eight, nine o'clock. If you're in a hurry, about all you can do is try hitchhiking."

Starfinder gets to his feet. "Thanks."

"I wouldn't try it in town if I was you, though. Cop see you looking like that, he might remember there's a law against bumming rides."

Looking like what? Starfinder glances down at himself. He has loosened his tie, and for the first time he notices that it is stained with tomato juice. There are even a few tomato seeds clinging to the fabric. There are seeds clinging to his shirt, too. All this in addition to the sweat stains underneath his armpits and the mud on his boots and pantlegs.

He rubs his cheeks. They feel like a pair of wire brushes.

"Yes, I guess you're right."

The park occupies one corner of the intersection of Main Street and Central Avenue. A clock above the bank on the opposite corner registers 3:31. Beneath it, an interstate sign bears the word "Buffalo," with an arrow under it. After crossing the street he sets out in the direction indicated by the arrow. Ahead of him looms a steep hill. There is a restaurant at the foot of the hill, and he decides to take time out to augment the tomato which thus far today has constituted his sole nourishment. Seated at the counter, he pats his back pants pocket where his wallet should be. The wallet contains the hundred and some odd dollars left over from his "talking money." Only the wallet isn't there. No one stole it. It isn't there because he forgot to bring it. He forgot to bring it for the same reason he forgot his watch: because the whale was rushing him. Well, there must be some change in one of his pockets. There is. 51¢. He scans the illuminated menu on the wall behind the counter. There must be something on it he can get for 51c. There is. A cup of coffee. He is about to order one from the waitress, who is eying him suspiciously from the other side of the counter, when, at the base of the menu, he discerns the words, PLUS TAX. He gets up from the counter, walks out of the restaurant and starts trudging up the hill.

*Darn you, whale!*

**T**here is, of course, both an easier and a faster way for him to get to his destination. Via the Arc. But the whale can't bring it to him in broad daylight without making waves, and even if it could, for him to bring the craft down in the city could abort his mission.

**SPECTRAL UFO LANDS IN MIDDLE OF CITY; POLICE HAVE PILOT IN CUSTODY: MAY BE VISITOR FROM ANOTHER STAR.** Granted, he wouldn't have to land in the middle of the city; but even if he landed on the outskirts, someone would probably spot him coming down; and even if no one did, he would still be short of his destination and either have to walk the rest of the way or bum a ride. Nor will it be practicable for him to wait till after dark when the Arc's antiphoton field will be ninety percent effective, because by then Ciely will probably have left her aerie and have gone home, further

complicating the task of finding her. No, waiting till after dark is out. But maybe there is no need to. Maybe he can land the Arc on the Seneca Bank Building roof without being seen. But he may not be able to enter the building from the roof, and moreover there may be security guards stationed there. GHOSTLY FLYING SAUCER LANDS ON SENECA BANK BUILDING ROOF; VISITOR FROM DEEP SPACE ARRESTED; STAINS ON TIE BELIEVED TO COMPRISE DEADLY BACTERIA.

No, he will do it the hard way.

Expertly the driver of the big rig backs the trailer into a slot Starfinder would have sworn wasn't wide enough to accommodate a job half its size, and brakes the tractor. "Nothin' to it, man," he says, noting Starfinder's awed expression. "It all done with mirrors."

*Scene:* a warehouse on Ohio Street.

*Time:* 6:43 P.M.

"Now, to get to where you want to go," the driver continues, "you jes go right on down this street here, keep left where it curves, 'stead of goin' straight which would take you up Chicago Street, keep left like I said and jes keep right on going' till you get to Michigan, you turn right then, and jes a little jaunt, it take you to South Park, you turn left then, follow right along South Park, and South Park, it curve aroun' and get to be Main Street, you jes keep goin' right on up Main, underneath that big old Marine Trust Building that straddles it, keep right on goin', and after a while you see this big tall white building on your right with a little park in front, and a fountain, and that the one you want, you got all that, man?"

Starfinder opens the cab door. "I think so. And I want to thank you for your kindness in giving me a ride when nobody else would."

"Hey, man — it weren't no kindness. I comin' this way anyway — you think I goin' t'let somebody standin' by the road all covered with dust go on standin' there till he drop dead when all I got to do is downshift a little and put on my brakes? What that cost me, man? What it cost? Nothin' — that what it cost. Nothin'!"

Starfinder steps down to the concrete. "The fact remains that if you hadn't I'd probably still be standing there."

"One more thing, man. You new aroun' here and maybe you don't know about the brothers. When I give you them directions I give them like you was walkin', jes in case you might have to walk. But you don't have to. A bus come by here every hour or so, and it take you to Lafayette Square. That big white building you want to go to, it jes up the street a little from there. So when you come to the first bus stop, you stop there and wait till that bus come by, y'hear? The brothers — well, some of them, they down on their luck, and these parts hereabout ain't no good neighborhood to be out in after the sun goes down. So you wait for that bus, y'hear, and when it come you get on it and *ride* and where you goin'."

"All right, I'll wait for it," Starfinder says.

"Me, I got to go inside and get straightened 'round, 'n then hook onto 'nother them big boxes."

When Starfinder reaches the bus stop, he waits till the first bus comes by, gets on and asks the driver the fare; and when the driver says 65¢ gets back off.

He starts walking. In the distance the Buffalo skyline shows sharply against the darkening sky. It is different from the way the whale depicted it, probably because he is viewing it from a different angle. Even so, he can distinguish the upper section of the Seneca Bank Building. Or at least he thinks he can. Its windows, like those of the other visible structures, are infinitesimal particles of yellow light.

Is Ciely still at work? he wonders. The success of his game plan hinged on his getting to the Seneca Bank Building fast, and here it is after seven o'clock and he hasn't got there yet. Surely she must have gone home by this time. And yet she can't have. If she were no longer in the building, the whale would have apprised him of the fact.

Unless it is miffed because he blamed it for his having forgot to bring his wallet. But it is inconceivable that the whale would allow its personal feelings to interfere with his finding Ciely. It is dying to see her through his eyes. Nevertheless the fact remains that it hasn't contacted him since he left Muncieville.

*Are you miffed, whale?*

No, it isn't miffed. It and Starfinder are still friends.

*Then for Pete's sake update me! Is Ciely still in the bank building or not?*

Yes, she is still there.

Apparently she is working overtime.

*It would expedite matters if you'd contact her and find out whether she wants to rejoin us. It's no picnic down here, and I hate to think I may be going through all this for nothing. How about it, whale?*

"Silence."

The whales still mindful of being in the "Canis Majoris House," isn't about to contact her. Not as long, anyway, as Starfinder is available to do the job.

Maybe there is an additional reason for its reluctance. Maybe it has peeked into Ciely's mind, skimmed through the pages of her mental diary and come across one upon which she has "written" the words *I hate Starfinder, I hate Charles* over and over again.

But Starfinder is inclined to doubt that any such "page" exists. She may hate her good-for-nothing "Uncle John," but she would never hate her beloved Charles, never in a million years.

By this time he has reached the intersection of Ohio and Michigan streets. He turns right, and sure enough, it is just a little "jaunt" to South Park Avenue, just as the big-rig driver said. Reaching South Park, he turns left. Thus far, he has met no one on his travels. Vehicular traffic is sporadic. A few dregs of daylight still linger in the western sky, but to all intents and purposes night has superseded day. Up ahead, he can see the great pillars supporting the main artery into and out of the city, and the lighted Skyway itself. It is in startling contrast to the ruins on his left and the boarded-up brick buildings and littered vacant lots on his right. An arterial Phoenix rising out of the detritus of what once was.

"He jes a old bum."

"Ain't got a nickel in his jeans, I bet."

"How you know? You Superman or sompin!? You see with X-eray "vision?"

The three blacks, whose approach the whale warned him of too late, have seemingly materialized out of the darkness itself. The two smaller ones are bigger than he is. The largest looms before him like a tree. All are in their teens.

What was the word the big-rig driver used? Oh yes, "brothers."

The word rang a bell, but he did not bother to answer it. He answers it now, recalling to mind everything he read about the "brothers" when he was boning up on twentieth-century terrestrial history. Politically exploited, dole-conditioned, comic-book bred, TV-indoctrinated; unable to distinguish where the newscast left off and the parade of sitcoms, car chases and giggle-jiggles began. Bewildered, frustrated, resentful; brains blasted by Dust and Pot. Confronted with an "unreal" world that refused to conform to the "real" one encased in the magic boxes in their ghetto living-rooms. Beasts prowling the streets in search of the wherewithal to buy psychedelic dreams with which to wipe the incongruity away.

The tree-tall black steps forward. The two smaller ones spread out to left and right.

Like all arts, the art of hand-to-hand combat profits from the innovations of successive practitioners, acquires, through the years and the centuries, an ever growing sophistication. Within the context of his time, Jack Dempsey was indubitably the "greatest;" within the context of a later time, he wouldn't have lasted five rounds against Muhammad Ali. John L. Sullivan wouldn't have made it to the middle of the ring.

In Starfinder's day, all forms of hand-to-hand combat fall into the category of *kai*. In *kai*, a combatant generates his body's electromagnetism into a protective force-field that softens incoming blows and triples the force of outgoing ones. As a result, the blow the tree-tall black presently lands on the side of Starfinder's head has the impact of a powder puff, while the blow Starfinder throws in return knocks the giant flat on his back.

But the *kai* field fails to prevent the other two blacks from seizing him and wrestling him to the pavement. Once this has been accomplished, they begin systematically kicking him, and although their kicks are reduced to barely perceptible taps along his thighs, rib cage and temples, the barrage prevents him from getting on his feet before the felled black recovers, produces a length of metal pipe from a back pocket of his jeans, joins his confreres and swings the weapon in a murderous arc that terminates on Starfinder's forehead. The *kai* field softens the impact, but enough gets through to break the skin and to rob him of the concentration necessary to maintain the field. The three blacks go through his pockets, tear out the one with the 51¢ in it, then stand over him cursing the smallness of their reward. After venting some of their frustration by stomping their victim they fade back into the darkness from which they materialized and which in one sense materialized them.

Under the bludgeonings of the brothers, Starfinder's head is bloody but unbowed.

He stands at a busy intersection, waiting for the light to change. Diagonally across the street from him towers the tall white building he has come so far and endured so much to find. All up and down the street, Buffalonians are Friday-night shopping and/or going for Friday-night fishfries.

He could stand a fishfry himself. Even one contaminated with mirex and dioxin.

His head isn't really bloody, of course. Only figuratively so. The abrasion on his forehead ceased oozing blood some time ago, and he cleansed it for the time being with a torn-off piece of his shirttail. But he is a far cry, both physically and sartorially, from the "M. Jean D'etoiles, Independent International PR Man *extraordinaire* who boarded the Arc almost ten hours ago and set sail for the good planet Earth. Although he picked all of the tomato seeds off his tie and shirt, the tomato stains still remain; and in addition to the tear in his right coatsleeve there is now one in his left and still another along the outside of his right pantleg. A billowy gap has supplanted the blended-in slit that once gave access to the right-hand pocket of his trousers, and a button is missing from his coat. Were one to assess his occupation from the appearance of his executive boots and his lower pantlegs, one could hardly but conclude him to be a swineherd. Since his departure from the belly of the whale, the stubble on his cheeks and chin has turned into a fledgling beard, and the resentment accruing from his recent mugging has caused his 2-omicron-vii scar to glow a dull red. His bruised ribs ache, there is a periodic pain in his groin, and dark circles have come into being beneath his haunted eyes. The growls emanating from his breakfastless, lunchless, dinnerless stomach are audible up to a radius of three yards.

The light changes, and he crosses the street in company with a host of shoppers and/or fishfry addicts. Above the several entrances of the bank a large clock registers 7:48. A new glyph of the building appears in his mind as he is passing through one of the two sets of revolving doors:

Ciely has ascended from the eighth to the twentieth floor, and she is with a male companion.

Is the twentieth floor given over to offices, too, and is she still at work?

Or is it given over to apartments?

In the latter case, what is she doing all alone in an apartment with a man? Why, she's only twelve years old!

Starfinder shakes his head to clear it. Ciely is 20 not 12, he reminds himself. There is nothing in the least incongruous about her being alone with a man in his/her apartment.

Maybe the man is her boss. Maybe he is her husband. Maybe he is both.

Anyway, Starfinder doesn't know for certain that it is an apartment they are alone in. He doesn't even know for certain that they are alone. The whale's hieroglyphs are not noted for their explicitness.



He has passed through the revolving door and now finds himself in a huge, green-carpeted lobby with banking facilities to his right and banking facilities to his left. In the rear of the lobby a green-carpeted hallway provides access to the elevators. Stationed by it is a blue-uniformed security guard. Starfinder saunters past him with every ounce of nonchalance he can muster and tries to blend into the crowd of people who are already awaiting transportation to the upper floors. Locating the directory, he discovers that the twentieth floor is given over to a restaurant. The Skyview Suite. The mystery is solved: Ciely, after a long day's grind at the office, is dining out, either with a male coworker or with her boss, either of whom may or may not be her husband.

Starfinder finds the 10-20 express and stations himself as close to it as he can get. He ignores the disapproving glances cast at him from all sides, but he cannot ignore the look the security guard is according him. The man seems unable to make up his mind whether to accost him or not. Presently he takes a hesitant step in his direction. Another, this one less hesitant. It is a race now, between the approaching guard and the (presumably) approaching elevator. Who/which will arrive first? The guard is handicapped by the crowd. He has to pick his way through the people. But he is determined now. Closer and closer he comes. Still no sign of the elevator. Closer —

*Do something, whale!*

Abruptly the guard stops in his tracks. His eyes bug out slightly. So do the eyes of the people waiting to be borne aloft. The hieroglyph responsible for this ocular phenomenon also appeared in Starfinder's mind:

At this point, the 10-20 arrives, and he manages to squeeze into it. His last glimpse of the guard shows him still standing stockstill, his eyes gradually receding into their sockets. The door closes and the 10-20 takes off like a rocket.

"Mommy," a little girl says, "I saw a pumpkin moonshine."

(Nervously): "Shhhh!"

*Darn it, whale! — you didn't have to scare everybody!*

Someone has already pressed 20 on the floor-selection panel. Apparently all of the passengers are headed for the Skyview Suite, since none of the other numerals are illuminated. Starfinder reaches over a short woman's head and presses 18. He wants to see where Ciely was before he sees where she is.

He steps out into a maroon-carpeted lobby. On the wall facing him, big wooden letters painted a bright orange spell the names *Smythe*, *Durwood*, *Eisenstein* and *Mercer*. The lobby opens into a corridor that runs at right angles to it. A door with a frosted-glass window is visible. Apparently the entire eighteenth floor is a suite leased by an ad agency or a law firm. More than likely Ciely is employed as a secretary.

Which of her bosses is she dining with? Smythe, Durwood, Eisenstein or Mercer?

Ad agency or law firm, there is no one about. He presses the up arrow of the nearest elevator and after a short wait is borne to the twentieth floor. Another lobby — a small one this time, with beige carpeting. It is connected by an archway to an antechamber with candy-stripe wallpaper, a chandelier on low, low beam, and two white naugahyde-upholstered couches. Beyond a second archway a hostess stationed behind a glass counter is greeting the batch of eater-outers Starfinder rode partway up with, and directing them to the several dining rooms the suite presumably comprises.

He steps into the antechamber and sits unobtrusively down on one of the naugahyde couches. Despite the numerous air fresheners that have been employed to camouflage it, he can smell fishfry grease. It is an indivisible part of the ambience. From where he is sitting he can see diagonally through the antechamber archway and through a half-open door into one of the dining rooms. Some of the diners are within his line of vision and he can see them raising morsels of food to their mouths and chewing them and swallowing them. His stomach growls tigerishly. It cannot even remember the tomato it processed almost ten hours ago. But he has no recourse but to let it go on growling. His 51¢, even if he still had it, certainly wouldn't cover even so much as a cup of coffee here; and even if it would and he still had it, the hostess

would be unlikely to let him set Foot in one of the dining rooms. No, he has penetrated the posh Skyview Suite as deeply as he is going to, and it is a wonder he managed to get as deep as he did. He will wait for Ciely right here in the antechamber, and when she leaves on the arm of her escort, he will make his presence known to her, and she can take over from there. If she wants to return with him to the belly of the whale, fine. If she doesn't, that will be okay too. But at least she will have been given the option.

Another batch of eater-outers arrive, are greeted by the hostess and forth with blessings sent to the various *salles a manger*. For the first time, the hostess's eyes fall on Starfinder. She gives a little start; then, recovering, she comes over to where he is sitting and asks if she can help him. She is wearing a mauve hostess gown and her black hair is coiffured into an intricate pile on top of her head. Her face is a study in rouge, lipstick, eye liner, eye shadow and eyebrow penciling. "I'm waiting for someone," Starfinder tells her. "My niece," he adds. "I'm supposed to meet her after dinner."

The hostess seems fascinated by his suit. Or perhaps by his tie. Perhaps by both. At length she raises her eyes to his face, as though seeking reassurance. Apparently she doesn't find it, for she says, "If you'll give me her name I'll have her paged. She's probably finished by now."

"I doubt it. She's been working hard all day and must be famished. I'll just hang around till she leaves."

The hostess hesitates a moment; then, "If you must," she says and returns to her place. Starfinder half expects her to call Security, but at this juncture another batch of eater-outers arrive, driving him, temporarily at least, from her mind.

Since he can't assuage his own hunger, he watches the diners in the room diagonally opposite him assuaging theirs. A girl is sitting at a table almost directly in his line of vision. He can't see all of the table, and only one leg of her companion is visible. But he can see her. She is framed diagonally in the doorway, as it were. Like an animated picture in a parallelogrammatic frame, a picture rendered the more vivid by the relative dimness of the room from which he is viewing it. What strikes him first about her is her obvious happiness. Her face is radiant and she smiles every so often between dainty bites of food. Occasionally her lips part, and he knows she is laughing although he is too far away to hear the laughter, and the other sounds — the buzz of voices, the tinkle of glasses, the faint clatter of silverware — would drown it out in any case. But he can *see* the laughter, and it is somehow beautiful — as beautiful, almost, as she.

Her hair is dark-brown, and she wears it short, when long hair, judging from the hairdos of the other late-twentieth-century women he has seen, is *en vogue*. When she laughs, the laughter dances on her cheeks and discos in her eyes. He is too far away to see the color of those eyes, but he is certain they are blue. There is a hint of thinness in her face, or, rather, faint traces of a thinness that once was. Her mouth is both expressive and lovely. It has been touched with lipstick — a token touch that seems to say, "I'll conform if I must, but I don't want to." Her throat is white with the whiteness of the snows of Arctica XXI; a little locket gleams beneath her larynx. She is wearing a light-blue dress he would bet a dollar to a doughnut is the same shade of blue as her eyes. Her eyebrows are like the wings of blackbirds, blackbirds flying away. Away, away, away....

What light through yonder doorway breaks?

All else but that light has faded from Starfinder's vision, vanished from his awareness. The dazzling light of the girl ... Why, if I were to walk into a room filled with a thousand girls, she'd be the only one I'd see: I'd stand an instant in the doorway, then walk straight across the room toward her and none of the other people in the room would exist, only her; the room itself wouldn't exist, the house it was a part of wouldn't exist, the town/city, the very world — nothing, no one would exist but her; I've looked for her all my life and never knew it till now, never knew it till I looked up and saw her sitting there, saw her the way Poe saw Helen, the way Dante saw Beatrice, the way Petrarch saw Laura, the way Shakespeare, in his mind, must have seen Juliette when he sat down to write his love song ... the measure done, I'll watch her place of stand, and touching hers, make blessed my rude hand, would, if there were a measure, would if there were and I dared, would if I weren't a misfit and a bum, would if she weren't so obviously turned-on by whomever she is with, would if she weren't so patently in love, would if the world she inhabits weren't parsecs distant from my "place of stand," would if — *Yes, whale?*

The whale transmits the hieroglyph a second time:

*Yes. Ciely. I know she's here somewhere. I'm waiting for her.*

Again, the glyph denoting the object of his quest:

It dawns on him then that he is looking at her.

Someone deep in the bowels of the Seneca Bank Building has spun the dial of the air conditioner all the way over to 10.

It is freezing in the antechamber. There are icicles hanging from the chandelier. The candy-stripe walls are rimed. Particles of hoarfrost glisten in the multiscented air. Starfinder can see his breath.

Or, if not his breath, a figurative facsimile thereof.

Another batch of eater-outers arrive, rush ravenously through the ante chamber, impervious to the arctic cold. The hostess processes them with her usual efficiency; then, once again, her eyes fall upon the decrepit old bum still waiting in the waiting room.

Mercifully, the door through which the dazzling light broke has now swung to, shutting the radiant maiden named Lenore from Starfinder's sight.

*Why didn't you tell me, whale?*

Tell him what? Something he was already aware of? That Ciely had grown up?

No, but it could have warned him.

Warned him of what? That he would fall hopelessly in love with her?

At length the ridiculousness of the roadbed over which his train of thought is rolling gets through to him. Despite powers that sometimes transcend the miraculous and an intelligence superior to man's, the whale is still, basically, a sentient asteroid. What can a sentient asteroid know about love? The whale's own love for Ciely is still the same simple, direct affection it was before. She may have changed physically and she may have matured emotionally; but in its o.a.v. she is still the same charming little girl it watched over like a nanny when she was in its care; the little girl who created the Earth, the sun and the stars. How could it possibly have known that the affection Starfinder felt for her could become a different kind of affection when for it only one kind existed?

It knows now, of course, having witnessed the metamorphosis. But it didn't know before.

*What am I going to do, whale?*

The whale advances no suggestions, nor is there any need for it to. He already knows what he is going to do, or rather, what he is not going to do.

He is not going to give her the option.

His falling in love with her has pointed up as nothing else could have the absurdity of a decrepit old bum in an eight-year-old suit accosting a sophisticated and beautiful young maiden, who to all intents and purposes is a total stranger, and asking her if she would like to accompany him into space, there to spend the rest of her life with him in the belly of a spacewhale.

He will step aside — that's what he will do. Nobly. Selflessly. He will make the Supreme Sacrifice. He will give his loved one an uncluttered opportunity to live happily ever after with the man she is dining with and with whom she is so obviously in love.

When they walk through the waiting room on their way to the elevators, the decrepit old bum in the eight-year-old suit who occupied one of the naugahyde couches will be long gone.

For eight years, her good-for-nothing "Uncle John" has been to all intents and purposes dead. He will remain so.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I'm afraid I must ask you to leave."

The hostess is again standing before him, this time with an uncompromising look on her face. He gets to his feet. His erstwhile self makes a brief comeback. "Are you implying I'm somehow detrimental to the decor of your *poshlust* piscinery?"

She blinks. "If you don't leave at once, I'll summon one of the security guards."

He starts to say, "Then summon one," then reconsiders. If he creates a disturbance he will call attention to his presence, and his "niece" may inadvertently find out her "Uncle John" isn't dead after all, and that will never do. So he says instead, "Don't bother," and meekly departs.

Waiting for the 10-20 express, he contacts the whale: *You've tuned in on the whole thing, whale, so you know as well as I do that we've got to leave well enough alone. After I'm out of the city I'll find a secluded field and you can bring the Arc around and take me back on board.*

So be it, he adds to himself.

Back in the belly of the whale, the first thing he does is set the "clock" ahead eight years and two weeks. Then, after divesting himself of suit, shirt, tie and boots and consigning them to the desynthesizer, he undresses the rest of the way and showers and shaves. By concentrating on his ablutions he is able to keep his morale afloat, but the moment he is done it sinks to the very bottom of the Slough of Despond.

He applies healsalve to the abrasion on his forehead; then, wearing pajamas and slippers, he descends the midship companionway to the galley and dials a five-course meal — a brunchner, as it were — only to find that despite the abysmal emptiness of his stomach he has no appetite. After a few dispirited mouthfuls he heads for the dispensary, where he takes three nepenthe pills. Then he returns to the captain's cabin and topples onto his bunk.

*"Dive, whale,"* he murmurs sleepily as the dissolved tranquillizers begin their voyage through his bloodstream. *"Dive back to the Fall of Man. I want to see if there was malice in Eve's eyes when she handed Adam the apple.*

One nepenthe pill is enough to knock a person out for hours. Two guarantee him a good night's sleep. Three are tantamount to his hitting himself over the head with a sledgehammer. Starfinder sleeps the clock around.

Awakening, he finds that his appetite has returned, and he orders breakfast in bed. Juice, cereal, toast, coffee. Not until after the mobile meal-server has retracted with the tray into the dumb waiter do the events of yesterday come fully back into focus. He sits there immobile for a long time. A loner alone. Well, that was what he wanted, wasn't it? That was why he stole the whale, wasn't it? To be alone in the Sea. Maybe not the whole reason, but at least part of it.

Should he rail against the cosmos because it co-operated?

Mechanically he gets out of his bunk, divests himself of his pajamas, and showers and shaves. While he is donning fresh underwear and socks, his gaze falls upon the wardrobizer. Perhaps a new captain's uniform will provide him with psychological lift he is so desperately in need of. He steps into the machine, dials *Uniform, Captain's, deluxe*, steps back out a short while later resplendent in a snow-white coat, snow-white triple-creased trousers, gleaming black boots and a snow-white wide-crowned hat with gold-filigreed forepiece. A brand new Starfinder, all set to march forth to meet a "future" as meaningless as the ornamental medals on his coatfront.

He marches forth. When he reaches the second-deck corridor, he pauses. Shall he march up to the bridge and play captain of the whaleship or shall he march down to the lounge and watch "old movies" on the time-screen?

He doesn't feel like playing captain. He doesn't feel like watching "old movies" either. But the later is a bit more preferable.

Maybe he can tune in on Ciely and watch her grow up.

No. The game plan calls for him to forget Ciely, not to remember her.

Besides, he told the whale to dive back to the Fall of Man, did he not? At least he seems to remember issuing some such order before he dropped off to sleep. Maybe this time the whale found the Garden and its two occupants. It never could before, even with him at the helm; but maybe this time, through sheer chance, it succeeded.

If it didn't, he can take over. Rummaging around antediluvian Mesopotamia may take his mind off Ciely, put to rout some of his loneliness.

So he descends the midship companionway to the lounge.

Entering the room, he is surprised to find a scene already focused on the screen. He didn't think the whale's PK was up to such a feat.

The Garden of Eden?

Fascinated, he walks across the deck, oblivious to all else save the scene in the screen, and seats himself in one of the two viewchairs.

No, the scene is not the Garden of Eden, although there are a man and a woman present. It is a room — a large room with baroque furniture. And the man and the woman are fully clothed.

Moreover, the date registered at the base of the screen is *A.D. November 19, 1847*.

The woman is sitting in an ornate high-backed chair, a book opened on her lap. The man is sitting on an ottoman at her feet. She is in her late 30s or early 40s, the paleness of her cheeks lending her a sort of ethereal beauty. He is austere handsome, and at first glance appears to be the older of the two. But it is his whiskers that make him seem so, and if anything he is younger than she.

She is reading from the book on her lap. No, not reading, reciting from, for her eyes have lifted from the page —

*"The face of all the world is changed, I think,  
Since first I heard the footsteps of thy soul  
Move still, oh, still, beside me, as they stole  
Betwixt me and the dreadful outer brink—"*

Starfinder hears footsteps behind him. He smells perfume that can't possibly be Elizabeth Barrett Browning's.

He does not turn. He does not dare to.

He failed to see her when he entered the room because he had eyes only for the time-screen.

Because he never dreamed she would be there.

"—*I, who thought to sink,*" Elizabeth Barrett Browning says, *"was caught up into love..."*  
*Damn it, whale! — you shouldn't have interfered! Ciely doesn't belong here. She was happy where she was.*

"Starfinder—"

*What good can you and I do her, whale? She's a beautiful and intelligent young woman with her whole life lying before her. You're a member of an alien species. I'm a has-been and a bum.*

Closer now. "Starfinder—"

Still he does not turn. "Ciely, why in the devil were you eating fish! You know perfectly well that many species of terrestrial fish contain dioxin and mirex, not to mention mercury!"

"I—I know. But on Earth, everybody does what everybody else does."

"...Why did you let Charles talk you into coming back?"

"He didn't. I talked him into it. After he finally got up enough nerve to contact me. Can you imagine? — the big lummoX was *afraid* to contact me! Afraid I'd be so mad at him I wouldn't have anything to do with him. As though I could be *that* mad at him. Or at you."

He turns, then, and beholds her standing a little ways behind his view-chair; beholds her in all her springtime loveliness. Beholds the dew in her blue-flower eyes. Is blinded all over again by the light that blasted his retinas in the antechamber of the Skyview Suite.

"Charles told me everything," she says.

"Sometimes Charles oversteps his bounds."

"Well in this case it's a good thing he did! You big goof you! Whatever gave you the idea that a little girl who loved you would love you any less just because she'd become a big one? That she could ever *really* love someone else? That the way you looked would make so much as a smidgin of difference to her? Oh, you take the cake, Starfinder! — you and that silly Sydney Carton! 'It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done—' Hah! If a person wants to sacrifice his neck or his future happiness just so the girl he loves can live happily ever after, the least he could do is ask her first if she'll be happy

ever after!"

He has got to his feet and is facing her across a brief expanse of deck occupied solely by the viewchair he was sitting in. Behind him, Robert Browning says, "*You'll love me yet! -- and I can tarry your love's protracted growing —*" Starfinder says, "You were happy with whoever you were with. I could *see* your happiness. It filled the whole room."

"Of course I was happy! I've been happy, more or less, ever since I ran away. Ever since I put you and Charles out of my mind. With all that money you left me, I could do just about anything I wanted to, so long as I used a little common sense. I went to all sorts of different schools — I was able to buy 'parents.' I went through business school and got a good job. The man I was with 'last night' was in love with me and I was a little in love with him. But just because I put you and Charles out of my mind doesn't mean I wanted the two of you to *stay* out of it. Sure I was happy. But I'm happier now. This was where I always wanted to be. In Space and Time with you. You, Starfinder. You." She removes the little locket from around her neck and tosses it to him across the viewchair. "Look and see whose picture's in it. Look and see."

He stares at the locket, but he doesn't open it. He knows whose picture it contains. He stands there in his dazzling captain's uniform like a bemedaled bump on a log, the same bemedaled bump on a log he became under a different set of circumstances when a little girl needed him and he didn't know what to do. Only, now the little girl who needed him is a big girl *he* needs, and who — miracles of miracles — apparently still needs him.

"*Can it be right to give what I can give?*" Elizabeth Barrett Browning asks. "*To let thee sit beneath the fall of tears as salt as mine? -*"

"I—I see you've tuned in 'Ba.'"

"Yes. She and Robert are married now and are living in Florence, Italy. In the Casa Guidi Palace. The book on her lap is *Sonnets by E.B.B.* It was just published this year. She's reciting some of her poetry to him and he's reciting some of his to her. Maybe some he hasn't put down on paper yet. See how happy they are?"

Starfinder has raised his eyes from the locket. There is a touch of desperation in them. "Ciely, I'm not up to this. Our time-lines are all tangled up. In my line, a little more than a week ago you were only twelve years old. I know you're twenty now, but when I look at you I see you as both twenty and as twelve, and it makes me feel even older than you than I really am. I—I can't adjust."

"I'll tell you what might help," Ciely says. "You pretend you're Robert and I'll pretend I'm 'Ba.' We've just arrived in Florence, and you've just carried me over the threshold of our apartment in the Casa Guidi Palace. Now, let's take it from there."

"But 'Ba' was older than he was, not the other way around. The analogy just doesn't work."

"Oh, *you!* Who cares whether the darn thing works! It's whether *we* work that matters — not some darn old analogy!"

Nineteenth-century Earth turns imperturbably on her axis, blue sails billowing in the cosmic wind. The stars move sedately along their courses, and galaxies spin like macrocosmic Ferris wheels. The is silent — or as silent as the Space-Time Sea can ever be.

Abruptly the silence is broken as, deep in the belly of the spacewhale there is a scraping sound. As of a chair being shoved summarily aside. It is followed by another sound — the sound of kisses. Perhaps as many as a thousand of them.

A long while later, "*Hark those two in the hazel coppice,*" Robert Browning remarks, unaware of course that there are such creatures as spacewhales and that his "coppice" in this instance embraces a large lounge chair in the belly of one of them. "*Making love, say —the happier they!*"

observes the whale.

"Oh, *you!*" says Ciely Bleu.

